

THE SUNDAY TIMES

STYLE

18/10
2009

THE £100M WOMAN

STILETTOS, SCANDAL AND
SHAGPILE: THE BLOCKBUSTER
WORLD OF TAMARA MELLON

PLUS WHAT TO
WEAR TO WORK
6 PAGES OF BRILLIANT
OFFICE CHIC

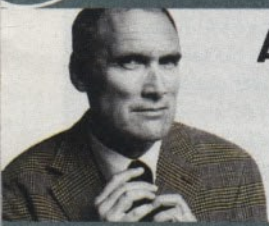
MURDER AT THE MANOR
STRANGE GOINGS ON AT
BRITAIN'S BLINGEST SHOOT

HIPPIE DELUXE
THE NEW HOME STORE YOU
WON'T BE ABLE TO RESIST





TABLE TALK



AA GILL

It's been a spectacular autumn for the rowan, glaucous clusters of orange and scarlet berries bending the neatly round boughs. The rowan can find itself a bed in the most meagre of welcomes, clinging to the side of a waterfall, bent over a crack in the granite or swarming along the side of roads and the edges of lochs. I have never seen them as ruddily effulgent as they are this year. They, the toothless cackling hunchback soothsaying they, say a heavy crop of rowans presages a hard winter. All over northern Europe, the rowan is thought to be a magical tree. In England, you automatically call it a mountain ash, though it's not related to the ash. It's actually an aunt of the rose. It's also called the wiccan tree. Or witchbane. The Finnish creation myth has the rowan being shagged by thunder to make the world. Rowans are a pathfinder species for the old Caledonian forest. Fast-growing, hardy, they're found round prehistoric stone circles and tors, where they ward off evil. In Scotland, they're placed in churchyards. You plant one outside your front door. Crosses, milk churns and witches' wands are whittled from rowan. Highland women would wear necklaces of their berries strung on red thread. Sprigs were tied to the halters of horses and the tails of cattle at Beltane. Runes were

carved in rowan. I particularly love rowan jelly. It has a deep and long bitterness. It is the taste of the country and the folk of the north. Best if it's made with apple and eaten with venison.

I've been stalking the red deer. When we shoot them and their livers are checked, they're taken away for a prewar pittance by a game dealer, who ships them to the continent. Scandinavians and Germans eat lots of venison. Here, we eat very little, but Scotland is overrun with wild deer. The national herd grows larger and smaller. More deer, but, individually, slighter. They need culling. They need eating, but chefs have a squeamish, timorous distaste for the stag.

There's a lot of received mouth-to-mouth kitchen nonsense talked about marinating for days, cooking for hours, barding and bonding, stuffing and stewing. If you do see venison on the menu, more than likely it'll be a roe doe from a Hampshire farm. Cooks who put a premium on wild bass and salmon will go for the battery version of the wildest of all our native creatures. Chefs want venison that comes in small, neat cuts, to cook it like lamb. Then add a chestnut and a plum, then add a premium. Almost everything they tell you about red deer is the opposite of the truth. Middle-aged stag is particularly good, but it needs to be hung long, like beef, then roasted fast. Chefs need to get over their twee comfort and start looking at meat that isn't a bland canvas for their decoration and twists.

I spent one night in Edinburgh on my way south. I drove down from Inverness and was starting again for London at three in the morning. I was starving. Emma, my hostess, suggested we go to the Kitchen, in Leith. This is the one widely reckoned restaurant in Edinburgh I haven't been to before. Mostly because I couldn't get a table. And because it's in Leith. I have an old prejudice about Edinburgh's docks. Like wharfs all over the country, Leith has been pomaded and neutered, its cobbles polished, its warehouses bijou'd. Old ports, the posterns and portals of gold and garbage, the warrens of violence and prostitution, drunkenness and darkness and slime, are now scrubbed up to look like born-again gangsters

THE KITCHIN ★★★★★

78 COMMERCIAL QUAY, EDINBURGH; 0131 555 1755. TUE-THU, 12.30PM-1.45PM, 6.45PM-10PM. FRI, SAT, 12.30PM-2PM, 6.45PM-10.30PM

★★★★ WINNIE THE WITCH ★★★★★ WHITE WITCH ★★★ WITCH? CAR ★★ WICKED WITCH ★ BLAIR WITCH