



# FOOD CRAWL

*Don't listen to your mom. Eat bugs, they're good for you. **Sonam Sawlani** gets some of the world's biggest chefs to give you a taste*

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 crisped 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.

**READY TO EAT**

**MEZCAL,  
MEXICO**

The kick of tequila. Bonus? An agave worm.



**SCORPION  
CANDY,  
GERMANY**

Lollipops with scorpions in them. Save these for Halloween.

**CRICKET  
BAR, USA**

Look ma, no legs. Just processed cricket protein.



**BUGS ARE BIG**

At Atala's D.O.M., you'll find the simplest dish ever created: one cube of pineapple served with four Amazonian saúva ants on top. "I've used saúva ants in two ways: one focuses on the texture and highlights the natural crispness of it (it goes very well with vegetables), and the second way — better received by the public — is to dry and transform it into powder and add it to pasta, salad or sauces," he says.

Atala's fellow *Time* cover star Redzepi was inspired by his presentation of ants at the annual MAD culinary symposium in 2011, in Copenhagen. The next year, when Noma set up a pop-up restaurant at Claridge's, London, Redzepi's cache of exotic micro herbs weren't a talking point as much as the ants he served. At over \$300 a pop, unsettled diners were served cabbage topped with crème fraiche and live ants, which they sampled without protest (star power is everything) and found to be pleasantly citrusy. Nowadays, the Danish restaurant routinely serves grilled onions and fermented pears dusted with crushed wood ants or aebleskiver, a pancake made with bee larvae and crunchy, fermented crickets.

**DIGGING IN**

The chefs argue that we've consumed insect produce like honey ("bee vomit") for eons, then why scrunch 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 are 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 on unsaturated fatty acids and iron, too. "Seventy to 80 per cent of land is already used for livestock. And the world's population, from now till 2050, will increase by at least 30 per cent," says Huis. And what that means is: insects have the potential to ease the food crisis, if not solve it entirely.

**SPREADING WINGS**

Insects can also be spotted on the menu of some affordable restaurants in the West. Like Archipelago, London, which makes chocolate locusts and crisp cricket salads. Antojeria La Popular gave Manhattan a taste of insect burgers. There are also entire festivals dedicated to them. London's Festival celebrates everything creepy-crawly inspired: movies, design, architecture and food. Its first edition in 2006 brought in 10,000 visitors; last year, it was 2,00,000. "The premise of Festival is that insects are at the heart of being human — we can learn a lot from them. For instance, we discovered more about the human genome by studying fruit flies," says founder Bridget Nicholls, who created a smaller edition of Festival called *Who's The Pest?* Here, you could spot 3D-printed, high-protein biscuits made from insect flour. Nordic Food Lab chipped in too, creating a special menu featuring anty-gin and tonic (using wood ants), moth mousse and wormhole beer (with oatmeal worm). The biggest return to entomophagy can be witnessed in the Netherlands. "The region is harvesting insects, and partnering with Copenhagen and Denmark-based chefs towards normalising insect consumption in the West. The queen of Denmark is an entomophagist too!" says Nicholls. That's all we needed to hear. If it's good enough for the queen, it's good enough for us. And by us, we mean you. ●

**TASTES LIKE...**

**Raw termites:** Pineapple

**Larvae of palm weevils:**

Beef bone marrow

**Fried agave worms:**

Sunflower seeds

**Diving beetles:** Clams

**Fried grasshoppers:** Sardines

**French-fried ants:** Beef jerky

**Fried praying mantis:** Shrimp and raw mushrooms

**Fried wax moth larvae:** Corn puffs or potato chips

**Fried spiders:** Nuts

**Fried baby bees:** Smoked fish or oysters