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#### SOUTHERN FLORIDA EXPLORERS CLUB

Exotic cuisine: This bug grub's for real

Forget pairing wines with filet mignon and salmon. Crickets and other crunchy critters were on this menu.

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Um, waiter, there's an ant in my phyllo dough.

Oh, hold on, it's supposed to be there.

About 40 members and brave guests of the Southern Florida Explorers Club expanded their palates Thursday night with an exotic food-and-wine pairing at Parrot Jungle.

On the menu: Baked worms, fried rattlesnake cakes, cricket toast, scorpions on endives and roasted ant tarts.

'I heard on the radio there would be worms and scorpions, and I said, `Hey, this is for me,' " said Sandy Wertheim, a Pembroke Pines resident.

The local Explorers Club teamed with a California winery to present Off the Eaten Path, a chance for its members to share their adventure stories over pigeon patés and sautéed dandelion.

"Most people pair wines with meat, fish and typical things," said Gene Rurka, an exotic foods expert who got David Letterman to eat flying maggots on cucumber slices on television last month.

"But when most people eat insects, their mouths are going to cringe, their saliva is going to shut down, so the intent is to find something unique to pair it with," said Rurka, wearing a tie spotted with lions.

Which he's eaten, by the way. Mountain lion, not the tie.

Cal Dennison, winemaker at Redwood Creek, recommended his pinot grigio to go with North American cricket served on a bed of sweet jelly atop a buttered toast crust.

The orange jelly overpowered whatever the taste of cricket may be. And Dennison's light, crisp white wine washed down any remnants of critter legs and antennae.

"It's all about knowing the food," Dennison said. ``Ideally, your wine and your food will both be so good, you want another sip and another bite."

LIKE CHICKEN? WELL, NO

Thankfully, the scorpion on endive with sun-dried tomato cream cheese was a one-bite endeavor. Dennison's trick was to tell people the scorpion's texture was like a fried softshell crab, much like frog's legs taste like chicken.

Yeah, right.

The scorpion's exoskeleton was crispy, as advertised, but it stuck around hard-to-reach mouth crevices a little longer than one would expect. Their poisonous stingers had been neutralized in the cooking process, Rurka promised.

Nan Broeder, an archaeologist from Lighthouse Point and Explorers Club member, said the experience reminded her of an archaeological dig when she found scorpions hanging out in her tent.

"I didn't really care that much because I was so exhausted from the dig," Broeder said. ``But I certainly didn't think about eating them."

The "alternative foods," as Rurka calls them, are intended to show Americans the vast variety of grub humans consume to survive. It's not aimed at shock value, he said, even though several large, hairy tarantulas were used as plate decorations.

"We're not going for a Fear Factor sort of thing here," Rurka said, referring to the reality competition television show where people have scarfed down bizarre foods to win.

"All of these are legitimate sources of sustenance for other cultures," Rurka continued. ``And all of them cost more per pound than a filet mignon or anything else we consider a delicacy."

Miami was the last stop on the Off the Eaten Path tour, where local Explorers Club president Dr. Stan Spielman tried to attract new members to the group.

More than an application is needed to join; would-be members have to justify their qualifications as bona fide adventurers. About 80 people are part of the Southern Florida club, which stretches from Palm Beach County to Key West.

"It's not a travel club. It's an organization for people who like to experience the more exotic parts of life," said Spielman, an ophthalmologist who has traveled the globe researching sharks' eyesight.

## GIANT ANT

Exotic parts of life that include chomping down on phyllo dough with a spattering of black currants and a giant ant atop the heap, that is.

"He's a big guy, isn't he?" Spielman said, eyeing the ant tart.

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ALEXIA FODERE/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

POINTS FOR PRESENTATION: The texture? Crunchy. Chef Gene Rurka places a menacing-looking scorpion, its now-harmless stinger still in strike position, on endive.