

## Game dinner cooks on the wild side

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Chuck Nolan will be grilling deer poppers at the wild game dinner to benefit Habitat for Humanity.

The camp chairs in Chuck Nolan's driveway are the first clue. The big, shiny grill is the second. And when the deer poppers hit the heat, sizzling happily in their bacon blankets, it's clear the hunt is over. This teaser for a Wild Game Dinner can only end one way: deliciously.

The May 10 event at the Brandon Civic Center will be the second Wild Game Dinner organized by a coalition of men's ministry groups from Rankin County Methodist churches, to benefit Habitat for Humanity Mississippi Capital Area.

Deer poppers, venison sausage, duck gumbo, turkey and fish will be among the wild game samples at the dinner, which will also include red beans and rice, whole hog and catered barbecue from Dickey's Barbecue Pit for a tame game selection, you might say.

Nolan's deer popper appetizers marinate in a mixture he first jokes is an ancient Chinese secret, but later lets slip a list of flavor-filled ingredients: Worcestershire sauce, Dale's seasoning, raspberry vinaigrette, a little Italian dressing, garlic, salt, pepper and steak seasoning.

He picked up the idea from his pal Ramsey Russell of Brandon, whose GetDucks.com organizes trophy duck hunts. Russell's duck poppers, wrapped around cherries, figs and other fruits triggered some taste bud imagination. "He offers duck hunts all over the world, so he comes back with some good recipes from all over the world," Nolan said.

"I'm not a duck hunter, so I translated it over into the deer poppers." Also an adventurer, he explored other pairings. "Just something different."

Deer poppers with maraschino cherries were a big hit at last year's dinner. For this set, he used maraschino cherries, orange marmalade or baked apple slices in the center, wrapped in tenderized venison backstrap and a bacon strip, then secured with a toothpick.

The poppers sputter and brown quickly on the grill's medium heat as Nolan deftly turns the tasty bites with

tongs. The deer meat has been pounded flat so it cooks quickly; when the bacon's done, they're done.

As soon as one cools just the slightest, it pops into an onlooker's mouth. Juicy and full of flavor, the meat and sweet make a tasty twosome. Bacon helps carry the flavor — savory enhanced with a fruity finish. The fat, the meat, the sweet ... what's not to like here? "Exactly," Nolan said.

Orange marmalade is the most assertive, offering a sweet/tart tango with the venison. The cherry provides a sweet red surprise. Apple is the mildest, and Nolan says he plans to bake apple with cinnamon and sugar for his deer poppers at the dinner.

"You can do it with a pork tenderloin," he said, and the backstrap out of a wild hog would be "just as good."

Last year's inaugural Wild Game Dinner drew about 435 people and donated just under \$25,000 to Habitat for Humanity Mississippi Capital Area, event co-chairman Mel Coxwell said. A group of Methodist men in Rankin County, from Brandon First United Methodist Church and Crossgates United Methodist in Brandon and Marvin United Methodist in Florence, combine efforts in the dinner; this year, organizers target the sale of 525 tickets.

"Ideally, what we want this to be is a county-wide event," Coxwell said. "Hopefully next year, we'll try to go to 600 or 700 people," with all Rankin County cities and communities involved.

The dinner's guest speaker is professional fisherman and motivational speaker Clay Dyer, who was born with no legs, no left arm and only a partial arm on the right, and whose "If I can, you can!" motto is an inspiration. He began fishing at age 5 and competing in tournaments at 15.

Vendors there will include Cobo's women's clothing, Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks with its virtual hunting game for kids, Buck Creek Outfitters and more. About 70 door prizes will be awarded.

"This is our favorite type of covenant sponsors," Merrill Tenney McKewen, resource development director for Habitat for Humanity Mississippi Capital Area, said of groups that sponsor a house.

"This is the first time someone has put together such an elaborate evening for the community," she said, noting that most organizations simply raise money within their own groups. This event has a community reach, which also helps spread Habitat's message.

It also taps into a ready talent and enthusiasm, with the number of avid hunters and fishermen in the area. As Doug Morgan put it with a grin, "I'd rather cook than go drive nails."

Money raised from this year's Wild Game Dinner will be combined with last year's fund to build a Habitat home in Rankin County.

"We're about ready to build," McKewen said, with resources, volunteers and possible homeowners lined up. "All we're lacking is an appropriate piece of property."