

## Ron Citron and the Great Pigeon Feast

by Peter Nagourney, friend since 1957

In 1970 I was living in an old farmhouse on Anderson Lane in an avocado orchard near the UC Santa Barbara campus, where I was teaching literature. One weekend Ron drove up to visit. At the time another friend was staying with me: Jim the potter had surrendered his house to his girlfriend's mother during her visit.

On Friday afternoon 80-year-old Mr. Anderson, after whom the street was named, came by and, without any small talk asked, "Peter, how'd you like some pigeons?" "Of course, Mr. Anderson," I said, more out of politeness than interest, since I'd never had any need for or interest in pigeons. "Sure we would," said Ron, perhaps thinking about squab. "Well, come get em," he ordered. So Ron and I walked over to Mr. Anderson's house and were presented with a cardboard carton containing a dozen live pigeons.

That night over dinner, enjoying meat that came neatly wrapped in plastic from the supermarket, we spent hours discussing the ethical question of killing our food. Eventually we agreed that it was our responsibility to acknowledge, at least once, that if we were going to eat another creature we should be responsible for taking its life. And, Ron added, the creature would be tastier because fresher.

Ron decided this bounty obligated a pigeon dinner with Jim's girlfriend and her mother. He reached for my copy of *Larousse Gastronomique* and convinced us that we should prepare "Pigeon à la Maître-Jacques (old recipe)," the most complicated recipe in the book. You can look it up (page 733). It requires you to bone pigeons, stuff with a *forcemeat*, create *ballottines* wrapped with a veal escalope and tied, simmer on the stovetop with Madeira, add brown veal gravy and cook in the oven, then cook in an earthenware cocotte with mushrooms and truffles and brandy for another 40 minutes.

"Sure, why not," we agreed.

Saturday morning we prepared the live pigeons. I held a bird with its neck on a chopping block, Ron strategically placed a heavy knife on its neck, and Jim hit the knife with a hammer. We submerged the warm body in boiling water and plucked the feathers. Of course none of us had every done anything like this, but as newly empowered carnivores our work was efficient and guilt free.

Eventually we had 12 plucked pigeons. The next hours involved shopping for all the ingredients unavailable in my farmhouse kitchen. The low point was shoplifting a small can of truffles from a Montecito market.

Back at the farm the preparations began. Ron, with his surgical training, boned 6 of the birds. Jim the potter decided the rest of the birds should be baked in clay. Ron supervised the next 3 hours creating our rustic *mise en place*, with ingredients never

before seen in my kitchen. Jim returned with the clay, and after Ron seasoned his pigeons Jim enclosed each in a 1" jacket of clay.

These preparations continued throughout the afternoon.

When Jim's girlfriend and her mother arrived at 7:00, we started to prepare the meal and light the fireplace. Only now did Jim casually mention that his girlfriend and her mother were strict vegetarians. We had prepared some other foods, fancy potatoes and vegetables, but we weren't prepared for the ongoing criticism from the women, and needed to recapitulate our reasoned arguments justifying killing our main course. Ron, as you might imagine, relished this debate and did his best to escalate their outrage. This continued throughout the evening, as Ron performed the many procedures necessary to fulfill the recipe's strict specifications; eventually the clay pigeons were buried in hot coals in the fireplace.

It was after midnight when dinner was finally served. Ron made sure we enjoyed our masterpiece despite the scornful gaze of the two women. He explained the recipe and identified each subtle taste. Indeed, it was wonderful.

I don't think any of us every attempted this recipe again, but if you have 18 hours and a trained doctor at hand, go to it.

In retrospect, this meal was probably just another casual snack for Ron; I quickly regressed to eating brown rice and vegetables. Of course, all meals with Ron in the subsequent years were equally complex, yet he prepared them by himself until Kathye joined him.

After 45 years I remember the meal, but not the tastes. But I'll never forget Ron.