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THE AUSTERITY KITCHEN
BY CHRISTINE BAUMGARTHUBER

Where the alimentary is elementary.



The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearl'd;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven —
All's right with the world!
— Robert Browning, song from
Pippa Passes (1841)

Previously by
CHRISTINE BAUMGARTHUBER

*Coweye Burgers and
Plastic Malts*

*Dinner with Caligula
A Contrary Image of
Steaming Excrement*

Slow Food

By CHRISTINE BAUMGARTHUBER



Of the various impressions made on the English man of letters Joseph Addison during a 1702 visit to a Freiburg monastery, one that lingered longest was the delight its inmates took in eating snails. A thick ragout they would prepare into which they would toss these creatures by the dozen. A great wooden box called an *escargotiere* ensured a reliable supply, its interior lined with greens in which nestled snails often as large as a child’s fist. “I do not remember to have met with any thing of the same in other countries,” Addison wrote in reference to this ingenious contrivance. In these boxes the snails reposed and ate, ate and reposed, until such time as the cook came and shook out a hundred or two of them for supper.

On the supposed uniqueness of the Freiburg monks’ *escargotieres* Addison proves an unreliable source; one could find versions in Brunswick, Silesia, Copenhagen and other locales. Their design varied by region. The people of Barrois used staved in casks covered with netting. The snails of Lorraine endured a somewhat more picturesque imprisonment: a quiet garden corner stuffed with leafy matter and encased in fine trellis-work. The earthier *escargotieres* of Dijon consisted of trenches dug by vine growers. Into these they dumped leaves, then snails, and then more leaves before topping everything off with few spadefuls of earth. Voralbergers, who combined gastronomy with good husbandry, preferred their snails free-range. Children made a game of searching farmers’ fields for the tasty pests, which they plucked from lettuce leaves and cornstalks in a bid to see how many they could contribute to the town *escargotiere*, usually a large plot of land encircled by a moat. These summer games yielded a great harvest: The enclosures contained often some 30,000 snails fattened on cabbage leaves and kept damp by twigs of mountain pine and small clumps of moss.

How snail aficionados, or heliciculturists, cooked their snails varied as much as how they kept them. Some stuffed them with forcemeat, while others steamed them with rice or boiled them in the shell before slathering them with drawn butter and sprinkling them with parsley. Whatever the method, simplicity ruled; snails were typically eaten during Lent. Indeed, a dish of these shelled savories traditionally marked the end of Carnival in Canderan, a town near Bordeaux. What the snail growers didn’t sell they shipped off to convents and monasteries. What the monasteries didn’t eat, they gave to the poor. The “hero who carries his house on his back,” as Hesiod called the snail, could expect life to describe an odyssey that, no matter the length, arrived at the same destination — the plate of some hungry soul.



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Illustration from *The Edible Mollusks of Great Britain and Ireland* (1867)

From *The Edible Mollusks of Great Britain and Ireland*(1867): “Ragoût of Snails — Guisado de Caracoles.— Soak the snails in salt water, then wash them in two or three waters; take thyme, marjoram, bay-leaves, and salt, and fry them with chopped onions in butter or oil; boil the snails, and take them out of their shells, or, if you prefer it, put them, shells and all, into the butter, and fry them. Let them be served as follows: — Soak a piece of bread in vinegar and water, and pound it in a mortar with a clove of garlic, a little pepper, salt, parsley, and mint, chopped very find; add oil drop by drop, turning the pestle all the time till it is quite a smooth paste, and place it round the dish, putting the snails in the centre.”