

# JUGGED HARE

by J J Hahn

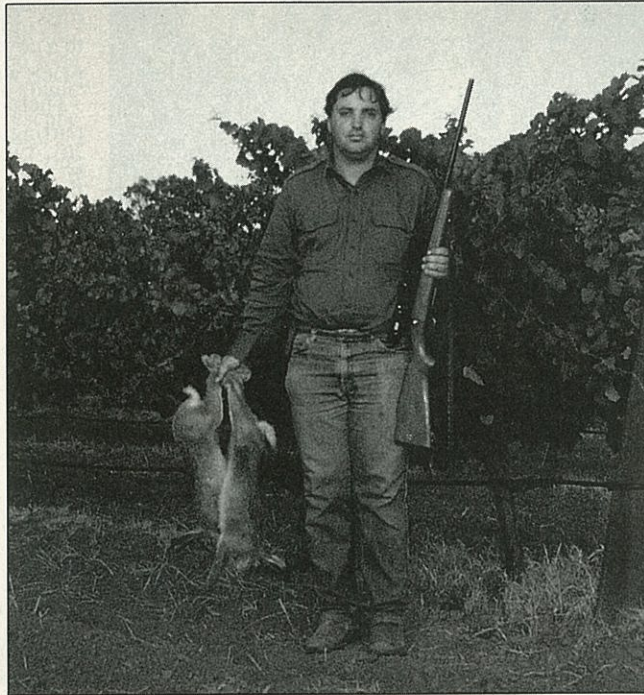
Having hunted in the vineyard for a couple of hours and only taking a solitary rabbit, this hare was unlucky and very unwise.

Earlier we had hunted him only to lose him in the leafy vine rows. Now he had the audacity (and foolishness) to romp around, about 300 metres away in clear sight of us. In the gloom of the fast approaching evening it demanded our attention. Paul, fetching his Tikka .17, began to stalk from the cover of the next vine row. Getting close, the wily hare not wanting to be added to the pot, made a run for it, resulting in a near miss on the run, then crossed several rows in an attempt to lose it, but being near a vehicle track, allowed easy pursuit. Sighting At about 90 metres it was cleanly dispatched by a 25gn Hornady hollow point in the head.

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The common European hare, *Lepus europeadus*, was introduced to Australia like his cousin, the rabbit, in the early 1870s. Fortunately the hare does not share his cousin's reproductive capacity. Also, I believe the hare is closer to a game animal. It is more difficult to hunt, it is relatively scarce, and becoming scarcer and it's meat is definitely more gamey. A hare is always a welcome addition to my game bag.

They can be found in a number of different places, but are primarily found in open cereal and grazing paddocks with some cover, perhaps along the fence lines. Here



The author with a brace of vine fed hares.

they are easy to "hunt" at night with the aid of a vehicle and spotlight. During daylight hours the situation certainly changes, one usually chances upon a hare underfoot which escapes unless one has a good dog and a fast shotgun. However this article deals with an unusual variation to the sport. That is, hunting hares in vineyards, in this case in the beautiful Barossa Valley.

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The Barossa Valley was named by Colo-

nel William Light after the area of Barossa in Andalusia, Spain. That valley of roses was where earlier in his career Light had fought under Wellington during the Napoleonic Wars. The new and beautiful valley covered with handsome blue and red gums abounded with kangaroos. Its rich soils grew grasses so high that a man on horseback was covered to his waist with dew. Today while the valley also has beautiful roses, it is for its vineyards and the fruit of the vine that it is well known.

Settled firstly in 1838, and largely with "Kavel's People", the immigrants were Prussian Lutherans fleeing from religious persecution and seeking economic advancement. Bringing traditions and the lifestyle of their country of birth, much of the heritage of the area owes its significance to these settlers.

Having tried in vain to farm the traditional crops of eastern Germany, eventually they hit upon a winner in vines. Today the valley and surrounding areas are covered with lush vineyards.

The valley of the North Para River forms the core of the Barossa. In the north, a large alluvial river plain surrounded by low hills narrows in the south with rolling hills eventually squeezing the river out onto the Gawler plains and into the sea. The deep loamy river soils of the north, and the red-brown earths of the south, provide ideal growing conditions for vines. The Barossa and its ranges are known for



Typical vineyard scene in the Barossa, an area providing good sport.



quality of its shiraz, semillon and riesling wines. But other varieties, such as merlot, cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and the main popular grenache also thrive. Vineyards are made on the flat valley floor and also on the steep hillsides of the region. The vines are trained in long rows of vine bushes supported by wire. Pruned and trained while dormant in winter, cereal and other crops are grown between the vine rows, later ploughed-in to enrich the soil. At these times the vineyards are difficult to hunt, game having plenty of cover. As the weather warms, the new plantings are worked over soil provide rich pickings for hares as the succulent buds burst upwards. Later foxes feast on the sweet juices of the grape, as well as hunting the wild game of the valley and the not so wild game of the nearby farm houses.

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To hunt hares in a vineyard does not require any special equipment, but will involve particular strategies. Here it is more productive as the open ground between the rows gives them less chance to hide, and they are more easy to observe. The method is to walk along a vineyard's paddock or a vehicle track, downwind of the vine rows, and scanning down the rows with a pair of binoculars. A hare may be easily sighted if standing upright but more likely it will be low on the ground crouching in the shadows behind the vines or in a hollow. Vine rows can be quite long, up to several hundred metres, so once sighted it may be necessary to walk closer to the hare to take a shot. This may seem simple. Crossing to the next row you walk silently (easy if the vineyard has been recently worked) with light footfalls, and try to raise as little dust

as possible. What makes it more difficult is that grape vine leaves start a couple of feet above the ground. This means an alert hare may see you from a distance, and you will have to lie down and possibly crawl through the row to check on the hare. It may realise something is wrong and will flee, other times the hare will move position to feed and then it is necessary to relocate it. Once the hunter is within easy shooting distance it is a simple matter of a headshot. The most productive method is to use a good gun dog to scent the hares. A combination of the above method and a dog triples one's success.

Vineyards are a favourite habitat of hares because of their browsing habits. Primarily being vegetarians, they will feed on tender shoots and twigs, leaves and buds, especially grape vine buds, but they will also feed on bark, twigs and moss. If undisturbed they will cause considerable damage to nurseries, immature vineyards, orchards and crops. Mixed farming with a combination of vineyards, orchards, cereal paddocks and rough ground is hare heaven.

To equip yourself is relatively easy. An accurate small bore centrefire with a large power scope is ideal. A .17 is perfect, with a .22 centrefire, preferably a .22 Hornet or a .222, also being acceptable. I use a Remington 788 in .222 with a 3-9x Tasco scope. 45 gn Hornady soft points, loaded in front of 24.5 gns of Winchester 748 gives me an accurate but mild load of about 3000 fps. Paul shoots a Tikka 55 in .17 Remington with a 8x Weaver, 23 gns of Mulwex 2208 pushing a 25 gn Hornady HP out at 4000 fps. Definitely a hot hare killer.

Many people use a .22 rimfire, however

I believe .22s in general are unsuitable because of their limited range. Usually hares are a good 100 metres away, however a .22 will suffice if the distance can be closed. But more importantly, the slow .22 bullet has a nasty habit of ricocheting. Vineyards are usually located in closely settled regions, so this is taboo. A projectile fired from .17 or a .22 centrefire will normally shatter, though care must be taken to ensure one has an adequate backdrop.

Sometimes only a shotgun is safe, which can be handy if a hare is sighted close to a track as he will usually bolt on sight. At full speed in a vineyard it is very spectacular, the hare tumbling head over heels for two to three rows raising a considerable amount of dust.

A Harris bipod is very useful, leading to accurate head shots. I used one to clear a vineyard of a dozen hares, all the shots being head or neck shots, with no misses. A good pair of 8x or larger binoculars is essential. One can "scope" the rows, but this eventually strains the arms, and is not advisable. What if someone is at the other end? No one wants a rifle pointed at them.

If you have time to observe you will find hares are creatures of habit. It is possible to know where to locate them at different times of the day. Hares tend to occupy a fairly small territory, usually only a hectare or two. They are mainly active at dusk, and at night, however they will move during the day in a habitual manner. Most advantageous is to find their squats. A hare's squat is its resting and hiding place, temporary or permanent. It may be almost completely open, a depression in the ground evidenced by the hare's sign and markings, or it may be covered with grass and vegetation.



Squats can be very hard to find. Only recently did I find one. Driving along a road I noticed a hare dash out of a vineyard, perhaps frightened by a worker, and enter the tangle of grass and weeds alongside a noisy road. I ventured down to find it but even after two minutes of careful searching, no hare. Only by using a stick did I manage to flush the doe hare having been within three metres of the her most of the time. This squat was a tunnel of weeds doubled over. I mentally filed away the location for future reference.

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The hunt described earlier started badly. The evening's overcast sky contributed to the humid weather, drizzle falling sporadically blocking much of the available light and considerably foreshortening shooting time. Seeing that my hunting companion Paul had his .17, I chose my Spanish Azhur 12 bore game gun with 34 gn loads of number 4s.

Crossing the railway line behind the farmhouse, we scouted a fruit orchard and a hill vineyard without success. The North Para River plain of several kilometres of vineyards was to be our next hunting ground. A weed choked vineyard, not tended as it was due to be pulled out, offered hope of a fox. Several days earlier during the vintage (grape picking) season I had sighted a fox hiding in the weeds.

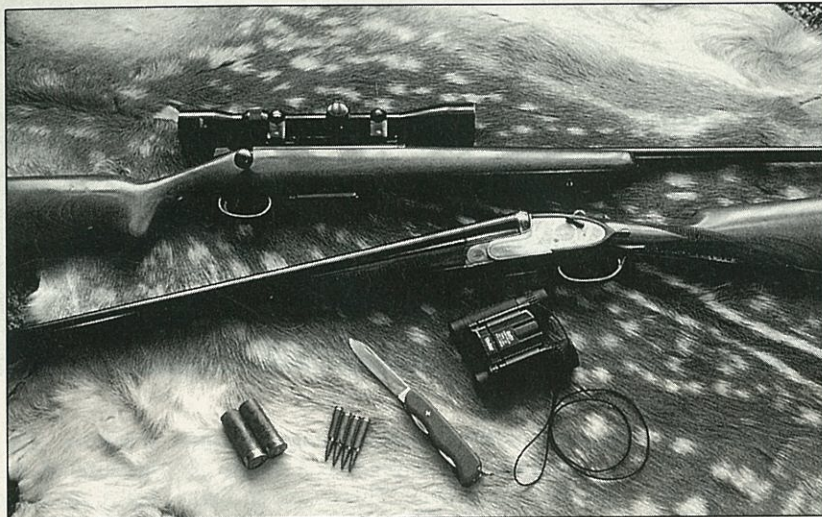
A disused vineyard, overgrown with wild fruit, sun ripened among crispy yellowed leaves, will draw foxes like a magnet. Having cover and prey close at hand, the warm sweet juices draw a fox, like a wine connoisseur to a late harvest botrytis semillon but the vineyard gives cover to the fox so it does for the hunter. The unaware, or perhaps even inebriated fox will be taken if one is quick.

We walked the overgrown vineyard abreast in the hope of flushing the fox. No fox, but by now the drizzle had turned into light rain. I missed my dog, a fox terrier mongrel who was useful for locating foxes and hares in vineyards. Since his death the numbers of game that I find has dropped considerably.

We continued on to my Uncle's vineyard next door. Walking along the headland, we sighted a hare about fifty yards away. Off he went to the right, I stayed put. Hares have a tactic of avoiding their pursuers by running off in one direction for two or three rows and then turning to the

opposite direction. Here if in range a shotgun is useful as they cross back in front of you. Tonight the hare did not follow this tactic. He failed to cross the row in front of us so we lost him.

The next vineyard bore fruit; a crouching rabbit sighted and quickly shot at about 90 metres. A nearby rabbit warren on the hill provides this quarry; the rabbits ven-



The tools of the trade.

turing to feed in the rich pickings of the vineyard. A fox was also heard barking in the distance. Most likely he would be hunting along the river, eventually to nose around the nearby farmhouses after dark, looking for easier domestic quarry.

By now soaked through, we headed back to the vehicle checking out the vineyard in which we had earlier sighted the hare. Meeting up with my Uncle astride his motorbike we stopped for a chat and unexpectedly finally scored — which is where we came in.

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The next evening I set out, wanting to clear some young shiraz vines which had been showing the effects of the hare's nightly depredations. The North Para River flows through the middle of my family's farm. Still flowing after the winter rains, a couple of black ducks rose from a pool in a considerable commotion of quacking and beating wings. Carrying my .222 tonight instead of the 12 bore they were safe, plus it was out of season.

My strategy would be to walk along the high river bank in order to see down the immature and mature vine rows. The wind would not be a major problem as it would be quartering away. No hares sighted, but I was certain there would be at least two in the vineyard.

Crossing the private road again, I walked to the north. One half of the vineyard would not be productive, my scent blow-

ing ahead of me, but the other half was worth looking at. Travelling only about ten rows I sighted a hare at the other end. He was squatting down and didn't seem aware of my presence. Hurriedly moving out of his vision, I crouched, and then crawled to look at him. He was up and moving through the next row. He must have seen me earlier. He stopped to look to see if I was following and I managed to get off a shot taking him in the head. Retrieving a good sized buck I returned to the previous vineyard to try again.

Starting from the east I moved west along the headland. There was another hare, this time a good distance away, perhaps 250 metres. It moved slowly while feeding on some thistles. The shot was a clean miss, the hare hightailing it through the rows. Running, I found him crossing the newly planted vines and optimistically fired again. This of course only served to speed him.

I returned again to the newly planted vineyard and found another hare (or was it the same one?) crossing the fenceline from the paddock back into the vineyard. As it paused, this time taking no chances, I despatched the animal cleanly.

The Barossa contains a variety of game to hunt. Other than the hares of the field and vineyard, numerous rabbits inhabit the narrow creeks and valleys. Foxes abound, often close to man. The North Para River, the River Light and their tributaries support a good population of waterfowl, predominantly black duck with the occasional grey teal. On the numerous farm dams of the ranges, wood duck can be found in considerable numbers, though approaching two hundred wary eyes can be difficult. Stubble quail, while not common, can be found passing through, so hunt them while you can. Other than euros and grey roos on permit, the only medium sized game is a small herd of fallow deer and scattered pockets of feral goats.

Hunting in vineyards provides an unusual diversion. The hunting is certainly not hard, but who wants to be always slugging across hot deserts or climbing freezing mountains? But in the cold nothing beats a good Barossa port with a roaring log fire to warm oneself up with after a successful hunt.

And now to our juggled hare recipe.

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# Recipe

## Ingredients

- 1 hare skinned & cut into convenient pieces
  - 2 slices bacon
- 300 ml red wine - a good Barossa Shiraz or Cabernet Sauvignon is ideal
  - 4 tablespoons oil
  - 1½ teaspoons dried oregano
  - 1 onion, peeled and sliced finely
    - 2 bay leaves
    - 4 cloves
    - salt & pepper
  - 3 carrots, peeled & sliced
  - 3 sticks celery, sliced
- 1 orange - squeeze the juice and grate the rind
  - 600 ml beef stock
  - 20 gms cornflour
  - 2 tablespoons cranberry jelly
  - 4 tablespoons port or red wine
- hare's blood - a freshly shot hare's lungs will flood with blood this may be drained to use in the recipe
  - sprigs of parsley to garnish

### Stuffing balls

- 75 gms fresh breadcrumbs
- 2 sticks celery, finely chopped
- 1 onion, peeled and finely chopped
- 1 apple, peeled, cored and grated
  - 1 egg - beaten
- grated rind of 1 lemon or orange
  - 1 teaspoon lemon juice

### Steps

Mix the red wine, half the oil, oregano, sliced onion, bay leaves, cloves and salt and pepper in a bowl. Add the hare, cover and leave to marinate for at least half a day. Turn several times. Remove the hare and dry. Brown the pieces of hare and the bacon in the remaining oil in a frying pan. Place the hare and bacon in a casserole dish.

Using a pan, add the marinade, celery, carrots, grated orange rind and juice, stock and seasoning and bring to the boil. Pour over the hare in the casserole and cover.

Cook in the oven for about three hours until very tender (160 deg. C/325 deg. F)

Strain off the cooking juices, removing the bay leaves and

put the juices into a saucepan. Thicken the juices with the cornflour blended with a little cold water. Add the cranberry jelly and port. Bring back to the boil, then blend a little of the sauce with the hare's blood (optional) and stir back into the sauce. The sauce mustn't be allowed to boil after adding the blood or it will curdle.

Pour the sauce over the hare. Garnish with parsley and the stuffing balls.

To make the stuffing balls, mix all the ingredients listed above and form into small balls about 4cm wide. Place on a greased baking sheet and cook alongside the hare for about the last half hour. Serves six persons.