



Ingredients

Serves 3–6 (1 or 2 quails each)

- 6 quails
- 2 tablespoons olive oil, plus extra for oiling the quails
- flaked sea salt
- cloves from ½ garlic bulb, peeled
- 100g jamón (Spanish ham), roughly chopped into 1cm-wide ribbons
- 1 medium onion, finely sliced
- 4 good bay leaves
- 1 heaped teaspoon plain flour
- 250ml Fino sherry
- 2 tablespoons roughly chopped flat-leaf parsley
- good bread or sautéed potatoes, to serve (optional)

The Good Table

Quails with Fino & ham

Wild quails taste exceptional, but I also find farmed quails very delectable and this is an Andalucian treatment for their pale, tender meat. Normally the jamón (Spanish ham) in cooked dishes such as this would be off-cuts from the edges of the cured leg. Although bacon could be used as a replacement, it will not deliver that holiday taste. Try to buy sliced off-cuts or a little block of ham for cooking from a Spanish deli. Alternatively, proper slices will give the flavour, but this is a somewhat expensive option. I use Fino in this dish, but any dry sherry would do.

Preheat the oven to 200°C fan/220°C/Gas 7. Use a sharp pair of scissors to cut out the spines of the quails by holding each one cupped in one hand with the back up. (The spines can be used to make a little stock for one person's evening bowl of soup).

Put each quail breast-side up on a chopping board. Put the heel of your hand on the breastbone and squash the bird flat. You should hear the breastbone break. Make sure the quails are dry; if not, wipe off any moisture with kitchen paper. Rub the birds with a little oil and season with salt.

In a shallow metal casserole or an ovenproof frying pan that can borrow a lid, sear the oiled quails over a medium–high heat, browning them all over. This will take around 4 minutes. Do not cook them for too long – this stage should be brief if the pan is hot enough. Remove the birds from the pan to a large plate.

In the same cooking vessel, fry the garlic cloves with the jamón in most of the oil over a medium–high heat until nicely coloured (about 2–3 minutes). Add the onion and bay leaves, then cook for another 7 minutes or so, stirring regularly, until softened (but the onions should not colour). Scatter over the flour and stir it into the onions for 30 seconds or so, to cook out the raw taste.

Stand back and add the Fino. If you are cooking with a gas hob, it is easy to flame them as you do this: tip the pan towards the gas and, as the vapours ignite, swirl the flame around the pan until the fire goes out (but flaming isn't necessary). Immediately transfer the cooking vessel to the oven for 12 minutes. Add the remaining oil to the casserole or pan then return the quails to it.

When it is cooked, remove the birds briefly from the pan. Swirl the sauce to make sure the flour thickens it properly and scatter in the parsley. Put the birds back and serve in the middle of the table, straight from the pan, perhaps with some good bread or sautéed potatoes.



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