

Crispy Critters: Western Precedents of Entomophagy

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*These ye may eat; the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind,
and the beetle after his kind, and the grasshopper after his kind.*
--Lev. 11:22



Never was a more direct instruction given in favor of the inclusion of insects in our diets. It should be clear from this statement and the others discussed below that, when it comes to eating insects, our abhorrence derives almost exclusively from attitudes in our Western culture. There is certainly no basis for it in the religious traditions of the West (Taylor 19).

For centuries, entomophagy, the eating of bugs, has been practiced throughout the world. One finds examples in the cuisine of places ranging from Africa, Australia, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas (Gordon xiii). Yet, the consumption of insects is all but excluded from the diets of Europeans and their descendants in the United States.

We look on the eating of bugs as sickening and dirty, while we do not hesitate to take down the meat of a pig or an oyster in the raw, both of which the Talmud and Koran proclaim as unclean foods and abominations to the body (Taylor 19).

Can anyone, after seeing the putrid flesh used to attract lobster and other scavenging crustaceans, claim that they are kosher, or clean, foods? Yet, a lobster is willingly consumed at the highest tables in the land, while the same individuals would shudder at the thought of dining on the clean feeding and less repulsive looking snail. Once again, one can look to the Bible for instruction in this matter. It states quite simply in Leviticus 11:12 that: "Everything in the waters that has not fins and scales is an abomination to you" (qtd. in Taylor 19). After this statement, should there be any question about common foods such as lobster, oysters, or shrimp? Most entomophagous societies are quite perplexed to learn that we draw such a sharp line between marine and land invertebrates which knowingly pass our lips as food. In 1738, Jonathan Swift is reported to have made this statement, "He was a bold man that first ate an oyster" (Menzel 192). For some mysterious reason however, people eat these foul-looking, "foul-feeding denizens of the sea – their muscles still contracting, their hearts beating, fecal material passing through them"

(Taylor 17).

Few people know that insects are actually closely related to the lobster and shrimp we find on pricey menus today. They belong to the same phylum, Arthropoda, and the eating of insects is, in fact, a much cleaner habit than the eating of the *fruits de mer* we often enjoy (Ramos-Elorduy 3). It is also permitted in several religions whereas other popular foods are clearly forbidden (i.e. Lev. 11:12 and the Jewish and Islamic laws regarding the flesh of pigs).

In the Christian and Jewish faiths, the above passage from Leviticus 11:22 is overwhelming proof of God's approval of entomophagy. One can also point to a passage from Mark 1:6 as further proof of its practice in the Christian faith. It states in reference to St. John the Baptist: "Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey." He ate both insect and an insect by-product! The faith of Islam provides precedents for entomophagy as well.



It is said that Mohammed's wives used to send him trays of locusts as presents. There are some restrictions, however. It is held, for example, that locusts ought not to be eaten if they have died of cold, and one segment of the religion holds that they are eaten lawfully only if their heads are cut off. The majority of Moslems (who, incidentally, are forbidden to eat pork) believe, nonetheless, that locusts are lawful[ly eaten] under all circumstances. (Taylor 20)

One needs only to patronize a restaurant or two in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or any other predominantly Islamic country and "menus will show that [locusts] are, in fact highly valued at the best tables" (Holt 36).

Anders S. Simmonds, in his 1775 book, *The Curiosities of Food*, makes light of the religious law promoting the consumption of locusts, looking to their scientific name as overwhelmingly plentiful in proof as to edibility and an open invitation to cook them: *Gryllus* (Holt 37). Arguably, Simmonds must be the fellow who first coined the phrase we commonly use today when suppertime approaches: "Bring on the grub!"

Atheists and agnostics, make ready for another angle. Religion is not the only institution from which one can gain support for the eating of insects. The ancient Greeks enjoyed cicadas in various forms and thought of them as a delicacy. Individuals were fortunate to be able to include them in their regimes. Indeed, "Aristotle tells us that the most polished of the Greeks enjoyed them, considering the pupae, or chrysalides, the greatest tidbits, and after them the females heavy with the burden of their eggs" (Holt 38). The cicada was so highly regarded in fact that "[f]rom the time of Homer, [the cicada] formed the theme of every Greek poet, in regard to both tunefulness and delicate flavor" (38). Herodotus tells of a method of processing for locusts into a powder or flour which can be baked into cakes (35). This method, according to him, was adopted by the Greeks from the Nasamonians, the peoples once inhabiting a region north of what is now Germany (American 1202). The word entomophagy, itself, comes from the ancient Greek words, *entomon*, insect and *phagein*, to eat (Menzel i).



According to Pliny, Roman scholar and naturalist, known as "the Elder" and the author of *Historia Naturalis*, Roman epicures used the *coccus*, or the large grub larva of the stag beetle in their cuisine, fattening it beforehand with flour and wine (American 1391, and Holt 51). Pliny also gives accounts of how greatly snails were appreciated in ancient Rome, "which were cultivated and fed to increase their number and size for the table" (44). As one who is an epicurean well knows, "[t]he epicure of Rome was most dainty and discriminating in his food" (39). The Elder

also records the fact that in his day the locusts of Biblical fame were commonly eaten by the Parthians (35), the ancestors of the people who resided in areas in and around present day Iran (American 1319).

More recently in history, philosopher/scientists have found their own examples and reasons for entomophagy, and are not opposed to taking a bug from time to time, themselves. Erasmus Darwin in his *Phytologia* mentions a dish of which he partook and found to be delicious during one of his research trips to China. He writes that the Chinese harvest the larvae of the silkworm after the silk has been wound off the cocoons. "They fry them in butter or lard, and add the yolk of an egg. Then it is seasoned with pepper, salt, and vinegar" (Holt 43). He must also have tried other insect dishes during various travels. He writes in the same work that the locust and termite dishes of the East are "grateful foods" (55). Various references also describe the caterpillars of the sphinx moths, as eaten by the Chinese, as "very palatable" (68).

Swedish physician, anthropologist, explorer, and historian, Andrew Sparrman, wrote of his witnessing and partaking of the locust dishes of the Hottentots, or Khoikhoins, a pastoral tribe of people in Namibia in South Africa (American 989). He wrote that the locust eaters of the tribe grew round and fat from the tremendous quantities they devoured of the persecutors of the Dutch farmers. In addition to locusts, Sparrman tells of "several other dishes, among which may be reckoned the larvae of insects, or those kind of caterpillars from which butterflies are generated; and in like manner a sort of white ants, (the termes) grasshoppers, snakes, and some sorts of spiders" (Sparrman 201). Darwin also mentions the insectuous diet of this tribe. "The Hottentots eat caterpillars, both cooked and raw, collecting and carrying them in large calabashes to their homes, where they fry them in iron pots over a gentle fire, stirring them about the while. They eat them, cooked thus, in handfuls, without any flavouring or sauce" (Holt 43). There is nothing in his writing to indicate that Darwin tried this dish, but Sparrman describes the flavor as resembling a "sugared cream or sweet almond paste" (44).

With all of this historical evidence promoting the insect in our diets, perhaps the most surprising evidence of entomophagy's approval and legitimacy comes from the United States Food and Drug Administration. Yes, few Americans realize that they are following the path set by the ancients in their everyday and thoroughly modern lives. Entomophagy is officially sanctioned by the FDA. The agency has established permissible degrees of insect infestation within our food

supply. This covers the allowable number of eggs, immature and adult insects, or their various parts.

It is OK, from the government's perspective, if there are up to sixty aphids in 3.5 ounces of frozen broccoli, perfectly fine if there are two or three fruit fly maggots in 200 grams of tomato juice. As many as 100 insect fragments are allowed in 25 grams of curry powder, 74 mites in 100 grams of canned mushrooms, 13 or more insect heads in 100 grams of fig paste, and 34 fruit fly eggs in every cup of raisins. (Gordon xviii)



The list of these accepted standards goes on. The annually published brochure of the Food Defect Action Levels from the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition gives all this information, and more, in black and white.

The FDA is, as *every* American would *surely* agree, the final authority on the matter. Let's all eat bugs! After all "insects are the predominant animal group on earth, constituting four-fifths of the animal kingdom. They have inhabited the earth for more than 300 million years—compared to man's brief existence of only one million years. They can be found in trees and shrubs, on the ground, in roots, in the sand, and in an array of aquatic environments" (Ramos-Elorduy 4). No other animal group on earth shows such remarkable versatility or plenty. Yet, today, Western man holds them in such disdain. "We dislike insects in almost every shape and form, but perhaps our greatest prejudice is extended to their use as human food, a prejudice we do not extend to all other invertebrate animals" (Taylor 16). Our children are planted early with this seed of discontent in regard to bugs in their literature. In Lewis Carroll's, *Through the Looking Glass*, a conversation between Alice and a friendly gnat results in the following query and statement. "'What sort of insects do you rejoice in where you come from?' the Gnat inquired. 'I don't rejoice in insects at all,' Alice explained..." (qtd. in Taylor 23). Neither do I, Alice, neither do I.

Christian, Jew, and Moslem alike are all traditionally permitted to eat insects, yet our misguided prejudices prevent us. Why the delicacy Aristotle once described should have died out of modern Greece, one cannot tell (Holt 38). Perhaps the problems of world hunger would be solved in a single day, if only this cloak was lifted from our eyes. "We imitate the savage nations in their use of numberless drugs, spices and condiments. Why not go a step further" (47)? There are so many things from which we take great pride in the Greek and Roman traditions. Modern societies look to them to imitate their arts. We treasure their dead languages, unearthed artifacts, and are unable to put a value on the legacy of higher thought they have given us. "Why not take a hint from their tables" (47)?

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