

ESSAY

The Love of the Chase

In Virginia, lusty, lively hunt breakfasts offer lasting lessons

BY RITA MAE BROWN PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER TAYLOR



GRANNY HAHN WAS two years older than God—the Old Testament God, for she always delivered a list of admonitions. Along with the usual tally of manners, she added riding rules: *Loosen the reins. Heels down. Head up. Always smile—no one wants to behold a dour child.* But her most elaborate demands involved hunt breakfasts.

A silver-haired, hard-riding Diana of the Virginia hills, Granny Hahn threw fabulous hunt breakfasts, and she attended those hosted by others with an eagle eye. Usually a hunt breakfast follows a fox hunt—I hasten to add the fox is chased, not killed—so even if held at four o'clock in the afternoon, it is called a breakfast. People take off their hunting coats, often torn and dirty, don tweed jackets, and go inside where it's warm, the food and drink are most welcome, and everyone relives the drama of the hunt.

I was in first grade when I attended my first of Granny's hunt breakfasts. She had taken her fences in style that day and was lavished with compliments. The table was set with a long wide ribbon in hunt red and blue running down the center. In the middle reposed a seasonal display of squash, wheat stalks, mums, and zinnias, surrounding a sawdust-stuffed pheasant she usually kept in the downstairs closet.

A juicy joint of roast beef, bright orange sweet potatoes, a striated salad, corn muffins, wheat muffins, and fresh baked breads twisted into fanciful shapes, chilled pork pies, deviled eggs, and a breakfast casserole bursting with sausage and cheese, followed by devil's food cake, rice pudding, a baked custard covered with raspberry sauce: Most of it had been cooked in Granny's wood-burning stove. It was probably a delicious feast, but all that I remember is a punch bowl

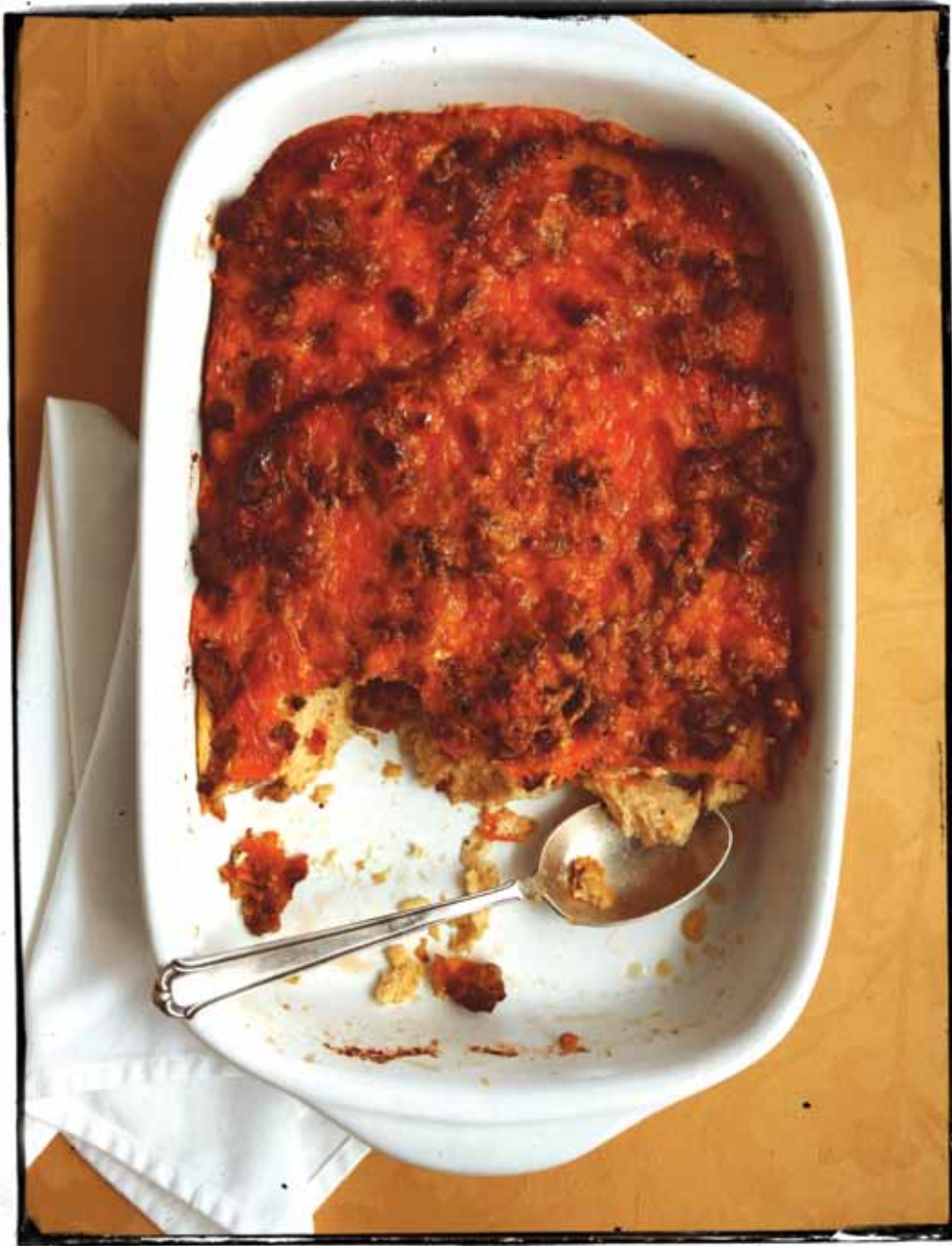
Hunters on horseback at the Oak Ridge Estate in Arrington in central Virginia, where the author fox hunts.

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Sausage and cheddar breakfast casserole, a proper hunt breakfast staple (see recipe at right).

as big as Rhode Island and my mother letting me have a sip from a pewter cup.

For Granny Hahn, the rules of a good hunt breakfast were to be rigidly adhered to:

Do not put too much paprika in the deviled eggs.

You must have at least one seven-layer salad.

Do not carve the roast beef ahead of time, but do serve some type of poultry.

Never try to outdo a Marylander when it

RITA MAE BROWN is the author of *Rubyfruit Jungle* (Daughters Press, 1973) and many other books. Her last article for *SAVEUR* was "Going to the Dogs" (October 2010).

comes to crab dishes. Best to leave that to them as it gives you another reason to attend those grand Maryland hunts.

Put the sherry and hard liquors in crystal decanters.

Pretend not to notice if a lady takes a stiff drink. Should she take two in rapid succession, notify her best friend. Under no circumstances do you notify her husband.

If you wish to use a stuffed fox as part of your display, make certain no cats are present.

Granny believed a proper hunt breakfast necessary to weaken men. I never knew Granny in her youth; she was born in the mid-1870s. But according to family gossip,

she was highly successful in this endeavor.

Listening to this elegant lady detail those courtesies she felt necessary for a wonderful life, I learned about hunt history, and history in general. Hunting, she said, gave General Washington respite and kept that magnificent body of his strong. He followed his own pack of hounds, rode out at daybreak, and returned to breakfasts organized with care: cornbread, feather-light biscuits, capons smothered in raisin sauce, lemon tarts. His table was known for its delicacies. For visitors from Europe, this was a sign those of us in the colonies were really not the stupid barbarians they thought we were.

Still, said Granny, those hunts paled in comparison with the 19 days organized by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, in July 1575. Morning hunts, masques, feasts, and dancing filled the weeks in this beautiful part of England's East Midlands. Queen Elizabeth I rode everyone into the ground. According to Granny it was the greatest party of all time—even better than the Field of the Cloth of Gold. This observation was always followed

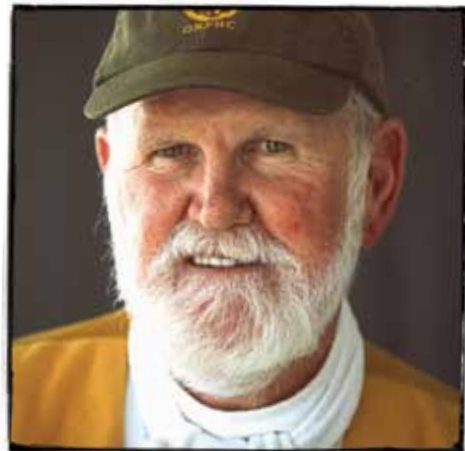
Sausage and Cheddar Breakfast Casserole

SERVES 8-10

This simple but satisfying breakfast casserole (pictured left) was a favorite at hunt breakfasts hosted by author Rita Mae Brown's great-grandmother, Valentina Buckingham Hahn.

- 1 tbsp. unsalted butter, for greasing
- 6 slices white bread
- 1 lb. bulk breakfast sausage, casing removed
- 10 oz. grated cheddar cheese
- 2 cups milk
- ½ tsp. dry mustard
- 6 eggs, lightly beaten
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Heat oven to 350°. Grease a 9" x 13" baking dish with butter. Lay bread slices, overlapping slightly, over bottom of dish. Heat a 12" skillet over medium-high heat. Add sausage; cook, stirring and breaking up meat into large crumbles until browned, 5-7 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer sausage to dish and arrange over bread. Sprinkle half the cheese over sausage. Whisk milk, mustard, eggs, salt, and pepper in a bowl; pour milk mixture over sausage and sprinkle with remaining cheese. Cover dish with foil and set aside 10 minutes. Bake, covered, until eggs are set, about 30 minutes. Turn oven to broil. Uncover casserole and cook until cheese is browned, about 3 minutes.



Photographs from the hunt and hunt breakfast of the Oak Ridge Hunt Club, where the author, Rita Mae Brown, is a member. The hunt took place at Oak Ridge Estate in Arrington, Virginia, in November 2012. Top row, from left: Gwynne Downey enjoys a mimosa; Page Turner on her mount; club member Jim Finn. Middle row: foxhounds await the start of the hunt; Dee Phillips, the whipper-in who helps handle the hounds; Steve and Gwynne Downey. Bottom row: the author, Rita Mae Brown, the event's huntsman; hunters following the fox's trail; Susan Migliore at the hunt breakfast.

by, "No one even knows how to do that anymore." This magical soiree, she insisted, had even inspired Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

How natural that hunting, feasting, partying should inspire literature. When else is one so free from the squalid little cares of the day, whatever the century? Of course, there was

stratification, but often with a cloth thrown over grass for an outdoor celebration, people were not so picky about who was who and exactly where everyone sat. Even royalty relaxes sometimes, and hunting allowed many a king and queen an escape from politics, and from family squabbles, too.

By General Washington's time, the hunt

breakfast in Europe had hardened into a strict class ritual. America took a different tack. Of course, some hunts were rich, and some still are, but many hunts were not attended by people privileged with centuries of inherited wealth. You couldn't buy your way over a fence, Granny Hahn noted; even the richest person in the county on the best

horse still had to know how to fly over the obstacle. What mattered was whether you could ride, not how much money you had.

Today, as in Granny's time, a hunt breakfast might be served on a trestle table if no grand home is available. At such outdoor breakfasts, even the horses and hounds attend, if they don't exactly sit at the table. The hounds eat in the kennel, and the horses munch on their feed bags and there's usually a large tub full of carrots for them. My grandfather gave each hound a shot of whiskey after a hard hunt. He had a reputation for great hounds and, loving them as he did, he always tested the whiskey first for purity. Granny made certain to test before he did.

Though she loved these impromptu breakfasts as much as the grand affairs, Granny Hahn could never bring herself to serve a Brunswick stew off the back of a well-used pickup truck. No matter where or when the hunt took place, she always had a set table.

Tough as Granny could be about what was proper, I am grateful. She wanted things done to bring people together, to create harmony, and in her defense, she was not a snob. If you could do something useful in life, she liked you. If you rode well, she adored you.

For Granny, feeding others was not just

a form of hospitality but a form of respect. Anyone who hunted, groomed, walked puppies in the summer, anyone even tangentially involved in the hunt was welcome at her table. And if unexpected guests came along, she beamed, announcing, "My tablecloth is rubber. It will stretch to feed a few more."

Her age was irrelevant to her or me, her horse always perfectly groomed. She taught me to cast aside dreary quotidian cares and let it rip.

Granny Hahn could never bring herself to serve a Brunswick stew off the back of a pickup truck; she always had a set table

That formidable lady left us in the early 1960s, riding to the end but no longer jumping much. Or at least, not jumping when her children were looking. Granny was fearless. In her later years, often as the oldest person in the field, men in their prime struggled to keep up with her, trailing after her like a line of ducklings. In retrospect, I know that my attractive, athletic great-grandmother, life circumscribed by class and gender, found purpose and release in fox hunting and everything related to it—nothing more so

than those fine breakfasts.

It's there I remember Granny Hahn most vividly, at a table like the grand one that followed last November's opening hunt at the Oak Ridge Estate in Arrington, in central Virginia, where I'm the huntsman. It's my job to care for the horses and hounds after the hunt, so by the time I made it to the table, people were cleaned up and digging in. (Virginians are still more than capable of serving a Dijon-glazed ham with cloves, brown sugar, and sometimes a bit of spirits in the glaze.) Mimosas and bloody marys flowed freely. Everyone's blood was up, and war stories abounded, as well as too much flirtation. I thought of Granny's insistence on what was proper and the care that she put into her breakfasts.

From riding with her, I learned to face danger with aplomb. From breakfasting with her, I learned kindness. She often advised me, "Do it now, you're going to be dead a long time." As I am close to the age she was when I first truly remember her, this has resonance.

She also quoted from *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour*, an 1853 novel: "Women never look so well as when one comes in wet and dirty from hunting." Quite so. 🐾

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