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Critter cuisine lures adventurous palates

Explorers Club menu: Gator bites, grubs

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KRT NEWS SERVICE

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 California, 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 took on the task of matching 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.



PHOTOS BY CHIP SOMODEVILLA/KRT NEWS

Scorpion on endive with herb cheese was one of the unique appetizers served at a tasting held by the Explorers Club in Washington, D.C., Thursday. The free event also featured Cajun-style alligator bites and baby tomatoes stuffed with grubs.

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 in that country. 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 for wine, pressing a man in his 20s to eat the crickets he'd been holding, while a group of intrepid diners looked inquiringly at bowls

full of spreads, 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 maggots 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."

He pulled out a tin box filled with roasted ants and Altoids, and passed it around.