

In the kitchen



A gastronomic gastropod slithers its way into **Paola Westbeek's** affections

Snails certainly make some people cringe. I must admit, I was quite apprehensive when I first tried them. We were in a restaurant in Chablis, the town known for the crisp white wines that happen to complement this specialty so exceptionally well.

In a surge of bravery, I ordered *'escargots à la bourguignonne'*, and before I could change my mind, six aromatic snails sizzling in little pools of parsleyed, garlicky butter were placed in front of me.

After a few clumsy attempts with those awkward tongs and a tiny two-pronged fork, I extracted the first one from its pretty shell and popped it into my mouth. It was fleshy, earthy and so delicious that I greedily started prying out the next one. Soon, all the shells were empty, and every last drop of melted butter had been absorbed by crusty baguette.

I've consumed my fair share of *escargots* since then, yet only a tiny percentage of these gastronomic gastropods were truly French in origin. People have feasted on snails since prehistoric times, but the Romans were the first to cultivate them. They enjoyed them for dessert, fried and flavoured with honey and wine. In the Middle Ages, snails were only eaten during famine or Lent.

It wasn't until the 19th century that they became a delicacy in the hands of the 'king of cooks and cook of kings', Marie-Antoine Carême. He created the classic preparation (in seasoned butter) for a dinner hosted by Talleyrand in 1814 in honour of Alexander I of Russia. The



czar loved them so much that he boasted to everyone about Carême's fantastic *'escargots de Bourgogne'*. Snails became so popular and were harvested so intensely that they almost disappeared from Burgundy in the 1970s. A law was passed in 1979 prohibiting wild harvesting between 1 April and 30 June, the breeding season.

Nowadays, most snails served in French restaurants come from Poland, Hungary, Romania and Ukraine. The French get their imported snails canned from the supermarket as preparing them fresh requires skill, patience and a lack of squeamishness. Before being boiled alive in a fragrant *court bouillon*, the snails must be starved and purged for a few weeks.

No matter where they're from, snails are especially delicious in a garlic cream sauce. Soften two shallots and four finely chopped garlic cloves in 50g of butter. Increase the heat, add four dozen snails and two glasses of white wine. Simmer for eight minutes, until reduced by half. Swirl in a large glass of heavy cream and season well with salt and pepper. Divide the snails over four small *cocottes*, garnish with parsley and serve with bread.

serve with...

An elegant white with a fresh acidity such as a Chablis will pair well with *escargots* in garlic and parsley butter or garlic cream sauce.

