

# smooth snailing

A slow moving gourmet delight is now being farmed in Hawke's Bay – Yvonne Lorkin paid a visit...

"Quick, grab him before he gets away!" is not a cry you expect to hear from a snail farmer, but I soon discover the slow, dozy-looking things sheltering in the leafy landscape of Hawke's Bay's Silver Trail Gourmet Snail farm can also be very cunning creatures, capable of feats of great dexterity and daring.

Following the direction of owner Raewynne Achten, I locate a strapping snail fleeing the scene at the cracking pace of 1 mm per second on a blade of grass beside my boot. I gently place him back inside the fence on a bit of silverbeet beside 6000 of his closest friends.

"They're actually much safer in the beds away from birds and other nasties, so it's become a busy morning ritual for us, picking up all the

snails that have escaped," says Raewynne. By "us" she means her husband Paul, son Josh who's nine and five year old daughter Olivia who all help to move the snails from bed to bed, and with the feeding and preparation of the snails for sale.

Walking slowly along the seven beds, which hold around 30,000 snails, Raewynne explains the early stages of Silver Trail Gourmet Snails. Determined to find a means of income as a stay-at-home parent, Raewynne investigated several different money-making ventures over the years – including (ironically enough), a business bagging eggshells for locals to use as snail repellent. Then in 2004 she and colleague Natalie Woelfel set up Replica 3D Sculptures, a business moulding

children's hands and feet in bronze, which has been very successful – so what possessed her to branch out into snail farming?

"I'd remembered reading about a lady in Kapiti who farmed snails about seven years ago, and something about snails just stuck. Then I Googled 'snails' and located a woman called Sonya Begg who runs Ross Hill Cool Climate Snails in New South Wales". Ross Hill is Australia's first sustainable, award-winning free-range commercial snail farm.

In 2005 they bought Sonya's manual, built a 'raised bed' for the first batch of snails and set about researching the market. Raewynne rang restaurants and gauged chefs' thoughts on snails: asking if they had ever cooked them, their views on the quality, and what they looked for in a good eating snail. Paul and Raewynne then travelled to Australia in 2006 to meet Sonya and observe the Ross Hill operation.

"We had great support from the team at Food Hawke's Bay and local chef Kent Baddeley, who over the last couple of years has been fantastic in terms of ideas and encouragement." Buoyed by their research and positive feedback, the Achten's decided to make a serious go of things. "Weirdly enough, on the way back from Australia I was sitting next to a woman at Auckland Airport who used to work at a snail processing plant in Taranaki about 20 years ago! So snail farming is definitely not new," offers Raewynne, "but our way is."

They also work in partnership with Jaye and Nigel Sims of nearby Onga Onga, who have three beds on their property.

The raised beds soon made way for the Italian Open Pasture Method: "The snails grow bigger and it's much more natural," explains Raewynne as the wind forces us to retreat inside. "Snails hate the wind; it dries them out and makes them moody."

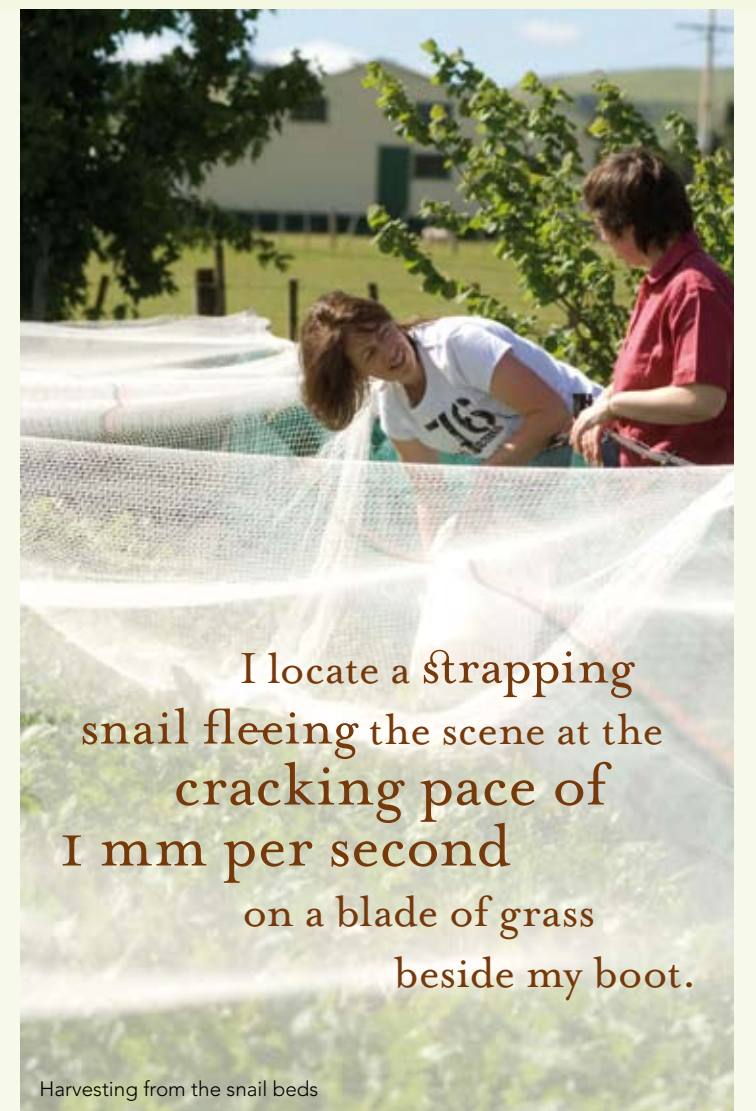
Silver Trail's snails roam in outside beds, feeding on organically grown greens such as silverbeet and brassica. They're harvested when they reach 32 mm across the base – once removed from the beds they're placed in buckets to feed on pale food like bran or apples until their waste is white, indicating their systems have been flushed of soil. Then they're cleaned, cooked and bottled in spring water ready for distribution.

I tell Raewynne that my escargot-eating experiences have amounted to little more than tough, chewy nuggets swimming in butter and garlic. "Oh that's terrible!" she shrieks, handing me a pottle of cooked snails and a cup of coffee. "You mustn't overcook them – a five minute rapid boil is all it takes". The snails look juicy and plump, a little like chicken livers, only lumpier and they taste tender, moist and moreish.

Their good looks made a big impression on Tony Astle of Antoinies in Parnell, who received some of Silver Trail's first harvest. "They're an absolutely perfect-looking snail," he enthuses, "just like a really pretty brooch. I remember cooking snails when I was 15 and working at Le Normandy in Wellington. They grew their own, crudely enough, in boxes out the back of the restaurant. They did the trick at the time, however I'm impressed by the size and shape of these Hawke's Bay snails."



(l-r) Paul and Raewynne Achten with Josh and Olivia, and Jaye and Nigel Sims



Harvesting from the snail beds

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"Snails have really taken off here lately," he adds, "in fact we'll have three snail dishes on the go soon, so there's definitely room for Silver Trail on our menu."

"Snails obviously have the flavour of the earth, the terroir they're harvested from," offers Kent Baddeley of Havelock North's Burnt Hills restaurant. "They're light and savoury and I enjoy scattering them over other dishes to enhance, rather than using them as a 'single' dish."

Chef Stephen Tindall of Terroir at Craggy Range Winery comments that the Silver Trail snails do actually look like a proper snail – round and spiraled – not like the slug-like, tinned examples. "I've never had the opportunity to work with fresh snails before, let alone a locally grown product like this. New things are really exciting, and although I love to work with exotic things like baby pua and wild game, the prices and administrative red-tape associated with purchase make them practically unaffordable. These snails offer superb quality so I'm looking forward to having a play with some recipes."

Back at home, Raewynne likes to wrap the snails in bacon then dip them in a little chilli sauce, or sauté them with butter, salt and pepper. But the firm family favourite is snails dipped in egg, then rolled in crushed, dried chicken noodle soup and fried in butter until they're crispy.

It hasn't all been smooth snailing though: some disastrous encounters with birds pre-netting almost wiped out the entire population. "And once we found our brand new food-beds swarming with white butterflies all laying their eggs on our greens!" Disaster was only

narrowly avoided by Raewynne getting down and picking thousands of caterpillars off the leaves herself: "I had buckets full of caterpillars and the sorest back of my life after that".

Hungry frogs and hedgehogs have been known to sneak into the beds too and the Hawke's Bay weather can also be brutally hot. Raewynne has had to adapt her purging pods so they can sit under the trees in the shade to receive the benefits of the breeze – if left indoors the snails can suffocate in the heat.



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In addition to bottled snails, Silver Trail is looking at supplying high quality snail shells, and pre-prepared items like snail pâté, small sausages and fritters. Research has shown snails to be a cancer-inhibiting food as well as containing proteins that help regenerate stressed skin – so the scope for value-added products is on the increase.

But for the moment they're concentrating on the job at hand. At the time of writing, Raewynne, Paul, Jaye and Nigel had been frantically harvesting and processing 30 dozen snails over one weekend for orders and fresh samples for New Zealand's top chefs, with another 30 dozen to be harvested before the end of the week.

Despite being highly labour intensive, it's in the calm of night that Raewynne and Paul feel truly content with their decision. "We love to go out into the garden when it's still and quiet," says Raewynne, "you can actually hear them munching in the darkness." •

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Silver Trail Gourmet snails prepared by chef Kent Baddeley