

Eat Out

THE CITY'S BEST RESTAURANTS, BARS AND CULINARY RICHES

Tastes like chicken . . .

Beef cheeks and lamb's tongue are for wimps! True culinary daredevils are biting into exotic meats like tarantula, rattlesnake and lion. Are you game?

By James Oliver Cury

There is a rattlesnake in my fridge. Along with a llama, a bear and an alligator. They are frozen, of course, and waiting to be cooked in some rich, elegant sauce. Am I out of my mind? Maybe, but I'm not alone. A few years ago, exotic meat was extremely rare in the U.S.; today, it's surprisingly easy to find—in stores, online and even at restaurants.

Always primed for the next culinary thrill, intrepid New Yorkers are eating more animal species than even Noah dreamed of. Now that the organ meats of common beasts like cows and pigs have lost their shock value, an increasing number of restaurants, personal chefs and curious foodies are experimenting with animals you used to need a Kenyan visa just to look at. Things like lions and tigers and bears. Oh my.

Various reasons have been cited for this heightened demand: rising concerns about

beef, increased availability of foreign species (especially online) and the promise of low-fat, low-cholesterol alternatives. But for thrill-hungry gastronomes, the question seems to be not so much *why* as *why not?*

Mirh Huynh and Russ McCurdy, owners of the six-year-old Exoticmeats.com (a.k.a. Seattle's Best), estimate that the national market for such delicacies has grown from \$110 million to more than \$340 million in the past few years. According to Greg Landry of 888eatgame.com, which has been selling its goods to American consumers and restaurants since 1993, "Our sales have grown 100 percent a year for seven straight years," with NYC customers responsible for about 10 percent of his company's total sales. The roster of animal species available from Landry's mail-order company reads like roll call at the Bronx Zoo: alligator, antelope, bear, bison, buffalo, caribou, elk, kangaroo, lion, llama, musk ox, ostrich, turtle, rattlesnake, wild boar, wild goose, zebra and more.

The meat, scary as it may sound, is as safe as any other: Exotic-meat suppliers generally get their goods from farms that have been approved by the USDA, both in the U.S. and abroad. This ensures that no poached animals, no endangered species and no sick animals reach American plates.

One New Yorker who has discovered the joys

of alternative meat is Victoria Crane, a financial writer who lives in the West Village. "I've bought a variety of exotic-game meats from Greg at 888eatgame.com," says Crane, who throws what she jokingly refers to as "endangered-species dinners" at her country house. She's grown fond of the unique flavors—and the reactions of her guests. Past tasting menus at the annual event have included kangaroo, alligator, wild boar and rattlesnake. "I try to do something baked, something broiled, something barbecue, something sautéed," says Crane, who got her



SPIDER-MEN Exotic-meat specialists at the Explorer's Club prepare to fire up some tarantulas.

Snake 'n' bake

Ever been bitten by a snake? Here's your chance to take revenge.

Baked whole rattlesnake

1 ½–2 lbs rattlesnake meat
2 tsp chopped lemongrass
2 tsp olive oil
1 14-oz can chicken broth
1 tsp chili hot sauce (available in Asian markets)
½ cup garlic-herb seasoning (available in most food markets)
1 tsp curry powder
½ tsp black pepper
3 tsp sugar
½ red, ½ yellow and ½ green bell peppers, seeded and sliced into thin strips
1 jalapeño, seeded and diced

1. Combine lemongrass, olive oil, chicken broth, hot sauce, seasoning, curry powder, black pepper, sugar, bell peppers and jalapeño in a large bowl, and marinate the rattlesnake in the mixture for 50 minutes.
2. While meat is marinating, preheat oven to 350 degrees.
3. Transfer the meat to a roasting pan and cover with lid or foil. Bake for 55 minutes, or until tender. Let stand for 3 minutes, then serve with white rice.

Copyright Minh Huynh at Exoticmeats.com

Other restaurants wait for hunting season—October to February—to experiment with seasonal menus. Chef (and hunter) John Philip Greco, who owns Philip Marie (569 Hudson St at W 11th St, 212-242-6200), dubs his menu “the wildest game in town.” The five-course extravaganza might include buffalo carpaccio and rack of antelope or loin of elk. Greco says he likes serving oddball meats because they tend to have a lower fat and cholesterol content than beef or pork, and they usually contain no growth hormones or steroids.

For 15 consecutive years, Henry's End (44 Henry St at Cranberry St, Brooklyn Heights, 718-834-1776) has hosted an annual game festival during hunting season. According to Mark Lahm, owner and executive chef, the restaurant keeps seven or eight items on the menu during the season, including antelope au poivre, herb-crusted elk chops and buffalo ravioli. A few of these dishes survive all year, such as the New Orleans-style turtle soup. Lahm says he doesn't include many super-exotics like lion, because they tend to be dry and gamey, and they require more marinating than other meats; plus, they aren't as readily

available and are comparatively expensive. He says that lion meat, for instance, resembles a gamey version of dark turkey meat and costs \$36.95 per pound at 888eatgame.com. “It wasn't worth the end results,” Lahm explains, adding that people who are looking to eat game tend, paradoxically, to want meat that doesn't really taste gamey.

Perhaps the most adventurous palates can be found at the Explorer's Club (www.explorers.org), which was established in 1904 and has hosted exotic, invitation-only dinners every March since the 1950s. (To join the club, you need to be sponsored by two of its members). The group held its 97th annual event this year at the Waldorf-Astoria; among the 1,200 guests were Neil Armstrong and Walter Cronkite, according to executive director Stephen D. Nagiewicz. The black-tie dinner featured whole alligators, grasshoppers, fried tarantulas and sautéed scorpions. In previous years, the club has served mealworms, crickets, Rocky Mountain Oysters (calf, sheep or boar testicles), buffalo, kangaroo, bear steaks, ostrich and, awful as it sounds, Central Park squirrel (actually a farm-raised version).

For some people, exotic game may not be so exotic after all. “It's all regional,” says Richard Weyhrauch at the Golden Egg (www.the-golden-egg.com), an online gourmet market that sells some unusual meats along with more conventional foods. “We like what we grew up with.” For example, alligator, which might sound outlandish to New Yorkers, is actually a Cajun specialty, while in Ecuador, a guinea pig-like animal known as *cuy* is a popular dish. Both of these meats are available in NYC restaurants. Sushi Samba (245 Park Ave South between 19th and 20th Sts, 212-475-9377), for example, serves an Alligator Beast Roll (alligator tempura inside a roll). And several Ecuadorian restaurants in Brooklyn and Queens, like Salinas (499 Fifth Avenue at 12th St, Park Slope, Brooklyn, 718-788-9263), offer *cuy*, which is served whole and tastes, yes, like dark chicken meat.

Chances are, rattlesnake—which Southwesterners sometimes use to make chili—won't be the next big thing at New York restaurants. But if you ever do see it on the menu, give it a try: The stuff's not bad. I finally mustered the nerve to take it out of my freezer and cook it. When served on the bone, as I prepared it, the meat comes off in stringy strands that follow the contours of the snake's length—like string cheese. While the eel-like body may gross you out, the snake meat itself is very appealing, tasting somewhat like frogs' legs or alligator—oh, hell, it tastes like chicken.



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