



IS THE CAPE TOWN POP-UP RESTAURANT THE INSECT EXPERIENCE, REALLY CHANGING PERCEPTIONS ABOUT EATING BUGS? **EUGENE YIGA** SPOKE TO CO-FOUNDER LEAH BESSA TO FIND OUT MORE.

Steamed Bavarian dumplings with black soldier fly larvae. Creamy butternut ravioli with local mopane worms. Stewed apples on a bed of mealworm crumbles. These are a few of the items on the menu at The Insect Experience in Cape Town.

“We launched South Africa’s first insect concept store in June with a tasting menu for consumers to try beautifully plated dishes that all have insects in them in one form or another,” says co-founder,

food scientist, and PhD candidate Leah Bessa. “We wanted it to be a comfortable space to try insects and have the option of buying insects, all sourced from ethical local farms, to take home to cook.”

So far the response has been great. “There are still some people who aren’t open to eating insects but those who come to the restaurant are happy with their dishes and amazed at how good they taste,” Leah says. “Initially customers ask for dishes with no visible insects, but by the time they

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leave they have tried the whole insects displayed on the counter.”

Indeed, although the restaurant initially expected nothing but young, eco-conscious consumers and other bearded, tattooed, and skateboarding hipster types, they’ve seen such a wide range of visitors that they can’t put them all into one category. The positive response is the reason they’ve extended their pop-up operation until 2020.

“It’s something different and exciting,” Leah confirms. “We’ve created dishes that are tasty and aesthetically pleasing, which helps bring insects to customers in a gourmet way, making it easier for people to try. We’ve dissociated ourselves from the whole ‘fear factor’ experience around eating insects. Consumers find that refreshing.”

CHANGING THE INDUSTRY

The long-term goal of The Insect Experience is to have a global footprint that positively impacts the food industry. The challenge is to find technologies that will address the potential obstacles and also reduce the effects of the current farming and processing methods.

“We need to change how we produce and consume our food as our traditional farming systems are outdated, unsustainable, and often follow unethical practices to meet high demand. I also feel that the overly processed nature of our foods has resulted in dissociation, giving us a false idea of how food tastes,” Leah explains.

Still, she believes there are so many good trends coming into the food industry, including aiming to reduce single use plastic, reducing waste in processing, using waste streams to create new products, the exploration of novel foods, and a general movement to more sustainable and ethical sourcing practises. There is also a strong trend towards plant-based food.

“This is a positive movement, as there needs to be a reduction in meat and dairy consumption,” Leah says. “However,

plant-based alternatives are trying to mimic meat and dairy to the extent that their ingredient lists are full of unnatural or overprocessed items to improve perceived texture and taste, often making the products healthier than their meat counterparts. There is a lack of transparency with regards to that.”

PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE FOODS

The big hope is to find sustainable and ethical alternatives without moving away from one problem just to create another. That’s why The Insect Experience is doing a lot of research into the potential of insects as food and ways to ethically introduce them into the food system.

“As consumers move away from conventional foods, they are on the search for novel, healthy, sustainable options,” Leah says. “This falls in line with the ethos of our company and is the biggest opportunity for us. We want to use this growing curiosity for new foods to introduce our products in both a delicious and educational way.”

The next step is to create more products using EntoMilk, a dairy alternative made from black soldier flies, and used in The Insect Experience’s popular and delicious ice cream. The product has been developed in an effort to demonstrate creative, versatile options for consumers. This includes an industrially applicable powdered EntoMilk that can be used in a variety of food products.

“We’ve made an impact changing perceptions about eating insects but it’s only a small group who have come to the restaurant as we are only based in Cape Town,” Leah says. “We want to reach more people around the country because we believe that more exposure to insect foods will allow the aversion barrier to drop. This is why we’re launching an online store on our website so that consumers can buy insect products nationwide. It’s our hope that more people will try insect products and incorporate them into their daily lives.”

Visit www.gourmetgrubb.com for more.



Previous page: dairy-free, high-protein ice cream made with EntoMilk, a dairy alternative made from black soldier flies. This page, from the top: insect croquettes; mopani polenta fries with smoked tomato chutney