

Nose to trail eating

The gastropod glut is good news for gourmets. Amy Oliver asks the experts how to make a meal out of the mollusc

They're everywhere I look. Bursting from beneath the bushes. Nestled between the branches of every tree and raised bed. I'd love to boast that my trug is overflowing with summer's bountiful harvest. But thanks to the endless rain over the past few months, the only glut I can look forward to is one of snails. Really juicy ones mind. Ones that have been gorging on my pea shoots, my onions — in fact everything in my sodden garden. And it's not just me.

This week it was reported that entries for fruit at Thruxton's village show in Hampshire were so low that organisers were planning on giving prizes for the biggest slug and heaviest snail instead.

I could have entered mine, but I had a better idea. Why don't I just eat them. Garden snails are not poisonous. You can eat virtually all land snails in this country. Prehistoric man loved them and the Romans thought them an elite food.

Sadly, you can't just pluck one off said pea shoot and pop it in your mouth. Snails must first be purged to rid them of any nasties they may have eaten. This means feeding them a gourmet diet for five days before starving them for another three. In order to kill them humanely they're kept in the fridge for at least 48 hours, or until they go into hibernation. They're then blanched in boiling water with salt and simmered in stock for two hours. As I'm quickly finding out, making homemade *escargot* is a bit of a faff, but it has got to be worth it for a snail-free existence not to mention a free lunch. So out into the drizzle I go, empty ice-cream tub in hand, to wrench a few big ones from the peach tree.

In foodie terms, my snail experiment has come at the right time. Over the past year or so the humble gastropod has slithered quietly on to the menu in all manner of British eateries, and not just swimming in garlic butter. Snails are literally coming out of their shells for an array of dishes.

There's Heston's snail porridge at The Fat Duck in Bray, in Dorset, The Tickled Pig in Wimborne serves snail pizza, while the L'Aubergade-trained Stephen Pielesz offers an all-day snail

breakfast at the Bridge House in Beaminster. Marcus Wareing puts snails with Galloway beef fillet at The Berkeley and Sean Burbidge serves them with langoustines at Pétrus.

Michael Chan, the head chef at Les Trois Garçons in London's Shoreditch, says his snail fricassee is so popular he is afraid to take it off the menu. He protests when I suggest this is because his is a French restaurant. "Actually, eating snails is becoming more British than French," he says. "The British have taken snails as a new product; they see them as versatile and something they can do anything with." This, coupled with the news that people are poaching protected Roman snails — the most sought-after type for eating in France — from the Surrey countryside and flogging them for hundreds of pounds to the restaurant trade, is surely further evidence of Britain's growing taste for *escargot*.

It's no surprise to David Walker, an accountant turned snail farmer who is struggling to keep up with the demand for his fresh molluscs. Dorset Snails shifts around 6,000 a week to top-end restaurants, including Les Trois Garçons and The Berkeley. Is there really such a demand? "Oh yes, there's an enormous market for snails in this country," Walker says. "We've never had a problem selling them." He and son Tony started out farming worms, but switched to snails in 2006 after watching Gordon Ramsay interview a Devon snail farmer on *The F Word*. After a shaky start — all 1,000 of their first batch from Serbia died — they are now one of the UK's leading snail farms. With that in mind, I pay the farm near Bournemouth a visit to glean some tips for my own foray into heliculture.

Admittedly, our set-ups are quite different. David and Tony house 30,000 *Helix aspersa maxima*, a type native to North Africa that can grow up to 40g, in an enormous pollytunnel complete with a mini electric fence to keep in the snails. They also have 2,000 breeding snails and a steady supply of hatchlings. Another 35,000 are in hibernation ready to be killed.

The 11 *Helix aspersa Muller* I plucked from my garden have free range of my fiancé's goldfish bowl. Despite selecting the biggest ones they look decidedly weedy in comparison. I'm also using a heavy-duty gardener's sieve for a lid. This may sound excessive, but snails are expert escape artists. I discovered this after attempting to keep them as pets when I was eight. Then, I'd housed them in a fish tank and put clingfilm over the top only to find them gone the next morning. "Well, they do have 2,000 teeth," says David when I recount the tale. This may explain why they're so good at dispatching my vegetables. They can also eat their way through cardboard — clingfilm was never going to cut it.

And what about their diet? The

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHERS, BEN GURR, MARY TURNER AND CHRIS HARRIS



Top: Snails covered with garlic butter and ready for cooking from Dorset Snails. Left: Michael Chan, the head chef at Les Trois Garçons, shows Amy Oliver how it's done. Above: Oliver prepares dinner for her snails

Romans fattened snails in special gardens and seasoned them with herbs and wine. David agrees that herbs are the secret to producing tasty snails. "What they eat now definitely love Little Gem lettuce, cucumber, apples and fennel, but turned their snouts up at parsley.

"Maybe it's too close to what they end up like — you know, in garlic and parsley sauce," Tony says, as he gives the snails their daily shower. I now know this is an essential part of snail husbandry. I've never known anything to produce so much

poo and have been forced to clean out mine daily to avoid a snaily stench. I've also had to wash them individually in a sieve and spritz their shells so they don't dry out. I've noticed their droppings getting lighter though, an indication they are purging nicely.

There are dangers to eating wild snails. They may have consumed poisonous plants and been exposed to slug pellets. They can also harbour a parasite that may cause a rare form of meningitis.

Luckily Dorset Snails is about to start selling its gastronomic delights prepared with garlic butter online, so you can eat them at home without playing Russian roulette with your health. But at around £20 for 24 snails, plus postage, they do not come cheap. None of the big supermarkets stock

Michael Chan's snail fricassee

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS
24 snails, blanched and de-shelled (preferably Dorset escargot snails)
½ onion

1 stick of celery

1 carrot, peeled

½ a leek

1 bay leaf

1 sprig of thyme

½ litre vegetable stock

For the fricassee

1 shallot, finely diced

½ chilli, finely diced

1 garlic clove garlic

1 tsp breadcrumbs

1 tsp olive oil

1 tsp chopped parsley

1 tsp chopped chives

TO PRE-COOK THE SNAILS

Wash the snails in a strainer under cold water until clear of slime. Place all the ingredients in a pot and cover with vegetable stock. Bring to the boil and immediately turn down to a slow simmer. Cook for 2-3 hours until tender.

METHOD

In a hot pan add the olive oil, snails shallots and sauté until shallots are soft. Add the garlic and chilli, being careful not to burn the garlic. Add the breadcrumbs and herbs, and stir to coat the snails. Serve straight away. By Michael Chan, head chef Les Trois Garçons

Dorset Snails' snail pâté

INGREDIENTS

225g blanched snail meats, roughly chopped

225g belly pork, roughly chopped

225g chicken livers, roughly chopped

250g salted butter

6 sage leaves, plus any other herbs to your taste

6 garlic gloves, peeled and chopped

2 onions, chopped

METHOD

Using a large pan with a lid, melt the butter then add all the ingredients and cook in an oven for 2 hours at 180C/gas 4, then a further hour at 140C/gas 1. Allow mixture to cool and then blend. Add seasoning, according to whether you want a rough, or fine pâté. Place in ramekin dishes, then top with melted butter and place one sage leaf in the butter.



Try Gordon Ramsay's recipe for sautéed snails with Camembert and potato fondue thetimes.co.uk/recipes

snails apart from Lidl, which sells frozen ones during its French week in September.

The health risks almost caused me to abort my homegrown efforts. Then I discovered that wild snails were eaten in abundance during the Second World War when meat was scarce. In the wonderfully batty 1940 book, *They Can't Ration These*, author Vicomte de Mauduit explains how to forage, purge and cook a consommé of garden snails alongside recipes for hedgehog pâté and squirrel-tail soup. Shelia Long, 79, from Gloucester, remembers eating snails in wartime. "It was that, or starve," she tells me. "We had them two, or three times a week with salt and vinegar. You'd boil them for a couple of hours, pull them out with a darning needle and pop them in your mouth. I loved them, but it was definitely a need more than a delicacy in those days."

Buoyed by Shelia's attitude, I place my little friends, who have now been starved, but given water for three days, in a Kilner jar and into the fridge. I did feel a bit guilty and had to channel my inner Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall to push on with the next stage — killing them. When the snail is fully tucked inside its shell and has formed a film over the entrance, it's ready. Mine

“I fork one. There's an earthy flavour but no chewing or gritty crunch

refused. After a desperate e-mail to David he advised placing them in an old onion, or orange net and tying it tightly to make them feel secure. It worked.

They should be dropped lobster-like straight from the fridge into a pan of boiling water with plenty of salt and vinegar. They don't scream, or hiss, but the sound of their shells banging against the bottom of the pan is rather unbearable. After five minutes they are drained and cooled under cold, running water before being de-shelled. I found a kebab stick good for this. The bodies are laid out on a tray and sprinkled with more salt. They fizzle into a gloopy mess, but this is just the slime breaking down. They are then splashed with vinegar before being thoroughly rinsed.

At Les Trois Garçons, Michael Chan then simmers his for two to three hours in a vegetable stock. He shows me how to sauté them out of their shells in olive oil with diced shallots, garlic, chilli, breadcrumbs and herbs. He serves them with a pig's head terrine, but says they are also delicious piled on to hot, buttered toast. I fork one. There's no chew and no gritty crunch. It's just wonderfully tender with a deep earthy, mushroom flavour that sits behind the garlic and chilli.

I try the recipe at home and I am surprised to find my snails taste rather good and are just as tender. I'm pleased I managed to dispatch them myself and eating them hasn't made me ill. Yet. But after a fortnight of mucking them out, hosing them off and enduring a healthy amount of ribbing, I'm not sure DIY snails are really worth it. I may have to try a different tack to stop them chewing my garden.

That or enter them into the Thruxton village show — I'd definitely win first prize.

Eat my words
Alex Renton



Chillies — why some like it hot, and some do not

I'm not really happy until there's tears in my eyes and a drop of sweat running down my nose," my wife says. We are sitting in a disappointingly insipid Anglo-Thai restaurant: the som tam salad and even a tom kha soup beaded with chilli oil has failed to excite her. Years in Africa and Thailand have left her with a lust for chilli, and she seeks it out like a cat after cream.

It is the oddest of human food habits: straight-up masochism. The key chemical in hot peppers, capsaicin, is an irritant, devised to scare my wife and other mammals away from chewing the plant's fruits. Rarely has Nature done such a poor job. It was believed that the hot sensation produced by chilli, pepper, raw garlic, menthol and so on was part of the spectrum of tastes. But actually the taste buds don't play a part in it. The neurotransmitter that takes the message of chilli's presence to the brain is called Substance P — for pain.

But pain has its positives, as athletes and masochists know. There's an endorphin rush with eating chilli and Substance P depletes fast, so you can quickly build a tolerance to the irritant. In Thailand there are two notoriously hot chillies — bird's eye and the even-hotter, mouse dropping (because it's that size).

By the end of our time there, we could eat these without complaint. Unlike my wife I've found that the tolerance has dropped off, but the addiction remains. We're not alone: in the 500 years since chillies first left the Americas they have become a key element in the cuisines of more than half the people on the planet. They're even on potato crisps.

I don't think that neuroscience tells the whole story. There are flavours: dusky and earthy, in dried chilli; vibrant and fresh in green ones. I love the smoked, hot peppers called chipotle; pimenton picante ahumado, smoked paprika, is such an addiction that I take it with me on holiday. Clearly the spice enhances taste.

Are the abused taste buds sensitised by the violence? Science doesn't say so, but chilli, for all its tough-guy attitude, cherishes the subtle elements in Asian cooking of coriander, cardamom and

lemon grass. Try some paprika or chilli flakes on avocado, sheep's cheese, buttered pasta or scrambled eggs.

Chilli doesn't really exist in classical French cooking, which for so long was the only one that counted in Europe. You won't read about it in Escoffier. Yet the British have always grown and used them. Imported cayenne pepper first appears in 17th-century cookbooks. Most 19th-century ones contain a recipe for chilli vinegar. Mrs Copley's *New London Cookery* of 1810 calls for "a hundred red chillies, fresh gathered in white wine vinegar for a week". Mrs Beeton says this is "an agreeable relish to fish, as many people cannot eat it without the addition of an acid and cayenne pepper", which gives you some idea of the state of gentlefolk's palates, c 1890. By then the cookbooks that emerged from British India had spread the word about spiced food.

My mother, an otherwise adventurous foodie, won't eat chilli or anything with "a curry taste": the memories of wartime cooking and dubious meats disguised with hot sauce are too much for her.

Measuring and judging the effects of chilli is not easy. There is an agreed system — the Scoville Heat Unit (SHU), based on how much dilution in sugar a chilli sample needs to reduce it to neutral. Ordinary sweet bell peppers score zero, tabasco sauce up to 8,000, and the Trinidad Scorpion Butch T pepper comes in at 1,463,700 SHUs. But chilli-tasting is subjective; one man's furnace is another's pleasant glow.

The best way to tackle any fear of chilli is to make your own infusion of chilli oil, at a strength you can judge with a fingertip. Useful for cooking and for dressings.

Spiced chilli oil

You can make this simply by mashing chillis and letting them sit in a light olive oil for a week or so. But to get a lovely amber colour in the oil and deep, complex flavour, hot infusion is best. You can use a programmable water bath, a stove with a warming oven or one that you can set to about 70C. You'll need to experiment with quantities till you find a taste that suits your tolerance. This works for me:

INGREDIENTS

30g thinly sliced fresh red chillies

30g dried red chillies, crushed

1 tsp cumin seeds, toasted and crushed

Finger of cinnamon bark, toasted and crushed

500ml light olive oil

METHOD

Combine all the ingredients in a vacuum bag or a clean glass container, sealed. Place in bath or oven for 24 hours.

Then cool for 12 hours. Strain, bottle in sterilised glass and keep in fridge.

