

by Charles S Evans



Is Field-to-Fork a Viable Alternative to Farm-to-Table

The Field-to-Fork project helps people who love the outdoors or natural food to take ownership of the meat they eat by harvesting it through hunting. Field-to-Fork spread quickly through both hunting and general media outlets; it gives those who are curious about hunting a sound perspective on this primal activity.

Don't misconstrue the title, I am not claiming there is anything unacceptable about farm-to-table restaurants, I am merely suggesting what may be a more palatable alternative for some individuals. While I enjoy the occasional trip to Heirloom Café to sit down in front of a freshly prepared burger that came from a sustainably-managed farm a few miles away in Watkinsville, Georgia; I much prefer the *Field to Fork* method, hunting.

Hunting is one of the most primal activities we have left and has evolved with humans for many reasons,

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but a central theme is procurement of food. This theme aligns perfectly with the large cultural shift that's in progress in many areas around the world, a shift towards more food-conscious societies. In the United States, organic is by far the fastest growing segment of the food industry, the grass-fed beef sector has increased exponentially, health-focused supermarket chains are gaining unprecedented popularity, and farm-to-table restaurants have become the place to be. As such, there is a large group of people that want a deeper understanding of where their food comes from and they prefer it to be sourced locally.

Hank Forester, Hunting Heritage Programs Manager at the Quality Deer Management Association, and I both fall into this group. Whenever possible, we prefer to taking ownership of the protein we ingest, which can really only be had by harvesting it ourselves.

Hunters have been doing this for thousands of years, but with the urbanization of society the traditional pathways of parents bringing their children into the fold have fallen by the wayside. We have started to notice incredible demand from adults that want to learn how to hunt for food, but do not know where to start. In 2016, we decided to take matters into our own hands in Athens, Georgia to provide these hunting-curious individuals a helping hand into what can be an extremely intimidating activity to a newcomer. We did a little research, based our program off of an example conducted in Kentucky, and enlisted some partners (Georgia Wildlife Federation, Quality Deer Management Association, National Wild Turkey Federation, and Georgia Department of Natural Resources). The end result was a program called *Field to Fork* intended to recruit individuals that want to take ownership of their protein source and show them how to obtain some of the healthiest red meat in existence via hunting.

The plan was simple, we were going to go to the Athens Farmers Market to find people that cared about their food and teach them how to hunt. Given that fair-chase venison is the original free-range, additive-free meat, and comes from an animal that lived life free of animal welfare concerns, we decided it pretty much sells itself so we started there. We offered samples from an impressive spread of venison sausage, sliced tenderloin with chimichurri sauce, jerky, and a hand out entitled "Why should you hunt deer?"

The reception we received was overwhelming, everyone was curious, most tried venison, and quite a few signed up to go hunting with us. In a matter of six hours we reached program capacity with a substantial waiting list.

We took all of these individuals through the entire process including training, hunting, and how to handle the animal after the harvest. The formal training consisted of curriculum covering how hunting supports conservation, deer biology as it relates to hunting strategy, and crossbow instruction. The training sessions prepared participants for a weekend hunt where we paired them with mentors and sent them afield.

Food was a central theme throughout *Field to Fork* with wild game meals provided during the trainings and it culminating with what was perhaps my favorite part of the program, the culinary social. This social brought participants, volunteers, and partners together to share a venison dinner prepared from deer harvested during the program. There were some excellent hunting stories told and everyone provided input on their experiences. A common response from participants when asked what they

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enjoyed about hunting was “the meditative component stemming from spending time in the woods.” After one participant told the story of her first harvest she stated “That was just the mechanics of the experience, but there was an overwhelming feeling that something that was missing in my life had been fulfilled, I felt like I was finally a human being.” I could go on with the quotes, but my main point is that hearing all of these stories was equally rewarding for me, as it was inspiring to see that there was such excitement and genuine interest in hunting in this diverse group.

Fast forward a few years and *Field to Fork* just finished up its third year in Athens, expanded into eight new states, and reached people from all walks of life. Participants have ranged in age from 18 to 70 and come from various disciplines including professors, organic farmers, construction workers, nutritionists, engineers, and chefs just to name a few. All of these people were brought together by their desire to further their connection with nature and where their food comes from. The direct impact is clear, eighty percent of the participants in the Athens program hunt again within the first year, but the indirect impact, albeit a little more abstract, has been the most impressive to me.

There is something about the authenticity of the *Field to Fork* message that has made it catch on like wildfire through hunting and mainstream media outlets. The program was even featured on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* and made an appearance across the pond in *The Times UK*. With the help of this exposure, *Field to Fork* is beginning to reshape the way the traditional hunting community thinks about new audiences and likely has a wide-reaching ripple effect within society as a whole.

Let’s start with what we are seeing in within the hunting community and industry. Local hunters have volunteered their time to make *Field to Fork* possible by serving as mentors for the participants. Everyone that has volunteered agreed that their experiences are extremely rewarding and many have commented that it changed their outlook on who might become just as avid about hunting as they are.

Watch QDMA’s *Field to Fork* video at <https://youtu.be/iS-dSzQCKl0>

David Kidd, on serving as a mentor last year: “I think this was the best season I’ve ever had, and I didn’t even harvest a deer!” We see similar shifts in attitudes as hunters become involved in or read about *Field to Fork*. Perhaps the most telling evolution is that the hunting industry is beginning to buy in. Earlier this year, the National Shooting Sports Foundation provided funding to expand the *Field to Fork* model to help create a more inclusive environment within the hunting community.

Society as a whole seems to have been impacted through publication of these efforts, but there is also a ripple effect closer to home within the food-conscious community. Program participants have shared their experiences within their social groups and professional circles. We have numerous examples of this, but I would just like to share a couple.

Edwin Pierre Louis is a graduate student at the University of Georgia and participated in the program last year. He harvested his first deer with a crossbow, proceeded to purchase a rifle, harvested four more deer, took three new people hunting with him, and shared venison with all of his lab mates, all within his first deer season! Brandon White is a racecar engineer who went through the program in the same cohort as Edwin. Brandon also got hooked, purchased his own equipment, and harvested three

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deer! He has two small children who he plans to introduce to hunting once they're older and he consistently talks about how rewarding it is to put all-natural protein on his family's table.

Edwin and Brandon both came back to help with *Field to Fork* as mentors this year. You may be thinking, "those seem like outliers or extreme examples." However, we have many stories similar to those above when dealing with adults getting into hunting for the first time. We recently further surveyed a few past participants and realized that the venison harvested through *Field to Fork* has been shared with hundreds of non-hunters. While it's hard to quantify the effect these people are having on their communities I think it is safe to say that through the sharing of their experiences and harvest, *Field to Fork* graduates are having a substantial positive impact on the way hunting is viewed within their circles and likely generating interest in hunting among their peers.

There is a reason I have chosen a career path surrounding hunting. I hike, kayak, and camp, but those are all just passive interaction with nature whereas hunting provides a more intimate experience, a unique chance to truly interact with our natural world. Field to Fork and programs with similar messaging provide us with an opportunity to ensure that people from all different backgrounds have the opportunity to experience that unique interaction. Hunting is an activity for anyone who loves the outdoors or has a passion for natural food; an activity that transcends societal, political, and religious boundaries allowing participants to form a deeper connection with each other and their surroundings.

Charles S. Evans earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in wildlife biology from the University of Georgia and now works for the Georgia Wildlife Federation as the state's R3 Initiative Coordinator. His position—which is also supported by Georgia Dept. of Natural Resources, Quality Deer Management Association, National Wild Turkey Federation and Safari Club International—was created to increase hunting participation and societal acceptance of hunting in Georgia.

Banner photo: A new hunter and his mentor after a successful harvest. Credit: Quality Deer Management Association

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