

# Food + Chef

MAGAZINE

Slow Food  
Farmer

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the sacred  
COFFEE BEAN

beans  
without  
borders

Guide to  
CHILI PEPPER  
Stouts

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# Slow Food Farmer

By: Mike Alexander



**S**nails are an integral part of French culinary history. They have been eaten here, and in many other European countries since prehistoric times. Roasted snail shells have even been discovered on archeological digs in ancient troglodyte dwellings. Although widely consumed throughout much of Europe, it is the French we most associate with this type of food. They manage to guzzle in the region of 35 000 tonnes per annum. Before moving to France I had eaten snails many times but aside from the novelty factor they were always something of a disappointment, little more than a small piece of meat tasting mainly of butter and garlic.

Producing snails is the easy end of the operation. It is after that the producer must turn into a creative chef in order for his business to succeed in this country. Once the snails are cleaned and prepared they are then transformed into some form of gourmet product that differs greatly from the simple snail in garlic butter that I had previously tasted.

The farmer I dealt with had more than a dozen different recipes which he relied on to attract buyers to the many markets he attends in the region. Only a small percentage of the snails were sold with their shells. Instead he offered snail marinated in basil, lemon and almonds, a spread mixed with walnuts, and a snail and olive tapenade with anchovies. It is now possible to sup-



ply the snail in an authentic looking shell that is actually made from wheat. These he stuffs with walnut and goat cheese fillings or nutmeg, cinnamon and paprika. When cooked in a slow oven they are delicious and eaten whole they retain the sauce so there is no need for all the fiddling about associated with the boring snail starters I was familiar with. Suddenly eating snails takes on a whole new dimension.

At many of the French village markets you will find a heliciculturist, or snail farmer, selling his produce and of course there will frequently be snails offered on restaurant menus. Exposed to so much of this cuisine I decided it was time to visit a snail farmer and learn more about the whole production process.

Snail farming in France has only been practiced

for twenty years which in many ways means it is still an experimental process. Most other forms of agriculture date back hundreds, or even thousands of years. The snail farmers keep in close contact with one another and exchange information on techniques to try and increase their range of knowledge. The farmer I visited does not breed his own snails but buys them in from a breeder.

They arrive as tiny creatures, a mere 1.2 millimeters in diameter, with 200 000 of them dropping through the post in a plastic lunch box each spring. These he releases into his prepared fields where they grow at an amazing rate. They arrive weighing 20 milligrams and five months later are harvested at 20 grams which is a one thousand fold increase in body weight.



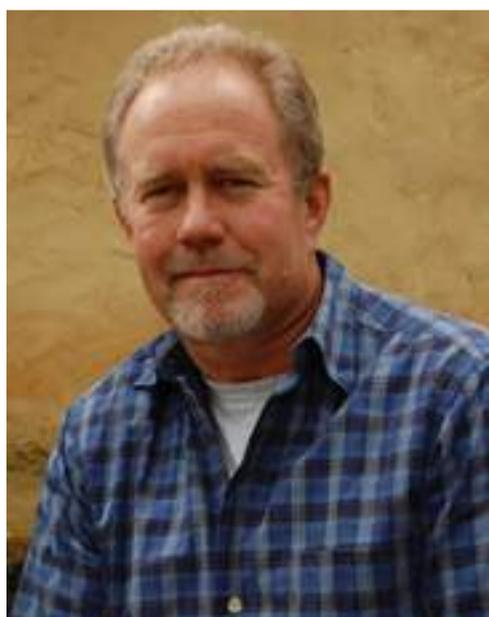


All French producers farm “gros gris” or “petit gris” snails which originated in North Africa. The much favored Bourgogne snail, which is native here, develops too slowly to be economically viable and they have been severely overhunted in this country where they are now protected. Snail farms are small.

No need for huge fields, just tiny patches well stocked with green vegetation and fenced with miniature electric fences. These are more to deter predators from getting in then to prevent the stock making a run for it during the night. As the season passes, their food will be supplemented

with excess crop from local vegetable producers and with a wheat and calcium mix to aid shell growth.

There are still many people who are repulsed at the thought of eating a snail. When you think about it though, there is little difference to eating mussels, cockles or clams. Success at snail farming requires a passion for cooking and a constant search for new recipes with which to tempt your clients. French farmer/chefs have learned to excel at this challenge and I am sure that if their broad range of recipes were to be tried elsewhere the demand for snails would increase.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike has lived and worked in France for the past twelve years. Although he writes on a broad range of subjects ranging from nature to gardening, Mike has found himself being drawn more and more into the field of food writing. Here cooking goes beyond passion and takes on an almost mythical life of its own. Such feeling is infectious and when embraced, provides a wonderful window both into French culture and the lives of the people that live here.