

AT LEISURE MAIN

EATING OUT

Really Slow Food: Escargot Makes a Comeback

Why top chefs are returning to -- and reinventing -- a French staple long out of culinary fashion

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Wobbling out of a tipsy lunch at an inn by a woodsy river in Burgundy some years ago (at that moment I probably couldn't have told you exactly what year it was then either), I caught sight of a small creature perched on a stump. It was a snail, a Burgundy snail in Burgundy! *Un vrai escargot de Bourgogne*, poster beast of traditional French cuisine.

Out of the Shell

Traditional French escargots may be out of style, but smart innovations and newly popular Asian and Spanish dishes are appearing on menus across the country. Here's a sampling.

CITY / REST.	COMMENT
Arlington, Texas Cacharel 817-640-9981	Hans Bergmann serves escargots with grapes and pecans on puff pastry. \$12.50
Chicago Cafe Central 847-266-7878	A signature dish here is snails with herb butter, topped with bread crumbs and broiled. \$8.95
New York Town 212-582-4445	Geoffrey Zakarian makes a risotto of escargots with sweet garlic and black truffles. \$22 as an appetizer
Norwalk, Conn. Meigas 203-866-8800	Luis Bollo's authentic paella features denizens of Valencia's rice fields: rabbit, rosemary and snails. \$30
San Francisco Ngu Binh 415-346-3100	This new Vietnamese place combines snails with tomatoes and ginger, or with crab, shrimp and tomatoes. \$6.45
Washington Olives 202-452-1866	Todd English's branch in the capital sometimes serves escargot flatbread with goat cheese and truffle vinaigrette. \$16

Traditional indeed. Even late last century, escargots reinserted in snail shells with garlic butter were, in their mother tongue, *passé*. Gone with Les Halles themselves were those midnight forays to Paris's central market for *un demi demi*, a glass of beer and a half-dozen snails. Gone too is the neighborhood bistro where I once heard the regulars debating whether the mother feeding her infant escargots at a corner table was committing a crime against childhood. But in recent months, snails have crept back into the culinary slimelight.

In a break with tradition, chefs are drawing on Spanish and Asian cuisines and introducing snails to New American menus. This is good news for confirmed helicophages like us. The banner headline should read: "Out of the Shell: Chefs Flaunt Inner Snails in Hot New Dishes."

Chef Hans Bergmann offers sautéed snails for \$12.50 at the literally high-end restaurant Cacharel, housed in a penthouse in Arlington, Texas. Chef Luis Bollo, who won rave reviews at Meigas in New York before the downtown restaurant shakeout that followed the Sept. 11 attacks, now serves authentic Valencian paella with

snails for \$30 at Meigas in Norwalk, Conn. The Web site of the Trellis, long the best-known eatery in Williamsburg, Va., features a recipe for grilled skewers of snails and chicken on red pepper capellini

created by chef Marcel Desaulniers of "Death by Chocolate" fame.

Why stop there? Why not try snail pizza, which Texas malacologist (snail scholar) and snail farmer Richard Fullington suggested back in 1995? It's available at Todd English's Olives NY in the W Hotel in Manhattan's Union Square and sometimes at his outpost in Washington.

Or you could fly to Kansas City, Mo., where, as the song says, everything's up to date at Bluestem, a three-year-old place that's getting a lot of food-world buzz.

Named after a native prairie grass, Bluestem is the brainchild of Megan and Colby Garrelts. It may well be the most sophisticated place to eat between Chicago and Aspen. Foie gras and wagyu are spoken here, but we came for the snails -- served with *fidua* pasta (noodles with a small cylindrical cross-section), slices of Portuguese linguica sausage and sweet pea shoots (\$15 a la carte). The snails tasted earthy and gave another kind of al dente texture to that of the *fiduas*.

I got to Bluestem early and had my hair cut across the street in a mini-mall by a woman named Deana Mountain with a cerise forelock who knew all about Bluestem. "That is really high end," she averred over the buzz of the clippers.

The exposed-brick dining room, the color photographs of bluestem aflame at night and the friendly but professional service were a far cry from the atmosphere of Kansas City's most famous restaurant, Arthur Bryant's Barbeque, a decorator's nightmare redeemed by brilliant hot sauce and ribs.

Bluestem's chef says he gets his snails from Burgundy through a Texas supplier, but they're probably grown and processed somewhere else, then transshipped through France. As recently as 2000, edible snails were endangered in France, so the small *petit gris* are imported from North Africa, and the larger choice "Burgundy" snails from Eastern Europe. Any escargots sent here from France in cans are almost certainly just packaged there.

Practically no fresh snails are imported into the U.S.; the Agriculture Department requires special permits, and several states forbid live shipments. The federal government does, however, publish a comprehensive guide to snail farming ("Raising Snails," SRB 96-05, available online at nal.usda.gov). Now's your chance to corner the domestic market before the already-established Australian snail-growing industry beats you out.

One thing's for sure in the brave new world of the nouvelle escargot: Don't go overboard and try to eat the snails from your garden or aquarium. Some snails are disease carriers, and all of them are full of disgusting filth that has to be laboriously purged. Let the wild critters follow their bliss, sliding forward a few inches a day toward snail nirvana.

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