

New York
RESIDENT

Is Quail The New Chicken?

January 15, 2008 – Dining

By Sylvie Bigar



Chicken may be our natural feathered comfort food but quail is leaner than duck and so much tastier than its bigger relations.

Michael Anthony, executive chef at Gramercy Tavern, began cooking quail at Daniel. “At the time, we had boned-out birds from D’Artagnan, and Daniel’s technique was tremendous,” he said. “We stuffed them with foie gras and peaches or figs. They are an excellent choice because they are not too gamy.” In fact, “the quails I came across later in my career were often too lean and lacked the kind of flavor profile I was looking for,” he added. “So I enlisted the help of Sylvia Pryzant at Four Story Hill Farm in Pennsylvania, and with a local farmer, we developed the breed of Coturnix quail we use now.”

At Gramercy Tavern, he wraps home-cured bacon around the bird and roasts it, for an extra smokiness that “makes the bird come alive.” The quail lives on the five-course tasting menu, and about half the guests take the plunge and let the chef decide what they will dine on. His advice for the home chef: “Don’t overcook it.”

Joel Hough, chef de cuisine at Cookshop, first experimented with quail while at Mark Miller’s Red Sage in Washington, D.C. “We used to brine the quail for at least four hours. I don’t think it’s absolutely necessary, but a Bourbon brine or a lemongrass/honey mix can do wonders,” he said. Another method he recommends is to “infuse it with rustic charm thanks to a light buttermilk fry.” Cookshop serves two quails as an entrée and is loyal to Cavendish Game Birds of Vermont. “The key is to work with semi-boneless birds so that the customer doesn’t have to fight with little bones. He sells as many as 140 portions per week.

Most people, though, don't actually know what quail is, said Eric Hara, chef de cuisine at Davidburke and Donatella. "It's really a cross between chicken and duck and has a light flavor but real taste," explained Hara, who grew up in California. Like Gramercy Tavern's Anthony, chef Hara also uses the rich birds from Four Story Hill Farm and stuffs them with braised Bibb lettuce, pistachios and shrimp. "Squab is a tough sell because guests often don't appreciate the gamy part. The quail is a great compromise, almost like a flavored chicken."

"Is jumbo quail an oxymoron?" asked Andy Nusser of Casa Mono and Bar Jamón, referring to the breed he favors. "We create a red carpet for them made with Serrano ham, and an arugula salad with blood orange vinaigrette. Since we don't serve chicken at Casa Mono, it's a great alternative for a lighter meat dish but it's crucial to leave it pink and juicy. We often marinate it with olive oil, thyme and red onion," he said. "It's a great restaurant dish because of its size."

Philippe Massoud grew up at his family's hotel, the Coral Beach in Beirut, Lebanon and remembers tasting quails during his childhood. They were simply seared "piccata-style," with lemon, butter and olive oil. Today, at his restaurant Ilili - "tell me" in colloquial Lebanese - he offers quails with apricot, endive salad and cardamom jus. "We break apart the legs and confit them separately. Then we sear the breasts to make sure they remain tender. We do the work for the guests so that we remove the complexity of the dish and leave them with a wonderful surprise. That way, I can get 'repeat offenders,' so to speak."

(Photo: Davidburke and Donatella's Quail Salad)