



BEETLE LARVAE

Photo by Doug Wallace

Matters of Taste

When it comes to culinary customs, taste is relatively relative

By Doug Wallace

"It was around here somewhere that I ate bull's testicles," my friend said as we wandered the streets of Jerusalem toward the old market. I couldn't possibly judge: I have eaten my share of unusual things in my day, starting at a very early age.

My grandmother often had a pig's head floating in a pail of water on the back porch, in preparation for her homemade head cheese. This is not an actual cheese, but a meat-in-jelly terrine made with the head of a pig or calf. And today, after having sampled the wildly differing culinary offerings from other countries with vigour, I can truly say that one culture's delicacy is another one's "ew."

The Chinese have their thousand-year eggs, preserved in clay, ash, salt and rice hulls for a month or more until they turn yellow and blue. The French have their sheep's brains, the French Canadians their horse, the Scottish their haggis. Eating dogs and cats was only recently outlawed in Taiwan. Ireland's Aer Lingus serves blood pudding with their breakfasts on morning business flights from Dublin to London. And on it goes.

How about rotten shark? *Kaestur hakari* is not actually rotten, but a cured shark dish in Iceland and Greenland. The fermentation process renders it the smelliest thing on earth. Celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain thought it was totally vile—and he can stomach anything.

I'm merely scratching the surface here.

Deep-fried guinea pig legs and barbecued beetle larvae are just two of the things I ate recently on a G Adventures tour through Ecuador I took earlier this year.

Guinea pig is considered a delicacy, and I found it at the top of the menu at one of Quito's best restaurants. Really, it tasted like chicken; crispy and deep fried, salty and satisfying. I washed it down with lashings of red wine, which is my approach to eating anything that could present a challenge. (This always works.)



A THOUSAND-YEAR EGG



Photo by Doug Wallace

CHICHA

Later in the week, I had a mind-blowingly good lunch in the Amazon jungle during a visit to a Quechua village. There was yuca for starch, plus plantain, fresh catfish and palm hearts, as well as *chontacuro*, a beetle larva, which tasted just like pork. It was all cooked over a wood fire and presented in a community kitchen along with *chicha*—a milky corn beer—which made me a little woozy.

We smiled and patted our stomachs, and wondered what our hosts would think of some of our "normal" North American food. I'm sure these community cooks would turn their noses up at the very thought of mayonnaise or pizza pops or all the mass-produced and meaty things we eat too much of.

At last year's reThink Food conference in St. Helena, California, researchers pondered the problem of what to do when sustaining the red meat supply in the world becomes impossible. The talks were of snails and crickets, maggots and bugs—all smaller and much easier to maintain. Crunchy, too.

So whenever I find myself tempted to judge another culture by what they're putting in their stomachs, I think back to my grandmother's head cheese and how I, too, was born into a society that can think outside the taste-bud box.

More ants in your soup, anyone?



HAGGIS