

Bug cuisine not for the squeamish

Insect chef tries to combat society's prejudice to his nutritious and, he claims, delicious dishes

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Putting your prejudices aside can lead to different, and possibly better, experiences — such as eating insects.

A recipe book recently published by Shoichi Uchiyama may be quite an eye-opener for many people in this sense. But be prepared before opening the 256-page book — some of the 64 color photos of bug recipes may leave you feeling a little queasy.



Shoichi Uchiyama

The meals in the pictures range from huge cockroaches soaked in pink vinegar soup, half-raw fat hornet larvae, huge moth pupae simmered with sugar, and a pizza covered with giant water bugs, spiders, caterpillars and adult hornets.

Uchiyama, who lives in Tokyo and holds a food sanitation license, has his own reasons to justify his bug-eating crusade. He argues that insects are almost the perfect food for human beings, were it not for our emotional aversion — nurtured by society — to insects.

"Everybody says bugs taste good even if they taste

them only once," said Uchiyama, who organizes a number of bug-eating meetings through his popular Web site, Konchu Ryori Kenkyu (Bug-eating Recipe Studies) at www.bekkoame.ne.jp/~s-uchi/musikui/musikui.html

To get his point across, Uchiyama recently published the book "Tanoshii Konchu Ryori" ("Enjoyable Bug-eating Recipes"), featuring 80 bug-eating recipes in Japanese, Western and other ethnic styles, as well as bug-based desserts.

Academic studies have shown insects are rich in nutrition and many are even more nutritionally balanced than meat or fish, Uchiyama pointed out.

In addition, they grow much faster and require less feed than animals and fish, and leftover vegetables are enough to farm many kinds of bugs. They grow in small spaces and don't compete with human beings over food, Uchiyama said.

"I think a food shortage will emerge as a global problem in the near future. Insects will play a big role in solving that problem."

Uchiyama's argument may sound bizarre, but the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization is in complete agreement.

"With over 1,400 insect species eaten by humans worldwide, the insect world offers promising possibilities both commercially and nutritionally," the organization said in a statement at a bug-eating workshop Feb. 19 in Chiang Mai, Thailand.



"While the idea of eating insects may seem unusual or even unappetizing to some, human consumption of insects is actually very common in most parts of the world," the U.N. body said.

According to



Alternative cuisine: A hornet and silkworm pupae, wrapped in "kamaboko" fish paste, are served on a traditional Japanese plate, while a giant water insect and hornet larvae are toppings on a plate of rice curry. COURTESY OF SHOICHI UCHIYAMA

Uchiyama, 1,400 kinds of insects are eaten in 90 countries, mainly in Africa, Latin America and Asia. According to FAO, the most common insects eaten by humans come from four main insect groups — beetles; ants, bees and wasps; grasshoppers and crickets; and moths and butterflies.

"As a food source, insects are highly nutritious," FAO said. "Some insects have as much protein as meat and fish."

Some scholars have also argued that eating insects is one of the most efficient ways to obtain protein during space trips or long-term stays in the Antarctic, given the ease and speed they can be farmed.

For example, you can grow 4,500 giant mealworms into adults of about 10 cm in length over three months in a space of only 1 sq. meter, according to Uchiyama.

He originally hails from Nagano Prefecture, where locals have a long tradition of eating certain kinds of bugs, including locusts and silkworms. Hornet larvae are a special fall delicacy of Nagano.

Uchiyama therefore grew up open-minded about eating insects, but he became particularly fascinated after seeing an exhibition of edible insects in 1998 in Tokyo.

"At the exhibition, I saw lots of photos of people from Africa and Asia who were happily eating bugs. It seemed they couldn't wait to catch and eat bugs."

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Even though Uchiyama and his bug-eating friends understand FAO's nutritional approach to insects as part of its efforts to save the world from a looming global food shortage, he and his friends eat insects purely because of their good taste and out of curiosity.

They organize a bug-eating meeting once a month at a restaurant in the Asagaya district in Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo, and three seasonal events a year.

In spring, they catch, cook and eat bugs together with wild weeds. In summer, they gather and fry cicada larva. And in fall, they catch and eat hundreds of giant locusts tempura-style on a riverbank.

"Cicadas are quite similar to shrimps in texture. The taste is something like beans or nuts. They are really good," Uchiyama said.

Asked for his favorite, Uchiyama pointed to fresh, blanched yellow hornet larvae right before turning into chrysalides.

According to the recipe in Uchiyama's book, you simply blanch the larvae in boiling water for 30 seconds, cool them off and eat them with soy sauce and wasabi.

"Larvae should be very fresh. (The best ones) are those that you just pull out from a nest, still alive and moving," he said. "That tastes sweet and creamy. Really great."

People instinctively tend to be conservative about what they eat because poisonous food could endanger their lives, Uchiyama pointed out.

But most insects do not contain any poison or toxins, and they can be safe to eat if they are cooked with adequate heat, he said.

Still, most people detest the very idea of eating bugs because of an obsession with excessive cleanliness and a fixed prejudice against bug-eating, Uchiyama argued.

His dream is that someday bugs will be recognized as ordinary food just like meat and fish, and sold on supermarket shelves.

"There are no clear borderlines between what you can eat and what you cannot eat because we human beings are omnivorous and at the top of the food chain."

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