

**Millennial Entrepreneurs Think Americans Should Eat More Bugs -- WSJ**

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Snack-maker says whole-roasted crickets have nutritional and ecological benefits

By Annie Gasparro

It's difficult to imagine that lobsters were once considered a garbage species, a cheap source of scrap food. In the 1950s, however, they became luxury menu items.

Mohammed Ashour, the chief executive of a Texas company called Aspire Food Group, thinks he has identified the subject of America's next great culinary reversal. He believes the day is coming when the nation's snacking masses will open their kitchen cabinets and reach for a \$2.99 bag of insects -- specifically whole-roasted crickets, which Aspire now manufactures in five flavors including Texas BBQ, sea salt & vinegar and sour cream & onion.

To help **Americans** overcome the taboo of eating **bugs**, the 30-year-old entrepreneur decided not to put the word "crickets" on the front of the bag, but to call the snacks Aketta, short for Acheta domesticus -- the species of cricket contained within. "Insects are gross," Mr. Ashour explains. "But what we farm are not insects because they are not in the wild."

Eating insects, a practice known as entomophagy, is described as far back as the Old Testament. Including such delicacies as fried locusts in Thailand, grasshoppers in Mexico and water **bugs** in China, some two billion people regularly partake, many of whom, according to the United Nations, consider insects a crucial source of nutrients. The global edible insect market was valued at \$424 million last year, and is expected to reach \$723 million by 2024, according to Persistence Market Research. The U.N. has studied the role insects could play in global food needs.

In the U.S., munching on small invertebrates with compound eyes, three-part bodies and three pairs of jointed legs is an adventurous choice. It is also nutritionally and ecologically responsible -- a marketing profile that seems to place it squarely in the sweet spot for millennials. A label on Mr. Ashour's packages touts them as "protein packed sustainable snacks." A serving has 150 calories and 13 grams of protein.

Mr. Ashour says his belief that insects, which can be raised by the billions, might help stave off a global food shortage led him to abandon plans to become a doctor. "I'm saving more lives in a far more meaningful way with a farther global reach than if I'd become a physician," he says. "A physician serves a community. This is geographically boundless."

It remains to be seen whether **Americans** will set aside staples like popcorn, peanuts and energy bars for half-inch arthropods whose dead, black, beady eyes are staring back at them.

Michael Pfeifer, 48, recently braved a bag of Aketta's crickets. He said that while they weren't "the most attractive hors d'oeuvres," they weren't bad. "There isn't much taste, but there is a light crunch."

Jenna Salerno, a 27-year-old human resources account manager in Chicago, said she's all about eating more healthy protein. But, she added, "I'd probably have to start out slow with the powder so I don't see an actual bug going into my mouth."

"It might need a French name, like escargot," suggests Manny Picciola, a consumer products analyst at L.E.K. Consulting. "Or it needs some kind of Dr. Oz endorsement, or a declarative statement that this would cure Alzheimer's or something. Then, I **think** it's got a chance."

Aspire was born after Mr. Ashour and his team won a \$1 million business-school challenge aimed at addressing global food insecurity. The team, which includes Chief Operating Officer Gabe Mott, traveled the world from Ghana to Mexico, dropping to their hands and knees to study soil full of thousands of tiny cricket eggs. They took over an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Austin and turned it into an indoor cricket farm where cardboard-box cricket condominiums are stacked high.

Aspire decided to focus on crickets because they are easier to raise than grasshoppers -- which need more space to jump around -- and are more appealing than say, mealworms or scorpions.

Finding the most humane way to nurture crickets during their weekslong lives proved immensely difficult, Mr. Ashour says. If the temperature or other factors aren't just right, anywhere from 10% to 90% of a batch will die before harvest. When they are just tiny "pinheads," a single drop of water can kill hundreds of them. With the help of insect scientists, Aspire once tried increasing the protein in the crickets' food by 20%, but they all croaked.

Once the crickets are older and chirping, it can get crowded in the open boxes, causing the insects to fight over resources like water and the organic corn feed Aspire provides them, so the farm has to be careful not to put too many in each box. But, says Mr. Mott: "They have everything they need; most don't feel the urge to get out."

The harvest involves putting the crickets into a freezer, inducing what the company calls a peaceful death. Then, they roast the crickets with canola oil and extra virgin olive oil, adding seasonings such as chili peppers or garlic powder.

Mr. Ashour has been tinkering with various new strategies to help boost sales. He hired a Le Cordon Bleu chef to create recipes, and is considering, for people who don't enjoy the crunching sensation, developing a line of cricket jerky. Aketta packages have a stylized image of an insect on them, but the word cricket appears only in small type in the ingredients list. "We don't **eat** cow and pig," he explains, "we **eat** beef and pork."

Aspire also sells cricket excrement as fertilizer. Cricket exoskeletons, which they shed when they reach adulthood, can be used in animal feed, and alternative food companies buy the ground-up crickets to mix with flour to make specialty cookies, crackers and protein bars. Mr. Ashour says he is proud of his company's "ability to pulverize crickets into a taste-neutral, smell-favorable product."

Sales of cricket products are still minuscule in the U.S., but investors and foundations, including those of Bill Gates and Bill Clinton, seem to have their antennae up. They are forking over tens of millions of dollars to several startups, betting **Americans** will come around to the alternative source of protein, according to the foundations and investors. Lifestyle-guru Tim Ferriss, an investor in cricket-based protein bars, is optimistic **Americans** will come around. "Crickets are just like lobster but easier to clean," he says.

Mr. Ashour recalls being nervous about eating his first cricket -- it was mixed in a dish with white chocolate, which, he joked, turned out to be more offensive tasting than the insect flavor. Mr. Mott, who was a vegetarian, says he found it especially hard to overcome the psychological barriers. Now, he says, he eats cricket curry.

"I have never had a single investor of any caliber say 'This is crazy. Get the hell out of here,'" Mr. Ashour says.

The worst he has heard, he adds, is that he's ahead of his time.

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