

Published September 11th, 2013

The New Buzzword is Entomophagy

Are you ready for cricket snacks?

By Sophie Braccini



John Heylin prepares cricket meal-based snacks in Canyon. Photo Sophie Braccini

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' 2013 report on future prospects for food and feed security, insects offer a huge potential for enhancing food security worldwide.

Young Canyon resident John Heylin, who is concerned about the future of our planet, does not want to be the last one to jump on the insect bandwagon and recently started a new company, Chirp Farms, that produces snacks incorporating cricket meal as its source of animal protein. His recent appearance on Lifetime channel's "Supermarket Superstar" sent his sales through the roof and he is now considering raising crickets himself as opposed to purchasing them from a Louisiana farm.

While people from many tropical countries consider insects as decoration, entertainment, food and medicine, most westerners simply see insects as pests. "Yet this is far from the truth," says Heylin. "Insects provide food at low environmental cost, contribute positively to livelihoods, and play a fundamental role in nature."

The young entrepreneur explains that 10 pounds of feed are needed to produce 1 pound of cow protein, while crickets will gain 1 pound of weight for just 2 pounds of

feed.

In addition, insects can be reared on organic side-streams and can help reduce environmental contamination. Insects are reported to emit fewer greenhouse gases and less ammonia than cattle or pigs, and they require significantly less land and water than cattle rearing. "As developing countries achieve greater wealth people want more meat, and this is unsustainable," he adds. "Soy protein takes a lot of land and has increased deforestation in Brazil (the main exporter of soy). So bugs provide a way to solve this problem."

Right now Heylin operates his snack making operations from Canyon. "I buy 10,000 crickets at a time (10 boxes, 1 foot by 5 inches)," he says, "I get them alive and put them in a freezer." In sub-zero temperatures the crickets go into hibernation before peacefully dying. Then Heylin dehydrates them for a few hours at a low temperature before turning them into 2.5 pounds of flour meal.

The 'cricket-meal' is 65 percent protein, contains all 20 amino acids, vitamins, iron, etc.

"It's like eating a super lean steak," he says. The FAO's report indicates that the nutritional value of edible insects is highly variable because of the wide range of edible insect species. For example, the composition of unsaturated omega-3 and six fatty acids in mealworms is comparable with that of fish (and higher than cattle and pigs).

Heylin adds honey, flax seeds, sunflower seeds, crispy rice, dried apples, peanut or almond butter and chocolate chips to his bar. The cricket meal itself has a very pleasant, malty taste; the bar tastes like any healthy protein snack. Heylin also produces whole prepared beetles and crickets; this reporter had to overcome some initial hesitation before sampling them, but found that the crunchy treat tastes like the spice that was added by the cook.

"I want to stay away from the freak-factor," adds Heylin. "What we are doing here is working on a next generation of protein that will be better for the environment, better for humans and does not involve the mistreatment of animals."

The biggest problem Heylin faces is cultural. Most people recoil at the idea of eating insects. Heylin, who graduated from University of Washington, spent two years in Niger with the Peace Corps on a sustainable agricultural project where he got a very different perspective on the urgency to find a worldwide solution for feeding people.

Heylin's next phase is to have an organic cricket farm. "They reproduce really fast and do not need a lot of space to live a normal insect life," he says, adding that he has been looking for a piece of land.

The cricket bars can be bought at www.chirpsfarms.com. You can learn more about eating insects by watching Marcel Dicke on Ted Talks: http://www.ted.com/talks/marcel_dicke_why_not_eat_insects.html.

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