

Food

---

# Wings of desire

They say revenge is a dish best eaten cold. But when it comes to getting your own back on the pesky wood pigeon, Nigel Slater recommends a roast, or a sorrel salad

---

**Nigel Slater**

The Observer, Sunday 8 May 2005

---

There is much pleasure in a young pigeon: the skin of the roasted bird with its freckles of black and gold; the sweet juices that run from the plump breast as your knife slices through; the little bones to gnaw and suck and nibble. But for me there is an extra pleasure - that of revenge. Each mouthful is sweeter for the thought that I may be tucking into the country cousin of the pigeon that pecked the tops off my broad beans.

The pigeon has the keenest eye of all edible birds, and is the most destructive, gobbling up millions of pounds' worth of young crops each year. But no matter how many we roast or grill, or slice for a salad with lettuce and young peas, we can barely make a dent in the vast population of what are, at least to the farmers, pests.

I have heard people say that these softly feathered birds can be tough. Well, yes, they can be towards the end of the year, but from now until late summer they are a pretty safe bet as a tender roast. The only worry is that of over-cooking, but that's hardly the poor bird's fault. As the summer progresses I will cover each breast with thick slices of fatty bacon to self-baste as it roasts; until then I think it is enough to massage the young birds lavishly with butter.

Those who cannot be doing with the bones might like to slice the breasts off, taking care to run the knife along the bone to get as much meat off as

possible, season them, then grill or cook them briefly in a hot pan, perhaps with a few crushed juniper berries. Butter is better than olive oil. Perched on a plate of salad of sorrel, spinach and something frilly like oak-leaf lettuce or frisee, they will have dressing enough with the juices from the pan and a dash of vinegar.

I planted my first sorrel this spring, a pot from a stall at the farmers' market. Sorrel is a salad to use sparingly, tossed in with less strident leaves. Its fresh lemon notes perk up even a bowl of plain lettuce. Pity, then, that such a smart, brilliant-green leaf cooks to an olive-beige slop, no matter how much care you take. The trick is to be brief in the pan, to turn the leaves over gently in hot butter rather than oil, and to drain off the copious water that is produced. Don't even think of letting the leaves come into contact with water.

Sorrel's lemony, unripe-apple tang is as good with lamb as it is with fish, so I was surprised to find it was a match for my roast pigeon, the toasty juices from the roast birds adding meaty depths to the leaves' inherent clean sharpness.

This is not an easy leaf to find in the shops, but there are boxes to be had at the farmers' markets. I always buy what looks like a vast amount, as even the most generous handful dissolves once it meets the heat. Earlier in the week I tucked a few leaves, wilted first in butter, into a dish of pommes dauphinoise, and they melted into the creamy depths. Yesterday, I dropped them into a green salad bright with watercress and skinned broad beans. Not just a meal to surprise and delight, but one with which I well and truly got my own back.

### **Roast pigeon with sorrel**

Serves 2

**2 plump young pigeons**

**butter**

**2 small sprigs of sage**

**½ an apple**

**for the sorrel puree:**

**350g sorrel leaves**

**a thick slice of butter**

**2 tbsp double cream**

**to serve:**

**2 thick slices of ciabatta or open-textured bread**

Set the oven at 200°C/gas mark 6. Remove any feathers that have escaped the pluckers, and put the birds in a small roasting tin or baking dish. Pop a small piece of butter in the cavity of each one then tuck in the sage and a few slices of apple. Rub them all over with butter, and salt and pepper them generously. Turn them breast-side down. Roast the birds for 15 minutes, then turn them breast-side up and continue roasting for a further 10 minutes (slightly less if you like them very pink).

Toast the ciabatta 10 minutes before the birds are due to come out of the oven. Melt the butter in a shallow pan then add the washed sorrel leaves. As soon as they start to wilt and turn a soft olive green (a minute or 2), pour off any water that has collected in the pan, season and add the cream.

Put a slice of toasted ciabatta on each plate, pour the buttery juices from the roasting tin over the toast, then divide the sorrel between them. There won't be a lot of sorrel at this point. Place a roasted bird on top of each and serve.

**A sorrel gravy for chicken**

Roast the chicken as usual, then take the bird out of the roasting dish to rest before carving. Pour any excess fat from the dish, leaving behind the pan juices and the gooey sediment at the bottom.

Put the roasting tin over a moderate heat and pour in 2 wine glasses of stock, white wine or water. Bring the liquid to the boil, scraping at the pan stickings and dissolving them into the gravy.

Wash a good handful of sorrel leaves and remove the toughest stalks. Shred the leaves finely then stir them into the cooking juices. Let the sorrel soften and wilt, then beat in a generous knob of butter. Correct the seasoning with salt and pepper.

**Sorrel with new potatoes**

This salad is spot-on with cold roast pigeon. Cook new potatoes in deep salted water till tender. (You will need about 500g for 4.) Meanwhile, make a dressing with a little oil and vinegar then add salt, pepper and the shredded sorrel. As soon as the potatoes are drained, and while they are still piping hot, toss them with the sorrel dressing, leaving them to rest for

10 minutes before serving.

## Grilled pigeon with juniper

Cut the pigeons in half straight down the backbone with a large, heavy cook's knife. Place the birds - one per person - in a glass or china dish and pour over a little olive oil, add a few coarsely crushed juniper berries (6 per bird is fine), a few black peppercorns and a small clove of garlic per bird.

Get a charcoal grill hot, then cook the pigeon, drained of any excess oil, over a low heat. Allow the skin to colour but check the inside for doneness by piercing with a skewer: if the juices run clear with a hint of pink, then it is ready. Overcooking is something to watch. When the birds are done, their skin a little crisp here and there, serve with a green-leaf salad and flakes of Maldon sea salt.

[nigel.slater@observer.co.uk](mailto:nigel.slater@observer.co.uk)

---

### More from the Guardian

[What's this?](#)

[Glasgow's welcome stand against the '21st-century square'](#) 28 Jan 2013

[A poisoned vagina? What an intriguing yet stupid murder weapon](#) 31 Jan 2013

[Premier League: 10 things to look out for this weekend](#) 01 Feb 2013

[Can a fruitarian diet land you in hospital?](#) 28 Jan 2013

[Things to do in the garden in February](#) 27 Jan 2013

---

### More from around the web

[What's this?](#)

[Alternatives to buying an annuity](#) (Your Wealth)

[The 7 Things Pet Owners Do That Drive Veterinarians Crazy](#) (Vetstreet)

[Six share tips for 2013](#) (Hargreaves Lansdown)

[Why more people are using ISAs and not pensions](#) (MoneyVista)

[10 Very Valid Reasons To Invent A Fake Girlfriend](#) (The Shadow League)

© 2013 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.