

Your Man in

La Mancha

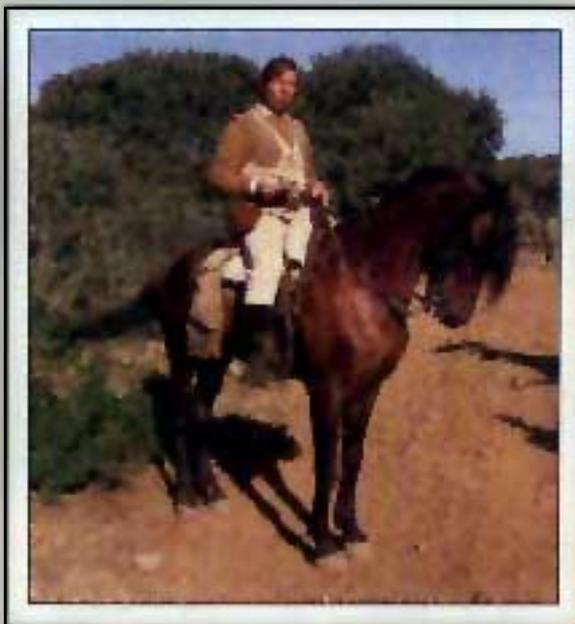
BRUCE BUCK

Basquing in the glory of Spanish redlegs

Like everyone else in the crowd, the dark-haired young Basque wore white trousers and a white shirt punctuated by a crimson sash. At that particular moment, however, he stood out from the others because he was airborne. Then he was lost to sight as he fell back into the agitated throng. The pushing and jostling became more intense as a tremor went through the crowd. It had started. Men began shouting and running past me. They looked back over their shoulders, their faces contorted in grimaces of glee and fear. The mass of people in front parted like a school of minnows before a predator, and I stood alone. I saw my first huge black Miura fighting bull at just about the same time he saw me. Welcome to Spain. Hemingway, I was soon to learn, got it wrong: You don't run with the bulls. You run from them.

That was a long time ago. My recent trip to Spain involved less bull and more birds. It started at last fall's Vintage Cup, in Millbrook, New York. Gun lust caused me to abandon the sanctuary of the Shooting Sportsman booth and brave the temptations of the vendors. On the way to certain destitution, I stopped to chat with a pleasant young Spaniard who was

offering driven red-legged partridge (*perdiz*) shooting at La Nava, his family's estate in Spain. It was in Castilla la Mancha, the windmill battleground of fabled Don Quixote. Javier Medem told me of the history of La Nava and of the



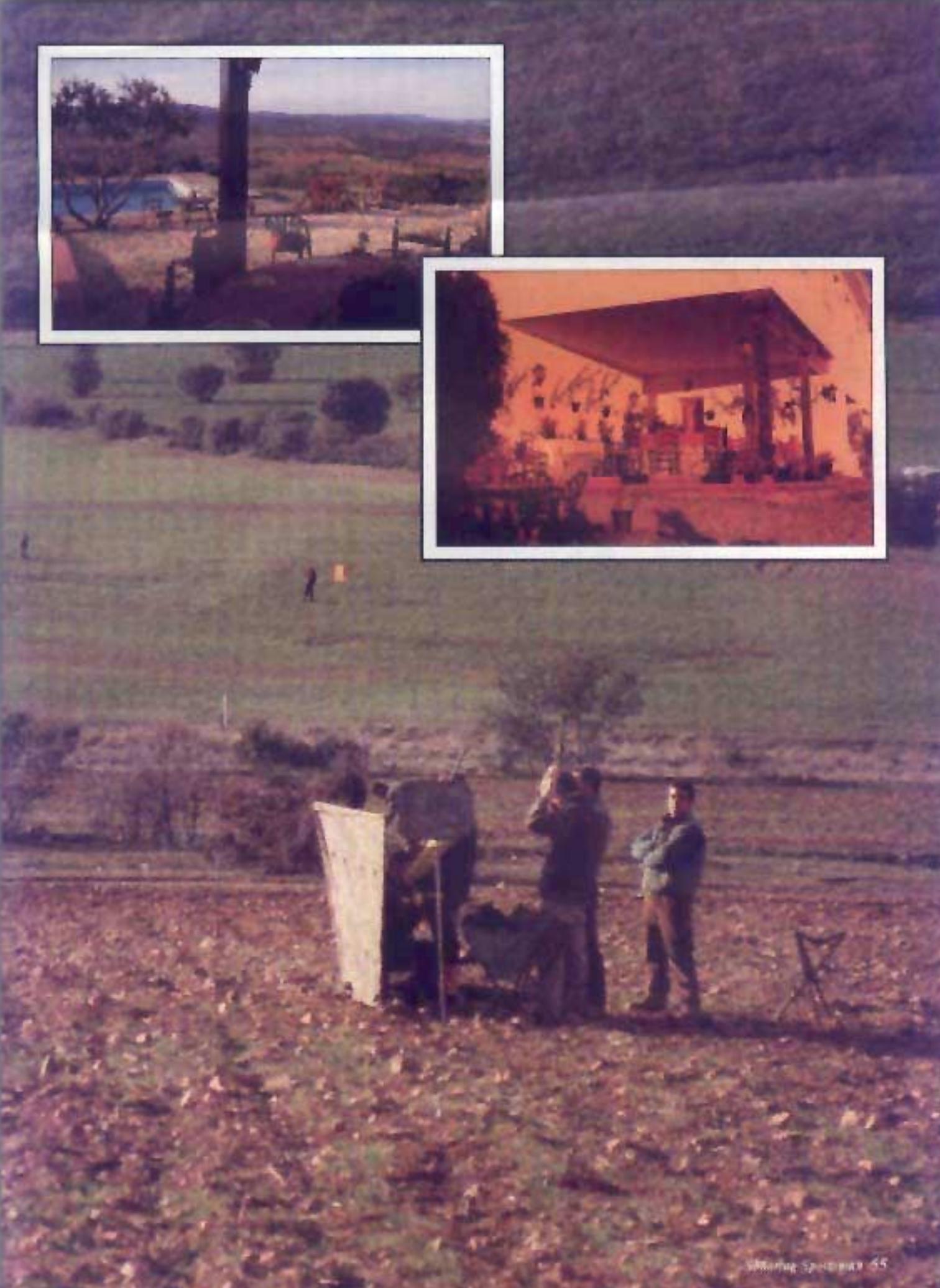
Javier Medem (above) heads up the shooting at La Nava, his family's glorious Spanish estate that offers driven red-legged partridge on more than 50,000 acres of land.

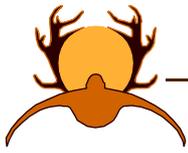
kings, princes and world leaders who have shot there. He talked of partridge flooding over the butts, of the quick exchange of hot guns, of sumptuous meals in the field, of panoramic views of the Spanish countryside. No siren ever sang sweeter to a more willing Odysseus.

Javier loaned me a magnificent three-book set called *Perdiz en Ojeo* (Driven Partridge), written by his father, Roberto. Spain's foremost driven-partridge authority, Señor Medem wrote of the hundred-year history of the sport and his participation in it. The books had hundreds of photographs. There were game cards showing fantastic bags from the turn of the past century, black & whites of an enthusiastic Franco shooting with his entourage, and modern photos of Europe's royalty disporting themselves.

Much of that shooting was at La Nava.

I just had to go. It was a dream trip and would finally be the honeymoon my wife, Rebecca, and I had never had.



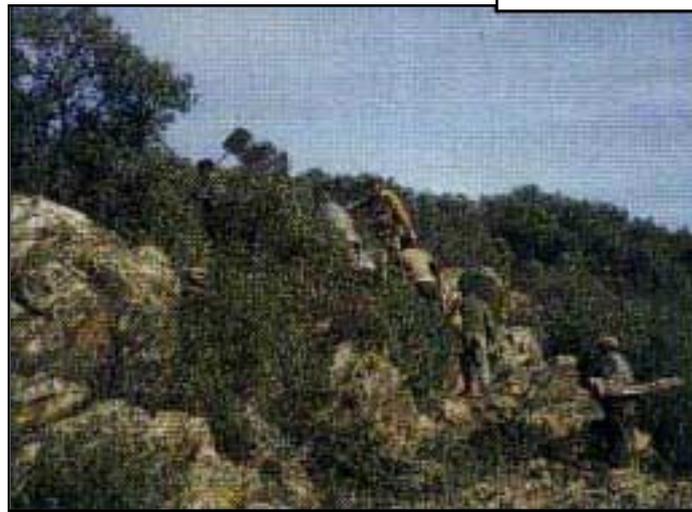


It was night this past February as the big chauffeured Mercedes drove us up the mile-long road to the country house. Flaming torches lit the entire drive as well as the courtyard. A half-dozen of La Nava's uniformed white-gloved staff were waiting patiently outside the front door for us as Javier stepped forward to bid us welcome.

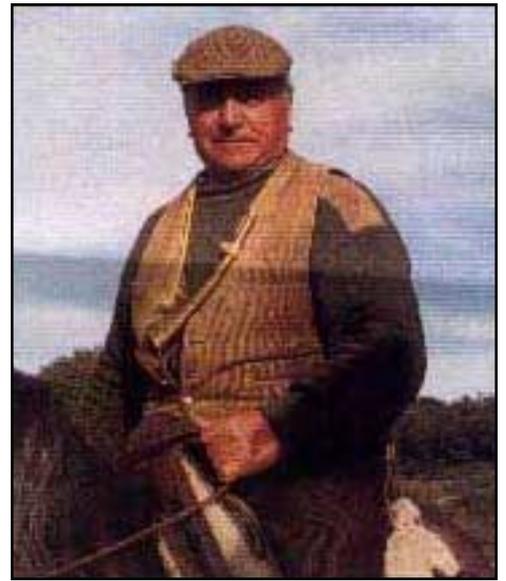
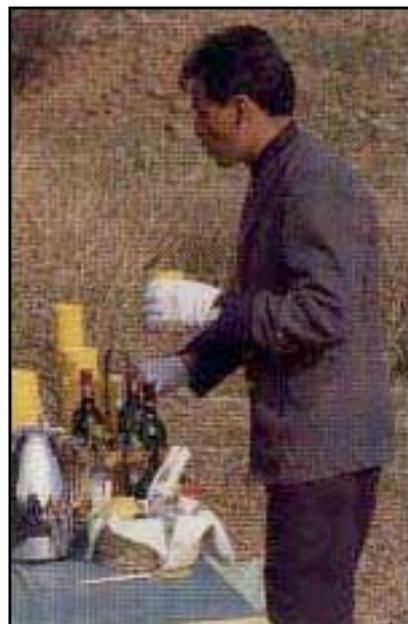
Over a late dinner of fettuccine Alfredo with caviar and whole fresh Mediterranean flounder, we were introduced to the Spanish aristocrats and businessmen, the Portuguese bankers and the French industrialists who were to constitute the line. Enthusiastic conversation about partridge flowed in four languages.

Midnight arrived before Rebecca and I could take our leave and retire. Our suite, one of a dozen in La Nava's main house, was carefully decorated with many Medem family photographs showing a toddling Javier with his brothers, sisters and nannies. It was as comfortable as a home, though I must admit that my home lacks the opulent black Castile soap and gold-plated faucets we found there.

In the morning we awoke to sun streaming through a window that looked out over an entire valley. It was magnificent. There was another building in sight. La Nava is a classic southern Spanish finca (working estate) of choppy brush-covered hills and long vistas. The family owns



La Nava's drivers (above) work hard to produce some of the best birds in Spain while the uniformed staff caters between-drive meals in the field.



or leases more than 50,000 acres of land. Though the area is dry, olives and some other crops prosper amid the rugged red-rock hillsides. The red-legged partridge think it is paradise. So did we.

Alectoris rufa intercedens is similar to a chukar is size and appearance. The annual cycle at La Nava starts with about 100,000 birds. During the October-to-February season the birds are shot down to about 20,000. The wild birds breed back to about 60,000 by spring. Like chukar but unlike British red

grouse, Spanish partridge breed well in captivity. The wild population is augmented by another 40,000 purchased birds in July. Then the training starts. Like pheasants, redlegs are no fools. They would rather run than fly. La Nava has the reputation of producing some of the best birds in Spain, in part because Javier takes certain steps to make sure that they will fly, and fly fast. When the birds are young, feeders are placed on the ground throughout the property so the chicks can walk to feed. As the birds mature, the feeders are raised off the ground so that a bird has to fly if it wants to eat.

The birds are even exercised. Prior to La Nava's shooting season, the birds are driven by men on horseback, mimicking the drives they will make



tridge on a single drive. The record for a line is 800 birds in one drive. After breakfast we stood about in the courtyard chatting as the drivers got their gear together and clambered into the backs of the trucks. This was the last shoot of the year and everyone was in high spirits. It had been a great season. The Labs ran about offering undying

red roads, past olive groves and entire fields of red rocks the size of softballs. Partridge were all over the place. Every now and then one would run across the road in front of the truck as though baiting us. Their turn would come. At the beginning of each drive our secretarios built a blind or added a few extra branches to one that was already there. Then they set out the panatallas. These are metal shields that look like giant lollipops two feet in diameter on six-foot sticks. One is placed at each side of the butt. Not only does this arrangement stop you from swinging the line on low birds, it also offers some protection if a nearby gun isn't quite as careful. Spectators -and there usually is a bit of a gallery- stand behind. I noticed that the butt right in the center of our line was three times as wide as the others. Javier explained that royalty used it, and they required more space.

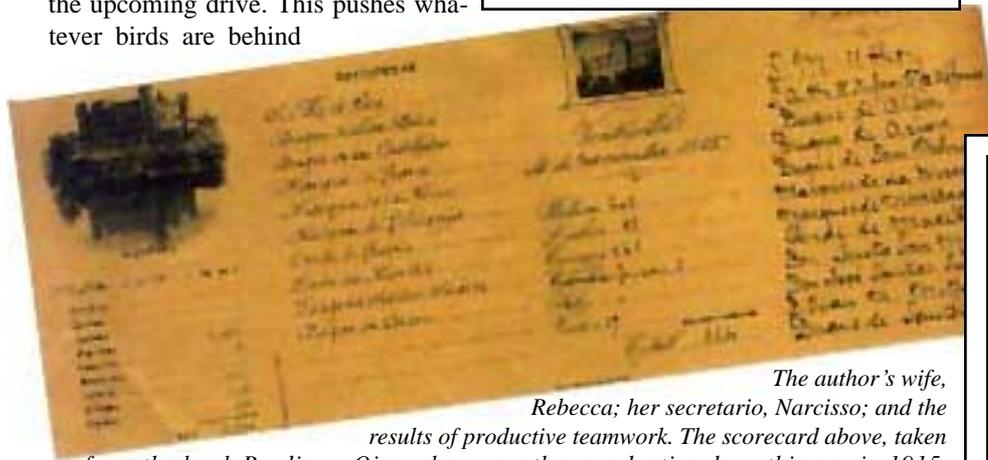
Occasionally a morning drive will face the sun. When this happens the secretarios carefully position a smaller panatalla in just such a way as to shadow the shooter's face. It is surprisingly effective, if you don't move around too much. Finally, in the center of the butt they lay down the esterilla, a round mat originally used for crushing olives. As long as you stay on the mat, you know you are in proper position within the butt.

Spanish loaders are called secretarios for a reason. They actually sit at a little collapsible metal desk. The shells are arrayed on the desktop for quick



when the season opens, in October. This is not only toughens the birds, it's also a dress rehearsal for the real thing. Early in the shooting season some of the birds are bound to be weaker than others and thus less challenging. On these early drives, fewer drivers are used so that the weaker birds can escape back through the gaps while the stronger, wilder birds flush over the guns. Everything is calculated to produce the fastest birds in the largest possible numbers.

To provide the masses of birds expected in first-class partridge shooting, La Nava sometimes surcharges the drive with a replayte, or false drive. While the guns are enjoying one of the innumerable catered meals afield, a small group of mounted drivers will reverse the upcoming drive. This pushes whatever birds are behind

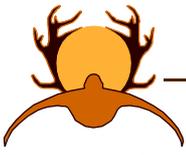


*The author's wife, Rebecca; her secretario, Narcisso; and the results of productive teamwork. The scorecard above, taken from the book *Perdiz en Ojeo*, shows another productive day -this one in 1915.*

the butts out to the front, where they will be driven back again in the real drive. The result can be incredible. Once one gifted shooter at La Nava took 180 par-

friendship in exchange for a biscuit, the way they always do. The secretarios bundled the sheaves of cased guns into the Land Rovers. We drove off on dusty





access and the second gun lies across the secretario's lap. Instead of standing off your right hip, as a loader in Scotland would, the secretario sits at the front right side of the butt with his back to the oncoming birds. As you exchange guns, you just hand it down to your right, never taking your eye off the birds. If you are using a trio of guns, as some shooters on our trip did, there is a second secretario at a desk facing the first. The second man is left-handed so that the muzzles of the gun being loaded are always outboard. I asked my secretario why they didn't do things the British way, with the loader behind. He said that the Spanish way is faster. Smiling, he added that it has to be because the Spanish shoot so many more birds than the English.

As in any driven shooting, tension builds as you wait for the first birds. Sometimes I could see a few partridge scurrying around underneath the olive trees or rough green chaparro bushes 50 yards out front. On the ground they looked big, but they flew past with the size and speed of a good fastball. They made almost the same hiss too.

Most often the line of butts was on the backside of a rocky hill, so that you and the birds would surprise each other when they came over. Once we were placed in front of a little brook near an old tree sheltering a hive of bees. The warm sun, the drone of the bees and the splash of the water took my mind off the shooting and probably saved the life of the first bird that rocketed over. They typically start as a trickle, one or two here and there; then the trickle becomes a stream; then a torrent. Steady shooting can last for 20 minutes in one drive. You don't notice the sweat in your eyes or the burned fingers of your left hand until later.

The perdiz come downhill at you, flying at 60 mph when it's calm, faster with the wind. They glide a bit and then beat their wings to a blur. Then they glide some more. They fly so hard that a bird shot dead in the air may not strike the ground for another 50 yards. Sometimes the birds are overwhelming and it looks like one of those movie scenes where

the spaceship accelerates through the stars and the white streaks come flashing toward you. These birds aren't like the canny grouse of Scotland, with all their last-minute jinking and swerving. The red-legged partridge is like the fighting bull. It bores in straight, hard and fast.

I was told that the great Spanish shots, called Los Galáticos and ranking up there with soccer stars in the pantheon of Iberian heroes, can plan ahead three or four shots at a time. It must be like an hyperspeed version of Minnesota Fats assaying the table. For my part, I concentrated on one bird at a time, willing to sacrifice a high score for some shred of dignity.

Score? Absolutely. The shooting was highly competitive among the group. Scorecards were eagerly compared at the end of each drive. It's pure predatory economics. When the shooting is let to a group at a given number of birds per day, the greater percentage of the birds you shoot, the more of your birds your friend are paying for. One secretario always keeps count. You can hear him in the background as you shoot: '...veintiuno, veintidós, veintitrés...'

During all of this, our loaders were a study of calm. Taciturn, polite and very efficient, my secretario had loaded for kings and commoners alike. Narcisso was never hurried. He never dropped a shell. Yet the second gun was always ready when I reached for it.

He wasn't so phlegmatic when my wife shot. Though a number of the ladies in long leather skirts and Hermès scarves were spectators, few shot. You could see Narcisso settle at his desk just a little as Rebecca stood to take the next drive. A single bird came through. It disappeared in a pillow cloud of feathers. She must have hit it with every pellet in the load. Narcisso uttered a quiet "Olé" and started to smile. As the birds began to come in earnest and more fell, the "Olés" became louder and the grin wider. At the end of the drive Javier came over and commented that I must have done well for he could hear the secretarios cheering, something they seldom do. I was so proud to tell him that it had been

my wife.

While Rebecca was shooting I was watching the others in action. Most of them seemed to use swing-through for the short shots and pull-away on the long ones. They all had a strong follow-through. Más mano izquierda! (More left hand!) After firing at one bird, the best shots turned their attention to the next, never stopping to watch the first fall. The goal is to shoot fast and often. The Spaniards, who made up the bulk of the party and were seasoned redleg guns, mostly shot best Iberian side-by-sides. I saw the names of Ugartechea, Garbi, AyA, Grulla and Arrieta. Opinion seemed divided between pairs and trios. Often the third gun was brought along but left cased as a spare. Twelves predominated, but there were a few 20s employed by the older gentlemen. I asked one young aristocrat which guns he preferred. He said he liked the Garbis. He added that his uncle (who shot in the center butt) had a number of Hollands but preferred the Spanish guns. He felt they were stronger than the English guns and stood up better to the heavy shooting of driven redlegs. One of the Portuguese used a pair of Fabrique Nationale B-25 O/Us, whereas a Frenchman liked his pair of Winchester 101s. Each drive cost him more in fees than that pair of guns was worth, but he shot them well and didn't want anything else.

Chokes are always a personal preference, but in this type of driven shooting identical chokes make sense. When the birds start pouring in, there isn't time to think about picking barrels. Shots ranged from 20 to 40 yards, so something in the Modified area was appropriate. We used Spanish shells with one ounce of No. 7 shot and modern plastic wads and hulls. They worked extremely well, and the mild recoil was welcome when things got active.

Dress in the field was less formal than in the UK because it was hotter. A vest, necktie and breeks or slacks worked nicely. A brimmed hat makes sense, especially in the early part of the season when the Spanish sun can earn its reputation. Mirrored wrap-around sunglasses

ses are an aesthetically painful but practical idea. Sometimes you have to shoot into the sun, and you must always protect against an errant pellet that gets past the panatalla. A heavy leather left glove is a must when the barrels heat up. I saw one gun using a ski glove. He'd been to La Nava before.

When the drive was over, men picked up the birds that had fallen in the open. Dogs busily nosed out the rest. There were several Labs and Javier's big liver-and-white springer, Taco. I was surprised to see a wirehaired dachshund industriously retrieving. No bird was overlooked. The lush dark meat of the partridge is highly prized as table fare, and the birds quickly disappeared into the game merchant's van.

During waking hours we either shot or ate. La Nava approaches dining in the same luxurious yet relaxed way it does everything else. At breakfast we were enveloped in the attar of freshly baked croissants mingled with the pungent sizzle of country bacon and fried eggs. These were washed down with fresh orange juice from the groves of Seville and thick chicory-laden Spanish coffee. After the first two drives of the day and again in the early afternoon, after the second pair of drives, we would break for a restorative little meal. Field rations, served up by the uniformed staff, always included a selection of local cheeses, exquisite Serrano ham from acorn-fed swine, plus some marinated beef tenderloin or other treat. To drink there was always a chilled *Épernay* champagne, a sturdy red wine from the nearby Valdepeñas vineyards, soft drinks and more of that coffee. The February sun was warm enough to be comfortable, but not too hot. We would lounge in our field chairs, discuss tactics and vow to shoot better once we had regained our strength.

After six drives the day's shooting ended at about 5 PM. We would retire to the main house for a late tea. Then it was upstairs to wash off the dust of the day, don a blazer, necktie and slacks, and report downstairs for cocktails. La Nava's living room is filled with dozens of big-game trophies from the monterí-

as held at other times of the year. There were magnificent racks from stags and arrays of huge tusks from wild boars. The exotic bird mounts added the air of a private museum, which it really was. As we sipped our drinks we could watch the sun set over the sharp hills to the west as the Spanish horizon caught fire.

Dinner, at 9, was as much French as Spanish. Exquisitely fresh Mediterranean seafood mingled with subtle French sauces and robust Spanish roasts. The highlight was La Nava's justly famous flambéed partridge. The moist dark meat of the bird was set off by the rich taste of a flamed cognac sauce and surrounded by braised grapes. It was ethereal. The culinary wit who opined, "If you can't cook, flambé" never tried La Nava's partridge. You would kill for food like that. As a matter of fact, we did.

The Medems went to extremes to please their guests. At dinner that first night my wife asked for some Perrier water. When told they didn't have that brand, she happily accepted something else. The next morning at breakfast a bottle of Perrier was at her place. I don't know where they found it, but someone drove a long time that night to get it.

Sooner or later cost must be mentioned. Shooting top-quality Spanish redlegs is not an inconsequential investment in gunning bliss. La Nava's fee for a minimum shooting day of 600 birds for a line of six to 10 guns is \$30,000 (per team). Figure on additional birds at \$50 each. Many groups will contract for the minimum at first, but increase it to 1,000 birds (\$50,000 per day) the next time. It is absolutely addictive. Although it can be the most expensive bird shooting in the world, you should cut the mattress for this trip. You will never be treated better by man or bird.

For many of us, a shoot like this may only come once in a lifetime. I can still remember the afternoon drives with little clouds of feathers slowly drifting in the warm breeze after the birds had come through. The feathers sometimes caught the late sun and glistened in flickering gold. You try to save memories

like that, safe from the greedy thief of time and age. There will come a time when memories are all I have. These will be enough.

Author's note: For more information on shooting driven redlegs in Spain, contact Javier Medem, La Nava, Lagasca 126 Bajo, 28006 Madrid, Spain; 01134-915-64-57-30; reservas@la-nava.com.
