

Bug Bites



Two tarantulas, please. At a restaurant in Cambodia, Sok Khun samples deep-fried spiders. “This is a very normal food to eat,” Khun says.

*Have you heard the one about the customer
who finds a fly in his soup?*

*Outraged, he points it out to the waiter, who says,
“Keep your voice down, or everybody’ll want one!”*

OK, so it’s an old joke.

But the funny part is what the waiter says.

Who on earth would want to eat a bug?

Well, would it surprise you if we said lots of people would? It’s true. In Australia, South America, Africa, and Asia, eating bugs is no joke. Bugs aren’t just pests. They’re lunch or dinner or a nice after-school snack.

To those of us who’ve never crunched a cricket or slurped a worm, the idea of eating bugs sounds pretty gross. We wouldn’t eat those creepy-crawlies even if someone dared us! Yet lots of bugs are nutritious, tasty, and perfectly safe to eat.

Eat Up! We’re Outnumbered

Eating bugs is an old habit. Ten thousand years ago, before they learned to farm, our ancestors found food by hunting and gathering. Bugs were considered part of the daily diet. It made sense for ancient people to eat a source of nutrition that was right under their noses—or buzzing by their ears.

As you’ve probably noticed, bugs are everywhere. One out of every three animals is a bug, and scientists estimate that there are 200 million of the little critters for every person on the planet. No wonder more than half the people on earth still eat bugs daily. Of the million or so types of bug that scientists have named so far, more than 1,500 are somebody’s favorite snack.

The most popular bugs to eat are crickets and termites, which are said to taste a bit like pineapple, but lots of other bugs are edible, too. Restaurants in Mexico sell ant tacos. Cans of baby bees line supermarket shelves in Japan. In Thailand, outdoor markets offer silkworm larvae. And in Mozambique, in eastern Africa, people call grasshoppers “flying shrimp.”

Fun Fact: Moviegoers in Colombia eat roasted ants instead of popcorn.

Bugs Do a Body Good

Dinner is served: on one plate, a big, juicy hamburger, and on the other, a heaping pile of cooked grasshoppers. Ground beef or bugs? Which one do you think is better for your body?

Both have lots of protein, which is what your body uses to build muscle. But in other ways, grasshoppers clearly come out ahead. A pound of grasshoppers has less fat than a pound of beef, and the insects are higher in calcium and iron. Other bugs are good for you, too. Says biologist David George Gordon, author of the *Eat-a-Bug Cookbook*, “I tell kids, if your bones are still growing, eat more crickets and termites.”

One scoop or two? Prossy Kasule sells dried grasshoppers at Nakasero Market in Uganda, a country in Africa. If grasshoppers don't make you jump for joy, stop in two stalls down for a bag of termites.



Not only are grasshoppers better for you than beef, they're also better for the planet. It takes a lot of grass and water and space to raise a cow. Imagine how many grasshoppers you could raise on the same amount of land!

Still wouldn't pick the grasshoppers? Gordon says they also taste delicious, a lot like green peppers.

A Matter of Taste

In North America and Europe, the idea of eating bugs is downright disgusting to most people. But even though we don't think of crickets and termites as food, lots of things we do eat are bug-related. Honey is made by bees. Shrimp, crayfish, crabs, and lobsters are all arthropods, which is what scientists call the bug group of animals. In fact, lobsters have only recently made the

Which Is More Nutritious—Ground Beef or Grasshoppers?



transition from bug to edible treat. The first American colonists ate lobsters only when they didn't have anything else. In Massachusetts, servants who were tired of getting the "cockroaches of the sea" for dinner wrote into their contracts that they'd eat lobster only three times a week.

Other parts of the world also have forbidden foods. Lots of people would never eat lobsters and the other sea-dwelling "bugs" we consider delicacies. Many people don't eat pork. Even among people who eat insects, tastes differ. South Africans might munch termites for lunch, but they'd never eat scorpions, which are raised for food in China. In Bali, Indonesia, dragonflies are a treat, but in the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya, no one would think of eating a dragonfly. Cicadas are on the menu instead.

So when it comes to eating, people mostly stick with food they're used to. What's food and what's not is a matter of taste—and what you've been taught.

Future Food

Could our tastes change? Could school lunches ever include grasshopper kabobs and caterpillar fritters?

Attitudes about bugs are already changing. Thanks to bug-appreciation programs at schools and science centers, kids today are less squeamish about insects. If we can get over the "Gross!" factor, bugs could one day become part of our daily diet. Bugs are even considered a perfect food for long space journeys, because astronauts could breed them in outer space.

Still wondering who on earth would want to eat a bug? Better to ask, who wouldn't?



Gotcha! On the island of Bali, kids catch dragonflies on long poles rubbed with sticky sap. This expert hunter (top) has skewered the day's catch on a strip of palm. Silly hats and ant casserole (right) are on the menu at the Roasted Goose restaurant in Kunming, China.