

The Best Meal I Ever Caught: Bill Schindler



Professor Bill Schindler talks hunting, foraging, and connecting with your food

If you bring up the subject of food with Bill Schindler, be prepared to roam across a wide range of topics. Schindler, an assistant professor of anthropology at Washington College in Chestertown, is interested in everything from "The Hunger Games" book series and the legality of raw milk to why vampire myths took hold in the 1700s. His voice rises enthusiastically as he talks, searching for the words to explain why the issue of our modern diet is so important to him. There is so much he's

learned in his studies, and not near enough time to tell you everything.

Dressed in his trademark plaid flannel shirt tucked neatly into his jeans, we are meeting at the local bakery in Chestertown. Maneuvering from the counter where we placed our order to a table where we can talk has been a bit of an undertaking: Schindler seems to know everyone, and he stops and chats with ease. The cashier is one of his students. Doug, the owner and chief baker, pops out to shake hands. Several colleagues are sprinkled at nearby tables.

At our table, Schindler has opened his laptop to show me photos of the best meal he ever caught. Or, as one of his colleagues said to me, "the best meal I ever killed with my bare hands, skinned, dressed, prepared, and cooked." Schindler is known around campus as the guy who does things "old school"—he can flint knap an arrowhead in just a few minutes and affix it to a shaft with sinew he's also prepared by hand, using prehistoric methods. Yes, Schindler often hunts with a longbow and arrows he's crafted himself.

Getting to that point has been a circuitous one. Schindler began hunting when he was 6 or 7 years old growing up in New Jersey. At the age of 10, he turned his attention to foraging—Mom was not happy, he recalls—gathering mushrooms and plants. As a teen he was a competitive wrestler (he was recruited to wrestle at Ohio State), and obsessed with his diet. He would sit down every Sunday night to plan his meals for the week using the USDA guidelines. None of it felt right, however. He didn't buy into hunting just for sport, and his high school diet did not produce the results he expected.

"I wasn't feeling as good as I thought I should," he recalls.

Then he enrolled in the anthropology program at Temple University in Philadelphia, where he saw how much more robust pre-agriculture bones are compared to their modern counterparts. "I realized something is really wrong. It was like a light bulb to me," he recalls.

At the same time, he read an article about a butcher in Virginia who made a business out of teaching adults how to butcher wild game. Everything finally came together.

"These people wanted to reconnect with their food source," he says. "That finally made sense to me; I wanted to reconnect with my food source as well."

Today Schindler rarely steps into a grocery store to buy food. Instead he makes almost 100 percent of the food his family eats from scratch, including peanut butter, yogurt, and ketchup. Items such as milk and eggs he buys directly from local farmers.

"I feel irresponsible eating something I didn't kill or gather myself, or directly know the people I got the food from," he says. "The rule at home then, is that we only eat meat that I've killed myself or we directly know the person who raised the animal and I'm supporting them. I think it's a safer system."

It's also a lot of labor-intensive, time-consuming work. Why do it?

"For all the research that I do, and all the things I like to teach students—I've spent years learning how to make stone tools from the best people in the world—at the end of the day, it doesn't have much real-world application," Schindler laments. "This is one way I can take my passion, my training, my research, and make a difference in my family. I can bring it home and be helpful to my family."

And that favorite meal? **Venison loin wrapped in venison caul** (the membrane encasing the organs that has "fabulous fingers of fat" Schindler explains, and is often used in French cooking), seared quickly on all sides to give it a bacon-y flavor and finished in the oven. The venison is sliced atop polenta made from hand-ground corn and served with a sherry cream sauce and a variety of sautéed wild mushrooms (gathered from roadsides and the neighborhood, of course).

The side dish is venison tartare—raw venison heart chopped up with a raw egg on top. To accompany it, Schindler adds to the serving plate wild elderberry flower buds (lacto-fermented to taste like capers), shallots, pickles, ginger, and sliced beefsteak polypore mushrooms.

The appetizer is a dish that makes Schindler happy and proud. Venison liver-and-mushroom pate covered with rich, venison-stock aspic and served with sourdough bread, a hard-boiled egg, and steamed carrots.

The effect is similar to eating at the best high-end, cutting-edge restaurant.

Know someone we should profile? Email Nadja at nadja@jecoannapolis.com.

Want to try these dishes yourself? Bill was kind enough to share the recipes for the dishes in his favorite meal. Find them in our **Weekly Recipes** sections.



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