

## Pigeons, squabs and the Wonga Wonga at the Australian Table 1864 - 1964

June 2025

To be LET, For Five Years certain, or any time less, as the Tenant shall require. A Valuable Farm most desirably situate at the Seven Hills, consisting of 50 acres, 40 of which are under cultivation, with dwelling house, pigeon and fowl house, two good barns and a garden containing two hundred bearing trees ; the situation one of the first in the country for stock or agriculture. — Application to be made to Henry Neile on the premises.<sup>1</sup>

This 1806 advertisement is the earliest published reference I found for pigeons in Australia. It tells us a few of things of interest. First, that pigeons were present in Australia by this time. Second that they were being raised domestically. Third that having a functioning house for them was an attractive feature to advertise in a property to let or up for sale.<sup>2</sup>

I should here clarify what is being spoken of are not native Australia pigeons of which there are 20 plus species. I write later about the most favoured one the Wonga Wonga.<sup>3</sup>

What were pigeons doing in Australia? They were being raised for the table, shot for sport, and later racing. This article only deals with the pigeon at the table. I also look at squabs.

References to pigeon in newspapers and magazines fell away dramatically from the 1950s. This article uses that as its end date..

### Pigeons

Pigeons have been eaten for millennia.<sup>4</sup> They were being eaten in Britain at the time of the colonising of Australia. Elizabeth Raffald in her 1788 cookery book has thirteen recipes for pigeon: to boil, to boil with bacon, to boil in rice, to broil, to compote, to fricando, to fricassee, in a Hole, jugged, to roast, in savory jelly, to transmogrify. Here is her recipe for the latter.

Pick and clean the six small young pigeons, but do not cut off their heads; cut off their pinions, and boil them ten minutes in water then cut off the ends of six large cucumbers, and scrape out the seeds, put in your pigeons, but let the head be out the ends of the cucumbers, and flick a bunch of barberries in their bills, and then put them in a tossing-pan with a pint of veal gravy, a little anchovy, a glass of red wine, a spoonful of browning, a little slice of lemon, Chyan [cayenne?] and salt to your taste, stew them seven minutes, take them out, thicken your gravy with a little butter rolled in flour, boil it up, and strain over you pigeons, and serve immediately.<sup>5</sup>

The first published recipe for pigeon in Australia was in Edward Abbott's 1864 cookery book *The English and Australian Cookery Book: Cookery for the Many, as well as the Upper Ten Thousand - by an Australian Aristologist*.

#### Pigeon Compote

Truss four pigeons as for boiling; grate some bread; scrape some bacon, or cut it into small slices; chop some thyme, parsley, and onion, and some lemon-peel; grate some nutmeg, and season with pepper and salt. Mix it up with an egg. Put this forcemeat into the craw of the pigeons, lard

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<sup>1</sup> The *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 19 October 1806 p.2

<sup>2</sup> The *Sydney Herald* 18 September 1841 p.1

<sup>3</sup> Usually shortened to Wonga which is what I use here

<sup>4</sup> Evidence Shows Neanderthals Ate Birds. *Smithsonian Magazine* August 8, 2014

<sup>5</sup> Raffald, Elizabeth, *The experienced English housekeeper, for the use and ease of ladies, housekeepers, cooks, &c. ... consisting of several hundred original receipts, most of which never appeared in print.* 1788. p.130

the breasts, and fly them brown. Afterwards place them in a stewpan, with some stock, and simmer then for three-quarters of an hour; thicken the gravy with a piece of butter rolled in flour, serve with forcemeat balls, and pour over the pigeon.<sup>6</sup>

This is a variation on Raffald's Pigeon Compote.

Recipes for pigeon generally were no different to the ways of cooking poultry. They were roasted, stewed, jugged, stuffed, baked, made into soup, and pie after pie after pie.<sup>7</sup> Which is to say that they have been treated as other table birds.

In 1931 the *Sunday Times* published a pigeon pie recipe in verse:

Sing a song of sixpence,  
A pocket full of rye,  
Four-and-twenty blackbirds  
Baked in a pie;  
When the pie was opened  
The birds began to sing.  
Now, wasn't this a gorgeous dish  
To set before the king?  
Still, other things are jolly  
When baked inside a pie.  
A pigeon's more than tasty  
And chicken will defy,  
If cut and quartered neatly  
And stirred an hour or so  
In water covered o'er it  
With mushrooms in a row.  
Then place the pigeon gently  
In pie-dish that is waiting,  
And strain the liquor from it,  
And give it a good grating  
Of chopped ham, while you thicken  
With one spoonful of flour  
A little ketchup, adding  
A squeeze of lemon sour;  
A sliced tomato also;  
A crust then make of boiled  
Potatoes, mashed quite finely,  
Then o'er the pigeon coiled;  
A knob or two of butter,  
Some breadcrumbs sprinkled o'er.  
Then bake inside the oven  
For half an hour or more.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Abbott, Edward *The English and Australian Cookery Book: Cookery for the Many, as well as the Upper Ten Thousand* - by an Australian Aristologist Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, London, 1864 p.46:

<sup>7</sup> Of 66 recipes reviewed 21 were for pigeon pie, the largest single category of recipe.

<sup>8</sup> A Recipe in Rhyme, *Sunday Times* 1 February 1931 p.18

There was a recipe for a precursor to the modern Turducken (turkey stuffed with duck stuffed with chicken).<sup>9</sup>

#### North Country Goose Pie

Bone a goose, a fowl, and a pigeon; sprinkle the interior of each very thickly with pepper; put the pigeon into the fowl, the fowl inside the goose, and fill all the gaps with any kind of good sausage meat and hard-boiled eggs. Sew up the goose, lay it in a large baking tin, cover with a thick crust, and when baked (this will take several hours) pour in some savoury jelly, well seasoned.<sup>10</sup>

There were two recipes for dishes for 'invalids'. This is one from 1910:

#### An Invalid's Dish

Procure a young pigeon and place it in a stewpan containing equal parts of milk and white stock, seasoned, and bring all to the boil Skim carefully. Simmer the pigeon for half an hour then take it out, thicken the sauce, boil it up, and serve round the bird.<sup>11</sup>

One of the more adventurous recipes was Hariett Wicken's Pigeon and Prawns; or "Ragout de Crevettes".

#### Pigeon and Prawns; or "Ragout de Crevettes".

4 Pigeons	1 Onion stuck with 6 cloves
½ pt Gravy	1 gill White Wine
½ pt Prawns	1 doz Small Mushrooms
1 oz Butter	2 Yolks Eggs
½ oz flour	

Prepare the pigeons for roasting; cut them in half and put into a stewpan, with the onion, stock, and wine; simmer till tender; take them up and keep hot; strain the gravy; put the butter into a small stewpan, and when it is dissolved stir in half an ounce of flour; mix well and pour in the gravy in which the pigeons have been cooked; when it boils put in the prawns, skinned, and the mushrooms and simmer till tender; drop in the yolks of the eggs and stir until the sauce is quite thick; sprinkle in a little very finely chopped parsley, and see that the sauce is nicely flavoured; dish the pigeons in a circle and put the mushrooms and prawns in the centre.<sup>12</sup>

In 1912, *The Sun* published Escoffier's recipes for pigeon, with a couple for squab also: Soup with Curry, Pigeon and Barley Soup, Cream of Pigeon Soup, Pigeon and Tomato Soup, Pigeon and Pea Soup a la Paysanne, Pigeon Sauté a la Paysanne, Estouffade of Squab or Squab Stew, Estouffade of Squab a la Cavalieri and Stuffed Pigeon.<sup>13</sup>

Where were they getting their pigeons? The pigeon houses suggest they raised pigeons for the table (also for racing) bought at market. In 1829 pigeons were selling for two sixpence and three sixpence the brace.<sup>14</sup> They also would have eaten birds they shot as with any game.

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<sup>9</sup> For example see Turducken Recipe - NYT Cooking (nytimes.com)

<sup>10</sup> 'North Country Goose' Household Recipes, *Launceston Examiner* 2 October 1893 p.3

<sup>11</sup> 'An invalid's Dish' Useful Recipes, *The Northam Advertiser* 28 May 1930 p.6

<sup>12</sup> 'Pigeons and Prawns', Wicken, H.F. *The Kingswood Cookery Book*, George Robertson and Company, Melbourne and Sydney, 1888 pp. 124 -125

<sup>13</sup> Pigeon Receipts from the Famous Escoffier Book, *The Sun* 18 August 1912 p.21

<sup>14</sup> Sydney Markets, *The Australian* 8 May 1829 p.2

They could also get pigeon already processed in some way. In September 1830 it's reported that Mr. Girard raises pigeons on bran and pollard and 'converts them into bacon and hams, which (after two months curing) he sells readily for 6d. a lb. and the hams for a shilling.<sup>15</sup> Also in 1830 Mr. McLeay is noted as keeping pigeons at his Elizabeth Bay property 'which, when fattened with the offal grain of the (flour mills near him) are found to make very superior pies; especially when the crust is made with the butter which comes from the Church Reserve in the Cowpastures, or the Grant in Argyle, or the chalk at Paterson's Bay, or a later chalk at Port Macquarie'.<sup>16</sup>

The last recipe pertinent to this review was published in 1949 and was fittingly for a pigeon pie.

#### Pork and Pigeon Pie

Stuff 2 pigeons with mixture of 2 cups white breadcrumbs, 1 cup prepared mushrooms, parsley (and any other herbs preferred), salt and pepper. Put birds in casserole with dripping, surround and cover with 1 lb. pork cutlets and some veal cutlets if liked and bake one hour.<sup>17</sup>

#### Squab

In 1912 the *Sunday Times* carried an item 'Pigeon "Squabs" for The Table" on 'breeding pigeons for profit and pleasure.'<sup>18</sup> Squabs are immature pigeons typically at most five to six weeks old. The article reported that a 'suburban breeder' sold squabs at 2s 6d for a pair. The item said that squab were 'used in the best restaurants for special dishes .. The flesh is peculiarly delicate in flavor, and soft and the birds being fat when killed provide a very dainty dish. ... Runts and homers are the best crops, the birds being of good size and rapid growers. Pure homers are also favored; good returns having been got from birds of that breed'.

*The Observer* in 1913 reported 'The squab breeding business has already made rapid strides in New South Wales, where hundreds of squabs are supplied weekly by the Plymouth Squab Company and other breeders of the table pigeon.'<sup>19</sup> Two varieties were being raised, the Homer and the Carneaux 'the latter being undoubtedly better for the table being larger and of finer quality'.

*The Journal* in 1914 carried an item 'Pigeons for the Table' which gave six recipes for squab reprinted from an American journal 'Utility Pigeons': squab coated with egg batter, crumbed and fried; squab wrapped with bacon and stewed; Stuffed Squab and Tomato Sauce; Roast Squab with Oysters; Streamed Squab; and Roasted Squab.<sup>20</sup>

In 1921 recipes for squab from Escoffier were published including this one:

#### Estouffade of Squab à la Cavalerie

Roast (two or three) squabs lightly, in butter and put them in the terrine with their cooking butter, cognac, and white wine. Then, surround them with a dozen small lamb sweetbreads, slightly, browned in butter, a few slices of truffles, cut rather thick, and a few spoonfuls of good veal gravy. The whole well seasoned. Cook gently in the oven for about fifty minutes.

This and the preceding dish have the advantage that they can be eaten hot or cold.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *The Sydney Monitor* 6 November 1830 p.2

<sup>16</sup> *The Sydney Monitor* 22 September 1830 p.2

<sup>17</sup> 'Pork and Pigeon Pie' Come Into the Kitchen, *Chronicle* 17 November 1949 p.29

<sup>18</sup> Pigeon 'Squabs' for the Table' *The Sunday Times* 13 October 1912 p.12

<sup>19</sup> 'The Table Pigeon', *Observer* 27 December 1913 p.14

<sup>20</sup> 'Pigeons for the Table', *Pigeons, The Journal* 17 January 1914 p.8

<sup>21</sup> Estouffade of Squab à la Cavalerie, Pigeon Receipts from the Famous Escoffier Book, *The Sun* 18 August 1912 p.21

In 1932 the Australian Soprano Gladys Moncrieff gave the *News* her recipe for squab:

#### ‘Squab en Casserole’

Dress squab and roll in flour, then sprinkle over the top with chopped garlic and fry in dripping until golden brown, Lift out and drain off on brown paper. Then place in a casserole dish. Fry onions, carrots, and turnips all chopped in small pieces in the same dripping as the squab---drain off on brown paper and place in casserole dish with squab. Have a pot of stock- if this is not available use hot water-cover squab and vegetables with it, if not thick enough add a little flour and put in oven and cook very slowly for two hours.<sup>22</sup>

The most common ‘squab recipe’ used no squab at all. It was Devonshire squab pie.

#### Squab Pie.

A layer of nice neck or pork chops, sprinkle with pepper, salt, minced onion, then a layer of sliced apple; repeat until the dish is full. Pour in 1 cup of stock, make a nice potato crust and cover as pastry. Bake in moderate oven 2 hours.<sup>23</sup>

### The Wonga Pigeon

The flesh of the wonga-wonga is very similar to that of the pheasant, being quite white but very rich, and this bird has often furnished my bush table in the wilds of Australia with a " plat," not to be despised by the most fastidious gourmand.<sup>24</sup>

At Newcastle its waters with fish, its interior bays with duck, and its islands and adjacent brushes with the kangaroo and the wanga pigeon the sportsman may always find employment for his gun, and picnic parties never fail to secure a sumptuous repast on any day they may.<sup>25</sup>

In the annals of eating native foods in Australia one creature is rarely mentioned - the Wonga pigeon, and yet it was very much a part of settler cuisine as the quote above suggests.

The Wonga was a notably easy bird to catch. It spends much of its feeding time on the ground ‘picking up the fallen seeds and fruits of various trees. ...the Wonga may be easily flushed, while quietly feeding beneath. ... (The) birds are easily trapped with the aid of a large but roughly formed cage of vines, and a little cracked maize.’<sup>26</sup>

Those who wanted to eat wonga but not shoot or trap the bird themselves could buy them at the market for 2s. 6d. per pair<sup>27</sup> or from ‘bird dealers or poulterers shops ... So much is the flesh of this pigeon esteemed as an article of food, that numbers of them are frozen so as to be able to supply the demand made for them by epicures when they are out of season.’<sup>28</sup>

The Wonga was cooked in the same ways as pigeons.

#### Wonga Pigeon

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Squab en Casserole’ Gladys Moncrieff’s Favourite Recipes, *The News* 2 April 1932 p.5

<sup>23</sup> ‘Squab Pie’ Selected Recipes, *Kilmore Free Press* 14 January 1937 p.3

<sup>24</sup> ‘Australian Birds’ *The Sydney Morning Herald* 20 May 1845 p.2

<sup>25</sup> Newcastle, *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 29 October 1829 p.2

<sup>26</sup> Australian Birds No 11 Edible birds’ *Australian Town and Country Journal* 21 August 1897 p.23

<sup>27</sup> Sydney Markets, *The Sydney Morning Herald* 20 June 1846 p.2

<sup>28</sup> Australian Birds No 1A Edible birds’ *Australian Town and Country Journal* 21 August 1897 p.23

Required: 3 Wonga pigeons, ¼ lb butter, 1 cup fresh breadcrumbs, chopped parsley, juice of 2 lemons, pinch salt, and cayenne.

Method: Pluck and clean birds and dredge them with flour, pepper and salt, rubbing it in well. Make a stuffing with part of the butter, breadcrumbs, parsley, salt and pepper, and fill the birds. Beat lemon juice with butter allowing it to become creamy. Place pigeons in a baking dish, cover with the lemon anil butter mixture, and bake in a quick oven for ¾ hour.<sup>29</sup>

Wongas now are a protected species but one of 'least concern'.<sup>30</sup>

### Summing up

Pigeons, both native and non-native have been a part of the Australian table for a considerable time. They have been culinarily treated as other table birds – chicken, goose, turkey, grouse, quail. But by 1950 there was a significant downturn in the number of instances of recipes for either pigeon or squab. In 2015 Jacqui Newling and Scott Hill wrote in 'The Cook and the Curator' blog All a flutter: 'Pigeon it seems went the way of the rabbit, associated with depression food and wartime rations, and it fell from favour for many years. Today pigeon is a slowly growing industry, starting to appear in cooking shows and recipe books as an alternative to quail.'<sup>31</sup> This may have been optimistic. A look through cookbooks from the last 20 years turned up just one recipe for squab and none for pigeon.

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<sup>29</sup> 'Wonga Pigeon' Making Good Wives Better, Truth 190 June 1932 p.19

<sup>30</sup> Wonga Pigeon - BirdLife Australia

<sup>31</sup> 'All a flutter', Newling, Jacqui and Hill, Scott *The Cook and the Curator* 16 April 2015

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