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Seattle's scariest chef will get you to eat a bug

By Katherine Luck

"Tarantulas are way tastier than you would think. Much tastier than a caterpillar. Their body armor is not crunchy, but chewy. You bite into a caterpillar and you get a mouth full of roughage," said David George Gordon, known in Seattle as the Bug Chef.

I've eaten more than my share of what the average person would consider odd food.

I've tried chicken feet, beef tongue soup, and the potentially deadly pufferfish known as fugu.

"Crickets have a very mild, shrimp-like flavor. Scorpions have a very white, stringy, muscle meat, like crab meat," Gordon continued.

I've eaten raw sea urchin, raw quail eggs and raw beef.

But bugs? No way.

That is, until I ran across the Bug Chef.

"I jokingly say that I'm the Martha Stewart of bug cooking. It has to be just right," said Gordon, a science writer who trained as a biologist before becoming notorious for his use of six-legged ingredients.

Gordon was introduced to the concept of bugs as culinary fare while researching a perfectly harmless book about cockroaches: *The Compleat Cockroach: A Comprehensive Guide to the Most Despised (And Least Understood) Creature on Earth*. Amid dry studies on morphology and physiology, Gordon discovered that humans around the world have a surprising tendency to regard some of the most despised bugs as potential snacks. "Louis Armstrong in his memoir talks about how whenever he had a cold, his mother would brew him up a cup of cockroach tea," he said.

Gordon's scientific desire to get the public excited about the least hug-able of creatures led him to create a unique book.

"Rather than write a preachy book about why insects are wonderful, I thought I could



PHOTO BY KATHERINE LUCK

Chapulines (grasshoppers), a traditional Mexican snack, served at Ballard's La Carta de Oaxaca.

reach more people through a cookbook."

That's right: a cookbook. About bugs. *Eat-a-bug Cookbook: 33 ways to cook grasshoppers, ants, water bugs, spiders, centipedes, and their kin* (Ten Speed Press, 1998) features skin-crawling recipes such as "Scorpion Scallopine." These recipes aren't of the chocolate-coated-cricket variety, either. "I want people to understand what it is they are eating. That's my number one rule. Insects are very delicately flavored compared to other things we eat," he said. "People are always surprised that this tastes pretty good."

He can attest to the tastiness personally. "You can't write a cookbook without trying all your recipes," he emphasized. "All 33 recipes in the book are recipes I've tried."

To date, Gordon has conducted cooking demonstrations in 32 states, mainly at museums, science centers and schools. He has been featured on TV shows including ABC's "Nightline" and NBC's "Today Show" and "Late Night with Conan O'Brien," and has been written up in *Time* magazine and the *New York Times*. His most recent gig was at the annual "Bug Blast" at Seattle's Burke Museum.

"When I do cooking demonstrations, I

CONTINUED ON PAGE 17 >



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< CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16

bring volunteers up to cook and taste," he said. "I have parents come up to me and say, 'I can't get my kid to eat anything, but here he is volunteering to eat a scorpion!'"

I've tried candy made from durian fruit, which tastes something like rotten onions sprinkled with motor oil. I've repeatedly consumed haggis, a Scottish favorite made of minced heart, liver, lungs, onion and oatmeal, cooked and served in a sheep's stomach.

But never, *ever* a bug.

It became apparent that I ought to do so. For journalism.

So, where can you find tasty bugs in Seattle? Not in your own backyard, according to Gordon. "I think the biggest threat is pesticides. If the bugs are eating pesticides, then so are you." And that's not all. "The danger isn't diseases as much as parasites in some rare cases. I tell kids who get dared 'I'll give you a dollar to eat this bug' to say, 'Sure, but I have to cook it first.'"

Gordon gets his tarantulas from a biological supply house that provides the creepy crawlies for schools and scientific study. He buys crickets, mealworms and waxworms from suppliers that stock local pet stores. "They've been raised under hygienic conditions so that pets [that eat them] don't get sick."

When he's not cooking his signature dish, the cricket-based "Orthopteran Orzo," he has been known to nosh on something similar at the Mexican restaurant, La Carta de Oaxaca. Though not listed on the menu, this popular eatery on Ballard Avenue serves chapulines: small grasshoppers toasted with garlic, lemon or lime juice and salt. The last time Gordon ordered them, "My fellow diners were alternately delighted and horrified."

There was only one thing to do: eat a bug at La Carta de Oaxaca. For journalism.

I called them up, inquired after the chapulines and was informed, yes, they had them this week.

The waiter in the crowded restaurant didn't bat an eye when I ordered the traditional snack. When he plunked the plate down on the table minutes later, I was stunned to immobility.

I had expected the little guys to be safely hidden within a tortilla. Or swimming in a sea of guacamole and sour cream.

Instead, a plate of very cricket-like bugs, accompanied by nothing but a wedge of lime, stared up at me with vaguely hostile eyes.

My young dinner companion was horrified and not at all delighted. While attempting to calm her, mindlessly, as if eating popcorn at a movie, I popped a grasshopper in my mouth. To my surprise, there was nothing horrifying about it — just the crunchiness of a corn chip and a spicy, lawn-like flavor. After that first bug, the rest of the plate was easy to consume.

It was done. I'd eaten the scariest food in Seattle. I took my dining companion to McDonald's and all was well.

But then I learned that Gordon isn't going to be just the Bug Chef for long.

He's hard at work on a new cookbook, *Eat It To Beat It*. The book is being published as an outreach effort by his employer, Washington Sea Grant at the University of Washington. The book's message: combat invasive aquatic species ... by eating them. Gordon is currently crafting recipes including palatable but non-native treats like Pacific oysters from Asia and crayfish from the Gulf Coast, as well as icky things like bullfrogs, nutria and tunicates or "sea squirts."

His new cookbook, as well as a series of YouTube videos, will explain how to cook and eat these critters as a way of preventing them from taking over the Puget Sound habitat. *Eat It To Beat It* will be available free of charge through Washington Sea Grant this winter. Though the recipes are frighteningly real, Gordon emphasized that the main point of the cookbook is to educate the reader about the harm these outsiders are causing native species and the environment.

"Sometimes people think I'm Mr. Weird Food. But I'm really interested in science," Gordon said. Then he added, "And it's another chance for me to be a bizarre chef!"

Am I going to have to eat a bullfrog? That might be one thing I can't stomach. Even for journalism. ■

Get terrifying yet tantalizing bug recipes at www.davidgeorgegordon.com.



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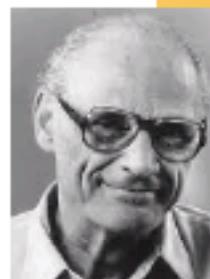
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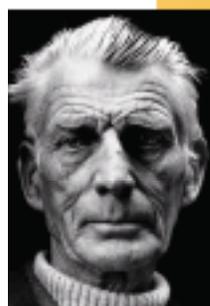
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