Written by Carol Pomeday
Wednesday, 10 February 2010 15:59

Wild game would be an apt description of Sunday's contest between the Saints and Colts and the gourmet menu of venison, pheasant and rabbit prepared by Jon Freeland and his all-male cast of cooks for the family's 26th annual football party extravaganza

The New Orleans Saints beating the Indianapolis Colts to win the Super Bowl Sunday was a wild game to watch.

More wild game — gourmet dishes featuring venison, pheasant, rabbit, boar and wild turkey — filled the table at Jon and Wendy Freeland's Town of Grafton home.

The couple hosted their 26th annual Wild Game Super Bowl party. About 60 people sampled the type of fare that is common for the Freelands and their five children to eat, entered football pools and cheered for the Saints to win.

By the end of the evening, there were leftovers, but most people sampled all the dishes.

"I don't eat rabbit because I used to have pet rabbits, and I don't eat rodents (squirrel), but everything else was delicious," Wendy said.

“There was a lot of (venison) meatloaf left over, but I think that’s because everyone wanted to taste the more exotic things. The wild boar tasted like regular pulled pork, and everyone loved the pheasant Parmesan.”

Their relatives look forward to the event, and the chefs search magazines and the Internet for weeks for unique recipes.

Jon and two hunting buddies started the tradition the year before Jon and Wendy were married.

The guys made wild goose on the grill and Wendy, the only woman invited, made a dessert.

“It was a whim, but we decided to make it an annual thing,” Jon said. “More hunters joined, then women started coming. The men still do all the cooking.”

Friends and neighbors used to join them, but as their families grew, the Freelands have limited the party to relatives.

The men, who are all hunters, cook game and the women make appetizers and desserts.

A few of the guys fudge on the cooking. Kevin Sperber of Saukville was given credit for barbecued pulled boar, but everyone knows his wife Vickie, Wendy’s sister, is the cook in the family. In past years, she made venison Wellington, but this year she prepared boar that her boss shot. Their son Brandon made wild turkey noodle soup.

Nick Fallucca of Milwaukee admitted that his grandmother, “who is a really good cook,” made the pheasant Parmesan he brought to the party. But he shot the birds.

The Freeland men were proud of the dishes they made.

“All the men in this family cook more than the girls,” Wendy said of her husband, sons Dillon, 17, Eric, 20, and Wesley, 22, and daughters Caitlyn, 19, and Abigail, 14.

Jon prepared venison chili earlier in the week. He, his father Ken and Dillon spent

all day Friday making venison stew, venison meatloaf with an herb crust, braised rabbit with apples and braised rabbit with pears.

“The recipes are only guidelines,” said Jon, who continually tweaks the recipes.

Dillon, a senior at Grafton High School, was allowed to stay home Friday because his grades are good and he was caught up with his assignments.

“The kids earned the right to stay home and cook,” Wendy said. “Only those with good grades and all assignments completed were allowed to miss a day of school.”

Caitlyn, a freshman, decided to go to her classes and let the guys cook. The older children are now working or in college.

Eric made venison tips with noodles and Wesley made venison pumpkin curry.

As the Super Bowl game started, Jon grilled marinated turkey tenders wrapped in bacon for an appetizer. Venison liver paté, meatballs and sausage were also on the appetizer table.

“In this family, the love of cooking has come from that man,” said Wendy, pointing to her father-in-law.

“I don’t hunt or cook anymore, but they use my recipes and I can supervise,” Ken said. “I’ve got bad knees. I tried hunting once from a car, but that’s not hunting.”

The elder Freeland grew up in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, where he started hunting when he was 6.

“We were born and raised on venison,” Ken said. “We hunted or grew all our food.”

He learned to cook from his mother. Ken taught his children to hunt and cook, and now Jon is teaching his children the same skills.

Both men owned pizza restaurants in Ozaukee County. Jon and Wendy owned Pizza Bank in Saukville, and Ken owned Vigano’s Pizza in Cedarburg.

Jon is now the building superintendent at John Long Middle School in Grafton, but cooking is his avocation.

Both men used to go to northern Wisconsin to hunt but now hunt in the Town of Grafton.

The women and men hunt deer and turkey with a bow. The guys also hunt with guns, but prefer the bow.

“We’re a bow hunting family,” Jon said. “It’s more challenging and fun.”

Caitlyn, who is studying photography at Milwaukee Area Technical College, doesn’t hunt anymore. She went out a couple times with a bow, but prefers taking pictures of animals to killing them.

Abigail tries to fit hunting around her soccer and volleyball schedules.

The Freelands butcher the game they bag and smoke their own venison sausage, including a breakfast sausage.

“We rarely buy beef,” Wendy said. “It’s a nice change once in a while. The first time I served something with fat on it, the kids asked, ‘What is this stuff? Yuck.’”

Chefs were (clockwise from lower left) Kevin Sperber with barbecued pulled wild boar, Dillon Freeland with rabbit and apples, Eric Freeland with braised rabbit and pears, Nick Falluca with pheasant Parmesan, Wesley Freeland with venison pumpkin curry, Jon Freeland with herb crusted venison meatloaf and Brandon Sperber with wild turkey noodle soup. Photo by Sam Arendt