

Summer of Snails

A Missing Chapter from A Pig in Provence

By

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Learning to Hunt Snails – A Short History of Snails in Provence – Cooking Snails

We were introduced to the local passion for snails one summer when nosing around Marie and Marcel's *cave*, looking for a tool to pry up some stones on a wall we were repairing at the rear of our barn. We stumbled upon an old wooden grape-picking crate with screen fastened across the top. It was full of snails. They were thick on the sides, crawling massed just below the screen. Some were the huge Burgundian types, but most of them were rather flattish, about an inch in diameter. Their shells, brown now, looked like the sun bleached white ones we saw scattered across the rocky hillsides when we went exploring. (Later we learned the white ones were a different variety.)

"Marie," I said, when I saw her that afternoon, "what are those snails doing in the box in the cave? You know, near the rabbit cages."

"We put them there," she replied.

"Yes, but what are you going to do with them?" I asked.

"Eat them, of course. They're almost ready, just another few days."

I could see I was going to have to be a lot more explicit. "What do you mean, almost ready? Are these snails you found? Around here? And how do you cook them?"

Start from the beginning, OK? I've only eaten snails in restaurants, so I don't know anything."

She was heading out to the melon fields to help Marcel with pruning the melons, something they did when the plants were young to increase productivity, and I went along with her.

"We've always eaten snails, at least whenever we have time to gather them. You see", she said, "after the rains, the snails come out. Then we pick them up and put them in the 'snail box' with lots of wild thyme and bran. They eat that, it cleans out their system, and after 15 days," she continued, "they're ready to eat."

"But where do you find them? Just anywhere?" I asked.

"There used to be lots more. When I first came here there were snails everywhere. We ate them a lot, but now, with the chemicals and all the farming, they're not so many. They come out after the rains. Remember that big storm a week or so ago?"

I certainly did. We had been at the lake at Bauduen when the first black clouds swept above the mountains, and by the time we packed up and drove home the rain was torrential. I had jumped every time the thunder roared and Oliver had pressed his hands tight against his ears and pushed his head into my shoulder.

"After the storm Marcel came back with a bucket of snails. He was up visiting his aunt in the old village. There's a lot of ivy along the road, and they come out from that. Just like at Sillans-la-Cascade. It's a good place for snails. Lots of ivy on all those stone walls and snails like to hide in it."

"Do you want me to help prune?" I asked, as we approached the edge of the melon field.

“No, no that’s OK. Just keep an eye on Aileen, all right? She’s with my mother right now, but she’ll want to come and play with Ethel and Oliver. And listen, when I do the snails, you can come help if you want. Then we can eat them together.”

“OK”, I said.

Two days later it rained again. “Donald,” I said, “let’s go snail hunting when the rain stops. Remember, Marie said that after the rains the snails come out.” He agreed and Ethel and Oliver loved the idea. It was a relatively brief rain, stopping mid-afternoon. The dark clouds passed on, heading toward the mountains, and the sun came out. We got in the car and headed toward Sillans-la-Cascade, a ten minute drive. As we started down the road, Oliver, who was fascinated by our mission yelled, “Stop! Stop! There’s a snail! Don’t run over it!” Donald stopped, Oliver clambered out and picked up a nice, juicy Burgundian –size snail and put it in the bucket, which, at least in the beginning, went in the rear of the car. After the third snail stop we realized that the snails were not going to placidly stay in the bottom of the bucket, so Ethel took charge. She put the bucket between her knees and as the snails reached the top, she plucked them off and put them back on the bottom.

We made about 10 more snail stops along the road before we reached Sillans. At Sillans there were at least a dozen people patrolling the long wall that curved around the village, and several more, each with a bucket, were skimming the wall along the path that led to the waterfall.

Some of the snail gatherers appeared to be elderly locals. The women were dressed in dark gray and blue dresses, topped with cardigans and wore sturdy shoes. Most had headscarves tied beneath their chins against the chance of more rain. The men were

equally dressed in grey or blue, wearing twill pants, cardigans, and berets pulled down over thinning hair.

Among the snail-gatherers were families, like ours, as well as some people who we had learned to spot as ‘from the coast’, that is fashionably dressed, with faces unlined by years of working outdoors in the fields and hands and nails free of dirt. Often the ‘from the coast people’ were relatives of locals and they would come to spend a Saturday or Sunday or both, enjoying long country lunches with their family, followed by rural activities such as snail hunting.

Consequently we weren’t surprised by the out-of-towners, but I was a little taken aback by their enthusiasm. I remember one woman in a short white sundress with matching jacket and brimmed hat, teetering on her high heels as she reached above her head to pluck a slow moving snail as it edged toward the safety of the dense ivy that covered much of the wall. As she grabbed it she was slightly off balance and almost fell. The man with her, dressed a little self-consciously in pressed jeans, loafers, and a tight-fitting, open-necked shirt, caught her arm, and they laughed as she held out her prize, a plump Burgundian almost the size of Oliver’s, which they dropped into the covered wicker basket the man was carrying. I liked the basket and saw the value in its snugly fitting lid.

Another group, this one with children, was hunting in a pack. There were five of them, three adults and two children and they kept in tight formation as they attacked sections of the wall in a phalanx, scouring it for snails before moving on to the next section. They carried two buckets which were soon half full of snails.

We felt a bit out of our league. I didn't know snail hunting bordered on a blood sport until an outside member of the pack and I reached for the same snail at the same time. I could have sworn the woman snarled. She certainly got her hand on the snail first and whisked it off to her bucket seconds before I could grasp it. After a few more similar encounters, Donald and I decided to leave the walls to the obsessed and instead went into the verge of the forest, where, with Ethel and Oliver, we gathered a goodly amount of the smaller flat snails, plucking them from the slippery rocks where they had ventured out after the rain.

Once we were home, Ethel and Oliver went to borrow a grape picking crate from Marie and some wire mesh and set about making a *cajot des escargots*, or more properly a *limanciere*. They sprinkled the bottom with about two cups of bran that Marie had given them, then topped this with the wild thyme they had gathered on the way home. One by one the snails were put into their new home, then the top was covered with the wire, and four rocks balanced on each of the reinforced corners of the box.

"We can eat them two weeks from today," announced Ethel, who had taken charge of the project and looked forward to eating the snails. Oliver was ambivalent, being more interested I think in the process of gathering and keeping snails in a box rather than eating the finished product.

"Oh, no!" I heard the next morning as I was drinking my coffee and reading my book. "The snails are gone!" Ethel shouted from the courtyard behind the kitchen where she and Oliver had put their snail cage. Donald and I went out and sure enough, the box was empty, two of the rocks knocked off, and the wire mesh askew. Not a single snail remained. We immediately started a search, lifting the logs and branches of the nearby

woodpile, looking all around the chicken coop and the rabbit cages, continuing out into the grass. We eventually found about half our cache, and this time Donald nailed the wire mesh down, leaving just one small flap open, and weighted this with a heavy rock. He instructed Ethel and Oliver not to lift it up, but to just look at the snails through the mesh.

In the old days, *limancieres* were wooden cages constructed specifically for snails. The cages were covered with a metal grill and had a small door built at the bottom of one end. People had several *limancieres*, one for each different kind of snail. Also, although I have never seen one, there were once terracotta *escargotieres*, which were jar-shaped and fitted with pierced lids, both evidence that the gathering and keeping of snails were part of the stock and store of the self-sustaining Provencal farm.

A few days after we had regathered our errant snails, Marie declared it was time to prepare hers. They had been feeding on the bran and wild thyme for two weeks and were considered cleansed. She referred to her snails as *petit gris*, but pointed out that there were some big ones too, the ones I called Burgundians, saying that she didn't bother to separate them out. "There's not as many snails as there used to be, so it takes too long to plenty of one kind. Mostly now we find the *petits gris*."

We went together down to the snail box. She had a big bowl with her and we helped transfer all her snails to the bowl and then we went upstairs to her kitchen.

"How many kilos do we have?" I asked. "Oh, two, maybe two and a half." I was taking notes about the process, so I wrote down "4 to 5 pounds snails", a rough translation of two and a half kilos. She got out a salt canister full of coarse salt and dipped out 4 or 5 handfuls, which translated to "about 1 cup salt per pound of snails", and sprinkled the salt over the snails, then turned them round and round with a wooden spoon

and covered the bowl with some aluminum foil, poking a few holes in the surface. She put the bowl on top of her refrigerator. “Tomorrow we’ll cook them. But now, they need a last purge with the salt.” Marie explained that we would cook them in a sauce the next day and eat them *a la sucerelle*, that is, with our fingers, sucking the snails from their shells, a traditional way to eat the small snails.

The earliest snails eaten in Provence were not in sauces, but cooked in or over coals. The remains of ashes and snail shells have been found in the aprons of prehistoric caves in the region of Haute Provence, dating to at least 11, 000 B.C. In some areas, archeologists have unearthed several sites where such an impressive number of snail shells have been found that the sites are sometimes referred to as Mesolithic *escargotieres*, or snail farms. Of course, prehistoric man ate more than snails.

The *Musee de Prehistoire* in Quinson, just up the road from the Verdon River, at one of our favorite swimming places, is dedicated to the prehistory of the immediate region of the river between Quinson and Moustiers-Sainte-Marie. In the summers, when we inflated our rubber rafts at the river’s edge, paddled beneath the watch of the towering cliffs of the gorge, and basked in the sun, we were completely unaware that prehistoric animals roamed the very land we were sitting on, hunted by Neolithic man who lived in vaulted caves above the river. It wasn’t until the museum opened in at the beginning of the 21st century that I learned we had been living only 8 miles away from an area so rich in its artifacts and sites that the largest prehistory museum in Europe was built there.

The exterior of the museum is a solid convex curve of grey concrete, flanked by a thirty-foot high wall of local stone that leads the visitor to the museum entrance. Rising

behind the museum, not far in the distance, are the grey cliffs that frame the western side of the lower gorges formed by the Verdon River on its inexorable way to the sea. Here, in caves discovered by a local priest in 1927, prehistoric man made his home as early as 500 BC. He hunted bison, ibex, bears, and wolverines, discovered fire, and, according to the site excavations, cooked his kill at the mouth of the caves. The bones found in the sites told the story and the museum recreates it for the visitor. In one expressive diorama of a cooking scene, life-like waxen figures, two men and a woman, small statured with fine hairs sprouting on their limbs, thatches of dark hair on their heads, and clothes of animal skins, are crouching over a fire. In the embers of the fire they are tending can be seen small white and brown snail shells. Behind them is a painted background of the *Plan de Quinson*, the flood plain of the now-dammed Verdon River and our swimming and boating beach.

The people of Provence have continued the tradition of cooking snails in the coals, as well as developing more elegant culinary expressions. I have been told that up until the 1950s and 1960s, it was common to cook snails for lunch while working in the vineyards. The workers would build a fire of grape prunings in a clearing and place a rack over the coals to hold the snails, just the way their grandparents and great grandparents did. The snails were picked from their shells with a pin or a needle and ideally would have been eaten with aioli alongside, still a popular combination in the region. In Marseilles, in the 1930s, snail vendors plied their wares in the streets, selling paper cones of snails accompanied by a pick. During the early part of the 20th century eating snails ‘*a la sucurelle*’ was one of the feasts of preference, and certainly the one most beloved by Marcel and his extended family.

Today, probably the most popular presentation of snails, both at home and in restaurants is the ubiquitous *Escargots Burguignon*. Snails, Burgundy style, that is stuffed with butter, garlic, parsley and baked until the butter melts into the savory pools that are so good for bread-dipping. As long ago as the 1850s this dish was renowned in Paris, but it was referred to then as *Escargots Provencale*, because the snail farms of Provence were the provenance of the snails. However, by the end of the 19th century, the snails were coming from Burgundy and the dish was to be known forevermore as *Escargots Burguignon*, regardless of their point of origin.

I no longer know anyone who still hunts and cooks snails. Sometimes I can buy fresh snails at the Saturday morning market in Aups that come from a snail farm on a hillside near Bauduen, 15 minutes to the north and only 15 miles from the Gorges du Verdon.

As Provençal chefs and home cooks alike search for local, fresh, quality ingredients, snail farms have again becoming a profitable small business. Snails, like mushrooms, which they resemble somewhat in texture, are adaptable to sauces, soups, omelets, and stuffings. At a restaurant in the hinterlands of Haute Provence I was once surprised with a two-thimbleful taste of snail and parsley soup, an *amuse* offered by the chef. At another I began my meal with ‘*Profiterole d’escargots*’ which translated to the plate as snails bathed in a sauce of fresh goat cheese, shallots, and chives and tucked into savory, bite-sized cream puffs, served three to a bowl resting on a swirl of the sauce. At a restaurant in Nice striving to earn its first star, I recently feasted on an appetizer plate of *beignets des escargots*, fresh snail fritters, accompanied by lemon aioli for dipping, and

finger bowls to finish up, a Michelin version of snails in the vineyards, accompanied by a glass of Blanc de Bellet, the local white wine of Nice.

At Marie's house that long-ago summer, we rinsed the salt from the snails in several passes, the last with vinegar, then cooked them in white wine with aromatics, including a branch of wild fennel. It took about 2 1/2 hours until the snails were tender and could be easily removed from their shells, then they were set aside to drain. We plucked each snail from its shell and clipped off the colon at the tip, which is bitter, then replaced the snail in its shell.

Marie made a sauce with fresh tomatoes and garlic and simmered the snails in it. That night we ate upstairs with the Palazolis, just the snails and the bread. Aileen and Florent would have nothing to do with snails, so Marie cooked them each a thin steak, sautéing it in olive oil. Oliver and Ethel ate some of the snails, liking the being able to make noises without being criticized as they sucked out the snails. I resorted to using the toothpicks Marie had set on the table after my first few slurps because I made such a mess. We kept eating until not a snail was left, and our plates were wiped clean of sauce with our bread.