

BUG BUFFET

Coconut 'with a crunch' and other dishes served up at annual MSU event



MIKE GREENER/CHRONICLE

Nick McAllister, 4, of Hot Springs, explains to his grandfather on the phone what bugs taste like, while his sister Clarie, 10, snacks on a fried mealworm during the Montana State University Bug Buffet at the Plant Growth Center on Friday afternoon. The McAllister family drove 4 1/2 hours to attend the event for a 4-H entomology project and spent the afternoon snacking on an assortment of edible insects.

By RACHEL HERGETT
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In Disney's "The Lion King," a young Simba is introduced to life in the jungle, including eating bugs.

"Ew, gross," is his initial, wincing reaction.

That look was reflected on the faces of many in the crowd at the 24th annual bug buffet Friday afternoon at Montana State University's Plant Growth Center.

Kallie Mathers said she saw the grimace on most faces right before trying their first bite.

"It's that moment when they're picturing it instead of tasting it," she said.

Mathers, a human resources employee at the university, said her plan of attack for lemon basil fritters with wax moth larvae in the batter — and protruding from the finished product — was to just stick the whole thing into her mouth.

"I had a tissue just in case," she said.

She didn't use the tissue, saying the fritters were surprisingly good, with a nice pop of basil. It was, however, hard to get past the idea of what she was eating.

"I think of worms as slimy invaders of good things like fruit," she said.

Now, having learned about the nutritional value of food insects, Mathers may be a convert.

"Had we grown up eating these things it probably would have been better for us," she said.

Susan Kelly went straight for the fried bugs and the dessert, where brownies were fortified with sautéed meal worms and dream bars included a layer of buffalo worms.

"It's coconut texture with a crunch," Kelly said of her dream bar. "It's really good."

Kelly, who runs outreach programs with the university, said it's not the first time she has come to one of entomologist Florence Dunkel's buffets.

More BUFFET | A8

Buffet/from A1

"She's a mastermind," Kelly said. "I come every year."

The bug buffet goes along with the curriculum in two of Dunkel's classes, "The Issues of Insects and Human Societies" and "Health, Poverty and Agriculture."

Dunkel said Western cultures — North Americans and Europeans — are the only ones that don't include insects as part of their diet.

"I feel it's my responsibility to introduce other cultures to students," she said.

Obie Pressman, a regional representative for the Peace Corps, was also in attendance.

"If you get out into the rest of the world, bugs are going to be part of the menu," he said.

While in Namibia, he spent three days eating mopane worms, which are really caterpillars of the emperor

moth and contain up to 17 times the amount of iron as beef.

A delicacy in southern Africa, mopane look a bit like the wax moth larvae, only they are the size of a roll of nickels.

"They're crazy about them," said Pressman, who first tried them in the bush, where a family fed him mopane for breakfast, lunch and dinner for three days straight. He's also tried crickets in Mexico, spiders in Cambodia and dragonflies in Mali.

None of those were on Friday's menu, but it did include a cricket stir fry and quesadillas with tenebrio, a beetle larvae.

The insects, Dunkel said, are like mushrooms, needing to be cooked with something.

"They're pretty bland," she said.

They're cooked a variety of different ways, some of which cover them up, and some of which highlight the insects' peculiar flavors.

"It's like us with meat," Pressman explained. "Sometimes we want a steak straight up, or a piece of chicken, or we take a piece of chicken and bread it and deep fry it and then eat each piece with a bunch of sauce. It's not that we don't like the chicken."

The main idea is that insects are not strange foods, many of us only view them that way because we haven't experienced eating them.

"There are plenty of people in this world that would choose to eat insects over beef or chicken," Pressman said.

Though they may not go that far, after they had tried the dishes and learned about the nutritional benefits, some of the attendees were certainly fans of edible insects.

"I think everyone should eat bugs," Kelly said. "What the heck?"

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