



*Ravioli of giant water beetle with fresh turmeric cream sauce
at Insects in the Backyard in Bangkok.
Photo: Insects in the Backyard*



LEFT
Omnipork Scotch egg, dehydrated veg tart, smoked tomato tartare, homemade vegan cheese with zero-waste pineapple by Tom Burney, the founder of Invisible Kitchen in Hong Kong. Photo: Invisible Kitchen

STORY VICKI WILLIAMS

PLANTING NEW IDEAS

Famous chefs are serving plant-based meat and edible insects as an alternative protein source to promote dining of the future

With an increasing global focus on eating sustainably and environmentally consciously, more diners are turning to alternative, and, in some cases, unusual, protein sources. This allows them to indulge and feel guilt-free about doing so.

"I think one of the things that alternative proteins are tapping into is the idea of eco-indulgence: if there's some ecological benefit or there's some sustainability benefit, people will go ahead and indulge more happily," wrote Tamara Charm, senior expert at McKinsey & Company, in its report "The Future of Food: Meatless?", published in October last year.

This is leading to more fine-dining chefs presenting creative dishes that showcase non-processed alternatives, from completely plant-based meat to more meaty protein options, such as insects.

When it comes to plant-based alternatives, numerous fine-dining and Michelin-star restaurants around the world are celebrating plant proteins as much as traditional animal proteins by presenting vegan and vegetarian tasting menus, including Arcane and Amber in Hong Kong.

Tom Burney is a French-trained and now Hong Kong-based private chef (Hong Kong Personal Chef) and the founder of Invisible Kitchen, a catering company that he says is Hong Kong's greenest. He is taking it one step further.

Take, for example, his vegan pulled "pork" that is made from banana skin.

"I use banana skin that is shredded, pan-fried with spices and then slow cooked sous vide before being served on a taco with jalapeño and vegan cheese as a Mexican-style canapé. The challenge I set myself for this dish and also the smoked salmon alternative was to create vegan versions of classic meat-based canapés that meat-eaters would not notice were vegan ... and to do it from scratch myself not using processed ingredients," says Burney, who incidentally is not a vegetarian.

The smoked "salmon" mentioned above is →



Plant-based cuisine advocate Matthew Kenney's vegan cheese plate. Photo: Courtesy of Matthew Kenney

made from carrot. "Although technically not a protein source but rather a protein substitute, I use steamed, smoked and cooked strips of carrot with smoked salt, oil, peppercorns and dill to serve rolled on cucumber with vegan cream cheese," Burney says.

"A lot of the initial inspiration came from a challenge to design dishes around the theme of food's future and around the conversation of alternative proteins which has boomed recently."

In terms of customer response, he says, "Most are wowed by the creativity and work that has gone into fooling them. The banana pork particularly amazes people as I've taken an everyday ingredient, and a discarded one at that, and made it into something unique and tasty that fools their eyes and taste-buds."

Like Burney, American celebrity chef Matthew Kenney is an advocate of plant-based cuisine. He is the founder of many vegan restaurants.

Burney has also dabbled with insects, making brownies and doughnuts from cricket flour and worm chocolate using dehydrated mealworms.

Edible insects are perhaps the most challenging category for both the chef and the diner. Some noted chefs, though, including René Redzepi and Alex Atala, have been successful in introducing



Shawarma made of celery root from Noma in Copenhagen. Photo: Noma



EDIBLE INSECTS COULD BE CONSIDERED A SUPERFOOD FOR THE FUTURE **SURASIT BUTTAMA**

ABOVE

Noma's plant bee larvae chocolate.
Photo: Noma

ABOVE RIGHT

An Amazonian ant in cachaça created by chef Alex Atala in his Brazilian restaurant D.O.M. Photo: Ricardo D'Angelo

insects, such as ants, into fine dining. Danish chef Redzepi, co-owner of the two-Michelin star Noma in the Copenhagen, Denmark, has introduced insects on to his menu. Brazilian chef Atala has added ants (that are native to Brazil) into his dishes served at his restaurant D.O.M., which has been named one of The World's 50 Best for more than 13 years.

In Asia, the most well-known restaurant to dedicate an entire menu to this alternative protein is Insects in the Backyard in Bangkok, which opened in 2017.

The stunning fine-dining dishes produced at the restaurant are the creations of chef de cuisine, Surasit Buttama. "Thailand is a tropical country with many edible insects, which we have long consumed. At the restaurant, we use grasshoppers, white crickets, copper crickets, mole crickets, silk worms, bamboo caterpillars, water beetles and seasonal insects such as red ants" says Buttama.

Dishes include, ravioli of giant water beetle with fresh turmeric



cream sauce. "We use the female beetle, which has a really good taste. When eating this dish you would not be aware that it is insect-based."

Other dishes include grilled sea bass topped with roasted ants with a white wine and red ant egg sauce. "The roasted ants are tasty, crispy and have a sour taste," he says.

Insects are also found in dishes that are quite common, such as pasta.

"We try to make everyone to think that eating insects is normal. While we serve insects, we take pride in producing food that is beautiful, easy to eat, and delicious," Buttama says.

While the restaurant also serves dishes that feature more traditional proteins, Buttama says the decision to highlight insects is twofold. "Insects are an excellent source of protein that is readily available and many food scholars have called them a pure source of protein as they are free of hormones and growth accelerators, and could be considered a superfood for the future."

It is interesting to note that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that insects form part of the traditional diets of at least two billion people, with more than 1,900 reported edible species. An online article from Michelin Guide Chicago cites Angelina Jolie, Salma Hayek and Zac Efron as using their star power to stimulate discussion about entomophagy (the practice of eating insects). [T](#)