

STUDENTS

OF CHEESE, BUGS AND CATERING

Whether they study computer science or history, these scholars major in food
By Meagan Campbell

EATING BUGS

STIR-FRY WITH MARINATED mealworms, pan-fried June bugs, peppered ants—when Laura Shine offers such delicacies to her friends, she already knows their instinct will be to gag. Her mission, in her doctoral research, is to figure out why. “To lots of North Americans, [eating insects] is absolutely unthinkable and disgusting,” says Shine, who is doing her Ph.D. in food culture at Concordia University. “We tend to group them all together as gross, crawling things.”

Entomophagy, the consumption of insects, is uncommon partly because insects are stigmatized as filthy. Shine traces the stigma to the 1950s, when a public-health campaign urged people to get rid of houseflies because they could cause illness. Meanwhile, the rise of agricultural pesticides categorized bugs as something to be exterminated. “That idea spread to all insects,” says Shine, “except maybe butterflies.”

Eating insects doesn’t just disgust people—it also frightens them. A prickly leg or invisible wing could get caught in the throat, they worry, even though they could simply pluck off unwanted body parts. Indeed, the ultimate reason for insect repulsion in North America, Shine argues, is that people simply don’t know much about them.

Globally, two billion people eat insects, the most common being beetles. Mexican snacks include fried grasshoppers with lime and salt, while southeast Asian cuisine features giant water bugs large enough to yield filets. According to the United Nations, 1,462 species of insects are edible, including caterpillars and wasps. Traditionally, Aboriginal people in Canada ate crickets and fly eggs, and, dating further back, according to the New Testament, John the Baptist ate locusts journeying through the desert.

Shine also seeks to figure out why soci-

eties sometimes change their minds about “unthinkable” foods. Raw fish was once perceived as inedible by North Americans, but young Californians transformed it into a luxury item that people needed to be initiated into, and the California roll took off. Insects are beginning to benefit from a similar trend. Noma, a restaurant in Copenhagen that has been ranked the best in the world, now serves insects with crème fraîche. “You pay hundreds of dollars to get this menu and be at this restaurant,” says Shine. “Then they serve you ants.”

Problematically, consumers with shellfish allergies may also react to insects, which are also arthropods. Further, the size of insects makes bug harvesting more difficult than cattle farming. Entomo Farms, the largest cricket farm in North America, based in Norwood, Ont., must raise 90 million crickets to sustain its current revenue. The company houses the bugs in “cricket condos” for six to eight weeks, then cooks them and grinds them into powder or sells them whole. Recommended recipes include blueberry cricket powder muffins, cinnamon cricket waffles and salad with

crickets substituted for croutons. “Of course there are people who have a degree of shyness or gross factor around it,” says Jarrod Goldin, co-founder of Entomo Farms. However, once customers try a sample, he says, “it’s very anticlimactic. They go, ‘Oh, it tastes just like food.’”

Nutrition is the primary allure of insects. High in protein and minerals, bugs can be ground into energy bars for athletes, and Entomo’s products are now sold in upscale Toronto food stores including Planet Organic Market and McEwan. Bugs are also marketed as environmentally friendly—on average, insects are seven times more efficient than cows at converting grain into meat. Even the feces of bugs needn’t go to waste. “There’s a whole science to insect poop and how it impacts plants,” says Goldin. “If you add it to tomatoes, you’ll get extra tomatoes.”

Shine sees mindsets change first-hand. Harvesting a bug farm in her basement and backyard, visitors ask to sample her marinated mealworms and roasted crickets. “Most people are quite curious about it.” However, if a guest isn’t ready to consume critters, “I really don’t believe in coercion,” she promises. ♣



Creepy crawlers: Laura Shine studies edibility at Concordia University in Montreal

AT YOUR SERVICE

IMAGINE A MAN who does your grocery shopping, brings you the receipt and prepares three dinners in your kitchen for \$15 to \$25. His name is Cheick Kante, and he provides this service to students at Bishop’s University. “I’m cooking fresh at your place,” he says. “They usually stare at me. They’re like, ‘This is cool, man.’”

Kante grew up in Paris, refining his palate eating French cuisine and West African dishes prepared by his mother, who is from Mali. In high school, he moved to Philadelphia to play football. After injuring his knee, he spent four years working in a restaurant famous for its chicken wings, where he realized he adored cooking. “I can do math. I can do physics. [But] I always felt something was missing,” he says. “God showed me the way.”

While studying computer science at Bishop’s in Quebec’s Eastern Townships, Kante became an entrepreneur. Last year, he invited seven friends for dinner and served them fish tacos with homemade tortilla chips. Mid-meal, he asked them to stop eating and listen to his business idea. He would invite students to call him with orders, and he would buy the ingredients and other groceries. Instead of setting up his own certified kitchen, he would cook in their homes. They would reimburse him for the groceries and pay him \$15 per hour to cook a feast to eat throughout the week. “Yeah, definitely,” Kante’s dinner guests said of his idea, as he recalls. “You need to start tomorrow.”

Six months later, Kante has named his business *Votre Chef*. His first nine customers have had their fridges stocked with beef and chicken patties, sushi and Mexican pineapple sauce with nachos. Kante’s menu features cranberry French toast with almond butter and smoked salmon sandwiches on rye. He has also catered a campus fashion show of 200 people, and in February he plans to offer a service cooking Valentine’s Day dinners for two. “I’m still doing computer science, but mostly for my parents,” he says. “I feel like [cooking] is something I must do.”

While cooking in homes, Kante offers to teach his clients to cook. And when he’s finished, he cleans the kitchen, often leaving it fresher than he found it. ♣

THAT’S A LOT OF CHEDDAR

THE STUDY OF cheese has been a six-year pursuit for Hayley Goodchild, a Ph.D. candidate in history at McMaster University in Hamilton. To captivate readers, chapter one of her dissertation recalls the 19th-century creation of a 3,300-kg cheddar. “It wasn’t just ‘Look at how big this cheese is,’ ” she says. “It’s a cautionary tale about relying on niche industries.”

As craft cheese production makes a resurgence in Ontario, Goodchild urges Canadians to consider that the industry has long been romanticized, dating back to 1866. That year, three cheese-makers in Ingersoll, Ont., created a massive cheese wheel, heavy enough to dislodge the wheel of a wagon on its way to public display. It journeyed to Liverpool, England, where locals paid sixpence to witness the spectacle, and on the way stopped in Saratoga, N.Y., and Montreal, where samplers could line up for a nibble.

The cheese-makers weren’t just pulling an advertising stunt. Goodchild argues they also intended to recruit more cheese-makers in

Ontario and stimulate rural growth. While cheese-making was a laborious pursuit with slivers of profit, the giant cheese portrayed the industry as a labour of science. “Making a mammoth cheese isn’t as simple as saying, ‘Let’s put a lot of spoiled milk together,’ ” explains Michael Egan, the supervisor for Goodchild’s dissertation. “The challenge is getting it to taste like cheese and behave like cheese and taste the same wherever you take a chunk out of it.”

When selecting her thesis topic, Goodchild knew that saying “cheese” attracts attention. She wanted to analyze food culture in an enticing way, and her supervisor encouraged her to delve into a cheeky topic. “It can be

hard to take a [3,300-kg] cheese seriously,” says Goodchild. “My dissertation goes beyond that.”

Despite writing about the laboriousness of the industry, Goodchild is considering a career as a cheese-maker herself in the future, rather than an academic. “That, I’m seriously entertaining,” she says, adding that she adores the taste of most cheeses, though her preference is blue. ♣

‘IT’S A CAUTIONARY TALE ABOUT A NICHE INDUSTRY,’ SAYS HAYLEY GOODCHILD, PH.D. CANDIDATE

Wheel it in: A 3,300-kg cheese from Ingersoll, Ont., was a star at the 1866 New York State Fair

