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RECONSIDER

## SNAILS QUICKEN THEIR CULINARY PACE

The savory Gallic tong-twister goes beyond the garlic-herb butter

BY CHARLOTTE DRUCKMAN

**IN MY EARLY YEARS**, I was none too keen on ingesting snails. Something held me back: Bubblegum, my first pet and a shell-carrying member of the Helicidae family. Eventually, during a trip to Paris, I was coerced by the garlicky perfume emerging from my brother's appetizer of escargots (as the French call the edible land-based ones), and I caved. That's how many have been introduced to these mollusks—prepared à la Bourgogne, with that herbalicious compound butter.

"Of course, they have long been prized in Chinese cookery," says Ken Hom, an expert of that cuisine. "We love their slightly chewy but soft texture and, like the French, usually prepare them with a very tasty, savory sauce." Born in America to Chinese parents, Mr. Hom fondly recalls a traditional Cantonese dish from his mother's repertoire—snails in black bean sauce with a touch of chili.

In the Philippines, the gastropods are simmered in coconut milk. In Thailand, they're fodder for curry. And in Vietnam, they're fragrant with lemongrass and tossed in a fiery soy sauce.

Troy Guard of Denver's TAG eateries looks to East Asia and beyond for inspiration. He tucks the snails into soup dumplings; slices them into a Japanese-accented carpaccio seasoned with soy sauce, citrusy yuzu, mitsuba (a cress-like green) and myoga (ginger); and works them into an American combo—roasted tomato soup and grilled cheese (the snails are slipped between the bread).

At his restaurant Clio, Boston's

Ken Oringer relies on the chewy delicacies to capture the world in a bowl. His fricassee of snails contains the spicy Japanese condiment red yuzu kosho, local fiddlehead ferns and resinous Greek mastic infused with English peas.

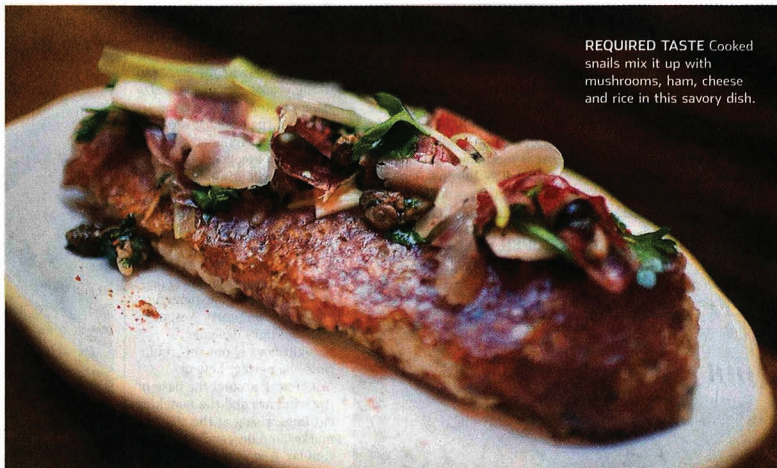
While on the subject of British contributions, we'd be remiss to exclude Heston Blumenthal's modern classic: his signature snail porridge, which appropriates breakfast's oaty staple. It uses a verdant butter blended with parsley, garlic, shallots and cepes and makes that a savory base for the meaty protein.

Then it's a visit to Brooklyn for Brian Leth's recent addition to Vinegar Hill House's list of specials, a pappardelle with the garden-variety snails plus watercress, pears and hazelnuts.

Across the bridge, at his new Spanish canteen Tertulia, in Greenwich Village, Seamus Mullen marries the creaminess of risotto to the earthy richness of snails and wild mushrooms, then adds the smoky saltiness of Idiazabal cheese and Iberico ham.

Mr. Mullen prefers the basil-fed buddies harvested by Mary Stewart in the Sierra Nevada. You can order them, when available, from Gilt Taste. Otherwise, the canned goods fly too (try the wild Burgundy offerings of Sarl Henri Maire from France, sold by Dean & DeLuca). To "amp up their flavor," Mr. Mullen recommends giving them a quick sauté in hot olive oil before doing the necessary marination.

When I taste the finished product, I'm reminded of a familiar chant. Bubblegum, bubblegum in a dish, how many pieces do you wish?



**REQUIRED TASTE** Cooked snails mix it up with mushrooms, ham, cheese and rice in this savory dish.

### Seamus Mullen's Arroz Cremoso de Caracoles

(Creamy Rice With Snails) Serves: 4

½ cup snails  
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling  
1 teaspoon Champagne vinegar  
1 clove garlic, finely minced  
1 bunch fresh basil leaves torn in pieces (save a few for garnish)  
1 cup mixed wild mushrooms, cut into even sized pieces  
Kosher salt, to taste  
1 shallot, finely diced  
2 cups arborio rice  
1 tablespoon white wine  
8 cups mushroom stock (vegetable stock simmered with 3 cups dried shiitake mushrooms for 30

minutes, then strained)  
½ cup finely grated good-quality, smoky hard cheese (e.g. Idiazabal)  
1 tablespoon unsalted butter  
Pepper, to taste  
Slices of Ibérico of Serrano ham

1. In a small bowl, mix snails, 1 tablespoon oil, vinegar, garlic and basil. Refrigerate while preparing the rice.  
2. Heat remaining oil over medium-high heat in a medium saucepot. Vigorously sauté the mushrooms for 3 minutes and season with salt. Add shallot and cook until translucent, about 2 minutes. Add rice and stir thoroughly, toasting for

about 2 minutes. Add wine and allow the alcohol to cook off before adding stock.

3. Slowly ladle in stock, stirring constantly. As the rice absorbs liquid, add more stock until the rice is nearly cooked all the way through, about 15 minutes. Fold in the chilled snail mixture and cook for another 2 minutes. Fold in cheese. Add liquid as needed to incorporate the cheese fully. Remove from heat and fold in butter. Season to taste with salt and pepper and divide onto four plates. Garnish with a few slices of ham, a drizzle of olive oil and torn basil leaves.