

Harissa-rubbed Roast Quail with Lentil Salad



Quail has always seemed a bit fiddly to me - but when I finally tackled it, I was really surprised at how simple it was. Brining is a great way to add flavour to meat and poultry - it's really the original 'marinade', a word that derives from the Latin 'mare', meaning 'sea', and the brine should taste salty like the ocean. The lentil salad is a tasty accompaniment to any roast meat, or even as a simple standalone dish, but if you're short on time, steamed rice works almost as well. When cooking lentils (or any legumes) don't add salt to the cooking water as it toughens them, but do salt generously after cooking. Harissa, a north African chilli paste, adds a gentle heat to this dish, I like Le Phare du Cap Bon brand from Tunisia, which is widely available. One wine match instantly comes to mind whenever I use preserved lemon - aged Hunter Valley semillon. The fresh lemony tang of a young semillon seems to mellow to more of a preserved lemon note as it ages, making the two a perfect match on my palate. So if you happen to have an old bottle of Tyrrell's Vat 1 in the cellar this would be the perfect time to open it!

Serves 6

INGREDIENTS

- 6 medium quail (about 150-180g each)
- 1½ cups cooking salt
- 3 litres water
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 2 red onions, cut into thin strips
- 1 tablespoon harissa
- 1 preserved lemon, skin only, cut into very thin strips
- ½ cup pitted Ligurian olives

Lentil Salad

- 500g black lentils
- 1 fresh bay leaf
- 2 tablespoons salt flakes
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup strained lemon juice
- 1 cup flat-leaf parsley leaves, chopped
- 1 bunch chives, chopped

METHOD

1. Cut quail into halves, lightly rinse the body cavities to remove any remaining offal or blood and place, cut-side up, in a baking dish.
2. Dissolve salt in the water and pour over the quail; they should be covered, if they aren't, make additional brine by combining ½ cup salt per litre of water. Cover and refrigerate for 1-2 hours.
3. Meanwhile, make Lentil Salad: rinse lentils and place in a large saucepan with the bay leaf and plenty of cold water. Place over a high heat, bring to a simmer, reduce heat and simmer for about 40 minutes, until just tender but still firm. Strain, return to rinsed out saucepan, add salt, oil and lemon juice and gently stir through. Set aside to cool. Stir parsley and chives through, cover and set aside.
4. Preheat oven to 200°C.
5. Pour ¼ cup of the oil into a baking dish, add onion, toss well to coat in the oil and place in the oven.
6. Remove quail from fridge and pat dry.
7. Combine harissa with remaining oil and rub all over the quail.
8. Remove baking dish from the oven, add lemon and olives and toss well.
9. Arrange quail on top in a single layer, cut-side down.
10. Return baking dish to the oven and bake for 20 minutes. Then turn on the overhead grill and cook for a further couple of minutes, watching them closely, until skin is well-coloured and crisp.
11. Arrange Lentil Salad on a platter, top with quail, spoon onion, lemon, olives and cooking juices over the top and serve.