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Care for an insect pizza of mozzarella, tomato, cumin, mealworms and zophobas worms? — AFP PHOTO

Mite-y tasty

Fancy a Big Mac made of bugs? Don't stick your tongue out — it could be the food of the future.

Stories by **JOLEEN LUNJEW**
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There I sat, a basket of sago worms in front of me. The critters were very much alive, happily wriggling about, oblivious to their impending fate.

It was with much reluctance that I gingerly picked one up. I resisted the urge to fling it back into the basket as its fat, soft body began to squirm between my fingers.

"Go on! You can't call yourself half-Sarawakian if you don't eat it," urged my Iban friends.

My community's pride at stake, I took a deep breath and put the wriggling creature into my mouth and bit down on it. Creamy mush started to ooze out, its texture quite similar to cottage cheese.

Was it tasty? I still can't say as I was too busy getting over the ewww! factor of biting down on a live slug and the horrifying fact that bits of its hard head was stuck between my teeth.

That was my first introduction to entomophagy, the practice of eating insects. While it might not be appealing to some, consuming insects is quite common in some parts of the world.

In Asia, the Thais, Laotians and Cambodians think nothing of snacking on fried grasshoppers, crickets, locusts or water bugs. Dragonfly boiled in coconut milk is a delicacy in Bali, and *hachinoko*, or boiled bee larvae, is a traditional Japanese dish.

Moviegoers in South America eat roasted ants instead of popcorn, and in Mexico, it's considered good luck if the agave worm in tequila bottles ends up in your glass. One man's meat is certainly another man's poison.

As food resources get more expensive due to the increasing global population, it's not surprising that the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is formally considering a policy paper to promote insects as food to the world. FAO held a conference in 2008 in Thailand on the theme "Forest Insects as Food: Humans Bite Back," to push for greater development of insects as food sources and, in their 2013 world congress, will further discuss the subject.



Above: Live sago worms.

In the UN paper, the author, Dutch Professor Arnold van Huis, an entomologist at Wageningen University in Holland, argues that bugs have high nutritional value, use less land and need less feed, thus are cheaper to farm and would produce far less greenhouse gases than current livestock. Health risks are also lower, as being biologically different from humans, insects are less vulnerable to contagious diseases like mad cow disease.

Talk about an all-in-one solution to food security and global warming!

"There is a meat crisis," says Professor van Huis in *The Guardian*. "The world population will grow from six billion now to nine billion by 2050, and we know people are consuming more meat. Twenty years ago the average was 20kg. It is now 50kg, and will be 80kg in 20 years. If we continue like this, we will need another Earth."

In terms of combating global warming, the professor's latest research shows that farming insects such as locusts, crickets and mealworms emits 10 times less methane than cows, pigs, sheep and chickens. They also produce 300 times less nitrous oxide, also a warming gas, and much less ammonia.

Being cold-blooded, insects don't need to convert food energy into heat, meaning they need less food to grow. This makes farming insects a much more sustainable alternative. FAO says that there are 1,462 species of recorded edible insects, with the most common coming from four main insect

groups: beetles; ants, bees and wasps; grasshoppers and crickets; and moths and butterflies.

Some insects have as much protein as meat and fish. A serving of small grasshoppers, for instance, has nearly the same amount of protein as ground beef. Some insects, especially in the larval stage, are also rich in fat and contain important vitamins and minerals.

The argument for eating insects sounds very good on paper, but can it take off in a world that has been softened by Western cultural influences?

"Most of the world already eats insects. The first time you bite into a grasshopper might be a little hard to swallow, but there are ways to handle this. Insects can be ground industrially so they're less recognisable, just as a fillet doesn't really resemble a particular animal. And sautéed crickets dipped in warm chocolate make a great snack," says van Huis in an interview with Dutch publication *Ode*.

Don't hold your breath for grasshopper Big Macs with mashed crickets shaped like fries, though. Interestingly, Malaysia does have a few places where creepy crawlies are part of the menu.

Events manager Elizabeth Chan, 43, whose husband is half-Thai, frequently visits a few restaurants in Kelantan that serve these delicacies.

"There are a few restaurants that serve fried bees and sago worms as you head towards Tumpat, my husband's hometown. We like to go to Bankok Restaurant for fried bees. It is near the police station in Wakaf Baru," says Chan.

Chan says the bees are deep-fried before being stir-fried with onions, chilli and ginger. You can choose your bees in different stages — larvae or baby bees.

"I prefer larvae as they are creamier and you don't see the wings. It doesn't look so gross then. They're crispy too. My family loves them but they're unfortunately not always in season."

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