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Shell shock

by Martin Bosley

Believe me, gourmet snails are delicious. Yes, really.

My first head chef position was at the Grain of Salt restaurant in Wellington. I was just 20, ridiculously young to hold such a position, especially at a restaurant that had enjoyed such an illustrious reputation. It had once been the Copper Room, run by Madame Louise, a Frenchwoman so passionate about her food that when she found she couldn't source snails for her menu, she decided to farm them herself in the garden at the rear of the kitchen. She must have been successful at it, because many years later even a late-night foray into the garden for a quick post-service cigarette was accompanied by the sound of delicate shells being crushed underfoot.

Before you turn your nose up at this column, you should know that snails are delicious, and you will really never know the truth until you have tried them. Many readers will dismiss snails as "shock-cuisine", which is not the case at all. A bowl of snails with spicy chorizo sausage and rocket leaves cooked in garlic butter can bring comfort on a cold spring day, so please read on ...

You can buy snails prepared in cans, but I suggest you contact Silver Trail Snails (www.silvertrailsnails.co.nz) in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand's only free-range snail farm. There are two main varieties of edible snail – the large burgundian or "vineyard" snail, and the smaller, finer petit gris.

At Silver Trail, which farms petit gris, the gourmet snails are harvested by hand, then fed a diet of organic bran and vegetables to cleanse their systems before being finished off in spring water ready for use. Madame Louise would have been proud.

For all these recipes, first thoroughly rinse your snails, canned or fresh, under cold running water. Next, bring a saucepan of water to the boil, add the snails, then cook for 3 minutes before draining. Rinse in cold water again, then drain.

SNAIL, CHICKEN AND BACON PIE

300ml cream

3 tbsp white wine

2 anchovy fillets

2 cloves garlic, chopped

freshly ground black pepper to taste

1 small carrot, peeled and finely chopped

1 stalk of celery, peeled and finely chopped

1 small onion, finely chopped

75g prosciutto or bacon, chopped

24 snails

2 cooked chicken thighs, finely chopped

1 tbsp chopped basil

1 tbsp chopped parsley

salt

2 sheets of store-bought puff pastry

1 egg, beaten

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Bring the cream and white wine to a simmer with the anchovies, garlic and pepper until it is thick enough to coat the back of a wooden spoon. This should take about 3 minutes. Cook the vegetables in boiling salted water for 2 minutes, then drain. In a frying pan, cook the prosciutto until it is lightly coloured. Divide the prosciutto, snails and chicken between 6 ovenproof ramekins. Top with a sprinkling of cooked vegetables and herbs, then pour some of the cream mixture into each ramekin and sprinkle lightly with salt. Cut the puff pastry into circles slightly larger than the ramekins and place over the top of each dish. Brush lightly with egg wash and sprinkle with salt. Bake in the oven until the pastry is golden brown – about 8 minutes – then serve immediately.

Serves 6.

THIS BUTTER IS LOVELY SERVED with grilled steak and lightly cooked green vegetables.

SNAIL AND ALMOND BUTTER

200g unsalted butter

4 garlic cloves, chopped

4 shallots, finely chopped

12 snails

1 tbsp smooth Dijon mustard

2 tbsp finely sliced almonds

a pinch of salt and some freshly ground

black pepper

1 tbsp chopped parsley

Melt 2 tablespoons of the butter in a frying pan, then add the garlic, shallots and snails. Cook them over a low heat until the shallots are softened but not coloured – about 5 minutes. Place in a food processor with the remaining ingredients, then purée until smooth. Stop the machine occasionally and scrape down the sides. Tip the butter onto a piece of plastic wrap, roll it into a cylinder shape, then store in the freezer. Cut pieces off the roll as you need them.

Serves 6.

YOU MAY WANT TO SERVE this dish with crusty baguette on the side to mop up the garlicky and buttery juices. The fennel can, of course, be used for many other dishes, such as a lemon-scented roasted chicken breast.

SNAILS WITH PROSCIUTTO-WRAPPED BAKED FENNEL BULB AND GARLIC BUTTER

2 large fennel bulbs, tops trimmed

freshly ground black pepper

4-6 large slices of prosciutto, thinly sliced

1 tbsp olive oil

4 sprigs of thyme

garlic butter (see recipe below)

48 snails, sliced in half

½ cup of chicken stock

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Season the fennel bulbs liberally with pepper, then tightly wrap them in prosciutto. Heat the oil in an ovenproof frying pan, then fry the fennel until golden brown on all sides – about 3-4 minutes. Add the thyme, then put the pan into the oven and bake the fennel for 30 minutes until tender, turning them as they cook. Remove the fennel from the oven, slice each bulb in half vertically, then cut into wedges. Heat the garlic butter in a frying pan until it starts to foam. Add the snails and cook for 3-4 minutes. Add the stock, then reduce the heat to low and continue cooking for another 4 minutes, shaking the pan gently to mix the stock and the butter. Add any juices that have come out of the fennel. Remove from the heat. Divide the fennel between 4 serving plates, top with snails, then spoon the butter over the top.

Serves 4.

IF YOU ARE FORTUNATE ENOUGH to find any snail shells, put a little of this butter into each one and then add one snail per shell. Cover each snail with even more garlic butter until the shells are full, then bake in a 170°C oven for 8-10 minutes until the butter bubbles and the snails are hot. Use a skewer or toothpick to carefully remove the snails from their shells. The shells can be reused.

GARLIC BUTTER

160g unsalted butter

4 garlic cloves, finely chopped

2 tbsp chopped parsley

4 tbsp grated parmesan

1 tsp Tabasco sauce

1 tsp Worcester sauce

6 tbsp fresh white breadcrumbs

salt and freshly ground black pepper

Mash the butter in a bowl or food processor until pale and creamy. Add the remaining ingredients, then purée until smooth. The butter can be used immediately or stored in the refrigerator.

Serves 4.

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