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They'll Start With Mealworms and Scorpions, in Pastry  
By THOMAS VINCIGUERRA

IT IS a chilly Sunday afternoon in Somerset, N.J., and Gene Rurka is preparing a snack in his kitchen.

He smears a wedge of red pepper with mustard dill sauce, lays on a piece of arugula and crowns it with a sizzling three-inch fried scorpion, carefully curling its tail. The canape disappears with a soft crunch.

"That's good," he said, chewing. "But it would work even better in a piece of celery."

Mr. Rurka, a farmer, investor and hunter, is hoping to give the Explorers Club a 100th anniversary dinner to remember.

Every year, the Explorers hold a black-tie gala, legendary for its unusual appetizers, drawn from the far-flung lands to which members routinely travel. Since 1998, it has been Mr. Rurka, 56, the chairman of the club's exotics committee, who has planned the menu — including roast armadillo and duck tongue. For the centennial celebration at the Waldorf-Astoria on March 20, he is going all out.

"I was never able to get cockroaches before," he said. "No one could certify they were clean. But if all goes well, we'll have them. I'm trying to get earthworms for the first time, 8 to 10 inches long. You want them supple enough to be juicy, but not limp."

Before any of that provender reaches the 1,800 guests, however, it falls to Mr. Rurka to concoct the recipes. So his home has become a food lab, and his kitchen counter is crowded with plastic tubs of Texas mealworms and crickets, a baggie of Colombian ants, styrofoam trays of frozen Japanese hornet pupae and a platter of Tibetan antelope burgers.

"If I had a beached whale," Mr. Rurka said, "people would probably enjoy it."

The definition of what the Explorers consider exotic eating has varied over the years. In 1907, moose marrow soup was served. In 1960, members chowed down on iguana and Macao monkey. Rarely, though, were more than half a dozen such comestibles found on the bill of fare. Then, as the new millennium and the 100th anniversary of the club approached, its president, Richard Wiese, upped the dinner ante.

"I wanted people to go home talking about it," Mr. Wiese said. "I green-lighted Gene and said, 'Just make it happen.' I know he relishes the job and revels in being the king of weirdness."

With a budget of about \$25,000, Mr. Rurka will devise some 30 appetizers. On order, among other treats, are a dozen raccoons, 18 nutria, a dozen or so four-foot alligators, six each of wild boar and feral pig, a score of rattlesnakes and up to 800 tarantulas.

"We're simply trying to show what explorers had to eat when they lived off the land," Mr. Rurka said. "We don't want to do the 'Fear Factor' concept. This is not to gross people out."

Mr. Rurka, raised on a farm in Germany, cultivates chickens and pigs on his farm in Somerset. For the club dinner, he relies on specialty-food sellers and growers in this country and abroad, grabbing what is available and, just as important, affordable.

"I'm not going to say that a mealworm on a celery stalk with a dollop of cream cheese is that expensive," he said. "On the other hand, if I take four inch-and-a-half mealworms, prepare them in a vol-au-vent pastry with escargot butter and bake it with a roasted two-and-a-half-inch scorpion in there as a hidden secret, you're talking an \$18 appetizer."

The display is always critical, especially this year. Although much of the game at the centennial feast will be simply dispensed with gravies, other dishes are more elaborate, like grilled ostrich served with yucca biscuits and green peppercorn sauce. Bugs are too costly to be gobbled like salted peanuts, so Mr. Rurka will limit them to one or two to a canape, artfully positioned to appear as if burrowing or emerging.

"Insects have to look the part," he said.

There are a few things the Explorers won't touch, even in this landmark year — endangered species, for one. Also off the list are any creatures that the club's honorary president, Jim Fowler (the ubiquitous Jim of "Wild Kingdom"), might present for after-dinner entertainment.

"I put the kibosh on lions a few years ago because Jim had them onstage," Mr. Wiese said, "and that would have offended people's sensibilities."

As exotics chairman, Mr. Rurka is working with the Waldorf to translate his small-scale recipe ideas to feed hundreds. Much of the food will arrive at the hotel days before the dinner, so he must also coordinate the cooking and presentation with the Waldorf's 30 chefs.

"I won't say this is a family affair," said Mr. Rurka, stuffing a puff pastry shell with goat cheese, "but the Waldorf staff looks forward to it. It's show and tell."

He garnishes the hors d'oeuvre with lime zest and dried cranberries. "That's a nice color combination," he said, adding two Colombian ants and popping the result into his mouth. Mr. Rurka's smile widened.

"I'll do that!" he said, writing down the ingredients. "Man, that was very tasty."

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