

Love bugs

From selling out at restaurants to wriggling their way into school dinners, we explore whether insects could be the future of food

by REBECCA NORRIS



P rue Leith is cooking a risotto. Chopped onion, a clove of garlic, mushrooms, rice, white wine, vegetable stock, Parmesan, cream. Then just as she is plating the dish, she reaches for something offbeat. Out of the oven come the roasted crickets, which are scattered generously on top. 'It's the most delicious mushroom risotto,' she enthuses to the camera. 'With a bit of crunch.'

This clip is part of a series of home-cooking videos uploaded by the celebrity chef to her ➔

illustrations
GEORGINA LUCK

☛ YouTube channel. The recipe was supplied – along with the critters – by start-up Yum Bug, which is on a mission to take edible insects mainstream. It is one of several UK businesses working to challenge the view that bugs should be fed only to pet reptiles or disgraced politicians on *I'm a Celebrity*...

'We eat prawns, which are actually just insects of the sea,' reasons co-founder Leo Taylor. 'They're related to the extent that if you're allergic to shellfish, you may also be allergic to crickets.' Though many of us Brits may feel queasy at the thought of tucking into a plate of bugs, they are already part of the regular diet of two billion people worldwide.

'People in these countries don't eat insects because they have to, but because they want to,' says Leo, who spent time in Cambodia and Thailand when growing up, where insects are typically fried and served with soy sauce and pandan leaves as a meal or snack. 'Our job is to figure out how to take this otherwise versatile, delicious ingredient and make it appealing to the Western consumer.'

That may sound ambitious, but it is not unrealistic, especially given Yum Bug has already captured the attention of top UK restaurants. Edible-insect evangelists point to foods such as raw fish, which held the same 'yuck' factor in the UK before sushi became fashionable in the Eighties and Nineties. They anticipate bugs will get the same treatment, with the United Nations predicting that the market for edible insects will be worth £4.6 billion by 2030.

This estimated growth is due largely to the sustainability of insect farming. According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation, by 2050 we will need to produce 60% more food to feed a world population of 9.3 billion. Described by the UN as an 'underutilised' resource, insects are routinely touted as a solution, largely due to their low carbon footprint. This is due to the fact that they require a fraction of the space, water and feed needed by more traditional livestock. The nutritional value of



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Grub's up
Yum Bug strips with beetroot glaze, rocket, pear and toasted walnut



insects is also impressive. 'Per gram, crickets have got more iron than spinach, more calcium than milk, more potassium than bananas, more B12 than red meat, and more fibre than brown rice,' says Leo. 'The list keeps on going.'

But the fact remains that most people in the UK are unconvinced. Only a quarter of British consumers would be willing to try bugs, according to a 2021 survey by the Food Standards Agency, let alone eat them regularly. Although Sainsbury's became the first supermarket to stock insects in 2018, selling roasted cricket snacks and later trialling cricket-flour crackers in 2021, both products have since been removed.

Yum Bug thinks it knows the secret to winning over sceptics. After first attempting to sell crickets whole, it realised that grinding them down into meat substitutes (think cricket strips, burgers and mince), so there are no legs in sight, is a sure-fire way of convincing people to set aside their prejudices.

Leo also believes that a lot of diners tend to be more open-minded when eating out than they are in a supermarket aisle. 'Restaurants are a tool to educate and create a great first experience with eating insects,' he explains. 'Familiarity is key to seeing success in retail later on.' He highlights how many similarly 'disruptive' brands have found success with this strategy, including Beyond Meat (known for its plant-based burgers and now valued at more than

£7 billion) and Oatly (credited with popularising oat milk and valued at £8 billion). Both impressed punters at cafés and restaurants before attempting to stand out on crowded shelves.

Hoping to follow in the footsteps of these big brands, Yum Bug began piloting cricket mince in London eateries in September. At tapas bar Morito in Islington, it was fashioned into a spiced cricket dish with hummus, pine nuts and flatbread. Tentatively provided with enough mince to sell 20 portions across a week-long trial period, the bar sold the lot on the first day. It has sold out four more times since. And when Yum Bug ran a special

menu at Old Street Brewery in Hackney, it tripled the establishment's average food takings, selling around 60 cricket burgers in a night. 'We started off with trendy, independent spots,' says Leo. 'That has been successful, so now we're in talks with some really big chains.'

Taste-wise, Leo compares crickets to sunflower seeds. 'The flavour is not super strong,' he says. 'The fact that it's subtle has done us a lot of favours because that means it's versatile. There's a meaty, umami base which chefs can then flavour however they like. In Morito, for example, they season our crickets like they would the lamb.'

Supermarkets are waiting in the wings. In October, Leo appeared with co-founder Aaron Thomas on Channel 4 show, *Aldi's Next Big Thing*, which saw up-and-coming food producers pitch their products to the supermarket. Yum Bug presented meal kits for nuggets, burgers and tacos made from crickets.

'I really like what you're trying to do,' Aldi's managing director Julie Ashfield told them. 'Come back in five years.' That's exactly what they intend to do.

Meanwhile, bugs are crawling on to menus elsewhere in the capital. In upmarket Japanese restaurant The Aubrey you might find dried black ants atop your sushi; Mexican Santo Remedio offers guacamole crowned with grasshoppers; and at Lao Café in the West End, you can tuck into deep-fried bugs.

In Wales, researchers hope school dinners might hold the power to influence a new generation. VEXo, an insect and plant-based protein, was created by Bug Farm Foods, founded by entomologist Dr Sarah Beynon and her husband, chef Andy Holcroft. They also founded Pembrokeshire tourist attraction The Bug Farm in 2015, home to the UK's first full-time edible insect restaurant, Grub Kitchen. Designed to be used in place of minced



meat in dishes such as spaghetti bolognese, VEXo may soon be rolled out onto lunch menus in Pembrokeshire schools and beyond.

During trials, 100% of the children who sampled it liked the taste. 'We have found that young people are generally more open-minded when it comes to trying new things,' says Dr Beynon. 'They also have an increased awareness of sustainability. We believe normalising eating insects for young people is the way forward.'

Currently, VEXo mince is exclusively available at Grub Kitchen, but Bug Farm Foods plans to market it this year as a frozen product in farm shops and delis across Wales, many of which already stock the brand's cricket

cookies. The hope is to reach larger retailers in years to come.

Lisa Harris is co-founder of Harris and Hayes consultancy (thefoodconsultants.org), which works with the biggest food producers, retailers and hospitality brands in the UK, such as Sainsbury's and Marks & Spencer. She points to another ongoing development that could facilitate the arrival of bugs on our plates.

Agriotech start-up Better Origin partnered with Morrisons to feed hens a nutrient-rich, soya-free diet of insects. Last year, it became the first supermarket to launch carbon-neutral eggs.

WWF-UK's The Future of Feed report in 2021 suggested that demand from the UK's pig, poultry and salmon sectors for insect meal could increase to

around 540,000 tonnes a year by 2050. 'These feeding schemes are one step removed from the consumer, which makes insects more palatable and marketable,' says Lisa. 'Once insects are more commonplace in animal feed, they will become more acceptable as a top-tier source of nutrition.'

In the long term, insects might become part of a spectrum of sustainable options at the dinner table. Cricket risotto, anyone? 🐛

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