



Shortlisted for 2017

**Escargots de Bourgogne**  
*by*  
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My glasses steamed up as I leaned over the circle of the saucepan. Left unwatched the water had finally come to a boil. I tilted the wooden chopping board and with a scooped hand carefully swept the roughly chopped carrots into the pot. A wilted branch of celery went in whole, followed by an onion unsymmetrically stabbed with half a dozen cloves. I had gathered fresh herbs from the garden, thyme, rosemary, sage all bundled together with a tightly drawn and knotted string and bay leaves plucked from the bush just minutes earlier. It was the first time I had access to bay leaves that fresh, the first time I was cooking for D's parents. D stood watching, leaning against the doorframe, a glass of wine in her hand.

"Don't forget the salt," she said.

"Don't tell me what to do."

"I'm not telling you what to do. I'm just reminding you."

"I don't need reminding. I know what I'm doing."

"Do you?"

"Why don't you just let me cook in peace?"

But she was right. I had forgotten the salt. I angrily flung a handful of greyish coarse-grained sea-salt grabbed from a porcelain box with the word *sel* branded into its wooden lid. I twisted ground black pepper from a wooden mill, turned down the gas, and slammed the lid on the pot.

If I was doing it today I would do things differently. I would do a lot of things differently. In life as in cooking we don't always get a second chance.

To make a court-bouillon now I would make a *mirepoix* first, finely dicing the carrots and celery to increase surface area, adding more flavour to the stock, and sweat them just short of browning with a bit of butter, allowing the magic of the Maillard reaction to intensify the flavours and sweetness. I might chop the onion too, or maybe just make a few incisions and still embed it with cloves, or add a slivered leek if it was in season. Some find garlic vulgar and overpowering, but when cooking snails a *court-bouillon* can never be too robust. I might even let more than a decade of living in Malaysia creep into the mix, perhaps adding star-anise and fresh chili to the stock, or some bruised galangal or lemongrass.

I poured myself another glass of wine, a young Burgundy bought by the litre from a local farmer. I stared out the window at the forest, at the rain that hadn't let up for close to a week. A week of being holed up inside the farmhouse, a week of getting on one another's nerves. I could have asked D if she wanted another glass too. I could have done a lot of things, but I didn't.

The trees and rain began to disappear as the window clouded over with condensation from the bubbling pot. The apartment filled with the smell of the court-bouillon. I wondered if I had added too many bay leaves. I lifted the lid and spooned one out and set it on the tiled counter where it steamed.

A few days earlier we had gotten up early, put on rubber boots and overcoats, and headed out into the morning. The wind had died down and the rain wasn't heavy, wavering somewhere on the scale between mist and drizzle. It was good to be outdoors. We took the trail that led into the green shade of the forest, the air full of the cool heady smells of chlorophyll and moss and last winter's rotting leaves. The forest was old growth oak and beech, with the occasional sweet chestnut, probably unchanged for thousands of years. Apart from the occasional discarded gun-cartridge there was no trace of modernity. On other occasions we had carried wicker baskets into the forest, tripping over moss-covered ruins and ancient Roman roads, looking for mushrooms – brown domed cepes and egg-yolk-yellow chanterelles. But today we carried plastic bags and searched for snails.

D carried a wire ring three centimetres in diameter. Snails that passed through it went back on the wet grass, the ones that couldn't pass we kept and dropped into our bags. Her rain-wet fingers were cold and wrinkled by the time we got back to her parent's house, mine almost blue from the tight weight of the snail-heavy bags.

We imprisoned the snails in a wire cage in the cellar and starved them for three days to empty their tiny bowels of glistening black threads of excrement.

D stood back, watching for my reaction as I reluctantly shovelled ungenerous fistfuls of salt onto the snails. They squirmed and squealed and fizzed. We left them in the darkness, oozing bubbling slime.

By next morning the snails were half-drowning in their own sticky goo. I ladled them through a

colander, gathering the slime in another pot poured in sickening slow motion onto the compost heap. Nothing was ever wasted on her parents' farm.

D showed me how to dispatch the snails by plunging them in boiling water with salt and vinegar, and then strip their hot dead bodies from their erstwhile homes separating the meat from the slithery coiled black entrails formerly hidden inside the iconic brown and white shells. The shells were boiled and rinsed and oven-dried.

While the snails boiled for two hours in the court-bouillon I made garlic butter. I hesitated adding a few drops of aniseed flavoured pastis but decided to play it safe and stay old school with the blessed trinity of garlic butter and parsley. It could hardly be simpler. I thought of grating the garlic into a pulp, but with the wine I wasn't sure I wouldn't inadvertently add some fingernail too. Instead I crushed the garlic with the flat of a knife, slipped the cloves from their papery envelopes, finely chopped them with a rocking of the curved blade. I chopped the parsley, then mashed it with the garlic and butter together in a bowl with a fork. I put a small knob of the butter into each shell, stuffed them with their former tenants, cemented the snails in with more butter, then placed them into the indentations of four specially designed stainless steel plates, and slid them carefully into the hot oven.

D's parents came to the table. Aperitif glasses of Ricard were served with clinking ice cubes, D's father, a bearded bear of a man, warned me not to add too much water. "Don't drown it!"

D had made a slow-cooked stew with the meat of a young boar her father had shot the previous winter. She used carrots and new potatoes and tiny onions, all pulled from the dark soil of the garden, and lots of red wine. But before the stew we would eat snails as a starter.

You only get one chance to make a good first impression. The snails would be perfect. I brought them sizzling to the table and watched expectantly, certain that I would impress with this quintessentially regional dish.

"Call yourself a cook?" D's father growled, pushing his plate aside.

I was confused. I popped one in my mouth and knew immediately what was wrong.

"You forgot the salt."

I was used to cooking with Irish butter, which is salted by default. It hadn't even crossed my mind that the butter might be unsalted.

D's mother nodded in agreement, shrugging it off with a smile, while D roared with laughter.