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Escargot cult

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: An ancient Roman household surrounded its snail farm (No. 26 in this illustration) with water and poorly drained soils to contain the livestock. (Public domain)

Monday was National Escargot Day in the United States.

One of the joys of raising kids must be surprising them with the nature of their food. My parents thought I'd be horrified by calamari when, instead of the anonymized rings we got at Red Lobster, a different restaurant delivered it with tentacles. Unfazed, I went on to discover that tentacles are even more delicious. Similarly, I wasn't a kid you could upset by revealing that the chewy nibbles in buttery garlic sauce were yucky snails.

So it's only natural that when I moved to one of our nation's wettest temperate climates, I would think about raising snails. I'm logistically unable to have livestock and am getting lonely, even though the earthworms and pets are good company.

Snails are easy and low impact. I'm surprised more permaculturists are not raising them because they take little care, eat vegetable scraps and can be harvested from the garden as you work on other matters.

I hope your garden work does not entail spraying Roundup or any manufactured poison. According to a Parisian farmer in the excellent documentary "The World According to Monsanto" (available on YouTube), one shouldn't spray the garden snails because "they'll be inedible."

Maybe it shouldn't be surprising that land snail cuisine is common throughout the world. They contain up to 16% protein and have a versatile texture, with a mild flavor similar to oysters and beets. Most land snails are edible, but only a handful are delicacies.

Just ask Marcus Terentius Varro, whose book "Rerum Rusticarum Libri Tres" (Three Books on Husbandry) explained to ancient Romans how to raise snails. Fulvius Lippinus, Western history's first documented snail farmer, fattened them on boiled wine, corn flour and herbs.

I haven't built a Roman cochlearium (pen for breeding snails). Mine were collected by a friend whose garden abounds in them; they snooze under the rims of her garden pots. My cochlearium is a Costco roasted-chicken clamshell provided by the same friend until I can find or make something more suitable. Our wet spring has kept them damp, and I feed them lettuce and celery scraps with sterilized oyster- and egg shells for calcium.

For inspiration, I've wanted to visit Little Grey Farms in Quilcene, one of only two USDA-approved snail farms in our country (the other is in Long Island, New York). It's named after the petit gris, or "little gray" snail beloved in France: *Cornu aspersum*. Most of the snails in my Costco chicken clamshell are these.

Purging snails before eating is important for flavor and safety. "The Household Farmer" on YouTube recommends ground organic hemp seeds, but I've read that oat bran works too. Cooking them thoroughly is critical. Like many of our more conventional meats, they might have parasites.

Shelton's OysterFest gives me hope that snails could feature in our cuisine. I've never seen so many enthusiasts for a food that many consider disgusting.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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