Monuments to the Birds
Dovecotes and Pigeon Eating in the Land of Fields

The area of northwest Spain called *Tierra de Campos* (Land of Fields) is known mostly for the intact Romanesque churches along the pilgrim route of St. James and the remains of medieval castles and fortified towns. Subject to harsh, rainy winters and infernally dry summers, Tierra de Campos was only gradually transformed by human activity. The advent of cattle ranching and sheepherding destroyed the region’s ancient forests, damage later compounded by the strict crop rotation and brush-burning methods of modern agriculture that limited cultivation to cereal crops and changed the landscape forever, turning it into a vast, barren plain. Now, compact towns with long walls delineating their perimeters disappear into an endless horizon of undulating grain, interrupted only by the occasional *palomares* or dovecotes that rise up from the fields—modest, vernacular structures that for centuries housed pigeons and defined land use, ownership, and culinary practices. The pure geometric shapes of the clay-and-straw *palomares* stand as references to bygone agricultural and culinary traditions and monuments to the birds that once adorned the tables of both peasants and kings.

Few other birds have been so revered by man or served him so well. The dove or pigeon¹ appears as an object of worship, a symbol of love and fidelity, a messenger of peace, and a source of spiritual purity in mythology, legends, and fables from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Rome, as well as from most European countries. This veneration is clearly seen in man’s desire to bring the bird closer to his own worldly existence through domestication and the construction of dovecotes for it to dwell in. Respect for the dove did not spare the bird from ending up in the pot, however, especially the tender fledglings, or squabs. The widespread urban presence of the bird today has eclipsed its dignified and savory past—familiar gray pigeons are seen as little more than a public nuisance. As for the dove, it has been relegated to a symbol of cultural heritage.

In a region of poor economic means and limited natural resources, dovecotes were an important agricultural enterprise. The predominance of field-crop production naturally preceded pigeon rearing, as the grains in the fields provided ready feed for the birds. The squabs in turn added an important nutritional component to the rural diet, while their droppings could be used to fertilize the fields. The cycle thus established a harmonious balance among man, pigeons, and the environment. It is likely that the earliest indigenous peoples in this area were already domesticating pigeons. In the first century A.D. Pliny the Elder remarked on the evident mastery of adobe construction in ancient towers and outposts on the Iberian Peninsula. These buildings were most likely dovecotes, since the use of pigeons as both messengers and food was well established in the Roman Empire. The domestication of pigeons was thus a natural complement to the intensive farming introduced to the plateau of Castile by the Romans.⁵
It wasn’t until the eleventh to fourteenth centuries that dovecotes became truly widespread in the Land of Fields. The so-called Derechos de palomar (Dovecote Rights), common throughout medieval Europe, reserved ownership rights for the privileged few. In Spain these laws were not formally enacted; instead, they represented a common understanding that only nobility, monasteries, ecclesiastic orders, and large landowners were entitled to own dovecotes and let their pigeons feed on the surrounding lands. Similar controls extended to all aspects of the rural economy. Feudal lords were the primary beneficiaries of pigeon farms, whether from the food the birds provided or from the profits earned by selling them. These rights ceased to exist with the passing of feudalism, and in 1465 Enrique IV signed a law in the Court of Castile and León that formalized dovecote ownership. This law proclaimed the importance of the palomares and targeted the illegal hunting of doves. Specific penalties were established for the following activities:

And so in regard to those people who kill them, because they believe the best thing to do is to destroy and empty these dovecotes… I order that no person or persons of any estate or social condition whatsoever shall dare to capture any dovecote or doves, nor shoot them with crossbow, bow and arrow or stones or in any other way, nor dare to catch them with nets or ropes or any other weapon near where there are dovecotes or doves. And I order and command that he who does otherwise shall lose his bow or nets and weapons, once he has done this, and they shall belong to the person or persons who took them, and for every dove he shall pay sixty maravedíes. Half shall be for the owner of the doves and the other half for the judge who passes sentence…6
This protective measure was further ratified in 1484 by the Catholic monarchs King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, who wrote: “And many people unjustly and individually shot these doves from these dovecotes with bow and arrow, and kill them, both with these bows and arrows and with nets, hawks, and other snares that they lay, with the result that the owners of these dovecotes have received and continue to receive great damage and harm.”

These royal decrees remained in effect until 1889, when they were incorporated into Spain’s civil code. Hunting rights were addressed separately in 1902 and again in 1996, when “shooting pigeons in their habitual drinking places or within 1,000 meters of a dovecote used for industrial exploitation” was prohibited, as was “shooting messenger or sport pigeons in a 200 meter radius of traditional dovecotes in use.” These measures demonstrated the government’s interest in protecting pigeon rearing for farmers and landowners alike. While pigeon farming is no longer popular, the substantial number of dovecotes described in old documents or still standing attests to their historical importance in the agricultural activity of the Land of Fields.

Dovecote Design

Dovecotes were constructed of clay, stone, wood, and straw in harmony with their surroundings. Their simple design was influenced by the physical elements of soil, climate, and altitude, and only their imposing circular, square, rectangular, or occasionally polygonal shapes announced their presence. Palomares can be found scattered or in clusters throughout the countryside; on the outskirts of towns; in towns under the eaves of houses and churches or adjacent to farm buildings. Their location was determined by property lines and right-of-way considerations and was largely dependent on tacit agreements between farmers and landowners.

Though most of the dovecotes faced south for warmth and to avoid the strong easterly Mediterranean winds, their styles varied and seem to have been a function of personal taste. Dovecote architecture has since been classified according to exterior shape—circular, square, rectangular, or polygon—and interior characteristics, such as the existence of a patio or not. Other features, such as raised parapet walls, the pitch and style of the roof, flight holes, and devices to prevent invading predators, are also considered. Ornamental elements were occasionally introduced to reflect period styles; these include pinnacles, wall trim, Renaissance-style tiles, and rooftops in imitation of the oriental pagodas that were much in vogue in the nineteenth century. As a final touch, painted clay doves were mounted on the roof to lure stray pigeons to the dovecote.

The interior architecture was designed to be functional, and it reflected the needs of the doves and their keepers. Important elements included domed or vaulted roofs to facilitate the birds’ entrance, a variety of nest shapes and ledges for perching, devices for access to the nests, and spatial variations to maximize volume. Dovecote design did not evolve greatly over time, retaining its original resemblance to Roman dwellings, with hermetic exterior walls and roofs sloping to a central patio surrounded by concentric or parallel walls etched with hundreds of small niches where the birds nested—similar to the niches of a Roman columbarium where cinerary urns were kept. Food and drink was placed in the center, and farmers collected the waste that fell to the ground for use as fertilizer.

Adobe and rammed earth construction were the most common methods used in the Land of Fields, where for centuries the great plains formed by layers of sand and clay dating back to the Miocene era have provided rich ochre and pale red clay for bricks or slabs of rammed earth. Closer to the mountains bordering Portugal, dovecotes were built of stone with slate roofs. The use of these rudimentary elements defined much of the architecture of the area, creating a vernacular style that blended with the surroundings and expressed the simple agricultural life in Tierra de Campos. Generations of skilled masons familiar with the local materials and construction techniques preserved this traditional architecture.

The Care and Feeding of Doves

An early work on agriculture in al-Andalus (the name given to the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule from the seventh to fourteenth centuries) refers to classical and Eastern writings in developing a theory about the practice of farming, including the keeping of pigeons, in the eleventh century. It discusses the birds’ characteristics and notes details of constructing their habitats. Domestic pigeons were preferable to wild ones for their plump, colorful bodies, cheerful cooing, and fecundity; their houses were to be constructed in the style of monastic cloisters, with a pyramid-like roof that had openings facing east, west, and south. Many aspects of dovecote management were governed by superstitious beliefs: fertility could be increased by burying a jar of mother’s milk in the dovecotes; birds could be deterred from leaving their home by hanging hats’ heads or grapevines on the walls; harmful animals could be scared away with a few sprigs of strong-scented herbs placed in the interior. In the case of reptiles,
“if one writes on the four corners of the dovecote the words ‘Adam and Eve,’ no serpent will ever come close to them.”¹⁰

Domesticated pigeons were treated with great care, even pampered. Nervous and capricious, the birds are liable to desert their home if frightened by animals or startled by noises. They can live compatibly in a confined space with other birds—up to five thousand or more—and are faithful to the companion with whom they mate and share the feeding of their young. Farmers were careful to keep their dovecotes clean, whitewashed, and perfumed in order to increase the birds’ attraction to their dwellings; they supplemented feed from the fields with other grains and seeds to guarantee well-fed, healthy birds.

Despite their nervous nature, doves have other traits that facilitated domestication, including a preference for common nesting areas, prolificacy (four broods of two squabs each per year), and, most importantly, a superbly developed homing instinct—an attachment to birthplace, dovecote, and mate. As early as A.D. 60, Columella, a Latin writer from Cádiz, Spain, had described in his Twelve Books of Agriculture the keys to a pigeon’s well-being. Even then the tricks of the pigeon trade were many:

The pigeon-cells themselves ought to be finished off with white plaster, since birds of this kind take a special pleasure in that colour… the mother-birds, which are sitting on their eggs or their squabs, can be let out into the fields, so that they may not become prematurely aged through the depression caused by the grievous servitude of perpetual imprisonment; for when they have fluttered about a little round the farm-buildings, they are exhilarated and refreshed and return invigorated to their young, for whose sake they make no attempt to wander far afield or escape by flight…. The young of this bird (Falco tinnunculus) are enclosed separately in earthenware pots, and while they are still breathing, lids are put over the pots which are smeared with plaster and hung up in the corners of the pigeon-houses. This induces in the birds such a love for the place that they never desert it.¹¹

The first book on agriculture written in Castilian Spanish, Agricultura General, was published only in 1523. The author, Alonso Herrera, thoroughly documented the practices of the time, devoting an entire chapter to pigeons and dovecotes. He states that the location of dovecotes, if in town, should be in high buildings so that the pigeons might fly in and out freely. Out-of-town locations are preferable, however, in towers or in treeless fields to prevent attacks from hawks and other predators. The building should always face south to promote the young pigeons’ growth, and it should be kept meticulously clean to prevent sickness and parasites. Herrera’s recommendations were many:

- Have running water nearby, so that they may bathe and wash; they should not get into the water they drink, because this harms the young doves and the eggs…. Keep a good enclosure around the house, so that you can put food and drink for them into it, and scatter for them something they can eat…. The walls should be well whitewashed inside and out, and very smooth, firstly so that nothing can climb or crawl up them and also because the doves enjoy the whiteness and come more often to the dovecotes. If the walls are smooth, nothing that might harm them can climb up, and the doves live more safely and without fear—they are very easily frightened—so they will live longer…. The walls should not be higher than a man who wants to inspect them can reach with a ladder with four or five rungs. Doves prefer to raise their young high up rather than low down, because they feel safer there…. Have some cress like ses that they can sit in the shade when it is hot, or raining, or snowing, and they can stay dry. The nesting holes should each have a brick projecting outwards a little on which the doves can sit, so they don’t go back into the nest again. The windows should face east and south where the sun will enter in the winter and towards the north so they can stay cool in the summer…. The dovecote should have a little door on the top, by which the person in charge can get in with a key, and with a moveable ladder which he can put up and take away.¹²

In his 1616 Book of Agricultural Secrets, in a chapter devoted to the “Secrets of Pigeons, and Dovecotes,” Friar Agustín Prior del Temple offers similarly detailed instructions to ensure the pigeons’ comfort and safety:

- It would also be good in guarding against the animals who do harm to the Doves, to hang inside the Dovecote the head of a Wolf, which, be it because of its smell or its shape, makes these animals flee; or to place some Rue branches against the window, and to form a white shape of a Dove, and place it on top on the roof, which the Doves can see from far off, to make fugitive Doves return…. You will also make sure that they do not leave if you give them Lentils mixed with Honeywater, or cooked with Must or with dry Figs, mixed with Barley and Honey…. The Doves will not flee from the Dovecote if you place a Bat’s head on top of the Dovecote, or a branch of Woodvine, or if you scrub and oil the doors, windows and corners of the Dovecote with Mint oil or Liquorice oil, and the Doves will attract others…. Fumigate the Dovecote with Juniper, Rosemary, and sometimes with a little fine Incense, because this does a lot to keep them there, and makes them fly more to your Dovecote….¹³

These treatises on the keeping of pigeons testify to the historical place that pigeon rearing occupied on the Iberian Peninsula, and the design criteria established centuries ago for pigeon houses have not changed significantly over time. However, manuals from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reviewed construction methods and dealt
with practical considerations regarding the use of pigeons for their meat, down feathers, and droppings, in line with the emerging industrialization of agriculture. Salvador Castelló, for instance, explains in a slim booklet from the 1940s the advantages of different breeds in terms of their productivity (five to six incubations a year with a yield of twelve to sixteen squabs was considered profitable) and the quality of their meat. The three most common birds are the rock pigeon, the Mondain, and the Roman pigeon, or Runt. Castelló describes the latter:

It is originally from Southern Europe, in particular Italy. It is highly valued, not only for its size, but also for its fine-textured meat, white and delicate. Some authors claim that it was plentiful in ancient Iberia, and how, in its resemblance in shape and size to the gigantic Mallorquin pigeon (so well-known in Spain), its origins might perhaps be found in the old Roman pigeon. They exist in all colors; they are birds with a heavy wingspan, very sedentary; they have a disagreeable character and fight amongst themselves: they lay eggs three to five times a year but lose some chicks, because with their great weight they either break the eggs or smother or crush the squabs. For this reason, their eggs are taken away and given to another type of pigeon to hatch.14

These practical manuals offer copious information regarding the birds’ feed, whether in captivity or in the field. The best diet consisted of a balanced combination of grains such as wheat, barley, rye, millet, buckwheat, corn, and rice; oily seeds including hempseed, safflower, white mustard seed, rapeseed, and linseed; and leguminous plants like green peas, lentils, broad beans, lima beans, and carob, all properly dried and seasoned. Seeds from grapes, apples, and currants provided extra nutrition and strength. The recommendations from Buenaventura Aragó, a dove expert writing in 1860, are very specific:

Oats stimulate pigeons though the grains’ sharp edges frequently hurt their craw; wheat cools and soothes them; hempseed, like oats, excites them and readies them for mating. . . . Peas of the best quality are the most nutritional and healthy food for the pigeons, like lima beans, and at the same time easy to swallow. On the contrary, bruised or damp seeds or those from a new crop when given produce diarrhea and weaken the pigeons. . . . When administered in large quantities, these seeds make the birds active and restless, intoxicate them, and make them fly more rapidly, giving them extra strength for the moment until it is expended and the energy gained is lost after digestion.15

Pigeons reared in confined areas, as opposed to those that fed solely in the fields, had greater variety in their feed, as grains were supplemented with breadcrumbs, sorrel, and chopped herbs. Additionally, a kind of porridge made of bran and potatoes was said to have a calming effect on the birds and was considered particularly refreshing when mixed with herbs during the torrid summer months. The birds liked carob beans best but received them only in small quantities during the nesting season. To aid digestion, a
block of salt, or salted codfish, was placed in the dovecote along with an adobe brick made of grainy sand. This careful attention ensured that the pigeons would become attached to their dovecote, remain faithful to their mate, and produce squabs—all factors that ensured a blessed and profitable dovecote.

Numerous essays and practical guides written from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century suggest an organized effort to reestablish the interest in pigeon rearing that had waned after the Middle Ages. By the 1800s, field-crop production had shifted from grains to root crops to enable farmers to feed their meat-producing stock throughout the winter; at the same time, commercial poultry farms obviated the need for each household to raise its own birds. Subsistence farming declined rapidly with the industrialization of the region, although modern farm machinery, improved grains, chemical fertilizers, and subsidies transformed traditional small-scale agriculture into profitable enterprises. Contemporary practices no longer fostered a human scale of farming that required cooperation between man and nature, a premise basic to pigeon rearing. Over the past fifty years higher standards of living, greater availability of purchased food products, and migration to the cities also altered rural life and economy in the Land of Fields. Fewer people worked the land, and the practical desertion of field crops eliminated the conditions favorable to the domestication of pigeons. Poachers took advantage of this neglect to pursue what pigeons remained, and by the 1960s the uninhabited dovecotes had been abandoned.

Doves in the Diet

With the disappearance of pigeons as a central food source, an integral component of a rich food culture deeply rooted in the land was lost. For poor and affluent alike, pigeon meat had always been available, a tradition harking back to Roman days, when pigeons were domesticated and crossbred to produce a more savory bird fattened with wheat, barley, and lentils. The pigeon’s steady breeding cycle ensured a regular and dependable supply of meat throughout the year. The young squabs, taken before they could fly, were tender and fleshy from regurgitated “pigeon’s milk.” Some considered pigeon a light food, and the meat was used medicinally as a cure for headaches and for people suffering from jaundice. In De Re Coquinaria Apicius details the sauces that accompanied roasted or braised squabs; they generally combined sweet and sour seasonings like pepper, dates, honey, vinegar, wine, olive oil, mustard, pine nuts, and garum for a saltier flavor.

The exchange of ideas and gastronomic practices in the Mediterranean region was stimulated by border expansions and shifting migrations, as well as by pilgrimages, travel, and burgeoning commerce over land and sea. This exchange was particularly evident in the explosion of culture and learning that took place in al-Andalus after the Arabs brought their farming methods, plants, and culinary and medicinal ingredients from the Middle East and East Asia to Iberia. Pigeons, beloved birds of the prophets and accomplices in amorous intrigues (for they conveyed love letters), also enjoyed an esteemed spot at the table. Specialists in dietetics and hygiene recommended pigeon and squab meat for their hot and moist complexion. The birds were considered exceptionally succulent, while the eggs were valued for their aphrodisiac qualities, especially pronounced when cooked in turnip juice or with onions. Prudent consumption was advised, since the squab meat and the pigeon’s head and neck could reportedly bring on migraines. However, physical proximity to pigeons was reputed to have curative powers against numbness, paralysis, strokes, stiffness, and lethargy.

All one had to do was to place one’s bed over the pigeons’ nests for the warmth to penetrate upwards and cure any ailment. Beyond their medicinal benefits, fat doves and squabs were enjoyed for their succulent taste, and many recipes and techniques were developed for preparing them. One thirteenth-century recipe advises:

Take the squabs and clean them well. Take some of their meat, the gizzards, and the livers and grind them well in a mortar. Place salt, pepper, ginger, cinnamon, dry coriander and a little minced onion on the ground meat. Break three eggs over them and stir them into the meat and spices. Add shelled almonds to the meat, and with this mixture, stuff the insides of the squabs, between the skin and the meat. Sew them up and place them in a new pot. Add some water, salt, oil, pepper, dry coriander and a little chopped onion. Place the pot over the fire to cook. When the squabs are done, take them from the pot and put them in a large tajine. Dip them in saffron and pour clear broth over them and make a fire under it until the squabs brown on all sides. The tajine is taken out. Add greens and decorate it with split eggs and mint leaves. Sprinkle generously with ginger and cinnamon and eat deliciously, if God the most high wills.
remove the bones…”23 The cooking methods often involved complicated processes over the hearth, in the home oven, or in communal ovens. Multiple seasonings complemented the natural flavors of the pigeon and provided a distinguishing touch to the Andalusí cuisine.

Fowl were also important to the medieval Spanish diet for the protein their meat and eggs provided.24 In Don Quixote Cervantes tells of “one of those gentlemen who are wont to keep a lance in the rack, an old buckler, a lean horse, and a swift greyhound. His stew had more beef than mutton in it and most nights he ate a hodgepodge, pickled and cold. Lentil soup on Fridays, ‘tripe and trouble’ on Saturdays, and an occasional pigeon as an extra delicacy on Sundays consumed three quarters of his income.”25 This weekly ration of food celebrates regular foodstuffs as well as special dishes like the pigeon for the Sunday meal. Low-paid knights like Quixote had to be as frugal as common land tenants, in contrast to the rural Castilian aristocracy, who were notorious gluttons.

Like the Andalusí treatises, Spanish dietary guides associated culinary practices with general well-being and healthiness. In Health Regime, published in 1507, Arnaldo de Vilanova placed young squabs in the easily digestible, hot and moist category of food and noted that it was desirable to hang the birds for one full day before cooking them in vinegar, rose water, spices, cilantro, and a pinch of sugar. On the opposite end of his food spectrum were the old birds, considered hot and dry but barely edible.26 The lean, white meat of squats was prescribed for those who were ill, though not for people suffering from gout or uremia because of its high purine content. Bad temperaments was often associated with poor or excessive eating habits, for which fowl and eggs were commonly prescribed as digestive cures. Yet Medicina españoña, contenida en proverbios (1616) did not tout pigeon as beneficial, because the meat, especially from the neck and the head, was believed to cause headaches, fever, and melancholy.

Several uses for pigeon and its byproducts existed beyond the gastronomic ones: the Italian duchess Lucrezia Borgia apparently applied a facial mask of pulsating live pigeons split in half and smeared their blood on her breast to enhance her complexion.29 An allusion to the same treatment is captured in the Spanish saying Carne de pluma, quita del rostro la arruga, which in the more practical English translates as “Eat fresh fowl today, take your wrinkles away,”30 suggesting, perhaps, that a healthy diet can free one from worry.

Both Alonso Herrera and Friar Agustín explored the virtues of pigeon droppings for medicinal purposes, warning about their strength and recommending that they be diluted with sheep dung rather than with the stronger cow or horse manure. The potent nitrogen content of pigeon meat and droppings may have given rise to the bird’s supposed aphrodisiac properties.31 The droppings were also used for a poultice:

> The manure is very good, and extremely valuable for cultivating the fields, especially the vegetable garden, and for many medicines. Cooked in wine or vinegar, and placed on swellings, it dissolves them if the swellings are new or matures them quickly, especially together with barley flour, and if it is placed on the face or anywhere else after being cooked in wine or water, it gives good colour to the body….”32

Agustín adds: “You can also benefit and make use of it for sciatica, making a poultice from the manure, and from Watercress seed and Mustard seed, adding a little Philosopher’s Oil for Migraines, burning it and mixing it with Walnut Oil and applying it to the painful part.”33

Cooking with Doves

The consumption of pigeons was consecrated in 1379 in the Order of the Pigeon, which was founded by King Juan I of Castile to defend the Catholic faith and the Castilian kingdom. Its members were regaled with celebratory banquets featuring the delectable roasted bird.34 Although this eating society dissolved after only one year, it foreshadowed gastronomic trends that would accelerate in the sixteenth century, when court cuisine came into its own, marked by extravagance and an exciting blend of flavors from Roman, Arabic, and new-world ingredients. This cuisine reached its zenith during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spain’s “Golden Age.” The enormous quantities of food served and the methods of preparation were documented in cookbooks and official inventories. For instance, Francisco Martínez Montiño’s The Art of Cooking (1611), written when he served as chef to the court of Felipe III, includes numerous entries for pigeons. Montiño was obliged to prepare sumptuous banquets consisting of such dishes as pigeon pie, pigeons with sauce over pancakes, stewed squab, squab with truffles and marrow, squab stuffed with squab, sweet pigeon turnovers with bacon, roasted turtledoves, roasted squab with lamb chops and bread crumbs, and squab with lettuce.35 A farewell banquet given in 1623 by the Spanish court for Charles I, Prince of Wales (despite his failed betrothal to a Spanish princess), included two thousand pigeons.36

Wild pigeon was occasionally served and enjoyed for its dark meat and strong, gamey flavor. Its meat was, however, tougher than that of domestic pigeons, which had a more delicate texture. Squabs, smaller in size and caught at four
weeks, were preferred for their silky, tender meat and subtle berry flavor. This meat was very lean, easy to digest, and rich in proteins, minerals, and vitamins. The type of pigeon determined the cooking method, and spices were often used to augment the natural flavors of the bird.

The religious orders were especially skilled in the culinary arts and customs of the table. At times they sought to enforce restraint in the courts or to exercise their own privileged position. Domingo Hernández de Maceras compiled recipes and cooking techniques from his experience as a chef in a university residence hall for monks and laymen (1607). His recipes include a pigeon pie made by placing strips of boiled pigeon on dough along with slices of pork fat, spices, and verjuice. He urged that squab be cooked with plenty of pork fat or even bitter limes to enhance its taste, and he used egg to glaze a twelve-squab casserole to be served over crisp, fried bread. He also explained how to carve and serve wood pigeon:

Like a capon or hen, start with the right leg, making a lengthwise cut in the breast and slice thickly, doing the same with the other half. Afterwards, cut into pieces and debone in the same way as a hen, and take the slices, and put them between two plates, and cover with white wine, and orange juice, and salt and pepper, all-together, and mix it, shaking well between two plates, and serve immediately.37

Less is known about the preparation and consumption of pigeons among the poorer classes or during periods of famine, although official census reports, municipal surveys, sales accounts, and surviving domestic records from the early Middle Ages on point to ownership of dovecotes and production patterns. Even the frequent mention of dovecotes in Spanish literature supports a sense of familiarity with pigeons in everyday life. Today, only the older generation remembers dovecotes as integral to their lives; their memories are tinged with nostalgia, as in the popular belief that holds pigeons were in constant supply until refrigeration became universal: “The traditional dovecote was like a live pantry until the refrigerator was invented.”38 Even though squab and pigeon were, in times of hardship, reserved for the Sunday meal and festive occasions, recipes were nevertheless handed down from generation to generation.
Eighty-year-old Peregrina, a villager from Robledo de Losa in La Cabrera (León), nostalgically recalls having fresh squab to eat. “All you had to do was put a slab of fatty cured ham, an onion, a pepper, and the whole squabs in a pote, a metal pot with three legs, and let it cook over the embers at the hearth’s edge for the entire day.” Her neighbor Pilar said that the birds could be prepared with fried green peppers, or with potatoes, or in rice, like paella. “It’s more the flavor it gives to the food than the meat of the squab. The taste of potatoes cooked with squab is heavenly.” Isabel de Prado Gairaud, who now sells squab confit at the family duck farm in Villamartín de Campos, remembers her grandmother’s customary preparation of squab with thirteen ingredients: “She added onion, garlic, olive oil, wine, vinegar, salt, pepper, bay leaf, thyme, rosemary, and water to cover. Then, at the very end, she thickened the sauce with a bar of local Trapa chocolate. This would cook slowly in an earth-enware pot by the hearth. It was extraordinary.”

As with any popular dish, pigeon eventually found a place on the menu at local restaurants, and it continues to be enjoyed today. The birds are supplied from traditional dovecotes or commercial pigeon farms, either directly from the farmer or through the official slaughterhouse in Cuenca de Campos. Traditionally raised squab is slightly preferred over commercial birds, since its dark meat tastes more like game birds. The meat of the commercial squab is paler and noticeably less flavorful. However, industrially raised squab are considerably larger—around 1.5 pounds compared with one-half pound for the traditionally raised birds—and take only half as long to cook. These birds can be roasted, grilled, or seared in several fancy cuts, while the free-range birds are best in slow-cooked stews and casseroles. The taste of potatoes cooked with squab is heavenly.”

Pigeon, still shot for sport in Echalar (Navarre), or the gourmet pigeon bred in Bresse, France. Gastronomy has actually helped to revive interest in pigeon rearing and dovecotes in the Land of Fields. Annual food events sponsored by local and regional governments to promote tourism feature pigeon and squab. Restaurants have now taken over the program to attract crowds during the peak squab season, March to September. The region’s native produce and culinary traditions have thus become part of a larger project to disseminate the culture, history, and architecture of the region, revitalizing the local economy and restoring a fundamental pride in rural life.

From this orchestrated awareness of the region’s rich agricultural past, several initiatives to preserve dovecotes have garnered support through local associations with financial backing from autonomous regional governments and the European Union. Individual owners and community groups are taking advantage of public funding to rebuild dovecotes for personal use and, in some instances, for commercial exploitation. Only a few examples of successful rehabilitation for other than agricultural purposes exist—a large square dovecote retrofitted as a country inn with stables; and two others converted into educational centers focusing on dovecote architecture and pigeon rearing. Marked routes to view dovecotes in the Tierra de Campos appear on local roads and in regional guides alongside listings of restaurants that serve pigeon and squab.

Approximately 3,420 dovecotes still dot the countryside, of which two-thirds are in good-to-perfect condition, some dating back as far as the late 1700s. Others have deteriorated, often beyond repair. Although less than one-sixth of the standing dovecotes are still in use, their graceful presence in the Castilian plains and fields transcends their historical function. They have become part of a contemporary landscape that celebrates them as emblems of sustainable agricultural practices, exemplars of ecological balance, and monuments to vernacular architecture. Above all, their survival over time is a gentle reminder of our earlier ties to nature and of a life once sustained by working the land and domesticating animals. The dovecotes remain a tribute to Spain’s cultural heritage, a distinctive form of architecture that over the centuries served to enable local gastronomy.
1. “Dove is traditionally reserved for use in the aesthetic context of religion, literature and art and pigeons for more mundane matters, such as sport, fancy breeds and culinary use.” Jean Hansell, The Pigeons in History (Bath: Millstream Books, 1998), 8.


5. Santiago Díez Anta, Los Palomares en la Provincia de León (León: Caja España, Ediciones Leonesas, 1993), 18.


8. Ley 4/1996, de 12 de julio de Caza y Castilla y León, Article 43.8 & 9, and Article 57.


10. Abu Zacaria, Libro de Agricultura, José Ranqueri, trans. (Seville: Biblioteca Edaf, s.a), 1878), 216.


16. Ibid., 140.

17. Díez Anta, Los Palomares en la Provincia de León, 50.

18. Peter and Jean Hansell, Doves and Dovecotes (Bath: Millstream Books, 1998), 25. Note that “pigeon’s milk” is secreted by both male and female birds to feed the fledglings. It resembles a mammalian function and is unique in the avian world.

19. Plutarch recommended pigeons a light food (see his Life of Cato the Elder, E 13.4); Caecilius Aurelianus recommended it as a cure for headaches (in On Chronic Disease, 1.13); and Theodorus Priscianus stated that it helped those suffering from jaundice (in Logic, 58). See Anthimus, De Observatione ciborum (On the Observation of Foods), Mark Grant, trans. (Devon: Prospect Books, 1996), 46.


22. The Greek school of philosophy that associated the study of health with natural elements later influenced Arab works on diet. Food items were classified according to their natural properties of hot and cold, wet and dry, and were believed to determine man’s humors according to the cooking process used: fire, earth, water, and air. See Al-Ashīnī’s Un tratado Nazari sobre los alimentos, Amador Díaz García, trans. (1944: Almeria: Aráce Ediciones, 2000); and Ibn al-Khatib’s Libro del cuidado de la salud durante las estaciones del año, María Concepción Vásquez de Benito, trans. (1952: Salamanca: University of Salamanca, 1994).


25. Ibid., 126.


32. Roldán Morales, Palomares de barro de Tierra de Campos, 64. Translation courtesy of S. Doubleday.


34. The facts about this order appear in the Enciclopedias Universal Ilustrada Europea Americana (Madrid:Espasa-Calpe s.a., 1920), 41.472; while the inference about their gastronomic inclinations is postulated by Toussaint-Samat in A History of Food, 540.

35. Martínez Llopis, Historia de la gastronomía española, 244–247.

36. Ibid., 250.

37. María Ángeles Pérez Samper, La alimentación en la España del Siglo de Oro (Huesca: La Val de Onsesta, 1996), 103.

38. Information obtained in an interview with Eugenio García, director, and staff of the Asociación Norte Valladolid, an organization whose main mission is the preservation of rural traditions and architecture. Villalón de Campos, April 2004.

39. My visits in June 2004 to view the restored dovecotes in the village of Robledo de Losada (León) were arranged by Concha Casado with Senén Bernardo as the local guide; he introduced me to his neighbors, María Peregina and Pilar. The next day we stopped at La Posada de Campos (Palencia), a rural inn with a menu featuring duck products from the family farm, Selectos de Castilla; Isabel is the daughter of the owner and chef at their restaurant. My pursuit of their quality foie gras first introduced me to dovecotes in the Tierra de Campos five years ago, when I visited their business, which is housed in a large, square restored palomar with a central patio.