



## Snail caviar on the Seine

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Chef Jacques Pourcel uses snail caviar to finish his dish of courgette flowers, yoghurt and summer fruits

Gastronomy by the Seine is an eclectic new festival located on two big moored river barges in Paris, which this month attracted some 300 chefs and suppliers from Europe and the US.

The relentless pouring rain made on-board conditions slippery but the audience appeared to be enjoying themselves – in other exhibitions the chef always produces just one dish while those watching just get hungrier. Not here. At 10.30am, the attentive waiters were handing round trays of chocolate lipstick as Dominique Persoone displayed his interpretation of la dame blanche, a classic Belgian dessert of vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce. In this version diners apply the lipstick and then eat the ice cream through chocolate-coated lips.

Sang-Hoon Degeimbre, from L'Air du Temps restaurant in Brussels incorporated Leffe beer into his intricate chicken dish while Jean-Paul Jeunet, from the Jura in south-east France, used Irish beef to produce a terrine and then served his version of beef with morel mushrooms and shallots.

But the biggest surprise was the snail caviar that Jacques Pourcel from Le Jardin des Sens in Montpellier used to finish off his dish of courgette flowers, yoghurt and summer fruits. This led to big crowds at the large stand occupied by the caviar's sole producer, De Viridi.

Dominique Pierru, its general manager, introduced me to this new luxury product, which sells for €1,200 a kilo to chefs. The production can only be described as a labour of love. Pierru explained that snails produced only 4g of eggs during their lives and roared with laughter when I asked how many snails there were on the farm at Soissons, northern France. "I don't have a precise figure but somewhere between 150m and 160m, I would guess." The eggs are white, 3mm-4mm in diameter and in their freshness and taste are remarkably similar to the caviar from the endangered sturgeon. A few snail eggs served on a fresh sage leaf was an excellent appetiser.

Michel Cloes, 50, is the softly-spoken organiser of Gastronomy by the Seine and the man behind similar conferences in San Francisco and New York, with others planned for Beijing and Mumbai. Born in the Congo, he grew up and studied law in Belgium before moving to the US, where he practised international law. A legal case brought him to Paris, where he set up an association of international lawyers so they could network more effectively. Though working in the law, Cloes had long held a passion for food and he realised that no such networking association existed for chefs, so he changed career and created two companies. Gastronomy Festivals brings the chefs and those who want to connect with them together at events such as this one. Chef Culinary Network allows him to continue to practise his contractual expertise, by putting together commercial deals between established chefs, hotels and developers as well as representing young, promising chefs. One of his clients is Guillaume Gomez, the young executive chef at the Elysée Palace, who explained to me the two constraints of his job: a French president who does not drink wine and an official diktat that working lunches must last no longer than 50 minutes.

Cloes hopes the festival will encourage the chefs to be more entrepreneurial: "The chefs have to perform in front of an audience of not just of their peers but also of young aspiring chefs and commercial companies who want to be involved because their success will depend on how well integrated their products can be."

The spirit of co-operation at the event was evident in the link-up between Gilles Verot, an eminent charcutier from Paris and Damian Sansonetti from Bar Boulud in Manhattan. They presided over tables laden with Bayonne ham, saucisson Lyonnais, rillettes and terrines interspersed with bowls of salad. Sansonetti said Verot had helped his boss Daniel Boulud to source meats in the US that had allowed them to produce charcuterie that would equal the best from France.

As I left, Cloes was walking between the tables, shaking hands and helping others make new food connections.