

# Kent Baddeley - The Fat Duck... and Snails

## Tales of the Humble Snail and a Recipe



Recently, from the English village of Bray in Berkshire (pop 6,000) we hear that Heston Blumenthal's The Fat Duck restaurant has again been named one of the best in the world by the Guide Michelin. Interestingly enough, one of its signature dishes celebrates the humble snail. Heston's amazing Snail Porridge, a feature of his Degustation menu, is at least partially responsible for the The Fat Duck's waiting list being measured in months, the tiny town of Bray's global media attention, and the area enjoying a phenomenal rise in tourism. ("Degustation," by the way, means taste or tasting...as in tasting menu).

Twenty four years ago in Wellington at my restaurant Petit Lyon, I created a way of dining that in 1983 was revolutionary: the "Surprise Degustation." After introducing this format to the top chefs that flew in from around the world, it is no surprise to me that many acclaimed restaurant menus are now Degustation derived.

As an "amuse" each evening, we used a snail dish...and clients loved it. Snail cappuccino especially! (Yes, this was created when Gordon Ramsay, Great Britain's most starred chef, was still in high school!) We did snail burgers, snail pizzas the size of the old 50 cent piece...you get the picture. I will admit we never did snail porridge...and when I first saw that dish I thought to myself: Damn! Over 3,000 snail recipes but not a one for breakfast. Nevertheless, we did get famous for our snail dishes.

Not only are snails delicious to eat-and you'll never know if you like them until you've tried-but they have a fascinating sex life. All snails are male until they mate, which is when something pretty strange happens. Below one eye, each snail has a type of penis that emerges during mating. This links up with the corresponding organ of the mating partner, and remains joined for up to 10 hours while the two politely exchange semen. One or other of the snails will then be inseminated, and will set off to lay several hundred eggs.

Snail caviar, as the eggs are known, was quite fashionable in gastronomic restaurants in the 1980s, but to tell the truth it does not have much flavor. Snail eggs look a little like grains of tapioca, and "pop" in the mouth, a characteristic that won't appeal to everyone.

Anyway, assuming that the eggs don't end up in the mouth of some discerning gastronome, each will hatch into a snail, which will form its shell as it grows. When they are about six months old, they are ready for the pot. Of course, many people (some of whom will never even have tried one) are quick to dismiss the snail as being not much

different from a bit of rubber, cooking wise. But, properly prepared they are really pretty tasty.

All of this is to say that I can't think of a single reason why snails shouldn't thrive on the menus of Hawke's Bay. This should come as good news to the folks at Silver Trail Snails, Hawke's Bay's illustrious snail farm, who asked me recently what I thought of the prospects for snail farming. Go for it!

Silver Trail Snails are easily available from the Hastings Farmers Market, are absolutely delicious and easy to prepare, and are-now that you've read this article-a remarkably reliable conversation piece. But take note: Silver Trail Snails have sold out for the season, so be early this summer or perhaps pre-order. Just give Raewynne a call (874-8554).

Currently, the only real local snail support is coming from Chefs Stephen Tindall from Craggy Range and Jeremy Rameka from Pacifica Restaurant. Isn't it ironic that both these restaurants are finalists in the Cuisine Magazine Restaurant of the Year Award? (This is a "participation competition" whereby the restaurant enters the fray on its own behalf, rather than through a selection process.) Regardless, the snails must have taken them there.

But lookout: One of my ex-sous chefs at Petit Lyon, Martin Bosley (from restaurant Martin Bosley in Wellington, last year's Supreme Winner) is in the running too; and I'm sure he's using snails. (Actually, Martin is a contemporary of Heston Blumenthal. He may make the porridge for you...tell him I sent you.)

And this just in: Silver Trail Snails (with 43 other finalists from around NZ) has been nominated for this year's Massey University Food Awards honoring "innovative food and drink" (to be decided this October).

Bringing it all back home, here is one of my favorite snail recipes from Petit Lyon (1983). This is a fun dish, very easy to prepare and a definite talking point. The most fun, of course, depends on keeping the main ingredient a surprise.

### Snail Cappuccino

1 tbsp butter

6 silver trail snails

2 tbsp very finely diced mix of red onion, carrot, celery, kohlrabi, garlic (one clove), parsley.

100mls chicken stock (recommended from European Gourmet at Hastings Farmers Market)

75mls Lustau Pedro Ximénez Solera\* sherry or good dessert wine

25mls cognac or brandy

milk foam (cappuccino foam by machine or whisk in pot to the boil on stovetop)

Heat butter in pan on med/high heat. Sauté vegetable mix briefly until colors brighten. Add snails. Slowly add stock and liquors, stirring until reduced by half, about 4 minutes, until thickened to soup consistency. Remove sauté from heat.

Divide snail sauté including dice and liquid evenly between two small demitasse cups. Top with milk foam and then cover with snail biscotti\*\*

\*Available at Liquor King and all good wine & spirit wholesalers

\*\*for recipe, go to <http://kentbaddeley.blogspot.com/>

Remember this: Nearly two centuries ago, Brillat-Savarin wrote that “*The discovery of a new dish does more for human happiness than the discovery of a new star.*”

*Kent Baddeley is a nationally recognized restaurateur. He served as Executive Chef at a variety of Hawke’s Bay restaurants including Sileni, Clearview and Diva.*