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Snails trailed from leaf to plate

By JON MORGAN - The Dominion Post Last updated 10:53 09/07/2009

A slow-moving garden business is coming out of its shell in Hawke's Bay.

For much of the year, Raewynne and Paul Achten and their children, Josh, 11, and Olivia, 7, get up at dawn and go snail hunting.

It's either that or lose their farm's assets to voracious birds.

The Achtens run New Zealand's only snail farm in Hawke's Bay. It is in two parts - in nine beds at their small Raukawa property and in seven beds at the small Onga Onga farm of their partners, Jaye and Nigel Sims.

Three years after making a tentative start, the business, Silver Trail Snails, is selling snails by the dozen to a handful of restaurants, mainly in Auckland, and by the jar in some shops and through internet and phone orders.

The dawn snail hunt is needed to retrieve small snails that have made a break for freedom, squeezing through the bird netting over their brassica beds and racing - albeit at a snail's pace - across the front lawn. Waiting to feast on the escapees is a flock of early-rising birds.

It is a problem they hope eventually to find a solution to, like many of the other problems they have had to overcome as they have ventured where few have gone before.

One was taste. Mrs Achten admits she was nervous about eating snails at first. So she served up the first cooked batch to her children. "I had to see their faces," she says. She needn't have worried. "It was like they were eating chocolate for the first time - they gobbled them up."

It is a reaction she has seen many times since. At the Harvest Hawke's Bay festival in February she served deep-fried crumbed snails. "It was quite funny, seeing people go 'Eww, snails', but after a few more wines they'd be back for a taste. Then their eyebrows would go up and they'd have another two or three."

The taste is most often compared to seafood - calamari, oysters, paua - but Mrs Achten says that is based on texture. They have a delicate earthy flavour that can easily be overwhelmed by what they are cooked in.

Mrs Achten worked as a veterinary nurse and her husband as a sewing machine mechanic in the Hutt Valley before moving to Hawke's Bay 14 years ago. Four years ago, she began looking for a venture she could run from home on their 0.8-hectare lifestyle block near Hastings.

She came across an Australian snail farmer who was selling an online manual. "So I bought that and it just sounded so easy. Within a week I had built my first snail bed and I was away."

But traps lay ahead. She stocked the bed with 200 snails from her garden, but then the birds found them and helped themselves. She covered the round corrugated iron bed and restocked, but during the hot summer the young snails died crawling up the sides of their home.

A visit to Australian farmer Sonya Begg in New South Wales was needed and she persuaded friend Jaye Sims to join her.

Before going, she sounded out the local market. Chefs were using imported canned snails and were keen to try a local product.

Kent Baddeley, formerly of Wellington's Petit Lyon and then at Hawke's Bay's Sileni restaurant, was particularly encouraging.

It turned out Mrs Begg had altered her methods since publishing the handbook and Mrs Achten followed, changing to open-air brassica beds protected by bird netting, that allowed the snails to go through a natural life cycle.

With Mrs Sims as a business partner, Silver Trail Snails was soon supplying the restaurant market.

In the winter the snails hibernate, but they will begin mating when temperatures rise in October.

Each bed holds about 5000 snails and with each snail capable of producing 80 eggs, the business gets hit with a population explosion from Christmas to February.

The snails feed on spray-free lettuce, cabbage, silverbeet and plantain and are watered at night to bring them out to eat. They are collected to order and put on a diet of organic bran to clean out their systems.

Then they are taken to a commercial kitchen in Hastings to be killed, shelled and chilled in springwater for sale.

The venture is so labour-intensive the company has to charge \$18 a dozen to restaurants to cover expenses. This compares with \$16 for a tin of three dozen imported snails that have a French branding but are actually grown in Thailand. However, chefs report the small home-grown petit-gris to be tastier and more attractive than the bigger Thai escargot.

The next investment should be a commercial kitchen of their own, but they need a constant supply of top-quality snails and an increased demand first.

After a promising start with a bumper 2007-08 season they were hit by last year's drought. Even with irrigation, they ran out of food for the snails.

Other problems have been encounters with hungry hedgehogs and frogs and an attack of egg-laying white butterflies.

The Achtens are keeping a close eye on promising research by a Massey University student into a snail pate, which could provide a use for undersized snails or those damaged in processing.

Other foodies are experimenting with snail sausages and pies.

Research has shown snails to be a cancer-inhibiting food as well as containing proteins that help regenerate stressed skin.

The snails are also pickled in wine and vinegar and bottled for sale at \$45 for 30. Recipes on the Silver Trail website demonstrate that snails are not just garlic butter fare, showing them with spinach and mushroom or cooked in pastry shells.

Mrs Achten likes to wrap the snails in bacon then dip them in a little chilli sauce, or saute them with butter, salt and pepper. The family favourite is snails dipped in egg, then rolled in crushed dried chicken noodle soup and fried in butter until they are crispy.

Despite all the problems with drought, pestilence and greedy birds, it's at night that she and her husband feel sure they have made the right move.

"We love to go out into the garden when it's still and quiet," she says.

"We listen to them munching in the darkness - they make a surprising amount of noise - and know they are working away for us."

TASTE CHALLENGE

Jeremy Rameka, chef at Napier's Pacifica restaurant, likes the Silver Trail snails because they have a better flavour and are more tender than imported canned French snails.

"It's like comparing a canned apple with fresh apples from the tree," he says.

He says his diners are surprised the snails are locally grown, and give them the "thumbs up".

His recipes depend on the availability of fresh produce, but he has used the snails with a chicken mousse to make dumplings with a garlic puree and shitake mushroom sauce, and with sea urchins battered in egg whites and sauteed with the snails in tapioca.

Kent Baddeley, now chief executive of Martinborough's Parihua Country Estate, says he's told many chefs about Silver Trail snails.

"Hopefully, they're buying them. We don't like to tell others what we've found, but in some cases, if we don't, they'll disappear."

The snails are small and delicate compared with the French product - and tastier.

He says he has a thousand recipes for snails.

"Imagine making a nice terrine and throwing in a handful of snails and then taking a slice and seeing a snail pop up here and a pistachio there. Fantastic!"

* Kent Baddeley's 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

75mls sherry or dessert wine

25mls cognac or brandy milk foam (cappuccino foam by machine or whisk in pot to the boil on stovetop)

METHOD

Heat butter in pan on med-high heat. Saute vegetable mix briefly until colours brighten. Add snails. Slowly add stock and liquors, stir for about four minutes until reduced by half and thickened to soup consistency. Divide evenly between two small demitasse cups. Top with milk foam and cover with snail biscotti.

* Snail biscotti

400g flour

400g caster sugar

200g pistachio nuts

24 Silver Trail snails

10g baking powder

4-5 eggs

METHOD

Mix together and stir in eggs. Egg wash and bake at 140C for 40-50 minutes. Slice thinly and dry out in oven.

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