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Nothing livens up a wild party like serving things you normally kill in the wild.

The Explorers Club and Redwood Creek Wines recently hosted a get-together at the Notebaert Nature Museum in Lincoln Park. The Taste of Adventure dinner honored the survivor's creed of the Explorers Club, which turned 100 this year. The club was first to the North and South Poles and on Mount Everest.

This explains why guests were dining on hors d'oeuvres such as North American crickets served with hot pepper jelly and cream cheese on a pastry cup and sauteed rosemary rattlesnake cakes. Such appetizers are low in carbohydrates and high in protein, offering essential survival needs for world explorers. That's why you never see a fat wayfarer.

Normally the cat has my tongue at these kind of affairs, but here I was a regular gadfly. Women couldn't stop telling me about orchids dipped in Champagne batter and the antelope pastrami on a small piece of toast.

"I did not like the scorpions at all," said reveler Barbara Marino of Chicago. "Its little legs got stuck in my teeth. It was nasty." Maria Hummel is a photography student at Columbia College. She compared the orchids to popcorn. "They're good for you," she said. "Until you deep fry them." Now this is stuff you don't hear at the typical holiday office party.

Gene Rurka was on hand to make sense of it all.

Rurka, 57, is exotic foods chairman of the Explorers Club, based in New York City. He holds a master's degree in biology and physical science and owns and operates a 30-acre farm in Somerset, N.J., raising cattle, Arabian horses and farm livestock. The farm has a butcher facility. Rurka is a rare first-generation farmer. "I eat a lot," he said. "I eat meat three times a day, seven days a week. I'm not going to take a chance buying it from the store."

I met Rurka as I reached for a 3-inch long scorpion served atop a dollop of herb cheese resting in endive. The appetizer was paired with a lemongrass-tinged Redwood Creek 2003 Sauvignon Blanc that refreshed my palate.

Attractive as the appetizers were, I remembered that scorpions have poisonous stings at the tip of their tails. Now, I get paid to ask tough questions. So, as I held the scorpion with its stinger at my mouth, my first question was, "Is this safe?"

Rurka answered, "If you're allergic to these things, maybe you should stick to the rosebuds."

How would I know if I'm allergic to scorpion?

Rurka responded, "When we find you on the floor."

He did not smile. "People spend a lot of money buying puffer fish," Rurka continued. "And they know about 12 people a year die from it. But the scorpion is simply an appetizer. You might need to do some things with it, like drink more wine or have more serious alcohol. But really, nothing is going to happen. We've heated them so the sacks where toxins are held are neutralized. Some people do like to bite off the stinger on the tail and spit that out. Being more traditionalist, we keep that the way it is."

The scorpion has an exoskeleton (or armor), which accounted for its crunchy texture. The herb cheese masked the pureness of flavor.

My favorite appetizer was the bite-size rattlesnake cakes. I attributed their spicy flavor to the Tabasco pepper sauce, ground pepper and Dijon mustard in the dish. "They taste like Bob Evans sausages," said Katie Hawkey, an administrator at Victory Gardens Theater. By coincidence, I wore my rattlesnake cowboy boots to the affair. I ate them when I got home.

The Taste of Adventure was free, but reservations were limited to 100 guests. Shawn Dooley is a Chicago bricklayer who was one of the few in attendance who had previously tasted exotica. He's eaten alligator, cicadas, elk, frog legs and goat. He's dying to try fried caterpillars. "The scorpion had a nice meat flavor and it was crunchy," Dooley said. "Someone mentioned it might have a numbing effect to your mouth, but I didn't feel it. I was looking forward to that. My favorite was the Cajun-style, deep-fried alligator. It had a chewy taste to it. I'm an oral creature, I guess. I like the earthy feel."

Rurka pointed out, "We're not out there plundering in the wild. We're not looking in holes and devastating nature in search of rattlesnake. We're offered a lot of other things we don't touch." Large tarantulas imported from Vietnam were on display, although not served to the public due to budgetary constraints.

"This is an expensive thing to play with," Rurka said. "And I'm against the fear factor of this. But the reality of serving people, getting numbers, quality and to ensure there's no pesticides or insecticides makes it all difficult. You have to grow everything fast today to get the best dollar value. Things are going to be adulterated with hormones. You cannot raise a cow in the time it takes a normal on-the-grass situation. I raise cattle. That being said, these don't have chemicals. Roses are so cheap -- in New York you can get them for \$12 a dozen -- but they're fed with fertilizer and maybe sprayed for insects."

Rurka looked down at the orchids and rosebuds with orange honey dipping sauce and said, "These don't have that. To ensure quality, it took a long time to find somebody who would raise them who guaranteed there were no chemicals of any type. Of course you pay a premium for that."

Large crickets are raised specifically for market, certified for cleanliness. Caribou and elk are farm raised in New Zealand. The edible orchids were flown in from Hawaii on the morning of the Taste of Adventure event.

Redwood Creek winemaker Cal Dennison told guests about appropriate pairings next time they might serve crickets at a party. "The cricket is a little meaty and nutty," Dennison said. "And the 2002 Pinot Noir is a refreshing light red wine that has nice raspberry characters. It's about the structure and fruitiness of the wine. We pair the rattlesnake with the 2003 Chardonnay. The sauteed rattlesnake is like a white meat, so we want to pair it with a wine that can hold up to the rattlesnake. The Chardonnay has a nice hint of oak, tropical flavors and very full-bodied." Personally, I would rather chase rattlesnake with a shot of tequila.

The Explorers Club president, Richard Wiese (pronounced wheese), spoke to the group. In 2003 he soloed the active volcano Oldonyo Lengai in Tanzania for geological sampling and was part of a conservation team that radio-collared jaguars in Mexico. Wiese earned a bachelor of science in geology and biology from Brown University, studied applied physiology at Columbia University and completed the USDA graduate program in meteorology. Wiese is no shrinking violet.

"I find a direct correlation between someone's passion for different types of food and wine and passion as a person," he said in an interview. "The difference between someone who goes on the downbeat 'Ooh, what's that?' And the person who goes on the upbeat 'Ooh! What's that!' speaks volumes about them. This is a celebration of the call of the wild."

But even Wiese admitted to be a little "tarantula intolerant."

He explained, "Today I was on the local Fox morning show. Co-anchor Tamron Hall stuffed her face with a tarantula, 30 mealworms and about four scorpions. I told her, 'Go easy,' because sometimes people have a bit of an allergic reaction. The tarantula is what does it. She got a little numb in her nose and her lips. It usually lasts for a few hours. People always want to take pictures of me eating tarantulas. They're hairy little things. One time I ate five of them and as I was lecturing I could feel them in my throat."

Rurka joined The Explorers Club due to his work as chairman of the Safari Club International Foundation's Humanitarian Services Program. He has devoted much of his life to humanitarian relief efforts for indigenous people in remote areas of

Africa, South America and Eastern Europe. Since he was inducted into The Explorers Club in 1990, Rurka noticed the group moving away from truly exotic food.

"It is no fault of the explorers," he said. "The day of going out in the jungle and living off the land is not cost effective. So you do everything prior to the exploration. I just try to revisit what it was like. Close your eyes and dream: You just met this tribe of people you can't communicate with. They're doing gyrations, you don't know if you're going to be in the pot or not. They invite you to eat and all of a sudden you see this eyeball coming at you. You have two choices; not to eat that, or take that experience knowing your life might be on the line."

Rurka was referencing The Explorers Club annual dinner held for 800 guests at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City. Heated and sauteed eyeballs from calves and sheep were served at this year's affair. Some were even pickled and used in Explorer Martinis, which gives new meaning to the term, 'Here's looking at you.' "

Rurka said, "When we brought in eyeballs, people said, 'That's grotesque!' Other people said, 'I haven't experienced that in 40 years.' We get all kinds. We had one lady who lived off tarantulas 53 years ago for months as part of a graduate course in South America. This is what an adventure was. They explorers obviously didn't make pate, but the idea of caribou was a staple. They did something with whale and seal. We're not going to touch that. Insects are still very big. Someone today is going to live one more day off of that as a protein source and we laugh at that.

"When we did mealworms at the Waldorf, I take it very seriously not to offend those working in the kitchen. When people saw the worms, some giggled. That's fine. There were three kitchen workers in particular who turned away. I said, 'Are you OK, what happened?' One said, 'My family's living on that today.' This was only March of 2004. If more people opened their mind up to exotics, I think you'd have more tolerance in the world."