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EXPLORERS CLUB

Want flies with that? These folks might

■ The New York-based Explorers Club serves alligator bites, scorpions and crickets.

By **BANKS ALBACH**
KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

WASHINGTON — Dinner was going fine for Julie Seiler until she bit into an endive with herb cheese, topped with a 2-inch scorpion. Very bitter, she said, noting the tough texture of the venomous beast's exoskeleton.

Next was the North American cricket with pepper jelly and cream cheese on celery. She decided to eat the chirpy creature, now silent, without the dressings. "It's kind of like when you eat the crunchy drippings out of a frying pan," she said, washing it down with some pinot noir.

She wasn't feasting in an exotic land; she was a block from the White House, chowing down with other adventurous eaters Thursday at a wine and critter tasting put on by the New York-based Explorers Club, a century-old, quirky tribe of weekend mountain climbers, cave explorers and scuba divers.

Nearly 100 people came for the free tasting. Many were club members; others were merely curious about Cajun-style alligator bites, caribou pate and baby tomatoes stuffed with grubs.

"It's not a *Fear Factor*-type thing," said Richard Wiese, the club's president. "It's more a celebration of life. Have you tried the antelope pastrami?" he asked as a waiter brought out more appetizers.

Wiese has seen many cultures eat creepy-crawly foods, and he decided to take the cuisine on the road last year at the prompting of a sponsor, **Redwood Creek wines of Califor-**



Jordan Silver Gleid tries a roasted cricket tort at a tasting held by the Explorers Club in Washington, D.C. The selection of adventurous appetizers also included roasted mealworms on cherry tomatoes. Thursday was the final stop after events in Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles, among other cities.



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nia, which footed most of the bill. Thursday was the final stop after events in Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles, among other cities.

Redwood Creek owner Cal Dennison matched sauvignon blanc to scorpion, pinot noir to cricket and cabernet sauvignon to alligator, a very tough and chewy animal.

"You have to know the foods," he said through a thick walrus moustache. "The texture, the consistency, the flavor and aroma. My favorite, hands down, is the rattlesnake."

Chef Gene Rurka, who prepares such cuisine for the club's annual dinners, doesn't catch the food; he buys it on the pet market at a pretty penny. A large tarantula, which he serves in a tempura batter, can cost around \$150, and a small rattlesnake around \$40. Ridding the animals of poison and venom isn't difficult, he said; he just cooks them thoroughly.

Some club members who are familiar with the food use tarantula fangs as toothpicks, he recalled, while others are picky about presentation.

"The purists, if they see the scorpion's barb on its tail is

gone, they won't even eat it," he said between bites of a tarantula on a stick.

Rurka said that organ foods, such as brain, were the next big thing.

When he isn't cooking for the club, he raises cattle and other livestock and works in humanitarian relief around the world.

The Explorers Club claims 3,000 members, with 300 in Washington. A 10,000-foot mountain in Antarctica is named after one of the club's board members, Kristin Larson, who spent years there. Members travel to Afghanistan, the Himalayas and both poles. The more daring delve into underwater caves, kayak white-water rapids and drive submersibles in the dark sea.

At the dinner Thursday, people waited patiently in line or wine, while a group of in-repid diners looked inquiringly at bowls full of spreads,

IN THE KNOW

Recipes

Explorers Club chef Gene Rurka shared two of his recipes:

Succulent Scorpion on Endive with Herb Cheese

- 12 scorpions (preferably 2 inches or larger)
- 2 cups cabernet sauvignon
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 12 endive leaves (3 inches long)
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh basil or parsley
- 6 ounces creme fraiche or cream cheese

Marinate scorpions in wine in refrigerator for 30 minutes. Heat oven to 250 degrees. Blot excess wine from scorpions with paper towel. Lightly glaze scorpions with honey and lemon juice. Transfer to baking sheet and dry slightly in oven for 3 to 5 minutes (smaller scorpions will require shorter drying time). Be careful not to bake or overdry; scorpions should remain supple. Remove from baking tray; let cool.

Wash and dry endive. Mix



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Gene Rurka's recipe calls for marinating scorpions in wine and glazing them with honey and lemon juice. Rurka is the chef of the Explorers Club.

basil into creme fraiche. Add a dollop of the mixture to each endive leaf and gently place scorpions on top.

Sauteed Rosemary Rattlesnake Cakes

- 1 pound fresh rattlesnake meat
- 1/2 cup breadcrumbs
- 4 tablespoons olive oil, divided
- 2 drops hot pepper sauce
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 2 tablespoons heavy cream
- 3 tablespoons diced fresh rosemary
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- Tartar or cocktail sauce (optional)

Eviscerate and skin rattlesnake (or use prepared rattlesnake meat, if available). Dice or grind meat. Mix meat with breadcrumbs. Add 2 tablespoons

of the olive oil along with the pepper sauce, lemon juice, mustard, cream, rosemary, salt and pepper; combine. Form into bite-size cakes; refrigerate 1 hour.

In heavy saute pan, heat remaining 2 tablespoons oil on medium-high heat and saute cakes on each side until lightly browned. Serve with tartar or cocktail sauce, if desired.

Note: Be extremely careful when handling the head of the snake, as fangs can cause severe injury if skin is scratched or punctured. Remove head and discard carefully.

which turned out to be an herb sour cream and an orange-honey dipping sauce.

They must have heard rumors of maggot pate, which is far too expensive for a free event, Rurka said.

"When we were doing mag-

gots last year at the annual dinner, it took me five years to prepare and make sure they were sterile and safe for everyone to eat," he said in his loose New Jersey accent. "We also went through 2,000 worms in a half hour. Worms are a big hit."