

Leon Davies has spent his time in the kitchen well.

For the love of the game

BGA chef ambassador Leon Davies shares his love of game meat with **Martin Puddifer**.

You only have to listen to Leon Davies talking about game meat to appreciate just how much he loves using it in his recipes. I first met Leon on the British Game Alliance's (BGA) stand at Ragley Hall in 2018, moments after he had enthralled an assembled crowd with his skills at the grill, the sights, sounds and smells turning heads across Gunmakers' Row. As the BGA's chef ambassador — and a keen Shot — he is perfectly placed to give readers a professional's take on game's place in the national diet and perceptions of it within and outside the shooting community.

Early life and career

Tell us about your background and how you first became interested in cooking — was it an important part of your home life or something you picked up elsewhere?

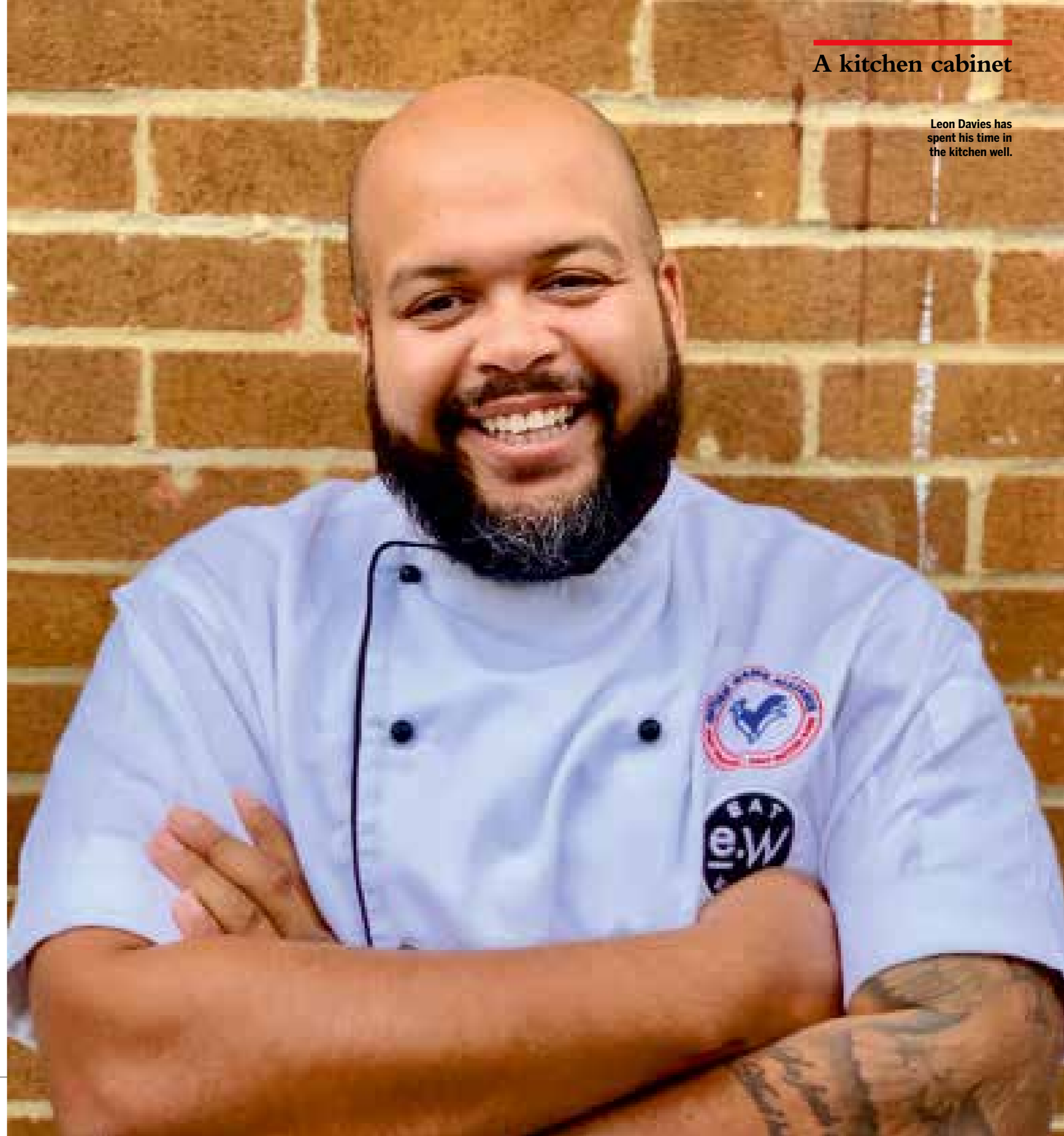
From an early age I knew that I was going to be a chef. With my Nan being an accomplished two rosette chef in the late 1980s and early 1990s, food was coursing through my veins.

Winding down on her career, she became senior cook at Harper

Adams University where I took full advantage of their outdoor pool as a child with my aunts. My Nan would pass me biscuits out of the window. So there I fell completely in love with pastry, that's how it started...the obsession.

I finished school in the early 2000s on the Friday thinking I would continue my part-time job at a local restaurant in Beaconsfield, looking forward to a summer of fun and games with my collective. However, that was short-lived. My father rang me on Friday night explaining that he and my mother had agreed I was to move in with him on the Sunday and I started work as an apprentice chef at the Allied Dunbar training centre in Swindon, not the idea I had in mind for my summer.

The rest is history, that day shaped me into the chef I am now. I learned basic skills at Allied Dunbar and loved every second of it. From there I worked in some of the most iconic country house hotels, from Bindon Country House — owned at the time by Country Food Trust ambassador Lynn Jaffa — to Castle House in Hereford, AA Hotel of the Year 2003-2004; Ballynahinch Castle, in the West ▶



Coast Ireland to Cliveden House with André Garrett.

When did game meat first find its way into your recipes?

I realised pretty quickly at Bindon that game meat was going to be a big part of the country house hotel life; right next to shooting country, I saw our menu revolve around game as soon as the season hit. I even cooked for Marco Pierre White after a hard day's shooting on numerous occasions. I then moved to another high-end country house hotel, but this time with a twist — it was in a city centre. It was here that, under the stewardship of executive chef Stuart Mcleod and head chef Gary Wheeler, I learned to hone my skills. I owe these two chefs a lot.

Game was on the menu in a completely different way, like nothing I have seen, such as a mixed plate — or assiette — of game, rabbit blancmange using wild salmon from the River Wye to mallard, partridge and rabbit, shot locally at some of Hereford's top estates.

Ballynahinch was every wild game chef's dream, 700 acres of pure Connemara beauty, 400 acres of some of Ireland's premier woodcock shooting, as well as the Ballynahinch River stocked full of salmon and trout, all with a backdrop of the Twelve Bens mountain range. It doesn't get any better than working with outstanding wild produce.

On board with the BGA

What was it about the core aims and objectives of the BGA that made you first want to work for the organisation as national sales manager back in 2019?

The core aims of the BGA are to promote, assure and develop game meat to put it back on the nation's



Leon puts the finishing touches to another dish.

plate. The BGA promotes the value of feathered game and does so through its much-needed assurance scheme. Pretty much everything we use in kitchens today has a fully traceable auditable body behind it. When I use beef, pork, lamb, fish and chicken it has a quality standard mark — such as Red Tractor — and wild game comes under that remit. Kitchens are being hit year on year with tougher regulations coming from EHO (environmental health officers) so traceability is a key.

What were the biggest successes you achieved and challenges you overcame during your tenure?

Working for the BGA has been nothing short of amazing. For me to help the BGA achieve its goals is very rewarding work. When I saw the position open for national sales manager in 2018, I jumped at the opportunity. Being a shooting man and a chef, I felt I had the skill set to make a difference — I'd like to say I did. There have been

lots of wins for the BGA, big and small. Getting our pheasant sausages and pheasant sausage rolls on the menu at Drake & Morgan was a great win as it's an indication of the hospitality's versatility and need for the BGA assurance scheme. It was the first restaurant chain to champion the BGA.

The BGA has always been brimming with creative ideas to get the message out about game to people within and outside shooting.

What can you tell us about one of its latest campaigns, #BGABites?

#BGABites is such cool campaign. Like most of us who enjoy shooting I have been on some shoots that are serving pork, beef and chicken as elevenses, or even the main meal, when they should be using game. There are so many recipes to turn the humble pheasant, partridge and grouse into banging stomach filler.

Take the 11 BGA new product development ideas: keepers pie, our

take on cottage pie, pheasant sausage rolls, mixed gamebird terrine to gamebird rillettes. I'm looking forward to seeing all the photos on social media throughout the campaign that will get the creative juices flowing in the industry.

Game shooting and cooking in general

What's the one misconception the general public has about game meat that makes you want to bang your head against a wall, given all the promotional work you and others have done?

The biggest is the "too gamey" flavour and the "it's so dry, though" comments. It's like running at the brick wall and food has come such a long way since then. Chefs have come a long way too; there is a science these days behind food. We understand more about what we are cooking with and there are so many cookery programmes and social media influencers using game in so many different and exciting ways. How can it be too dry or too gamey?

Gone are the days of hanging game to mature with guts in. We have salt chambers, vacuum packing machines, slow cookers, josper grills, open wood-burning stoves and water baths. With so many techniques to cook with now we don't need to; it would be pointless, it puts people off trying it.

I've always been a big fan of fresh grouse, partridge, mallard and fresh pheasant. Each has very different flavours which can be delicate, partridge often mistaken for chicken in the kitchen among young first-year commis chefs.

Does it surprise you when you hear about people in our community who don't eat what they shoot?

It shocks me, to be honest, that's all I have to say about it. We ➤



There are so many ways to cook and prepare game meat; its versatility is what makes it such an amazing food for everyone.

need to support the BGA's role in promoting, developing and assuring feathered game meat, put some of these misconceptions to bed on a national scale push with the likes of restaurant chains adopting Drake & Morgan's approach to game.

Let's see a pheasant sausage roll in Greggs or major retailers; we have the means to really change the industry for the better with everyone on board with the BGA and its aims.

What's the one ingredient — perhaps a sauce — that is absolutely superb with game meat but no one knows about?

Cajun spice seasoning has been superb throughout lockdown. I've been doing what everyone has — lifting my last-season game out of the freezer and firing up the BBQ or fryer, mixing it into mayonnaise,

breadcrumbs or straight on the meat for a wicked flavour burst.

Can you ever foresee a situation where supermarkets and other retailers will accept game meat that

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“We must put misconceptions about game meat to bed. Let's see a pheasant sausage roll in Greggs.”

might contain traces of lead shot? Or is it a case of the sooner game is shot with an alternative load the faster we can accelerate its exposure to a wider consumer audience?

I am going to say this, which

may leave people “salty”, but supermarkets have already said they will not take game with lead shot, so it's simple. We need to adapt. We must find an alternative safely and quickly to use to help the industry sell more gamebirds into that side of the market.

Which chefs should shooting people be following if they want to get the most from the game they prepare for the table?

Steven Ellis; Gavin Edney, Mike Robinson's group head chef at the Woodsman and the Elder; Sally Abe at the Harwood Arms; Gamechanger BBQ; Keith Greig's Field to Fork Food; Tim Maddams; Rogues London; and finally, of course, me on Eat Wild. These guys and gals are outrageous with game meat... give them all a follow on social media. 🦋