The first time Alex Atala sampled a spoonful of ants, he was in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, north Brazil, taking lunch with a home chef in the Amazon. “I felt this strong flavour of lemongrass and ginger and I asked her what she had put in the meal,” says the Brazilian chef of the two Michelin-starred restaurant D.O.M. “She said, ‘Ants’. I thought she hadn’t understood me, so I asked again. She said, ‘Son, there are only ants’.”

On the streets of Thailand, it’s not rare to see pushcarts full of crispy crickets and grasshoppers. Entomophagy, the practice of eating insects, has existed in China, Ghana, Mexico and Cambodia forever; according to the UN, the creatures are consumed by at least two billion people worldwide. But ever since they crawled their way on to fine-dining menus a couple of years ago — with super chefs like Atala and René Redzepi giving them the nod — they’ve roused curiosity, if not currency.

Don’t listen to your mom. Eat bugs, they’re good for you. Sonam Savlani gets some of the world’s biggest chefs to give you a taste.
DIGGING IN

The chefs argue that we’ve consumed insect produce like honey (“bee vomit”) for eons, then why scratch up our nose at them now? Nordic Food Lab, Noma’s parent company, is actively looking into their potential. They found that a purée of fermented grasshoppers and moth larvae is like strong fish sauce and bee larvae can be employed to make sweet mayonnaise. Their research has taken them across Sardinia, Kenya, central and southern Uganda, desert regions of Australia, Mexico and north Peru, and soon they’ll cover Japan. “On our trip to east Africa, we focused on termites — the queen termite was a surprise,” says Josh Evans, lead researcher at the Lab. The queen is almost twice the size of an average termite, and a rare delicacy because there’s only one in each hive. “You can cook it in its own fat, and it tastes nutty and fragrant, like porcini.”

GREEN REVELATION

You can start slow; there are many substitutes for meat. Larvae of palm weevils taste like beef bone marrow, diving beetles are a little like clams and fried baby bees will remind you of smoked fish or oysters. But novelty aside, why should you try them? Because it’s good for the environment. A recent study suggests that substituting pork and beef with crickets and locusts could reduce greenhouse emissions by as much as 95 per cent. If a cow takes 25 kg of feed to produce 1 kg of edible protein, then crickets feed on only 2.1 kg; plus, there is close to 1.4 billion insects for every person on the planet. Read: inexhaustible resource. “Besides, only about 0.1 per cent of insects in the world are actually harmful,” says Arnold van Huis, professor of tropical entomology at Wageningen University, Netherlands, and author of The Insect Cookbook (Columbia University Press). They rank higher of The Insect Cookbook (Columbia University Press). They rank higher...