

BUG BANQUET: SIFAT sponsors conference on edible insects

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by Ken Corson |

Have you had insects in your diet? A world class conference took place at SIFAT this past weekend called Exploring Alternative Foods for World Hunger: The Potential of Edible Insects.

Many "bugs" do contain good nutrition, including protein, minerals and vitamins. It is estimated that 85 percent of the world's population eat insects at least in certain seasons of the year. Canada and the United States are two areas of the world that have not utilized this source of nutrition widely. Probably, we will not see a McBug franchise of restaurants opening soon, but attitudes toward insects definitely changed this past weekend in those who attended this conference.

One of the speakers, Dr. Xiaoming Chen of The Research Institute of Resource Insects in China, said, "In the West, many see insects as pests. In our country, we see them as resources. We use insects in industrial products and medicines, as well as food." Dr. Chen is the head of one of the world's largest organizations that does extensive research with insects.

Some of the leading scientists in the field of edible insects headlined two days of conference on the SIFAT campus here with representatives from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, as well as a number of states. Auburn University's College of Agriculture, Tuskegee University, and the World Food Program's Universities Fighting World Hunger co-sponsored this seminar with SIFAT.

Many people will laugh when the subject of eating bugs is presented, but the topic has serious consequences in addressing the issue of hunger around the world. Bart Hogebrink, a Dutch inventor, said, "Insects are highly nutritious; they generally contain more protein and less fat than traditional meats. They also have an almost 20 times higher food conversion efficiency than traditional meats. Furthermore, they reproduce much faster than cattle, are easy to raise and need far less living space."

Hogebrink won the national award in Holland for the best idea not yet invented in a contest sponsored by Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research (TNO). He showed an impressive two-minute video that he used to win the award, showing how a small insect factory made in a 55-gallon drum could make a livelihood for one living in a country where there is hunger, as well as supply much needed protein to save the lives of hungry children. His video can be seen on FoodFactory foundation's website www.foodfactory.org.

Although 1,400 insects worldwide are reportedly eaten by human beings, TV educator David Gracer of Rhode Island pointed out that some insects are poisonous, and one must know which ones are edible. He also warned that people who are allergic to shellfish are also allergic to insects, as shrimp and other shellfish are related to insects.

One participant from the Democratic Republic of Congo said that he understood that people did not eat grasshoppers here in Alabama as they did in many places of Africa, but he was surprised to see that they do eat shrimp, which looks like a big insect to him.

Saturday night the conference closed with a Bug Banquet. Three tables were filled with delicious dishes, using insects in different ways in the menu. For more information on edible insects, contact Kathy Bryson, SIFAT international training director, brysonk@sifat.org.

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