



Caterpillars, please!

Two renowned entomologists explained the perks of eating insects at the Brussels Science Apéro “Insects à la carte”

The Brussels Science Apéro “Insects à la carte” took place on Wednesday the 22nd of January at the Italian restaurant Belli e Buoni. The event, organized by Minerva Communication in cooperation with the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, aimed to challenge the taboo of eating insects by showing the attendants the perks of entomophagy.

The event had as speakers Mr. Patrick Grootaert, Head of the Entomology Department at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences and Mr. Peter De Batist, Board Member at Antwerp Royal Entomological Society and CEO of Ecology-Projects SA. The duo of entomologists reflected upon the cultural and nutritional aspects of eating insects, as well as its potential for ensuring food security in the future.

Around sixty people attended the event, attracted by the prospects of an interesting discussion garnished with a free tasting of raw and cooked insects prepared on the spot.

Why should we eat insects?



The demographic boom of the 20th century is likely to continue in the 21st century, increasing the demand for food. It is estimated that, by 2030, there will be around 9 billion mouths to feed in the world. This adds up to a complex situation characterized by the limited possibilities of expanding cultivation areas, climate change, water scarcity and the depletion of fish stocks. Given this scenario, how could food supplies be ensured to the growing number of human beings?

For the speakers, one of the keys to address food security in the future is entomophagy, or consumption of insect food. Bugs have proven to be an effective and cheap way to nourish both cattle and human beings. Along these lines, Mr. Grootaert explains: “You can have from 3-4 to 6 generations of insects in one year, what makes them more valuable than

cows and pigs”

Insects are everywhere; they reproduce themselves quickly and breeding them has a very small environmental impact when compared with cattle. Apart from referring to the eventual

problems related to food security, the two entomologists point out at the advantages of entomophagy over the western omnivorous diet because “the fatty acids of the insects are healthier than those in the beef”.

They explain as well that eating insects has some advantages over vegetarianism, as “insects provide proteins, amino acids and micronutrients that cannot be obtained through the consumption of plants”. Mr. de Batist gives as an example “the amino acid methionine, that is not present in the soya beans employed to make tofu, but in insects”.

Why do we feel disgust when confronted with insects?

Insects are the daily bread in countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. However, when Europeans hear about it the first, instinctive reaction is to wrinkle the nose with disgust. For the speakers, this is a matter of culture and tradition.

Mr. Grootaert explains: “In the West we are not used to consuming insects. One of the reasons is the lack of the big insects that can be found in the tropics, and that the presence of insects is very seasonal, especially in spring and summer.”

This Belgian entomologist recalls: “In Asia they eat amazing things: cockroaches, beetles, spiders.... whatever you can think of! Besides, caterpillars are a very important source of proteins for people in the region of Kingasani, in the D.R. of the Congo, due to the scarcity of mammals resulting from overhunting”.

The speaker explains, creating surprise among the attendants, that we are currently consuming insects, particularly those such as the cochineal that are employed for the red coloration of processed food.

He concludes: “You can compare entomophagy with eating oysters; not everyone likes it. However, this will have to change because we will need more feed for animals and food for humans in the future.”

How should we eat insects?



During the Brussels Science Apéro “Insects à la carte”, the participants could taste crickets, and caterpillars of butterflies among other insectary delights prepared by Mr. de Batist. However, they specified that there are species of insects that are not recommended for human consumption. That species of insects include the Coprophagous insects (which consume the feces of larger animals) and Necrophagous insects (which consume the flesh of death creatures). “These insects can transmit germs and bacteria to human beings”- warned Mr. Grootaert.

This entomologist does not advise to eat one of the few insect-based traditional foods in Europe, namely the Sardinian cheese *casu marzu*. Mr. Grootaert explains: “The cheese contains larvae of the ‘cheese fly’ that can survive to the acid of our stomach; and they have mandibles and can punch our intestines”.

For this reason, it is possible to compare insects with mushrooms: you have to be aware that not all the species are edible. On the one hand, Mr. Grootaert explains: "You do not go to the Belgian field and pick up insects. In the tropic you could do that, but only if you know the ones you can eat". On the other hand, as highlighted by Mr. de Batist: "It is not easy to identify edible insects. What we eat from beetles and caterpillars of butterflies is only the larvae. In turn, larvae are difficult to find, and it is not easy to identify their species." Moreover, "breeding insects is complex and requires creating a warm microclimate and feed them appropriately".

They are aware that "it is possible to find caterpillars in the markets of Matongé", but they warn that their origin is unknown, and the best way of getting started in entomophagy is by obtaining edible insects in homologated establishments.

Mr. de Batist recommends eating them raw, because the cooked ones lose up to 50% of their content of vitamins. However, as shown during the event, they can also be grilled and used as a complement to a healthy salad. The possibilities are almost infinite, and due to that the chefs of 'haute cuisine' are excited about this new ingredient. "For them it is, finally, something new", says De Batist.

Is entomophagy allowed in Europe?

The use of insects for human consumption and cattle feed is not contemplated by EU law, with the exception of its usage for fish or shellfish feed. At the hearth of Europe, Belgium has taken the lead.

Mr. De Batist explains: "Belgium was the only country in the world that prohibited the use of insects among civilians by law. I tried to change that by asking the Health Minister if he thought people in Belgium would eat insects. He said that probably yes, because of its multicultural society. He requested me to prepare a dossier on the topic and based on that, since December 2013, there are 10 insects considered edible in Belgium. Now it is legal!"

Therefore, with the assurance of its healthy value, its sustainable nature and the possibility to legally acquire them in Belgium, Mr. Grootaert and Mr. de Batist encouraged the participants of the Brussels Science Apéro to enjoy the benefits of entomophagy by introducing insects in their daily meals.



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