

What's Cookin', Doc...?

It is with both shame and pride that your resourceful Kitchenboy recalls his early days as an artist, when there was always enough cash for Tassenberg & smokes but rarely for food. When the city pigeons and torries (turtle-doves) of Pretoria often saved the day.

From my studio, a spacious & once elegant dining room of a ramshackle old Victorian house in Sunnyside, I removed the large meshed burglar-proofing from the window, and set it up as a primitive fall-trap outside, connected by execution-line to my easel. Across the road, every morning, there was a dear old tannie, my first patron as it were, fattening an assortment of pigeons, torries, finches & mossies on breadcrumbs. I would wait, patiently painting away, for soon around twenty pigeons would settle under my seeded trap, and the scene was set for another raunchy party. A table of local artists, writers, collectors, wannabe & real intellectuals and indefinable adventurers was duly invited to a pigeon soup/stew dinner, (please bring some bread, salad & wine), and of course, one would invariably get lucky to boot, in those carefree days.

Do as you like with marinades and hanging, but I insist that they be cooked only to breast-rare, and pigeons are the only birds whose liver contains no gall bladder, so leave it inside. To roast, aficionados believe pigeons have to merely fly through a fierce oven (pre-heated to 500C). Oil & season well and bung in there for 7-10 minutes, according to size, and rest, of course.

PANFRIED PIGEON WITH FIG SAUCE

- 4 pigeons
- salt
- coarse black pepper
- 2 tblsp butter
- 3 tblsp blanched almonds

SAUCE

- 1 cup port
- 4 dried figs
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 3 spring onions, chopped
- 2 tblsp soy sauce (Kikkoman)
- juice of 1/2 lemon
- 2 tblsp fig jam
- Italian parsley
- 4 spring onion brushes
- soft or grilled polenta to serve (optional)

Before you prepare the pigeons, gently poach the dried figs in the port till tender

Snip off the wings & feet & split the breast, to flatten by leaning firmly on the backbone with your palm, outside up. Pat dry & season all over with salt & plenty pepper.

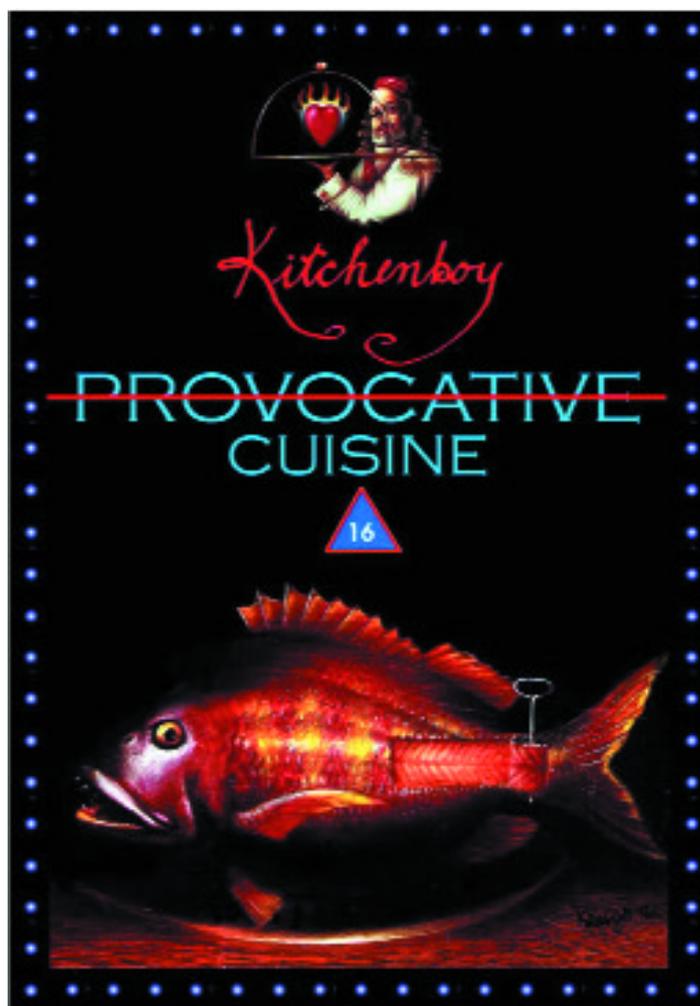
In a large frying pan, heat the butter to foam & fry the pigeons till browned lightly on both sides over a medium heat (about 3 1/2 minutes a side). Do not be tempted to overcook.

Remove pigeons and keep in the warming oven, to rest for at least 3 minutes.

Fry the almonds till golden, remove and drain on paper

Lightly fry garlic & spring onion in the pan juices, add the port & figs to melt (deglaze) the caramel sticking to the pan

Add lemon juice, soy sauce & lemon juice. Let bubble up quickly to concentrate a little.



SERVING:

Flood sauce over the bottom of 4 warmed plates and place a float of toasted polenta in the centre, then ride the pan-fried pigeon on it, skin up, scatter chopped parsley over, and top with a fig, holding a boompie of spring onion. Decorate with almonds.

ALTERNATIVES:

Replace polenta with mieliepap, risotto, mash, grilled potato cakes (i.e. latke & rösti) or crisply fried noodle nest. Other jams (ie strawberry), jellies (ie marula) or marmalades are fine too

As a starter, remove the breasts and fry as above, a minute a side, rest & slice to fan over toast. Then you too could roast the carcasses for soup, and invite a table of winter friends to an inevitable cacophony

— **Kitchenboy Braam Kruger**
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Many thanks to Cory Voigt, whose enthusiasm brought back these memories and supplied me with much information and 15 of his best shots. The book is available from Exclusive Books. Please note the age restriction.