



DUCK, DUCK, GOOSE

Recipes and Techniques for Cooking Ducks and Geese,
both Wild and Domesticated

— HANK SHAW —



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Photography by HOLLY A. HEYSER



Some of the recipes in this book include raw eggs. When eggs are consumed raw, there is always the risk that bacteria, which is killed by proper cooking, may be present. For this reason, always buy certified salmonella-free eggs from a reliable grocer, storing them in the refrigerator until they are served. Because of the health risks associated with the consumption of bacteria that can be present in raw eggs, they should not be consumed by infants, small children, pregnant women, the elderly, or any persons who may be immunocompromised. The author and publisher expressly disclaim responsibility for any adverse effects that may result from the use or application of the recipes and information contained in this book.

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FOR HOLLY—*my duck hunting buddy, photographer, guinea pig, and most of all, my best friend.*

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INTRODUCTION

Cooking a duck or a goose in today's world is an act of expression. It is a way to find that forgotten feast we Americans once enjoyed, to free ourselves from the Tyranny of the Chicken and shake our fists at the notion that fat is our enemy. Mastering these birds will make you a more competent carnivore. It will help you regain the skills we once had in our kitchens, and it will give you the knowledge needed to tackle more challenging morsels, such as giblets and wings and rendered fat. Cooking a duck or goose—a whole bird, from bill to feet—is real cooking. True, honest *cooking*.

Like pork, these birds offer an array of flavors and textures depending on which cut you choose. But unlike almost every other animal we normally consider food, ducks and geese offer a diversity of breeds and species that even a novice can detect at the table. The flavor of a Pekin duck is as far from that of a goose as a skinless chicken breast is from a rib eye. And that is just a domestic example. Throw in the world of wild ducks and geese and your experiences multiply tenfold: a roasted green-winged teal bears little resemblance to an eider, a goose, or even a cinnamon teal. The common mallard can taste markedly different depending on whether it had been eating corn, acorns, rice, or fish.

Waterfowl has a rich human history, as well. Tamed first by the ancient Egyptians, geese are one of humankind's oldest domesticated animals. Ducks, which arrived in the barnyard later, have nevertheless been domesticated for thousands of years and arose independently in two parts of the world before they spread to the rest of the globe. Cultures as far-flung as Mexico, Persia, and China have been cooking ducks and geese for more than three millennia, and nearly every cuisine in the world has found a place for duck at the table.

Perfectly cooked duck breast has the meatiness of a steak with an additional cloak of fatty, crispy skin. In fact, it is better to associate duck with beef than with other poultry: think of the breast meat as a steak and the rest of the bird

as the brisket. But it is the skin that most distinguishes duck in the kitchen. Crispy duck skin is one of the greatest pleasures of the dining table. It is the reason that Peking duck has persisted as a Chinese classic for nearly seven hundred years. And crispy skin is what separates confit, a French method of lightly curing duck legs or wings and then slowly cooking them in their own fat, from another piece of braised meat. Confit is so meaty, silky, and crispy that it has become many a chef's "death bed" meal.

I am not alone in feeling this passionate about waterfowl. Duck is experiencing a renaissance in restaurant kitchens across the continent. Seared duck breast or duck confit has become a common sight on menus. And just as with the pork revolution of the past decade, diners well outside of the nation's culinary capitals of San Francisco, New York, and Chicago are finding evidence of the trend: crispy duck tongues in Kansas City; duck skin cracklins in Toronto; duck consommé in Minneapolis; foie gras foam in Sacramento; duck legs, braised and pulled like carnitas, tucked into tacos in Austin. Diners are excited about duck. It has become the new pork.

But this renaissance need not be the province of the professionals. Restaurant cooks are not wizards. With the possible exception of Peking duck, they are not cooking duck in mystical ways that require years of apprenticeship to master. Cooking a duck properly is not rocket science, though it does require some specialized knowledge. This book's primary goal is to give you that knowledge.

I can hear some of you. You're thinking about the ducks you've eaten in the past, and the image you've conjured up is not good. Chances are the first word that popped into your head was some variant of greasy, dry, or livery. And I am certain that either you or someone you know has his or her Great Goose Disaster story. These tales of woe typically begin with visions of a Victorian Christmas and end with gallons of grease—often igniting into fireballs—dry, unhappy meat, and a lifetime of disappointment. "Oh, I tried goose once. Let me tell you about the time ..." Even hunters who often shoot scores of ducks in a season share this fear of fowl and banish their ducks to the sausage heap.

This need not be so. With a few exceptions, the recipes in this book can be done with no special equipment from ingredients you can buy in an average supermarket. Yes, I have included a few high-wire recipes, but that is just to show you the range of dishes you can create with these remarkable animals.

In the pages that follow, you will learn how to break down a duck or goose into legs, breasts, and wings, a process not terribly different from how you handle a chicken. The hunters among you will find out how to hang, pluck, and eviscerate their birds. Throughout this book, you will discover the fundamentals of duck and goose cookery: how to cook a duck breast properly, and how to cook duck legs so that they are tender, yet still have crispy skin. I will walk you through the culinary jazz of making sausages and other charcuterie and stocks, teach you how to render duck and goose fat from both domestic and wild birds, and describe how to cook with that fat as well as

with duck eggs, which may look like chicken eggs but are not.

Once you learn my method for braising duck legs, you can use it to cook not only my other braised waterfowl recipes but also to perfect your own creations. Master the task of searing a duck breast medium-rare with crispy skin and you will never be far from a memorable meal: even paired with a store-bought sauce and tater tots, a perfectly cooked duck breast never fails to impress. And after you make a few batches of sausage using my techniques, you will find yourself making links in your own personal style. Charcuterie is an addictive culinary art.

Of special importance to me is the section on giblets. Properly cooked, giblets can taste every bit as wondrous as the rest of the duck. But there is the rub: for many, “properly cooked” is an impossibility. The recipes in this book will disabuse you of that idea, and they will help you make full use of a duck’s so-called fifth quarter, even if it is only in gravy, sausage, or a homemade “duck burger.”

But before you can cook, you must first catch your duck, be it in the market or the marsh. Thankfully, this is no longer the ordeal it once was. Ten years ago, you would be lucky to find a frozen whole duck in your supermarket. Now those same markets are starting to sell breasts and legs separately and stock fresh whole ducks at the meat counter. Farmers’ markets are increasingly offering carefully raised heritage breeds, and duck eggs are no longer a rare item. What’s more, if you have an Asian market near you, you will never want for duck: Asians eat the majority of all ducks raised worldwide, and for many Chinese and Southeast Asians, duck is more common than chicken.

It is my hope that if you glean nothing else from this book, you will come away with a heaping slice of confidence in the kitchen. Waterfowl are endlessly fascinating, endlessly diverse in their forms and flavors. Get yourself some duck breasts, with a nice layer of fat and skin. Sear them in a pan until the skin crisps like a cracker and the meat is as lovely as a medium-rare rib eye. Flavor it with nothing more than sea salt, pepper, and perhaps a squeeze of lemon. Taste it. Savor it. You will see. A perfect duck breast is a revelation, a life-changing event. There will be no turning back. Ready to begin?

“Man who stand on hill with mouth
open will wait long time for roast duck
to drop in.”

— CONFUCIUS





BASICS

FROM MARKET TO TABLE: BREEDS, BUYING, BREAKING DOWN, AND STORING

It's been a century since ducks have been this accessible in American markets, and for more than a generation the only ducks available to home cooks were wan, factory-farmed Pekin ducks shoved into a dark corner of the freezer section.

Those birds are still there, but they are increasingly being joined by ducks raised under better conditions, as well as by breeds better suited to serious cooking. And for the first time, consumers can now buy the breasts and legs of ducks, just like they do of chickens. This simple change has opened a whole new world for the American home cook.

Here's a brief guide to the kinds of ducks and geese you will find in the market, what to look for when buying, and what to do with the birds once they arrive in your kitchen.

BREEDS

PEKIN. This is the standard white-feathered duck sold in supermarkets throughout the United States. Before the Chinese domesticated it thousands of years ago, the Pekin was a mallard. The breed made its debut in the United States in 1873, and soon became known as a Long Island duck because the East End of the island was a center of duck farming. Pekins, which average three to six pounds plucked and gutted, are primarily sold whole and frozen, although they are increasingly available as breasts and legs sold separately. The meat of a typical Pekin is so pale that it cooks up very much like a chicken thigh. In fact, in old cookbooks, it's listed as "white duck." Its paleness is a function of the bird's diet and limited exercise and is a hallmark of factory-farmed ducks. Pekins raised on better diets and allowed more exercise have better color and flavor.

WHY A GOOSE IS NOT A DUCK

A whole goose will cost you at least forty-five dollars and can approach two hundred dollars in the case of special breeds. A typical domesticated goose serves only six to eight diners, which makes goose one of the more expensive options for the table. There are a variety of reasons for this, primarily to do with the fact that geese are unique among domesticated

animals.

“Goose is a pain in the neck to breed,” says Ariane Daguin of D’Artagnan Foods. Geese only lay eggs once a year, unlike ducks and chickens, which lay year-round. Then, once the chicks are hatched, they grow slowly. “They take six months to reach adulthood, and at any point during that time if a sickness passes by, overnight the whole flock can die.”

Jim Schiltz of Schiltz Goose Farm notes that geese have one of the worst feed-to-weight ratios of all domestic animals. A goose requires close to seven pounds of feed to put on just one pound of weight, he says. A duck will gain a pound off of only two and a half pounds of feed, and a chicken’s feed ratio is 1.8 to 1. The only other commonly eaten animal with a ratio similar to that of the goose is grass-fed beef.

That makes sense to Schiltz, because geese—wild and domestic—prefer a diet heavy in grass, not grain. Ducks, on the other hand, love grain. “If you fed a goose diet to a duck, it would not do well at all,” he says.

Schiltz adds that geese have resisted attempts to breed them so they grow faster. “Their legs won’t support it,” he explains. “But honestly, growing slower is not a bad thing. Growing slower makes them more tasty.”

MUSCOVY. A species native to Central and South America, Muscovy ducks were domesticated around 600 BCE by the peoples living in what is now Ecuador; the Spanish conquistadores encountered domesticated Muscovies among the Maya, Incas, and Aztecs and transported them to Spain as early as 1494. Muscovies are larger than Pekins and put on less fat. They are an excellent eating breed for this reason, and their meat is darker and more richly flavored than that of a Pekin. In old books, you will see Muscovy ducks referred to as Brazil ducks. You will rarely see a Muscovy whole, though specialty purveyors such as D’Artagnan in New York do carry them whole. Mostly you will encounter only their breasts and legs.

MOULARD. A sterile hybrid of the Pekin and the Muscovy duck (the name means “mule” in French), this is the duck most often raised for foie gras, and its breasts are favored in the restaurant trade, where they are called *magret* breasts. Moulard breasts are twice the size of Pekin breasts, often topping one and a quarter pounds per side. One half of a Moulard breast will serve at least two diners. Moulards are also much fattier than Muscovies, so they offer the benefit of delicious fat with the larger size of the Muscovy. I have never seen Moulards sold whole, but the breasts are typically available in specialty markets or online.

ROUEN (ROHAN). A French duck bred specifically for the table (not for egg laying), the Rouen looks like a gigantic mallard. Culinarily speaking, it is a “natural” Moulard: it is large and fatty like a Moulard but is its own breed, so it will reproduce. Rouen ducks are commonly raised by artisanal breeders, so if you see ducks sold at a farmers’ market, it is likely they are Rouens. D’Artagnan is selling a variant called a Rohan that is smaller but offers the same characteristics of the meatier Rouen. A half breast will feed one hungry person or two light eaters. Both Rouens and Rohans are an improvement on the Pekin, and are my favorite domestic ducks, but Rohans are available only through the D’Artagnan website.

EMBDEN GOOSE. This huge, white goose of German origin is the standard goose in barnyards across the United States. A special variant of this goose, which was developed by mixing the Embden with several other domestic goose breeds, is what the South Dakota company Schiltz sells to supermarkets all over the nation. Schiltz controls the American goose trade, so chances are if you’ve eaten domestic goose in the United States, it is from Schiltz. Geese are primarily sold whole and frozen in winter months, though Schiltz sells legs and breasts on its website year-round.

DUCK MEAT IS HORMONE- AND ANTIBIOTIC-FREE

Duck farmers in the United States are not allowed to give their birds routine doses of hormones, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Antibiotics are permitted only when a bird is sick, which means no “preventive dosing” is allowed as it is with chickens. If a bird has been given antibiotics, it must go through a “withdrawal” period before it is slaughtered, so that no residue of any medicine remains in the bird’s system.

BUYING

In many cases, your only choice is to look in the freezer section for a frozen whole duck. This will almost always be a Pekin duck from a factory farm. Although it is not the ideal duck to work with, you can still do great things even with this sort of duck. But be careful: many of these birds are “plumped” with a salt solution the way many chickens are, and it will say so on the label. If this is the case, go easy on any salt you use with the duck, and under no circumstances should you brine it. It is already brined.

Many markets now sell ducks by the part. This is a good thing, not only because it makes it easier to cook duck on a daily basis—cooking a whole bird is more of a weekend thing, at least for me—but it’s also allowed farmers to sell different breeds of duck more easily. It is not too hard to find Muscovy breasts or a packet of frozen duck legs these days. Even rarer breeds such as Moulards are finding their way into high-end supermarkets and butcher shops.

In fall and winter, markets are starting to sell fresh birds, too. A fresh duck will have a better texture than one that has been frozen, so definitely buy fresh if you can.

Also, look to your local farmers’ market for high-quality ducks. Small farmers are beginning to raise ducks for meat more often, and if you can find one, cultivate a relationship. Chances are good that these will be the finest ducks around.

Finally, you can always shop online. Purveyors such as D’Artagnan sell some of the highest-quality ducks and geese in the world. They will be expensive when you factor in shipping, but they are definitely worth the cost for special occasions.

BREAKING DOWN

Perhaps the most important skill you will need to master as a waterfowl cook is how to break down a whole duck or goose. It’s not terribly difficult, and if you know how to cut up a chicken, you are most of the way there.

Mechanically, ducks are a little different from chickens. They tend to have a wider breastbone and a shallower keel than chickens do, and their bones are heavier. Their wings are longer, tougher, and leaner, too. They are also far fattier. That fat makes it more difficult to see the lines where you cut—between the leg and breast, the exact center of the breastbone, and so on—but once you have handled a few ducks, you will get the hang of it. Anatomically, ducks and geese are virtually identical.

To get started, you will need a fresh or thawed duck or goose. The best way to thaw the bird is to set it in the fridge for a couple of days; geese will take several days to thaw. To speed the process, you can set a wrapped bird inside a large pot and fill it with cold water. This method will thaw a duck in a few hours; a goose will take at least four to five hours.

Once your bird has thawed, set it on a large cutting board. You will need a sharp, thin-bladed knife. I use a boning knife, but a fillet knife or even a paring knife works well, too. Let me emphasize again: your knife must be as sharp as lightning. A dull knife is a lazy servant and will actually increase your chances of injuring yourself. Your other cutting tool will be heavy kitchen shears. I prefer the type that come apart for cleaning. I’ve used the fancier ones with springs, and I find they get gunky too easily.

Have ready a large bowl or tray for the bird pieces. When I am breaking down waterfowl, I have one small bowl for giblets; two medium bowls, one

for breasts and one for legs and wings; and a large tray for the carcasses. Another good thing to have around is a towel, cloth or paper. You will want to keep your knife hand clean and dry.

STEP ONE. Start by setting the bird breast side up on a cutting surface. For a domesticated bird, reach into the cavity and pull out the neck and the giblets, which will often be packed into a little bag. Begin breaking down the bird by removing the legs. I press on the gap between the legs and breast to push as much skin toward the breast as I can (**1A**).



When you make this cut, you want more skin on the breast than the legs, which will keep the breasts juicy and tender when you cook them. Slice down the gap and you will notice that you sliced skin, not muscle (**1B**).



That's how you know you cut in the right spot. Continue to cut gently downward until you reach the ball-and-socket joint where the leg is attached. As you slice down to the joint, arc the knife under the tail end of the bird's back to get all of the meat off the thigh.

Snap the leg back downward to pop open the ball-and-socket joint, which frees the leg (**1C**).



Tuck the knife behind the ball joint and cut the leg free (1D).



As you cut past the socket joint toward the front of the bird, don't forget to arc the knife around the little pocket of meat known in birds as the oyster. This is my favorite part. It is small in wild ducks but is more substantial in domesticated ducks and all geese. Set aside (1E) then repeat with the other leg.



TAKING DRY AGING A STEP FURTHER

Here's a tip from executive chef Paul Virant of Vie restaurant in Chicago that can be easily translated to a home kitchen: When you buy whole ducks, remove the whole breast bone with the breast meat attached. Use the legs and wings for another recipe.

Dry age the breast meat uncovered in an open container in the refrigerator. Lift it off the bottom of the container by putting it on a cooling rack or even celery stalks. Leaving it for only a day will improve its flavor but you can extend the drying for as long as a week. "It develops that special dry-aged character everyone loves," Virant says.

STEP TWO. Remove the wings (if your bird still has wings; you often lose one with wild birds when wing-shooting). Turn the bird breast side down and look for the curved bone on either side of its back (**2A**).



This is the saber bone, which is the duck's shoulder blade. Using the saber bone as a guide, slice toward the neck to free the wing drumette (**2B**).



If you cut the right spot, your knife will go right through the soft cartilage that attaches the wing to the body. Don't worry if you mess it up a few times; it takes practice to know exactly where that spot is. Finish by removing the

wing and cutting a little extra skin from the neck area. Repeat on the other side.

STEP THREE. Finish with the breasts. I like to take the breasts off in one piece. This lets me stuff them if I want, and it wastes less skin. Begin by making a cut along the very obvious fat pad at the center of the bird's flanks (**3A**).



Then start sliding the knife gently toward the bird's tail end along another visible fat line (**3B**).



Ducks and geese have broad breastbones, so you need to run the knife flat along this bony plate until you hit the keel bone, which divides each half of the breast.

Once you have freed the tail end of the breast, run the knife back along the breastbone toward the neck, tapping the point of the knife on the keel bone as you go. This ensures that you are cutting deep enough to get all of the meat off the bone. Continue this way until you get to the wishbone (**3C**).