



## How to Make a Pigeon Pie



Scans by Dee Shapiro, 2001.

### [Dee Shapiro](#)

When M.F.K. Fisher published [How to Cook a Wolf](#) in 1942, wartime shortages and rationing called for all the resourcefulness in cookery a chef could muster. Her chapter "How to Make a Pigeon Cry" is provided with a suitable epigraph from Jonathan Swift: "Here's a pigeon so finely roasted, it cries come eat me." This reminds the reader that men have eaten creature flesh for centuries, "not only to nourish their bodies, but to give strength to weary spirits." Fisher roasted her pigeon during wartime, when the wolf was at the door, "savoring it intelligently and voluptuously too." During a recent trip to Morocco, I saw none of the paucity of foodstuffs one experiences through war and famine, but rather an abundance of edibles both animal and vegetable, the latter including grains, fruits, nuts, herbs, and spices. In the meat market were camel, goat, lamb, beef, sheep's heads, slabs of liver, tripe; indeed, every part of an animal which is either eaten or worn. In the fish market, all varieties of fish and seafood were laid out in neat, patterned squares. In the poultry market, chickens were sold live. Women in *jellababs*, caftans, and veils would take the squawking birds and then, holding them dangling by their feet, calmly continue their shopping. The food stalls were so plentifully stocked, I got the impression that North Africa could stave off famine from all the rest of the continent. Yet despite the abundance of foodstuffs, Moroccans continue to eat pigeons, not as a desperate wartime measure, but as a delicacy.

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Pigeons, Fisher says, "those gentle fluttery creatures with soft voices and miraculous wings in flight, have always meant peace and refreshment to sad humans." Though I was neither sad nor ill at ease, Moroccan pigeon pie brought more joy and peace to my palate than anything I could remember-despite my initial aversion to it.

What is pigeon pie? In [Dreams of Trespass](#), her charming book on harem life in the 1940's, Fatima Mernissi says, "at once a pastry and a meal, *pastilla* is sweet and salty, made of pigeon meat and nuts, sugar and cinnamon. Oh! *Pastilla* crunches when you munch on it, and you have to eat it with delicate gestures, no rushing please or else you get sugar and cinnamon all over your face. *Pastilla* takes days to prepare because it is made of layers of sheer, almost transparent crust, stuffed with roasted and slightly crushed almonds, along with a lot of surprises."

[Pigeon pie](#) — also called *pastilla*, *bisteeya* or *bistayla* — is served at the beginning of the meal, after small salads of olives, eggplant, artichoke hearts, tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, zucchini, and chickpeas. For me, nothing else I ate in Morocco could compare with its taste, neither the whole roasted lamb, nor the *tagines* of beef with olives and lemon, nor the round flat *khubz* (bread), nor the many varieties of couscous.



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in Fez (pronounced with an "s," not "z" as in the cylindrical Turkish hat with tassel). Getting to Fez requires a flight to Casablanca and then a ride in a Grande Taxi, an old Mercedes with three in the front seat, including the driver, and four in the back, the most economical way to travel in Morocco save donkey. On the way, I recommend a stop in Rabat to walk through the Kasbah, taking

time for a glass of hot tea with fresh mint and some Moroccan pastries before moving inland via Meknes.

As you travel, you will be dazzled and dazzled by the variety of patterns displayed in mosaics and cedar carvings — almost always abstract since no recognizable images are allowed in Muslim practice. Mosques, palaces, fountains are each a marvel of integrated geometric design. For a change of style as you journey toward Fez, stop at Volubilis to see Roman ruins in which figures play an integral part in mosaic design.

Volubilis is located on a plateau; the air is pure and the silence stunning. A lone donkey rests along the edge of the path and a stray dog hides among the fallen walls. You will surely feel revived enough to continue to Fez, where you may become dizzy with the noise and movement and array and display of goods in the souks of the Medina. Olives, oranges, dates, and nuts — all to sample, all to bargain for.

Elias Canetti wandered the souks of Marrakesh in the sixties: "All the booths and stalls selling the same thing are close together — twenty or thirty or more of them. There is a bazaar for spices and another for leather goods. The rope makers have their place and the basket weavers have theirs.... You find everything — but you find it many times over." Canetti describes the bargaining that one must engage in: "The price that is named first is an unfathomable riddle. No one knows in advance what it will be, not even the merchant, because in any case there are many prices. Each one relates to a different situation, a different customer, a different time of day, a different day of the week. There are prices for single objects and prices for two or more together... One is tempted to think that there are more kinds of prices than there are people in the world." And more varieties of olives and dates than one can imagine trees for. Moroccans are proud of the abundance of their food and wares. I calculated what was needed just to make a pigeon pie: almonds, parsley, ginger, coriander, saffron, cinnamon, onions, sugar, butter, turmeric, lemons, mace, eggs, confectioner's sugar, mint sprigs — and pigeons.

Although these birds seem to be ubiquitous in most parts of the world, inhabiting parks, plazas, ledges, and rooftop roosts, I saw no pigeons in Morocco except in cages in the markets. Few are raised for consumption and those that are must be killed properly by smothering (says M.F.K.), then cleaned and trussed by a merchant. If pigeon is unavailable in your local market, squab, Cornish hen, or plain old chicken thighs and legs will do (chicken is also used in Morocco).

As described by Paula Wolfert in [Couscous and other Good Food from Morocco](#), the traditional *bisteeya* of Fez is an enormous, flaky pigeon pie never less than twenty inches in diameter. Beneath a perfectly crimped pastry top covered with cinnamon and sugar are layers of shredded pigeon, squab, or chicken held together by two



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dozen eggs, which are curdled in a lemony, spiced onion sauce and then sweetened with almonds. The whole is enclosed — top, bottom and sides — in miraculous tissue-thin wheat-flour pastry leaves called *warka*. The concept was brought from the Middle East after the first wave of Arabs moved across North Africa. The paper-thin leaves came to Morocco from Persia, though the Persians might have learned how to make them from the Chinese.

Moroccan *warka* is as thin as cigarette paper. *Warka* leaves are not too different from Chinese spring-roll skins, which may substitute for true *warka*, though spring-roll skins are made with rice flour. Greek *phyllo* leaves or strudel leaves are also acceptable substitutes if spring-roll skins are unobtainable.

Originally the name for chicken cooked in butter and saffron, the word *bestila*, Wolfert found, was derived from the Berber language — not from Andalusian as some have suggested because of the similarity of the Andalusian word *pasteles*, "pastry confections."

Of all the cookbooks cited in the reference list below, [The Momo Cookbook](#) by Mourad Mazouz is the most beautiful to browse through — a literary confection. Travel photos in that book by Mark Luscombe-Whyte brought me back to its place — and — food photos by Jean Cazal — back to my memories of the taste of Moroccan food — and particularly of pigeon pie. However, I am giving *Frigate's* readers Paula Wolfert's recipe for [bestila](#) because it is the least complicated to follow. *Bon Appétit!*

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#### DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

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