

Try pigeon as a tasty treat, says **Dory Masri** of the Last Wine Bar in Norwich – and you'll be pleasantly surprised! Photograph: **Andy Darnell**.



**SOME PEOPLE ARE PUT OFF EATING PIGEON** because they think of the feral pigeons flying about in our cities. But the pigeon you find on your plate is the wood pigeon, altogether a different prospect.

As game goes, pigeon is among the cheapest and most easily available. They exist in prodigious quantities in our countryside, are regarded by farmers as pests, and so pigeon-shooters are generally very welcome.

At their best between late spring and early autumn (for instance, coming into season right now), pigeons have a surprising amount of meat on the breasts for such a small bird, and are full of gamey flavour. The taste goes well with other strong flavours such as juniper, port, raisins and prunes – or even with chocolate.

As with many game birds, there is the danger of the meat drying out during cooking due to the low fat content, so marinating is a good idea to retain the moistness. You should be careful not to overcook the meat, it is normal to serve it quite rare.

Today's recipe is unusual in that it is accompanied by a sandwich of pancetta and date paste. The sweetness of the dates is the perfect match for the slightly gamey pigeon, and the crisp, salty pancetta completes the taste sensation. Always try to get hold of proper pancetta (most supermarkets now stock it), but if you can't, a good quality, low water content streaky bacon will do.

I have suggested various spring vegetables to go with the meat, but feel free to substitute whatever vegetables you want. Just remember the golden rule: only use those which are in season.

**MARINATED PIGEON BREAST WITH SPRING VEGETABLES, SHERRY VINEGAR, PANCETTA AND DATE SANDWICH**  
Serves 4

- 8 pigeon breasts
- 1tbsp honey
- 1tbsp pomegranate molasses
- A few sprigs of thyme
- 2 fennel bulbs
- 1 sweet potato, peeled
- 250g sugar snap peas
- 2 courgettes
- 250g baby onions, peeled
- 2 sticks of celery
- 2 carrots, peeled
- 2tbsp olive oil
- 400ml chicken stock
- 40g unsalted butter
- 16 slices of pancetta
- 100g pitted madjool dates

► Mix the honey, molasses and thyme together, and marinate the pigeon breasts in the mixture for two hours.

► Chop the vegetables to your liking and blanch them in boiling, salted water for no longer than one minute. Refresh under cold water to stop them continuing to cook.

► Lay the pancetta slices on parchment paper on a flat tray, and cook in the oven until they are crispy.

► Meanwhile, cook the dates in a pan with

50ml water for three minutes, then blitz them in a food processor. Spread the date paste on a pancetta slice (use a piping bag if you prefer). Then lay another slice on the top to form a sandwich. Repeat with the other slices until you have four sandwiches.

► Sear the pigeon in a pan on both sides. Now add the vegetables to the pan, followed by the sherry vinegar and chicken stock. Cook on a high heat until the liquid has reduced by half; this should take between three and five minutes. Whisk in the butter to finish, and season.

► Arrange on the plate and serve with the pancetta sandwich.

**The Last Wine Bar (www.lastwinebar) is at 76 St George's Street, Norwich, tel 01603 626626.**

**winechoice**

**Ecky Limon, of The Last Wine Bar, says...**

The grape variety which immediately springs to mind to compliment this dish is the noble Pinot Noir, with its original home in the ancient vineyards of Burgundy. The unique, elegant flavours which Pinot Noir offers and its velvety texture has led to it being revered as the aristocrat of grape varieties. Unfortunately such finery evidently comes at a cost, and although the quality of the top red wines of Burgundy undoubtedly justifies these higher prices, you may have to wait at least 10 years before these wines reach their full potential.

This is where the New World steps up to the plate. New Zealand, with a perfect cooler climate in which this grape

thrives, has for some time been producing top quality Pinot Noirs, echoing the delicacy of Burgundian wines whilst offering fully developed ripe fruit flavours. However, the real value at the moment comes from Chile.

Pinot Noir has also been widely planted there for several years now, although up until recently many of these wines, although very good value, have tended to be rather aggressive on the palate often with a 'cooked' fruit flavour. This seems to be no longer the case, as Chile is now producing in abundance, light, fragrant wines with subtlety and complexity. This pigeon dish would be perfectly matched by a good Chilean Pinot Noir. At The Last we are currently stocking the 2007 Viña Mar Pinot Noir from the Cavaillanca



valley. The combination of soft, ripe strawberry, raspberry, and cherry fruit with the more earthy characteristics of this wine will marry with the high, gamey flavours of the meat and the sweeter notes from the marinade.

The saltiness of the pancetta will also be well served by the juicy, tangy fruit with comes as a result of the wine's naturally higher acidity.

Chile, as with South America in general, has the added attraction of not seeming to be adversely affected by the difficulties in the global economy, and is thus able to maintain these very good prices.

So catch that pigeon and wash down Dory's dish with a bit of South American sunshine. The results will have you cooking with pleasure.

# A rare bird to savour