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TASTE OF ADVENTURE

Wining, dining on bugs and snakes
Explorers Club members taste assorted menu

BY FRED TASKER

You're lost in deepest jungle or remotest plain, with naught between you and starvation but scorpions, crickets, alligators and rattlesnakes.

Oh, but you do have a nice assorted case of wine.

Hey, it could happen.

And, if you attended Tuesday's meeting of The Explorers Club at Parrot Jungle Island, which sampled the before-mentioned exotic fare, you'd be prepared in that extreme setting for the inevitable wine-food pairing decisions.

It's Pinot noir with the crickets, sauvignon blanc with the scorpion, if you'll take the advice of Cal Dennison, winemaker at Redwood Creek vineyards, which provided the wines for the club's tasting. And the match is even more to-die-for if you serve the crickets with pepper jelly and cream cheese on endive spears, according to Gene Rurka, exotics chef for the Explorers.

The creepy culinary evening was part of a five-city membership-building road trip by The Explorers Club, a nonprofit educational society dedicated to preserving the urge to explore, and the Explorers' 70-member Southern Florida chapter.

The menu was one Rurka prepared for the club's 100th anniversary bash in New York last spring. His recipes also were featured on the National Geographic Channel's TV special Taboo -- Extreme Cuisine.

"We're not trying to be Fear Factor here," said club president Richard Wiese. "These foods are actual delicacies in some societies."

"We doctor it up a bit," said Rurka, "but the scorpion is a serious protein source."

The crowd was buying it, with maybe a touch of tongue-in-cheek.

"To your health," said Stu Connor, of Fort Lauderdale, popping a scorpion in his mouth, whole. "It's nice and crunchy, but it doesn't have much flavor."

"The snake cakes are my favorite," said Tom Graham, of Miami Beach. "They taste like turkey dressing."

To wash down the exotic delicacies, Dennison brought \$7-to-\$9 wines -- Pinot grigio, sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, Pinot noir, syrah -- from the Redwood Creek line at Frei Brothers Vineyards in Modesto, Calif.

Pairing them with the foods was a challenge. It's one thing to say "white wine with white meat, red wine with red meat." But what color meat is a cricket? And how much can you worry about the wine pairing when the most important thing about dinner is to eat it before it eats you?

An easier match was the gamy antelope pastrami and the earthy syrah. A match made in, well, maybe the Serengeti.

The light, lemony Pinot grigio was de rigueur with the batter-fried orchids.

Surprisingly, the crisp, inch-long cricket had the strongest shudder factor.

"I loved the snake, but I'm a little scared of the cricket," said Summer Pryce of Davie, making a face.

Jeff Legg, also from Davie, explained: ``You don't eat the whole snake."

Pryce downed the cricket, made a bigger face: ``You can feel the little feelers in your throat."

Overall, the fearless 70 or so guests seemed pleased with the evening's fare, although some stayed pretty close to the tray of carrots, celery and green bell peppers. They seemed to accept Dennison's explanation of the synergy between the food and wine.

``When you start to eat a cricket, your palate might not want to salivate. So you just take a sip of wine."

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