



# FOLLOW THE SNAIL TRAIL



Shell shock: chef Phil Fanning (above right) at Paris House restaurant in Bedfordshire cooks with snails and their eggs from Aylesbury Escargots (above left) DAVID SANDISON

Their critics claim the only nice thing about snails is the parsley and garlic butter they're doused in, the rest being rubber. Gardeners who this summer have seen their gardens decimated by munching molluscs may also have trouble stomaching them – except perhaps as some sort of gruesome gastronomic revenge. We Brits have tended to be a bit squeamish about snails, preferring to leave them, along with frogs' legs, to the French. Stretch back through history, though, and you discover that the Romans were breeding snails in Britain in snaileries, fattening them on wine and bran, then devouring them with relish. Pliny apparently liked nothing more than grilled snails as a pre-prandial snack. In medieval Britain snails were devoured on meat-free Fridays as the Catholic Church considered them "wall fish". Today, it seems, we're befriending the snail again. Farms are producing them commercially to satisfy demand from a growing number of British chefs. Leading the way was Heston Blumenthal at the Fat Duck, whose snail porridge has become a classic. Others now serving them include David Everitt-Matthias at Le Champignon Sauvage, Alan Murchison at L'Ortolan, and Phil Fanning at Paris House. At the Bridge House Hotel in Beaminstor Steve Pielez has become famous for his all-day snail breakfast.

We've long been content to leave les escargots to the French. But now the molluscs – and their edible eggs – are slithering on to British menus. **By Claire Hargreaves**

"Twenty-five years ago, when we first opened, we couldn't have put snails on the menu. People simply weren't ready," David Everitt-Matthias says. "Now, customers have grown up with us, and got used to trying things that are slightly different. So they're willing to give snails a go." Known for foraging for many of the ingredients used in his two-Michelin-starred Cheltenham restaurant, David collects nearly half of his snails in the wild (when his dog doesn't get them first). He uses them for flavour and texture in his ground-elder and snail risotto, or makes them into fritters to top balls of chicken mousse served as nibbles. "As the nibbles are free of charge, people try them. Maybe next time, they'll order snails as one of their dishes." Phil Fanning loves snails' earthiness. "In the past, we tended to hide their taste with parsley and garlic," he says. "So we never experienced their wonderful earthiness, rather like the earthiness you get with beef or beetroot. Snails used in restaurants used to be tinned, which don't have half the flavour. As a result they tended to be sidekicks rather than the central focus of a dish." Inside the kitchen at Paris House, a half-timbered gem on the Duke of Bedford's estate in Woburn, I watch Phil assemble a starter of beef carpaccio and braised Aylesbury snails, confit egg yolk, and crispy shallots, which he'll be offering

**“THE EARTHY FLAVOUR OF SNAILS' EGGS IS UNIQUE – BETTER THAN CAVIAR”**

on the à la carte menu this evening. The dish is topped with a delicacy that some might find a garnish too far: snails' eggs, resembling dainty white pearls. Known as "snail caviar", they have a price tag to match – a kilo will set you back around £1,300 – which is probably why until now only chefs such as Ferran Adria at El Bulli (now closed) have used them. "A lady called Sophie turned up at the kitchen door with some eggs in a jar," smiles Phil. "I'd never heard of them. I'd seen the tiny ping-pong balls in the garden but not realised what they were. I tried a number of curing methods and recipes and eventually found ways of using them that worked. Their earthy, 'forestry' flavour is unique – if anything, they taste better than the snail meat. They're far superior to caviar, which can often just be fishy goo." Phil often uses the snail eggs to enhance the meat, and bring out its flavour. "We do braised beef with snails and their eggs, for instance, using the eggs almost as seasoning."

I nip to nearby Aylesbury, where Sophie Wharton produces both escargots (the palatable name for snails) and "pearls" (the palatable name for the eggs) in her back garden. They're all *Helix aspersa* – garden snails to you and me – which Sophie has been fascinated with since childhood. "I used to collect them, wrap them in tissue paper and keep them in my pockets. Once, they ended up in the washing machine. Mum wasn't amused," she laughs. The commercial enterprise began two years ago when, after a visit to a snail farm, Sophie ordered 70 snails by post to eat. "When they arrived, they'd eaten all the recipes inside and were starting on the packaging. They were ravenous," she recalls. "We decided not to eat them, and instead found a box to put them in. We'd no idea what to feed them – the lady who'd sold them advised milk. We also tried vegetables, and spaghetti, which they loved." "Eventually, my husband, Mike, bought some living salads at Aldi. The snails went mad, laid hundreds of eggs in the soil and 21 days later they all hatched out. It was bedlam – we had mums and dads in the sitting room and babies on the kitchen table. At Christmas, we moved them all into the conservatory. Finally, they took over

Mike's tool shed in the garden and soon we built another, and then a polytunnel." In time, Sophie learnt how to process the eggs, making her the only producer of fresh snail caviar in Britain, and probably in Europe, too. After harvesting them from their pots of soil, Sophie uses a fine-tipped paintbrush and magnifier to select the best ones, then cures them so they can be eaten raw. Snails to be sold for meat are purged, then slowly braised in Sophie's kitchen. Both are now sold at Fortnum & Mason. Not only are snails "enormous fun" (take it from Sophie) but they have an awesome sex life, too – which I had the dubious privilege of witnessing. Snails are hermaphrodites so can all mate. A snail signals that it fancies another by firing hard, sharp, calcareous "love darts" at it. Once they've got it together, one whips out its penis, kept just below its eye like the inverted finger of a glove, and joins it with its mate's organ for an exchange of semen that can take up to six action-packed hours. One snail then burrows into the earth and lays around a hundred eggs. Each egg hatches into a snail that is ready for the pot within around four months – unless, of course, some discerning gastronome nabs them first. For more information, see [aylesbury-escargots.co.uk](http://aylesbury-escargots.co.uk) or [parishouse.co.uk](http://parishouse.co.uk)

## WHO'S DOING WHAT WITH SNAILS

With his **snail porridge** at the Fat Duck, Heston Blumenthal is the chef who got snails slithering back onto the menu. Porridge oats are topped with a delicious mixture of ham, mushrooms, parsley, garlic and sautéed snails.

Marcus Wareing at his eponymous London restaurant marries **Dorset snails** with Galloway beef fillet, horseradish and celery.

Gordon Ramsay makes a fricassée of **snails with spinach**, baby artichokes, mushrooms, pancetta and Jerusalem artichoke puree.

David Everitt-Matthias, at the Champignon Sauvage in Cheltenham, does a ground-elder and **snail risotto**, as well as a surf-and-turf mix of snails with winkles and whelks.

Allan Pickett, at Plateau in Canary Wharf, serves English parsley risotto with **sautéed garlic butter snails** and red wine jus.

Jez Barfoot and Matt Davey at The Ticked Pig in Wimborne make a **snail pizza** with Dorset snails, wood blewits, garlic and parsley.

Steve Pielez offers an **all-day snail breakfast** of garlic snails and the usual fried breakfast at the Bridge House Hotel in Beaminstor, Dorset.



## SNAILS' EGGS, APPLE AND BEETROOT BLINI

By Sophie Wharton

### Makes 24

**Blini**  
150g milk  
8g fresh yeast  
75g buckwheat flour  
50g plain flour  
1 egg yolk  
150g egg white

### Salad

1 small baked beetroot, finely diced  
1 small Granny Smith apple, finely diced  
25g escargot pearls  
1 teaspoon thyme leaves  
1 tablespoon vinaigrette  
Maldon sea salt to taste

Mix all blini ingredients together with a whisk and leave covered in the fridge overnight. Spoon small dots of the batter into a medium-hot frying pan with a tiny bit of oil, cook until golden on both sides. Mix salad ingredients (apart from pearls) together and spoon a generous helping onto a blini. Top with a few pearls.



**What's for supper?**  
Hot-smoked salmon, beetroot salad and horseradish crème fraîche, by Raymond Blanc

### INGREDIENTS TO SERVE 4

120g organic, line-caught hot-smoked salmon

#### For the beetroot salad

480g mixed small beetroot (about 4), washed and trimmed  
Half a shallot, peeled and finely chopped  
2 teaspoons aged balsamic vinegar (at least eight years old)  
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
1 tablespoon water  
2 pinches of sea salt  
2 pinches of freshly ground black pepper

#### For the dressing

100g crème fraîche  
1 teaspoon finely grated fresh horseradish  
2 pinches of sea salt  
Pinch of cayenne pepper  
Squeeze of lemon juice

#### For the garnish

A few dill sprigs

This is a simple dish that combines some interesting autumnal flavours and textures. Organic, line-caught salmon is expensive but it is definitely worth it. Today we have access to a large, exciting range of beetroot varieties, ranging from ruby red to yellow and white. My best beetroot experience was a huge root – about half a kilo. Was it French, Italian or English? I don't remember, but it was just divine. The beetroot can be cooked ahead and the salad prepared up to a few hours in advance. Put the beetroot (try Candy, Bull's Blood and Golden) into a large saucepan, add enough cold water to cover and bring to the boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for about 1 hour until tender. Drain and leave to cool slightly, then peel. Cut the beetroot into even-sized wedges and toss in a bowl with the remaining salad ingredients. Taste and adjust the seasoning if necessary. To make the dressing, in a bowl, mix all the ingredients together until evenly combined. Taste and adjust the seasoning if necessary. To serve, divide the beetroot salad among individual bowls. Break the salmon into generous flakes and scatter on top. Spoon the horseradish crème fraîche over and garnish with dill.

Taken from 'Kitchen Secrets' by Raymond Blanc (Bloomsbury, £16.99). Photograph by Jean Cazals