



# Opening Day feast

FOR FAMILIES ACROSS THE NORTHWOODS,  
NOVEMBER 15<sup>TH</sup> BRINGS THE RITUALS OF  
DEER CAMP. AT THE INMAN CABIN ON KELSEY  
LAKE, FIRST THEY HUNT, THEN THEY EAT.

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It's opening day of deer season, a rite of fall for Northerners Don Inman and Virginia Pierce. This starry morning their friends and family are stirring in wood bunkrooms that glow orange in the lamp light. One by one the clan climbs down the ladder from the loft to the kitchen, where eggs and sausage sizzle on the stove. The hunters eat quickly—they want to be at their spots in the woods well before a half-hour shy of daybreak, the official beginning of deer rifle season.

The Inman deer camp cabin sits on a wild tract of land down rough dirt roads off Wildcat Highway on the southwestern edge of Presque Isle County. It's the perfect nesting spot for two former state environmental officers: Don Inman, a former deputy director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and his wife Virginia Pierce, a former Department of Environmental Quality official, retired to their 495 acres surrounding Kelsey Lake. This place is home, Don says, to bald eagles, otters, mink, loons, black bear and, most important this day, white-tailed deer.

Every year Don and Virginia host a hunting party which consists of their children Sean Pierce, Dick and Julie Johnson and their friends John, Sue and Matt Robertson. Don and Virginia's grandchildren come, too, but they're still too young to hunt. As with so many deer camps across the North, the hunt is the focus, the food the fuel. But luckily for this family, Virginia Pierce can cook as well as she hunts.

Today's is a true hunter-gatherer feast. Don and Virginia harvested the venison for the noon meal during bow season. Don cut the meat—which had been aging in their woodshed—on the tailgate of his pickup. Virginia's breakfast muffins are tart with berries she picked and froze back around the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. She also heeded the

Above: Don Inman, a former wildlife chief for Michigan's Department of Natural Resources, relaxes in a midday sunbeam, taking a break from the hunt on opening day.



Virginia says she loves the feeling at deer camp



of going from cold to warm and back again.





### Wild Blueberry Muffins

Virginia Pierce picks wild blueberries in July to freeze for the muffins she bakes through the winter, but cultivated blueberries work great in the recipe, too.

- 1 egg
- ¾ cup buttermilk
- ¾ cup sugar
- ½ cup applesauce
- ½ cup oil
- 1 cup oats
- 1 cup flour
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 cup wild blueberries (fresh or frozen)

Preheat oven to 400° F. Beat the egg, buttermilk, sugar, applesauce and oil together in a large bowl. In a separate bowl, combine oats, flour, baking powder, salt and cinnamon. Add to liquid mixture and stir just until moistened. Stir in blueberries. Bake in greased muffin tins at 400° for 15 to 20 minutes. Makes 12.



## Deer Camp Menu

NOVEMBER 15, OPENING DAY

### BREAKFAST

- Fried Eggs
- Deer Camp Granola
- Venison Sausage
- Wild Blueberry Muffins

### DINNER

- Venison Stew with Dumplings
- Grouse with Béarnaise Sauce
- Whipped Red Potatoes
- Raw Veggies
- Applesauce

### AFTER-HUNT SNACK

- Thin-sliced Venison Loin  
with Horseradish on Crackers
- Dilled Green Beans
- Drinks

### Deer Camp Granola

Virginia stores this nutty and golden granola in an airtight Mason jar in the cabin.

- 10 cups uncooked old-fashioned oatmeal
- 2 cups almonds
- ¾ cups sunflower seeds
- 1 cup bran cereal
- 2 cups light brown sugar
- 1 cup canola oil
- 2 cups raisins or dried cherries

Preheat oven to 300° F. Mix together all ingredients except dried fruit in a large low roaster pan. Spread evenly in the pan and bake for 1 hour. Remove, let cool, then add dried cherries or raisins. Mix. Serves 12.





### Virginia Pierce's Venison Stew

Aged venison browned in bacon grease gives an amazing depth of flavor to this hearty dish.

- 2 pounds venison (from the ham) cut into 2-inch chunks
- 4 tablespoons all-purpose flour seasoned with a pinch each: black pepper, salt, garlic salt
- 3 tablespoons bacon grease
- 1 large onion, quartered
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- 1 teaspoon dried basil
- 4 cups chopped potatoes
- 2 cups sliced carrot
- ½ cup red wine

Place seasoned flour in a plastic bag. Add meat cubes and shake until meat is coated. In a large cast iron pot brown half of the meat in 1 tablespoon of the hot oil, turning to brown evenly. Brown remaining meat in remaining oil. Add onion, garlic, and basil and cook until lightly browned. Add potatoes and carrots. Add red wine and enough water to bring the liquid level nearly to the top of the stew mixture. Simmer, covered, for 2 to 3 hours. Serves 8.

### Grouse in Béarnaise Sauce

An easy gourmet dish prepared with pantry staples stored on the shelf at the cabin.

- 2 fresh grouse
- fresh sage leaves
- 1 packet McCormick béarnaise sauce mix
- ½ cup canned milk

Preheat oven to 300° F. Halve breasts of 2 grouse. Dredge these and the legs in flour and brown in olive oil in a Dutch oven. Place sage leaves over the grouse, then sprinkle a packet of McCormick béarnaise sauce over them. Pour ½ cup canned milk over all. Cover with a tight fitting lid and bake in 300° F oven for 1½ hours. Serves 4.



#### COOK'S NOTE

For optional dumpling topping, mix dumplings according to Bisquick box directions and spoon onto stew 20 minutes before you are ready to eat. Cover for 10 minutes. Uncover and continue cooking for 10 minutes.



Midwestern urge to put up preserves before the frost came: Later today they'll open jars of crisp dilly beans and spicy-sweet applesauce made with September's Cortland apples. But first, into the woods.

In the early afternoon the hunters begin to drop back in at the cabin for the big meal of the day and to find out how everyone fared that morning. They hang up their camouflage suits and hunter orange jackets in the firewood shed to keep the human scents of the cabin off of them. As they walk across the yard to the main house, the crisp air is spiked with smoke from the Majestic woodstove that warms the dining room.

Virginia warms a stack of plates on the woodstove. As the dumplings finish on the simmering venison stew, the gang tells of their morning hits and misses: between them they bagged two does and a three-point buck. Don pulls out his deer camp journal, meticulous notes made in ink, about the weather conditions, the exact location of their deer blinds and who took which deer. Don's obsession for hunting runs deep. His mother, Helen Inman, was still hunting at age 80. And that year she bagged a deer. The hunters relax, feet on the clean rag rugs, in chairs next to the upright piano and stacks of old *National Geographics*. No TV at deer camp.

Dinner is served: Sue uses her sweatshirt sleeve as a potholder to bring the stew to the table. Virginia turns over a cast iron skillet to work as a trivet. The goddess of the hunt, she got the buck this morning. The food she prepared for her fellow hunters is delicious fuel for their afternoon in the Northwoods. The venison is lean and flavorful, the stew rich with red wine and tender root vegetables.

Next Virginia brings a bird to the table, grouse that is sage-scented and succulent, tasting of its wild diet: berries, nuts and seeds. That's what Don and Virginia love about wild game. Knowing exactly where it came from. And what it ate.

"We do it all ourselves. We hunt and kill the animal, we dress it out, age it for a week or two and then prepare our own cuts," says Virginia, as she passes a jar of applesauce.

Don says that venison aged well—hung for a week to nine days, as long as it's cold enough outside—has no overly gamy flavor. Those who aren't fans of venison, he says, most likely ate what they call green or unaged meat, which can have a metallic flavor. His favorite way to eat venison, besides Virginia's deeply flavored stew, is to flash fry a cut of loin to medium rare. Each year the couple harvests just enough to keep themselves in meat for the year. And the best part of a communal deer camp is that those who get a deer will divvy up their spoils so everyone has something to take home.

After dinner, the hunters return to the solitude of their blinds, to immerse themselves once again in the woods, to tune into the wind in the bare trees and the sound of deer crunching in the frost-coated leaves. They're reconnecting with their ancestral and pioneer roots, the ritual of the hunt, the human need to provide for themselves. ■



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