

THE ART OF SHOOTING ARTLESSLY

A driven shoot at Château de Villette

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Dedicated wanderers—and by this, I mean those who understand the joy of whimsy and the gifts of found beauty, unexpected laughter—know there are places on earth that prefer to be approached when you're thinking other thoughts. Such places reveal themselves with the pleasing echo of a great idea, remembered more than discovered, a sense that things simply could not have been otherwise. Newton under the apple tree, Archimedes in his bath. It's the simplicity of perfection that stuns, its approachability. You know that if you arrive with a song in your heart, the place will sing back.

The drive from Paris to Château de Villette, an hour or so southwest of Dijon in France's Burgundy region, took a little longer than we'd hoped. When we arrived, the December sun had set an hour before, so we had little notion of the setting or the surrounding country, and in a sense we were introduced to the château from the inside out. Seen at night, the exterior was shadows and dappled light from a winter moon, a bright doorway into the entrance hall; introductions; a lovely dinner with our hosts, Coen Stork and Catherine Stork-Le Clef, beneath the traditional mounted stag in the paneled dining room; then up the winding stairs to bed. From our bedroom window, our impression of the place was a vista of terraces and trees, perhaps a fountain in the middle distance, but nothing more.

It was not until we walked out the next morning and saw the château on its hill, the countryside falling away in frosted waves of fields and ancient trees, that we began to feel the rhythm and the music of the place. The entire community had turned out for the shoot—handlers with their dogs, beaters with their flags, loaders carrying cartridge bags and cased guns. I remembered reading that Caesar and Napoleon had each camped here a couple of millennia apart. Sometime between their visits the essential framework for this community had coalesced and hadn't changed much in the interim.

We crunched along the frost-hardened drive down the hill, past the old bakery and the converted barn where the beaters gather between drives, through the gate and across the lane. We climbed a stile into a long field facing a forested hill to take our assigned pegs as Coen pointed them out to us. In the distance the château peered down between old oaks and plane trees, a little austere, perhaps, but interested, engaged: a brisk morning dusted with last night's snow, the neighborhood alive and bustling, birds poised to bestir themselves and hurtle down the line. Time paused for a moment. Then the

STROLLING TOWARD LUXURY

Driven shooting as only the French can imagine, combining luxury, cuisine, and tradition in new ways.





popping of the beaters' flags rippled through the trees, the first birds broke cover, and the pageant began to play.

Our group's organizer, Dave Cruz of Country Pursuits & Outfitters, had told us to expect high, high birds, and that's exactly what we got. Pheasants rocketed over the treetops in front of our line, hit their stride, and streamed overhead in waves presenting shots mostly at 40 to 60 yards, sometimes longer—very satisfying when you hit one, far enough and fast enough that you didn't feel bad when you missed. When Coen blew the horn to end the drive, we had quite a few birds on the ground for the dogs to retrieve and a lot more that had flown on and away. Just as it should be.

I was pleased with the gun I was shooting, one of a beautifully matched pair of Boss round-action over-and-under 12-bores built in 1927 that I'd been lusting after for several months on Dave's website. With characteristic generosity and perhaps just a touch of business acumen, Dave had offered to let me use them on this trip. It felt wonderful to be shooting a century-old gun in such a setting, and I was excited about doing some double-gunning with the pair on ducks later in the day. Coen usually prefers that guests shoot single guns just to keep things fair between shooters, not all of whom bring pairs, but he thought a low-lying peg on some very high ducks would even things out sufficiently. After seeing the height of the birds on this first pheasant drive, however,

I wasn't sure anything much higher had anything to worry about from me.

Our next drive was partridges and pheasants along a stream bed, again a mix of medium and high birds but this time with a bit of crosswind. Then we trooped back to the gun room for elevenses. The gunroom at Villette is a well-mossed and slate-roofed limestone building just behind the château, the interior a line of gun and gear cabinets for each shooter along the back wall with a long table for cleaning guns at one end and a pot-bellied wood stove at the other. Champagne flutes, pâté, and other snacks were laid out on the table when we arrived. Catherine uncorked a magnum with a stylish flick of a sword as we warmed ourselves at the stove and celebrated a splendid morning.

Well-warmed, we headed back out to the fields a half-hour later. This drive would be for high ducks and pheasant, and Coen indicated I should bring both guns. We walked down the hill in front of the château to a small steeply sloping pasture above a stream-fed lake. Our line spread out across the pasture with our back to the lake. I was at the low-

UPLAND LIBERTÉ

The call of the hunt and the waving of the French colors compels all to action, guns and birds alike.





est end of the line just behind a tall tree. Frank, my loader on this drive, nodded toward the tree, saying, “40 meters.” *Well okay*, I thought. *I guess that’s good to know*.

The first few birds were pheasants, mostly nice and high but nothing stratospheric. Frank and I had just started to find a nice rhythm passing the guns back and forth, knocking down several pheasants and feeling pretty good about life, when the ducks appeared. I’m not sure exactly how high they were flying as they came over the hill but a lot of them seemed well above the big tree. Wow. They were really up there, higher, I think, than anything I’d ever normally try to shoot. I started slinging shot as best I could, guessing at the lead. It took some howling misses to figure it out, but then something clicked, and we started to get some hits. The Bosses felt weightless and seemed to be shooting themselves. I have no idea how many shells we shot that drive, but when the horn blew, the ground around us was covered with empties and the air was full of feathers. I looked down the line and saw big smiles and a lot of dogs working hard. What a drive. The excitement carried us back up the hill, everyone—guests, hosts, loaders, dog handlers, beaters—talking at once on our way to a well-earned lunch.

One of the things we really liked about the Villette approach to putting on a driven shoot was the way we all mixed and walked and talked together, all part of the same shooting community. As best I can tell, this is common on French shoots. Whether it’s attributable to historical ideals—*liberté, égalité, fraternité*—or something else altogether, it makes the experience different from a typical shoot in, for example, the UK, and it’s fun. We had a lot of good conversations with the people who were working our shoot, sometimes in French, sometimes in English.

One thing we found interesting and a little surprising was how many different nationalities were represented among those involved. Our group of shooters was American, Korean, and English, and while most of the other participants were French, I also recall meeting some from the Netherlands, Germany, and Ireland. The eclectic flavor was captured nicely by the variety of national flags used by many of our beaters to chivvy the birds from cover.

We gathered for lunch in the château dining room and afterward regrouped with our loaders in the gun room to prepare for two afternoon drives. The first was mixed partridge and pheasant with a few ducks that crossed one end of the line, most of the birds flying at medium height, which no doubt was designed by Coen to instill a fatal touch of hubris prior to the spectacular final drive. For the finale, we climbed

INTO THE WOOD

Fall colors and mallard feathers offer a crispness to the air, but the oiled luster of walnut and exquisite engravings of a matched Boss pair tell the tale.



a heavily wooded hill behind the château, then dropped into a deep valley where Coen positioned us on pegs in two lines, the first about halfway down the hill, the second at the bottom just within the lower edge of the forest. I was on the second line and found myself looking sharply upward through narrow gaps in the distant canopy, wondering how on earth I was going to see birds in time to shoot, much less hit them. Imagine shooting hummingbirds flitting through the upper reaches of a rainforest.

One of the nice things about a pheasant is that it’s big enough to see without binoculars in such circumstances, which meant I could at least shoot at them. This I did, mostly while performing a gravity-defying backbend. The guys on the front line must have been doing the same thing because a lot of their birds fell neatly at my feet and some of them fell behind me. The birds I managed to hit fell well behind me too, probably somewhere on the outskirts of Paris. Once again, even on near-impossible birds, the Boss gun had felt just right in my hands. What a wonderful way to end the day.

Shooting in cold weather has a way of turning your mind to food, even when you’ve been eating a lot more than you usually do. Every meal at Château de Villette was good—English breakfast to get you ready for the cold trek to the first drive, delectable elevenses to keep you going, a delicious three-course lunch to celebrate the morning hunt,



and, to crown the day, the finest, most memorable dinners. They were so good, in fact, that I find it difficult to write about them. Walking and shooting the frosted fields all day is something I'm able to describe, but the taste of pâté de foie gras on crumbled honey bread, the rich beauty of Villette's version of duck confit, leave me fumbling for superlatives. Still more remarkable is that the owners prepare the meals themselves—Catherine as chef, Coen as wine steward—and between them, they put on a show that rivals any fine game restaurant I've visited. Ingredients are sourced locally and Coen takes great pride in serving the wines of Burgundy, each one described as it is presented, often with amusing anecdotes about the maker.

As easy as it may be to compare Château de Villette to a fine restaurant or resort, I believe such comparisons miss the essential point of the place. As Coen told me over drinks one evening, the château is a home, not a hotel. We dined in the family's own dining room, not a restaurant. When we shot birds, the loaders, beaters, and dog handlers were the family's

PATIENT PURSUITS

Dogs work patiently until the stroll turns toward home, where an evening's repast and a complement of beverages will fuel the stories of another great day afield.

friends and neighbors, the entire pageant a community affair. The buildings, bedrooms, and bathrooms are all individualized and quirky as any private house. They are comfortable and inviting, to be sure, but they are manifestly the product of individual owners across a long and interesting history, not at all something from a hospitality consultant's neatly-packaged prospectus. To stay at Villette is to walk into the middle of Burgundy country life, an experience that is at once aesthetically thrilling and firmly grounded in the reality of working with land and animals, crops and people.

Our shooting sojourn continued for three marvelous days, each following the same general pattern but with enough variety to maintain a sense of novelty and challenge. And in the end, we found Villette very hard to leave. We were going to miss the château, the Burgundy countryside, and the people we had met. I was going to miss that pair of Bosses, too. I really didn't want to let them get sold to someone else. I talked it over with some of the guys in our group who shoot pairs and know something about gun lust. Naturally, they seemed to think I'd probably die an early and painful death if I didn't give the Boss pair a good home. Mike Woodbury had an especially good line: "The wand chooses the wizard. You need to buy them." Who am I to argue with Dumbledore? When we return to Villette next year, it looks like the guns will be returning as well. 🦄