



<https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-bug-eaters/>

JOIN OUR EMAIL LIST *Email*

SUBMIT

[Orion Magazine](#) > [Articles](#) > [Departments](#) > [Lay of the Land](#) > [The Bug Eaters](#)

The Bug Eaters



“YOU MUST TRY THE GRASSHOPPERS,” my friend Marcos said with a friendly glint in his eye, ordering *chapulines* alongside mescal cocktails on my first night in Mexico City. Seasoned with garlic, lime, and salt, the little rust-colored arthropods arrived nestled into a guacamole dip. Summoning my courage, and steeling my stomach, I crunched into the toasted exoskeletons, swallowing my first-ever insect thorax, antennae, and abdomen. What I remember most is not the taste but the foreign mouth-feel of so many intricate, nonfleshy parts, an experience akin to eating shrimp with the peel left on. I chewed quickly and washed it all down with the smoky mescal.

Looking back, the conditions were perfect for my first foray into bug eating: an international setting, an enthusiastic friend, alcohol. But the idea of entomophagy, a diet that 2 billion people partake in worldwide, remains anathema to most Americans. Kevin Bachhuber, who started the first farm for human-grade crickets in the U.S. compares insect-eating to kinky sex. “It’s the revulsion-arousal cycle that makes bugs so irresistibly appealing,” he says. “There’s the fear, the fear, the fear . . . and then people do it, and the bugs taste so good! They get this endorphin blast far out of proportion to just eating insects.”

But as unsettling as the idea of bugs for breakfast may be to most Americans, as the world’s resources collapse under the strain of overpopulation and climate change, it’s a cultural shift worth cultivating. The average American eats more than two hundred pounds of meat per year, and while the developing world consumes significantly less, the demand has tripled in the past four decades. The environmental cost of humans’ ever-increasing desire for protein-rich foods is dire, and scientists predict catastrophic results if we don’t find sustainable alternatives soon.

Enter the formerly scoffed at, now-prophetic entomophagy movement. The US has been flirting with bug eating for decades, but it wasn’t until 2013, when the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations published its landmark report *Edible Insects: Future Prospects for Food and Feed Security*, that more scientists, chefs, and entrepreneurs began to take it seriously. *Edible Insects* laid out the resource efficiency of raising insects, especially in contrast to raising larger, mammalian livestock. One striking statistic in the report indicates that it takes 10 kilograms of feed and 22,000 liters of water to produce 1 kilogram of beef, while an equal amount of cricket protein requires just 1.7 kilograms of feed and *less than* 1 liter of water. Not only that, but crickets are highly nutritious. According to the report, 100 grams of cricket protein provides five times as much iron and six times as much calcium as its equivalent of beef.

About 80 percent of arable land around the world is tied up in meat production, either for growing feed crops or grazing livestock. But it takes only 15 square meters to produce 1 kilogram of crickets, and with vertical farming techniques (raising them in stacked layers) the land they require doesn’t even need to be arable. Crickets can be reared in warehouses and in shipping containers, which opens up the possibility of bringing “livestock” back to cities and rejuvenating urban agriculture.

And yet in spite of this overwhelming evidence that increased entomophagy can help save the planet, the fact remains that very few Americans actually want to eat bugs. Most Westerners associate insects with pestilence, disease, and poverty, and many think of them as decimators of crops, not as food themselves. As the insect-eating pioneer and author of *The Eat-A-Bug Cookbook* David George Gordon says, the American attitude to insects can be summed up by Raid pesticide’s slogan: “Kills Bugs Dead.”

That said, our culture does have a history of changing its tune—sometimes dramatically—about which foods we will consume. After all, lobsters were once considered “cockroaches of the sea” and fed to prisoners, slaves, and servants. But the meteoric rise of raw fish consumption in the U.S. is perhaps the most optimistic model for entomophagy. The first sushi restaurant opened in the mid-sixties in Los Angeles, where it primarily catered to visiting Japanese businessmen who enjoyed

introducing the delicacy to their American business partners. Soon enough, celebrities were on the bandwagon, the California roll was invented, and now you can buy sushi at Walgreens. Changing palates and dietary transformation often “come from the top down, from high-end gastronomes,” Gordon told me. Today, the sushi industry rakes in billions of dollars a year and has become largely unsustainable given the precipitous declines in fish stocks worldwide.

Could the more sustainable bug business be next? Perhaps, but it’s an uphill battle. Author Daniella Martin believes that for Americans, “the fear and disgust of insects is more deeply engrained than attitudes toward any other potential food source.” She came face to face with this reality as she traveled the world, sampling thirty-five species of bugs and writing her blog, *Girl Meets Bug*: “I realized that there was so much logic to it, and so much irrationality against it.” She’s hopeful that education can make entomophagy more palatable, but “it might take a whole generation to shake.” In other words, time we may not have.

Gordon also believes we need a new narrative, a “good sell job,” to reframe the Western perception of insects. Highlighting the importance of human-insect connections around the world, Gordon points out that our childish fears carried into adulthood do not match up with our true symbiotic alliance with insects. Many cultures have relationships with bugs that go beyond panic, confusion, and attempts at mass eradication. “If bugs were gone, the planet would shut down in a matter of months,” he says. “If we disappear, it would be no problem. We need bugs more than they need us.”

Orion remains 100% ad-free with the support of [subscribers](https://orionmagazine.org/subscribe/) and [donors](https://orionmagazine.org/donate-now/) like you.

Katherine Jamieson has written for the New York Times, Ms., Washingtonian, and Bust and has been anthologized in The Soul of a Great Traveler and multiple times in The Best Women’s Travel Writing series.

SPRING 2019