

## Ain't No Starter Odd Enough

The creepy-crawly ingredients served at the Explorers Club's annual dinner are wrangled from the most exotic of ports

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For more than a decade, Gene Rurka has been creating the exotic appetizers that the Explorers Club has famously served at its annual black-tie dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria.

When you dine with Gene Rurka, the so-called "Culinary Curiosities Curator" of the Explorers Club, don't expect baked Brie or crudité. Think instead of rattlesnake potato pancakes, *musca domestica* (yes, housefly) larvae and pupae or perhaps bull testicles with applewood barbecue sauce.

For more than a decade, Mr. Rurka has been creating the exotic appetizers that the 1904-founded New York-based club of international adventurers and field scientists has famously served at its annual black-tie dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria (this year on March 17). Just as Explorers surge to the highest mountaintops and plunge to the bottom of the ocean, so Mr. Rurka, a 64-year-old farmer, investor, lecturer and conservationist, scours the globe for provender and inspiration alike.

"All I do is open my eyes to the world," he said, "and I see that other people are not eating what we're eating." The 30 or so appetizers he will present to 1,000 or so intrepid diners next weekend are expected to include scorpions with endive, alligator chili and kangaroo with mango relish. (The main course is set to be decidedly less outré: short ribs and yucca confit.)

Price is a consideration for Mr. Rurka in selecting his menu of starters: He is working with a budget of about \$10,000. "Kangaroo is sky-high," he said. "Ostrich is sky-high. Gator is up." Mr. Rurka must also make do with what is available. "No one's raising puffins, no one's raising seals. If they did, I would try to get them." Following are some of the more memorable-sounding creations Mr. Rurka is planning on serving.

#### Tasmanian Leatherwood Honey-Infused Madagascar Hissing Cockroaches

The Preparation: Mr. Rurka is raising about 100 cockroaches at his farm in Somerset, N.J. "We've got a building to keep them in 85- to 95-degree temperature," he said. "These little monsters have had apples, oranges and bananas, a diet which is superb. You want them to taste good." Full ripeness will be achieved, Mr. Rurka estimates, when the roaches are three to four inches long. They will be frozen, then brought back to room temperature by soaking them in Scotch or bourbon "for pliability."

The Challenge: Mr. Rurka will have to inject each of his roaches with the honey. "That will take the edge off the more bitter parts of the alimentary digestive system."

#### Python Patties With Applewood-Smoked Bacon

The Preparation: As much as 90 pounds of python meat is on its way to the Waldorf from Vietnam and Cambodia. "I think they're going to be little roasted patties," said Mr. Rurka. "We could put it on a cracker, which is nice, but that disguises it. The bacon will give it a bit of juiciness because it's a dry meat."

The Challenge: Although Mr. Rurka is pretty sure he will offer small python fillets and "gently bind them" with the bacon, he still needs to test the recipe. "If it becomes too greasy, we'll grind it instead."

#### Stir-Fried Jellyfish With Bamboo Shoots and Snow Peas

The Preparation: Some 50 pounds of Pacific jellyfish ("two kinds—an umbrella type and another that's more tubular") will be sliced up and marinated for five hours in some combination of vinegar, sugar and soy sauce. "You'd think it was squid," said Mr. Rurka. "When you put it to your lips, it tastes like calamari. I'm putting the bamboo shoots and snow peas in there to give the vegetarians a bit of ease."

The Challenge: Should Mr. Rurka use dark or light soy sauce? "The problem with the dark soy," he said, "is that the jellyfish comes out dark," which obscures their natural coloring. "On the other hand, it looks phenomenal."

—Thomas Vinciguerra