



SARL HENRI MAIRE
en Bourgogne depuis 1958

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The snail picks up the pace

By Rick Nichols
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The marketing of the snail - and more precisely, the *helix pomatia linne*, the creme de la creme of snails - requires an untypical array of talents, not the least of which is a certain agility and inventiveness with language.

In this regard, Douglas Dussault, also known as the Snailman, and the exclusive U.S. distributor of Henri Maire's Wild Burgundy Snails, is extremely well matched: Lowly snails wear the mantle of "land lobsters" in his vernacular; his Potironne Co. champs are "the Kobe beef of snails."

One might be inclined to dismiss this as so much blarney. And to be honest, I was disposed to give the man short shrift. But there is an infectious charm about Dussault, born partly of his own good humor and willingness to abide my snail jokes. It is buttressed by his tenure in a number of kitchens and his solid training: He even did time, as a cooking student, at Taillevent, the legendary Parisian dining destination.

There is also the matter of his client - the snail itself, a niche curiosity suddenly enjoying one of its occasional revivals. (As steak prices soar, might it assert its will as an alternative "free-range," as Dussault calls it, protein? The ultimate slider? This year's sleeper?)

They're invading the Big Apple: New York's Varietal is serving them in a deconstructed lasagna. But Philadelphia is one of Dussault's hottest markets: Matyson carries his snails, along with Savona and Lacroix, Marigold Kitchen and Overtures. On North Broad, Marc Vetri's new Osteria sprinkles them on its incomparable wood-oven pizza.



DAVID SWANSON / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Escargot at Le Bec-Fin for National Escargot Day, May 24, hailing "the true Slow Food."



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So it came to pass that on May 24, Dussault stopped by the city (from his home in Texas), having prevailed upon Georges Perrier's Le Bec-Fin to host an eight-course tasting menu to commemorate National Escargot Day.

To discuss the snail with Dussault is to experience the rush of first hearing the miraculous news about ostrich ("the other red meat") and, later, buffalo, which seemed capable of effortlessly doing everything beef could do, but without the need for a Lipitor chaser. Nutrition facts for snails: They deliver half the protein of broiled salmon or raw filet mignon at 20 percent of the calories, and only a tiny fraction of the saturated fat.

Dussault is polished to a bit of a glow this evening, speaking fluent French to the waitstaff. "I like the smiles I'm seeing," he says, surveying the elegantly set tables. There's a wry flavor of John Lithgow about his features.

The escargot de Bourgogne - which confines itself to Europe - is as uncompromisingly natural and green as protein gets. Hunting season is limited to May, protecting against overharvesting. (Specially trained bands of Gypsies, Dussault says, mow meadows, then set up camp and harvest the snails at dawn when they crawl up the grass shoots to drink the morning dew.) They are handled with care, stored in crates allowing roaming room: "They're the true Slow Food," Dussault says, "sustainable, no methane emissions, wild, organic [although not certified as such]. Snails are the future!"

The handling and poaching in court bouillon by Henri Maire add to their cost, which can amount to a nickel more a snail over competitors, including the so-called *petit gris*. But look at the variety of sizes (up to "giant," which indeed is nickel-sized) of his product, Dussault says, not long before a third course of the biggies lands on the table - chef Pierre Calmels' robust, meaty (but not rubbery) snails grilled on a vanilla-bean skewer. (Next up, snails "Surf & Turf," involving a tangle of slivered conch over land snails in bordelaise sauce. And after that, grouper propped over a tangy snail Bolognese. Then, an exquisite saddle of lamb stuffed with snail persillade, the snails assigned the role of diced mushrooms.)

At a table nearby, a waiter suggests the snails might be thought of as "terrestrial mollusks," a term that pricks Dussault's ears up.



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Escargot at Le Bec-Fin, in an eight-course tasting menu saluting National Escargot Day.