



foodism
LONDON, ONE BITE AT A TIME



 COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

GRUB'S UP

Something's stirring in Copenhagen, where insects have been creeping onto restaurant menus for almost a decade. **ZOEY GOTO** heads to the Danish capital to investigate

IT'S BEEN TEN years since Noma, the two-Michelin-starred restaurant run by uber-chef René Redzepi in Copenhagen, let ants loose on their tasting menu – served live and desperately scuttling to escape the plate, no less. Naturally, the shock factor made for a headline-grabbing moment, but a decade on, I've returned to Copenhagen to see if insect eating has moved on from gourmet theatre to infiltrate the everyday.

Laying my cards on the table, I've never knowingly eaten a bug and I personally find the concept mildly revolting. But I'm also open to the persuasive eco arguments for bugs crawling up the food chain. As our population increases, so too does the demand for resources. Meat production gobbles up 70% of the planet's agricultural land and requires draining amounts of grain and water. As our population swells, the clock is ticking to find alternative sources of protein.

Enter stage left, the humble insect: a buzzy superfood with a tiny carbon footprint, packing a serious dose of protein. It's estimated by the United Nations that two billion people are already eating bugs as part of their standard diet – around a quarter of the world's population – which raises the question of whether we in the West are actually the weird ones.

But in Europe at least, Denmark is ahead of the entomophagy curve. "It isn't a crazy novelty any more," says chef Rasmus Munk from his restaurant Alchemist, situated in the industrial neighbourhood of Refshaleøen. The 30-year-old prodigy has gained two Michelin stars and international acclaim since unveiling Copenhagen's famed art-meets-food dining experience; Alchemist opened in its current location in 2019, costing more than £10 million to convert a former theatre set-building warehouse into a labyrinth of conceptual dining rooms, with an

In Copenhagen, eating insects like ants and grasshoppers is no longer a crazy novelty



FISHY BUSINESS: Inside two-Michelin-starred Alchemist, which serves an 'antwich'

enormous planetarium domed roof at its beating heart. The surreal, six-hour long gastronomy adventure is choreographed into acts, with dancers clad in LED lights and whimsical projections of jellyfish floating across the ceiling.

Star of Alchemist's show, though, is the 'antwich' – giant, ant-shaped ice cream sandwich. Our multi-legged friends are ground into the flour that makes the crackers, whipped into the ice cream for a citrusy tang, and congealed into the ant gel that holds the masterpiece dish together.

With the 50-course tasting menu costing upwards of £400 per person, and a waiting list that runs into thousands, Alchemist customers are clearly game for tucking into an antwich as part of their once-in-a-lifetime gourmet extravaganza. "A lot of people are taking a serious interest in the nutritional and flavour potential of insects," enthuses the Randers-born maverick, who has also served diners edible plastic to raise awareness of marine pollution. But he still ponders how best to get Europeans chowing down on insects on a larger scale: "It will require really delicious products to change the mind set, and it might take more than a generation to do it."

Across town, I meet with the owners of

Hey Planet, a cool Copenhagen start-up on a mission to coax insects from the plates of fine-dining establishments into the mainstream. Its millennial founders Jessica Buhl-Nielsen and Malena Sigurgeirsdóttir have harnessed a canny marketing strategy that plays up the health benefits and downplays the creepy crawly association. It's paying off with young urbanites, as the discreetly packaged insectible bars are comfortably shifting 10,000 units



HOP TO IT: [main] Grasshoppers from Bugging Denmark, an insect farm in Copenhagen; [above] Bugging Denmark's cricket paste being used in tacos



» each month through Denmark's major supermarket chain.

Hey Planet now has its sights on the meat-substitute market, with a plant-based meat incorporating buffalo beetles. There's already been a buzz from Copenhagen's big-name restaurants, Jessica explains as she serves me a bug burger patty in her airy apartment, overlooking a pretty cobbled courtyard lined with Copenhagen's ubiquitous bicycles. It tastes every bit as delicious as a veggie burger served in

London's coolest restaurants – so much so that I swarm in for seconds.

So if brands like Hey Planet triumph – perhaps not such a stretch, given that Barclays predict the edible-insects market to boom to £4 billion by 2030 – then how exactly do we harvest these bugs sustainably? I stroll through Copenhagen's Meatpacking District, past hipster coffee shops and a former slaughterhouse metamorphosed into a trendy Nordic food hub, dodging cargo bikes as I go.

Barclays predicts the edible insects market will reach £4 billion by 2030

On the outskirts of the district is BaneGaarden, an industrial park packed with ethical businesses and vegan eateries housed in rustic barns. It's here that Jakob Rukov, founder of Bugging Denmark, has set up Denmark's first urban cricket farm in an old shipping container.

Throwing open the door to the humid container where thousands of chirping crickets are housed in plastic tubs – much like a high-rise city in miniature – reveals that the beauty of insect farming is its lack of overheads or sophisticated equipment.

With a little ingenuity, even feeding the crickets can be cheap and hyper-local. Bugging Denmark has teamed up with a brewery that supplies beer to Noma, resourcefully taking the spent grain and mixing it with unsold loaves of bread for cricket fodder. "Being an urban farm, why not use local urban ingredients?" Jakob reasons with a shrug.

By the end of the year, Bugging Denmark hopes to harvest an impressive three tons of crickets. It raises the question; if one man and a disused shipping container in a city centre can achieve this, shouldn't more metropolises be jumping on the bug

Bugging Out

Where to have an 'I'm a Celebrity' Moment in London

The London restaurant scene is also hopping with edible insects. Head to London Bridge for an authentic taste of Mexico and a hearty serving of deep-fried grasshopper, guacamole and tortilla chips at Santo Remedio.

In Fitzrovia, Thai restaurant Greyhound Café serves up the aptly named 'Bugs In My Salad', a dish of greens topped with crunchy fried pupae. Also in Fitzrovia, you'll find locusts,

mealworms and crickets on the adventurous menu at Archipelago, alongside smoked python and crocodile wrapped in vine leaves.

Fancy rustling up your own ento-cuisine? Then Horizon Insects, an urban insect farm in Ealing, offers fun and informative classes.

Their three-hour course includes an introduction to bug eating, a tour of their insect farm and the chance to cook a curried

mealworm fritter, bug burger and cinnamon and raisin insect biscuit. You can also pick up a grow-your-own-insect-farm kit, or some cricket powder, which provides three times the protein content of meat without looking recognisably 'buggy', making it the perfect gateway ingredient.

The insect cookery class at Horizon Insects costs £28 per person: horizoninsects.co.uk



BUGGING OUT: [here] A dish called Apples and Ants from Flores' On Eating Insects; [left] Hey Planet's bug ball

I hesitantly pop a couple of beady-eyed beasties into my mouth and wait...

farming bandwagon?

My thoughts are interrupted by a loud ping, as Jakob announces that a batch of baked hoppers is ready to come out of the oven. Pushing aside images of dry crickets getting lodged into my esophagus, I hesitantly pop a couple of the beady-eyed beasties in my mouth and wait.

They taste... pretty non-descript, actually. It's like eating a lightly seasoned

crisp, and while I'm not sure I'd be throwing fistfuls of crickets down my throat on a daily basis, it also feels like no big deal.

That evening I swerve the crunchy crawlies and grab a table outside Hija de Sanchez, Copenhagen's hottest taco stand, opened last year by Noma alumnus Rosio Sanchez. Over some mouth-watering fish tortillas, I pick the brains of Roberto Flore, a Sardinian now living in Copenhagen.

Flore has spent the past 20 years deep-diving into how food can address global challenges, with a varied career including a stint as head of research and development at the Nordic Food Lab (the open-source laboratory founded by René Redzepi) and as co-author of the hauntingly beautiful *On Eating Insects* cookbook.

So what is it about Denmark that makes it a flag-bearer for future foods such as insects? "It's a combination of ingredients" Roberto reflects, "which includes an open-minded approach to gastronomy, the support of Danish scientific organisations and

flexibility from a legislation point of view".

And as a leading expert in this field, has Flore personally signed up to the notion that the looming food crisis might have a six-legged solution? "There's really no silver bullet answer," he says. "The key is to eat more diverse and local products, so insects aren't the ultimate solution - but they certainly could be part of the solution".

While I'm not sure I returned from my insect eating tour of Copenhagen a total convert, in future I certainly wouldn't be shy to sprinkle some cricket powder onto my cereal for a nutrition boost.

But really, the big takeaway was having my culinary horizons broadened, by the very act of questioning the cultural narrative of what we should, or shouldn't, put in our mouths. And if you're tempted to dip your toe into the world of gourmet insects, then from avant-garde ant-cream to zeitgeisty bug snacks, there's no finer place to do it than forward-thinking Copenhagen. visitsdenmark.com