

AN UNLIKELY AMBASSADOR

STEVE RINELLA
shares the spiritual
as well as material
bounty of the
wild world.

Story by SCOTT LINDEN

Itae pla nobite pa diciam, in p
os et officium sed eaquam,
simincitam, tem ad mo con
et aut repra ium in reic torer



His mission? Showing why eating what you shoot, catch, and forage is the respectful and primordial way to relate to the outdoors. He celebrates wild food, extending a bloody hand to anyone seeking a personal connection to the natural world.

REAL DEAL

You can hear the flannel in his voice, a vestige of Rinella’s rural Michigan upbringing hunting and fishing alongside his father and brothers. But beneath the blue collar is a shaman who devotes considerable thought to what he does and why. Even sometime detractor, website The Federalist lauded Rinella’s sleeves-rolled-up approach: “Rinella has worked to soften the public perception of (hunting), mixing it with a reverence for nature, a desire to protect the habitats of his prey, and a deep respect for the animals he harvests to feed himself and his family.” Steve Rinella cracks a beer, builds a campfire, and puts his arm around anyone willing to get dirty, bridging philosophical divides.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Caption info mo tentia venda volorehent, samser sperum aliam, sumis autessum quianda eperundunt facculpa volorehendus dolut omnisquat doluptatur audae parum inciam, sitat autempo rectas acearum a vendam, idus eumet as dustio cus rest eum fuga. Igent et, core pro ilit

magnates built this country with steel and railroads, real estate, oil, automobiles, and technology. But the pioneering spirit didn’t die with the horseless carriage or the silicon chip. Unlikely as it may seem, among the newpantheonofstreamingkingsandpodcastprincesis Steve Rinella. He’s interpreting a niche topic—hunting and eating the stuff he kills—for a massive, diverse community of hipsters and foodies, while retaining the undying loyalty of a flannel-wearing core constituency of sportsmen and women.

Rinella’s *MeatEater* brand rides the top of the sports-podcast charts with over 2.5 million downloads per month, his television series enjoys a massive Netflix following, he’s spawned a half-dozen other podcasts, six books, and a growing line of products. Hunting participation is a sliver-of-a-slice of the population (about four percent), but Rinella has thrown the tent flap wide open, unabashedly welcoming “clean” food aficionados, couch potatoes, environmentalists, and adventure seekers with his down-home approach to the most basic of pursuits—feeding the tribe.

THE EMPIRE

Rinella and his team of 120 acolytes testify via the flagship television series, namesake podcast and six others, six (and soon to be five more) books, and a substantive YouTube, web, and social media presence.

The Netflix series devotes one-third of each episode to care, preparation, and feasting on his quarry, a message critical to his mission. Stunning landscapes and adrenaline-pumping stalks on game keep viewers on the edge of their recliners. In whispers so as not to spook his quarry, he conveys the meaning of a hunt as much as the end game of meat in the pot.

Podcasts are a mob scene, going down rabbit holes and debating everything from feudal relationships to losing your tortoises in a divorce, along with hunting-fishing-gathering. Listening feels like eavesdropping on a bunch of guys at the next tavern table, where we learn just enough from folks just a bit smarter than us. The company has spun off a half-dozen others with titles like *Wired to Hunt*, *Bear Grease*, and a now-weekly trivia podcast that is the jeans-and-boots version of *Jeopardy*.

Thought-provoking online essays and videos are balanced by practical tips on everything from raising sheep to catching walleyes. A sophisticated social media presence ensures the digital world knows what the *MeatEater* team is up to, from slogging through beaver ponds, to kitchen tips and tactics.

Rinella’s vision runs counter to most other “creatives” in the insular hook-and-bullet crowd. He says he rarely watches other hunting shows or reads the magazines. “I’m careful about what I allow into my brain, have always tried to find my inspirations far removed from my particular genre,” he says. His me-time reading is “from people I regard in the discipline (literature) not in the genre.”

MeatEater’s philosophical rubber meets the commercial road in recent ventures into what Rinella calls “brand integration,” fueled by funding from The Chernin Group. In recent years, Chernin poured \$50 million into the franchise, of which it’s a majority stakeholder. Within days of acquiring apparel company First Light, *MeatEater* advertising brought in more than two million in sales. The company sold over 60 percent of its first batch of whiskey in the first three days, and *The MeatEater Fish & Game Cookbook* reached the number-10 most-sold book in the nonfiction category on *Amazon Charts*. Recent extensions include a tactical gear maker, cooking spices, and game calls. In three years, *MeatEater* revenue has more than tripled.

Some kids want to grow up to be astronauts. Rinella aspired to life as a professional trapper, turning muskrats and beavers into the makings for hats and coats. Through design and default, savvy decision-making, academic and school-of-hard-knocks efforts he adjusted his sights, right when “content creation” became a thing.

He’s been called “an environmentalist with a gun,” an apt description of a man who balances the sacred act of hunting for food with the gratitude and awe that comes with that responsibility. As ifbellied up to the bar, he preaches a holistic way of looking at the hunt, both practical and emotional. Panting his way up a mountain, he conveys passion for the place, respect for his quarry, and reverence for the act, reminding viewers that hunting is nourishment for both body and soul. “I was a tree hugger without recognizing it. So are many, not all, but many hunters and anglers. I think that learning to articulate how you really feel about it will help you define what exactly you owe to it,” Rinella says. A conversation

Caption info mo t ia venda volorehent, samser sperum aliam, sumis autesuiaanda eperundunt facculpa volorehendus dolut omnisquat doluptatur audae parum inciam, sitat autempo rectas



His mission? Showing why eating what you shoot, catch, and forage is the respectful and primordial way to relate to the outdoors.



with him runs deep into philosophy, a realm that gets short shrift in an industry where “how-to” dominates pages and air time.

THE EVOLUTION

Rinella’s rise to prominence didn’t come quite as naturally as his love of woods and water. Team members get plenty of credit (key players are CEO Dan Chumbler, TV director/producer Janis Putelis, and director of conservation Ryan “Cal” Callahan). They complement his evangelism for Mom Nature, helping him navigate from freelance writing and book authorship to media juggernaut.

High-profile guests also help establish his bonafides in the digital universe, from podcasting’s 800-pound gorilla Joe Rogan (Rinella taught him to shoot and hunt on TV) to Fox News commentator Tucker Carlson.

MeatEater is first and foremost a content factory, and Rinella is the point of the creative spear. Callahan says he leads by example, “You just don’t get around somebody who works as hard as him. It’s like staring up at a mountain,” he says of Rinella’s work ethic.

But it hasn’t been all 50-yard ‘gimme’ shots. “For the first five years of MeatEater, it was just every day trying to make things happen, you know,

without long term strategy. I eventually met people who were very interested in nascent, emerging digital media properties,” Rinella recalls.

Stars aligned when Rinella found The Chernin Group. The company had been buying all or part of brands from Barstool Sports to Headspace, formerly owned pieces of Twitter and Pandora, and now, most of MeatEater. The linkage has not been without controversy. Founder Peter Chernin is a financial supporter of Democratic causes, including gun control measures. Both sides say it’s an arms-length business relationship, and while Chernin acquired a majority interest in the company in 2019, Rinella retained creative control of all content.

When the acquisition drew flak, Rinella shoots back: “I have spent my entire career working in the media space with people who have little or no familiarity with our lifestyle and it’s a point of pride that I have successfully put out the content and messaging that I want to put out.” To date, he’s walked his talk.

Outside funding also helps spread his big-tent philosophy farther afield: “If we’re going to protect the future of hunting and the shooting sports, we have to grow them beyond the same base that we currently have.”



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Caption info mo tentia venda vol orehent, samser spe rum aliam, sumis autessum quianda eperundunt facculpa volorehendus dolut omnisquat doluptatur audae parum inciam, sitat autempo rectas acearum a vendam, idus eumet as dustio cus rest eum fuga. lgent et, core pro ilit

THE PERSON, THE FUTURE

MeatEater’s future includes more books, podcasts, and acquisitions fueled by Rinella’s ability to deftly straddle cultural divides...quite a stretch for a guy who planned a life tramping the woods in search of furs and the occasional moose to shoot. But he takes seriously his accidental role of ambassador of all things natural, to a receptive and growing audience.

Rinella’s first book was about a solo winter hunt for Alaska bison. It’s an apt metaphor for his formative media years: Don Quixote with a rifle, astride a tottering donkey in a harsh, unforgiving environment, tilting at perceptual windmills. Unlike the hapless character in Cervantes’ novel, he has prevailed due to tenacity, a thorough grounding in history and literature, and an unrelenting desire to share the spiritual as well as material bounty of the wild world. &



SAVE THE PLACE— SAVE THE WILDLIFE

Not only is Steve Rinella a force of nature, he is a force for nature. A brother’s gift of Aldo Leopold’s A Sand County Almanac “was the beginning of my conservation awakening,” which continues to this day he says. Since his literary epiphany, he’s pulled together the people to tackle a number of causes, led by MeatEater Director of Conservation Ryan “Cal” Callahan.

Callahan sees his job as an extension of Rinella, seeking out worthy causes and groups, connecting with others that have time, talent, and “treasure,” as he puts it—cash. Most of their work focuses on public access, Callahan says, complemented by seasonal and short-term fundraising in their online store through donations of sale proceeds.

On the sometime-contentious topic of “conservation” versus “environmentalism,” he’s pragmatic: “Conservation is environmentalism in many respects, it’s just semantics. A lot of our end goals are the same, we’d like to see clean air and clean water, healthy wildlife habitat, abundant wildlife resources, right? If there’s a difference, it’s like arguing about how many angels fit on the head of a pin.”

While he may have been coerced into it, he’s since embraced the conservation ethos, particularly the belief that if we re-build it (the habitat), they will come (wildlife). Rinella has finessed hunting, fishing, and foraging into an inclusive, soup-to-nuts (pun intended) art form, living in harmony with the natural world.

Learn more: themeateater.com and search “MeatEater Gives.”