



Pigeon

in a salt pastry crust, with a cabbage & mushroom fricassée

During the 16th and 17th centuries, squabs were often bred specially for the table, but this practice fell into decline many years ago. The current interest in good food means that squabs are now being bred again in England, and I find them as good as any from France. I think they are the most tender and flavourful of all poultry.

SERVES (YIELD): 4
DIFFICULTY RATING: ••
PREPARATION TIME: 1 HOUR 10 MINS
COOKING TIME: 55 MINS

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT:

Electric mixer with a dough hook, rolling pin, steamer

PLANNING AHEAD:

Order the squabs well in advance. Ask the butcher to hang them for 6 days to heighten the flavour before plucking and dressing. Ask him to cut off the feet, wings and necks, remove the wishbone (to make carving easier) and draw them, reserving the livers.

INGREDIENTS

For the pigeons

4 squab pigeons, cleaned, with livers
40g/1½oz clarified butter, plus extra to serve

For the salt pastry crust

1kg/2lb 3oz strong white flour, plus extra for dusting
600g/1lb 5oz fine table salt
9 free-range egg whites
300ml/10½fl oz water
8 cloves
2 free-range egg yolks
1 tbsp milk
pinch caster sugar
1 handful rock salt

For the sauce

20g/1oz unsalted butter
4 shallots, finely chopped
100g/3½ button mushrooms, finely sliced
1 tbsp olive oil
Reserved pigeon squab necks and wings (see above)
4 tbsp dry Madeira wine
100ml/3½fl oz brown chicken stock
salt and freshly ground black pepper

METHOD

For the pigeons

1 For the squab pigeons, singe off any remaining feathers or stubble by turning the pigeons over an open flame (use long heatproof tongs to do this). Chop off the neck bones and wings (trimming as close to the breast as possible) and reserve for making the sauce. Remove the wishbones to make carving easier.

2 Heat the clarified butter in a pan and sear the pigeons for 2-3 minutes on all sides, or until golden-brown all over (*1). Set aside. You do not need to season the birds at this stage as the salt crust pastry will season the meat as it cooks.

For the salt crust

1 For the salt pastry crust, combine the flour, salt, egg whites and water in an electric mixer fitted with a dough hook. Mix on a slow speed for 1-2 minutes, then scrape down the sides with a spatula. Turn the mixer back on and mix for 5-7 more minutes, or until the dough starts to come away from the sides of the bowl.

2 Knead lightly with your hands, then divide the dough into four equal pieces and wrap separately in cling film. Chill in the fridge for 20 minutes.

3 After 20 minutes, remove the dough from the fridge. On a floured work surface, roll each piece of dough to a thickness of 5mm and a diameter of about 28cm/11in. Using a small knife, cut out a circle from each piece of dough measuring 23cm/9in in diameter and set aside.

4 Gather all of the pastry trimmings and roll out to a sheet of 5mm thickness. Cut out eight pigeon wing-shaped pieces and set aside on parchment paper.

5 Roll up the pastry trimmings and divide into 4 equal pieces. Mould each piece into a round squab 'head', pinching one end to form a 'beak'. Press 2 cloves into each 'head' for eyes, then set aside on parchment paper..

Wrapping the pigeons

1 Place a pigeon, breast-side down, into the middle of each circle of pastry and bring the edges up to wrap up the pigeon completely. Pinch the edges together to seal, making sure there are no gaps.

2 In a small bowl, beat together the egg yolks, milk and caster sugar for the eggwash. Brush the pastry 'wings' with some of the eggwash and attach 2 onto the sides of each wrapped pigeon. Brush the base of the pastry 'heads' and press firmly onto the wrapped pigeon.

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PIGEON IN A SALT CRUST P2

For the cabbage & mushroom fricassée

2 pointed cabbages, quartered
 30g/1½oz unsalted butter
 ½ banana shallot or ¼ onion, peeled, chopped
 1 garlic clove, peeled, puréed
 400g/14oz mixed wild mushrooms (pied de mouton, girolle, chanterelle and trompette de la mort)
 100ml/3½fl oz dry white wine
 10g/½oz fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves, roughly chopped
 15ml/1fl oz lemon juice
 4 pinches sea salt
 4 pinches freshly ground black pepper

CHEF'S NOTES: (*)

- *1 Searing the squabs: Do not salt the birds; the salt crust will do it for you. The object is not to cook the squabs but simply to crisp them up and colour the skin to enhance their taste and appearance. This stage does, however, partially cook the legs, which require a longer cooking time than breasts. It is important to allow the squabs to cool before wrapping them in the salt pastry.
- *2 Observe the cooking time precisely. The heat builds up slowly at first, but since it cannot escape, it intensifies during the final 5 minutes. Even as little as 2 or 3 minutes less or more cooking time could grossly under- or overcook the squabs. Only adjust the cooking time if the dressed squabs weigh more or less than 225 g

VARIATIONS :

This technique can be used for a variety of dishes, eg: a whole sea bass scented with tarragon, or fillet of lamb, beef, venison.

3 Brush the completed pigeons all over with the remaining eggwash, except for the bases. Sprinkle rock salt over the breast, place the pigeons on a baking tray lined with foil and chill in the fridge until ready to bake.

For the sauce

- 1** Melt the butter in a pan until foaming and gently fry the shallots for 2-3 minutes, or until softened but not coloured. Add the mushrooms during the last minute of cooking.
- 2** Meanwhile, heat the olive oil in a separate pan and sear the reserved pigeon necks and wings for 3-4 minutes, until golden-brown all over. Add the Madeira to the pan, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pan to deglaze, then add the contents of the pan to the shallots and mushrooms and the brown chicken stock, bring to the boil and simmer for 10 minutes
- 3** Strain through a fine conical sieve, pressing down with a ladle to extract as much flavour as possible. Season, to taste, with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Reheat the sauce to order and serve in a gravy boat just before serving.

To cook the pigeons

- 1** Preheat the oven to 220C/425F/Gas 7.
- 2** Bake the pigeons in the oven for 20-22 minutes (for medium; cook for 18 minutes for medium rare or 12 minutes for rare) (*2). Remove from the oven and set aside to rest for 5 minutes. The salt crust pastry is not just for visual effect, but also greatly enhances the taste and texture; the juices and flavour are sealed in and the slow build-up of heat keeps the flesh moist and tender.

For the cabbage & mushroom fricassée

- 1** Bring a pan of water to the boil and place a steamer insert over the top. Add the cabbage to the steamer and steam for 2-3 minutes, or until just tender. Cut the cabbage into strips and place into a small serving bowl.
- 2** Heat the butter in a pan over a medium heat until foaming, then fry the shallots and garlic for 30 seconds. Increase the heat to high, then add the pied de mouton and cook for one minute. Add the white wine and cook for one minute, then add the girolles and cook for a further minute. Add the trompettes de la mort and herbs and stir well, then squeeze in the lemon juice and season, to taste, with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Spoon into a small serving bowl.

To serve

- 1** Present the baked pigeons, brushed with melted butter, on a large serving board with the bowls of cabbage and mushrooms on either side. To serve, first remove the pastry 'head', then slice open the salt crust to reveal the pigeon. Place a long fork inside the pigeon and lift it out onto the carving board, leaving behind the crust. Cut off the trussing string and serve the pigeon on a plate, allowing guests to help themselves to the sauce, cabbage and mushroom fricassee accompaniments.

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