

Small Birds For Dinner

It's a truism that all the tastiest things are often small and, if referring to meat, tastier still if near the bone. With small chickens (size 10 or 11) or poussin (baby chicken) one can get a nice compromise of flavour, more succulent eating and the ability to partake of several cuts or every cut, including the tender back meat, in one sitting. My recent transpacific zoom lunch had small bird as its theme. Poussin either stuffed with mograbieh (pearl couscous), spices and pistachios or roasted with duck fat potatoes, garlic and rosemary formed part of the virtual shared table with my contribution, a dish I have been fascinated by for years but never made; b'stilla. The b'stilla (Moroccan) or pastille (Spanish) is traditionally a pigeon pie made with cinnamon dominant spices in brik pastry. The crispy baked pie is given a dusting with cinnamon and icing sugar and that combination of savory and sweet, though a little strange, marries well with the slightly gamey flavour of squab. Filo pastry can be used but it is worth making it with brik (available from The Essential Ingredient) as it creates a beautifully crisp shell-like layer when baked. At about \$21 a bird (available at the Queen Victoria market stall 84, Nifra Poultry) squab are not cheap. This might take some commitment by the cook but it is worth it for the exotic, medieval-like experience. However, if you are not up to the challenge of a pigeon and dealing with a bird complete with head then poussin is a good substitute, better than chicken, if you want to approximate the leaner meat of game. The filling should not be greasy or wet with meat juices and the addition of beaten eggs binding the stock ensure this.

B'stilla

- 2 squab or 1 poussin
- olive oil

- 1 onion, diced
- salt
- 1/4 tsp pepper
- 1/2 tsp cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp ground cumin
- 1/2 tsp ground ginger
- small pinch of saffron strands, crushed
- 1/2 tsp Aleppo pepper
- 2 whole eggs plus one egg yolk
- 3 tbs chopped parsley
- 5 sheets Tunisian brik pastry
- 60 g butter, melted (from brushing pastry)
- handful flaked almonds, toasted
- cinnamon and pure icing sugar (for dusting)

For the stock

- carcass of the squab or poussin
- 1 medium carrot
- 1 stick celery
- 1 small onion
- 8 parsley stems
- 1 tsp coriander seeds



Make the filling the day before if you can, otherwise ensure it is cold when you are ready to assemble the pie. Remove the breast meat and thighs from the birds and set aside. Remove the head and wing tips and put them together with the whole carcass and stock ingredients into a small roasting pan and roast at 180°C for 30 minutes. Transfer to a saucepan and cover with water. Bring to the boil and simmer for 30-40 minutes. Strain the stock into a clean saucepan and reduce to a third of the volume. Discard the vegetables. When cool remove the flesh from the bones using your fingers.

Cut the meat off the thigh bones and slice the breasts into three pieces. Saute the chopped onion in a frypan until softened, add the spices and the thigh and breast meat and coat well with the spices. Add the stock and cook for a few minutes, then add the eggs, parsley and shredded meat and turn off the heat as soon as the mixture thickens. Cool and refrigerate until ready to assemble.



Remove the brik pastry from the packet, lay each sheet between a damp tea towel to make it pliable. Brush the base of a 20 cm round roasting or cake pan with butter. Lay a sheet of pastry down, brush with butter, and lay another sheet over the top. Sprinkle the base with the toasted flaked almonds. Cut a disc from another sheet of pastry to fit neatly over the almonds and within the overlapping layers of pastry. Spoon the filling on top of that disc of pastry, gently pressing down with the back of a spoon until even and smooth.



Tuck the overlapping sides of the pastry in towards the centre. Wet the pastry to help it fold over easily. Place another layer of pastry over the top, brush with butter and repeat with another sheet. Lay a small bread plate on top and flip the pie onto it. Tuck the overhanging edges of the pastry towards the centre to make a neat, flat disk of a pie. Place the baking pan over the top and flip it again so that the top is smooth and the overhangs are underneath. Brush with butter and bake at 180°C for 15 minutes. It should be golden brown and crisp. Cool for 10-15 minutes and then dust with a 3:1 mix of icing sugar and cinnamon.

