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Eating sea urchin alive

Ever eaten sea urchin while it's still moving? Ever been to a sushi restaurant and have seen uni, or sea urchin, on the menu? Ever wondered what it looks like before you eat it? I bet you've never seen live sea urchins on any menu before. It is a very unique taste, one that is either loved or hated. Many people describe it as a sweet taste of the very essence of the sea. Often, processed, and frozen, sea urchin has a very strong taste and smell that is not very attractive to the less adventurous eaters out there. That being said... If you want real-deal, then we have it for you! We get live sea urchin two or three times a week here at Quality Seafood from a diver who only sells to us. John, our fisherman, dives to the bottom of kelp beds, picks them off the seabed one at a time, and puts them in a net to be pulled on board. Once you buy them, we'll break them up and clean them up for you. If you're wondering what a live sea urchin looks like just before it will be eaten, then here's a video a customer of ours took before eating his: [Pretty wild huh!?](#) And pretty cool, I must admit. Now don't worry, the little guy doesn't have a brain or nervous system, so he/she doesn't feel a thing. Quality Seafood is your choice for all your seafood needs, including hard to find things like live sea urchin! Thanks Garick for the video! Comments comments How does it taste? I'm not sure because I've never had anything like it. All I know is that it tastes alive, something alive at the undragged bottom of the sea; it tastes like meat would taste if meat was a mineral.... the night I threw up..... But a week later, I'm better. and I'm going back myself. The woman is there and so are sea urchins, glittering in the warm sun. I know what you want, she says. I sit, my mouth slick with anticipation and disgust, yet not knowing why. -Chang-Rae Lee, The New Yorker I recently saw the movie 100 Steps. It's about an Indian family setting up a restaurant by the side of the road in front of an elegant establishment deep in the French countryside. Our hero, Hassan, is the eldest son of the family and the film opens with his mother taking him to a food market in Mumbai. We know he's marked out for great culinary stuff when he's offered a sea urchin and he faints appreciatively, acknowledging their earth-moving wonder. I won't tell you how the film ends except that it means Hassan enjoying sea urchins again, and again appreciating that they are the answer to life, the universe and everything. So that was it, eating out the other night, and finding sea urchins on the menu, I decided to try them myself. Crostini di rizzi was what was offered, sea urchins on toasted French bread. They duly arrived, spread thinly and gently, on thickly sliced baguette, rusty gelatinous globules, tasting of the sea, but not of life itself. I ate sea urchins on the beach (literally) in the bay where they had grown so they were ultra fresh. My taste buds were underwhelmed, and my gray cells began to wonder if some of their magic isn't connected with the food itself. The only edible part of the animal (they are not plants that many people think) are the genitals - its gonads. They were, we have it on good authority, served at the marriage of Heracles and Hebe, goddess of youth. Could it be, asked my inner cynic, that sea urchins are admired more like a kind of edible wrinkle-effacing moisturizer – a culinary triumph of hope over experience? Or, of course, that they offer youthful potency. As Nick Fisher comments in *The River Cottage Fish Book*: [Sea Sea Urchins] is one of the few foods whose purported effect on body and spirit is one we would graviously for. Hugh once ate two dozen and recalls feeling clearly.... Uplifted. Aphrodisiacs might run it, but they're definitely a tonic. Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Nick Fish, *The River Cottage Fish Book* The five deep pink corals of rum, a.k.a. tongues, are sweet and kelpy tasting parts to eat. What makes sea urchins taste so sublime? My problem may have been simply not eating enough! Apparently (further research is required) the edible part of the sea urchin contains the chemical Anandamide ('ananda' is the Sanskrit word for joy, bliss, joy ... all exhibited by Hassan in the film in fact). According to this blog a similar chemical is responsible for the euphoria-producing effect of cannabis. When are they in season and where to find the best Sure they are appreciated in many countries, especially Japan (where they are served as a kind of sushi called uni). Michel Roux Jr. says his dream destination is Hokkaido. He plans to go in mid-June, the beginning of the sea urchin season in Japan. He says that the best can be found around the town of Shakotan which is located in a beautiful area with amazing capes, reefs and ridges surrounded by intense blue seas. Here in Italy, in addition to being served, fresh from the shell, on bread, they are often stirred, again fresh, into a simple paste. Their taste is delicate, so what they are served on or with should not detract from the main event. Avoid recipes that involve chili – a little lemon peel and sea salt is really all the spice needed, if that. In Italy the season for sea urchins is mid-November to the end of April. Between 30 April and 30 June, hunting for sea urchins is strictly regulated. Ways to eat sea urchins avoid food partners who overwhelm - sea urchins taste is delicious - scrambled eggs do well in this regard chef Pascal Aussignac, of London's Club Gascon, whips them into a foam as he pours over the carpaccio of duck throughout Italy they are served either on tagliatelle (again, a neutral or on crostini – maybe with a little lemon or white wine they are good straight from the shell (use the technique in the clip below) on top of nigiri sushi Specialist Stephanie Mutz's favorite way (quoted in *Cherry Bombe*, Issue 7) is to eat them directly scooped out of the shell with some sea salt.... believe it or not if you sprinkle salt on your uni it tastes sweeter. But I also like to crack open a sea urchin, clean it, crack an egg inside, and steam it until the egg is softly poached. Maybe add rice. Creamy amazing. For more recipes go to Stephanie's website. The best way to eat sea urchins is simply - plain on a piece of toasted, oiled bread is perfect. What to drink with sea urchins Drink raki, or sake with your sea urchins Did you know? Sea urchins were once known as 'sea hedgehogs' – urchin is an old word for hedgehog. Follow this link for some wonderful National Geographic photographs of sea urchins. How to prepare sea urchins Below is a clip showing how to prepare and eat a large sea urchin (in Europe they are mostly much smaller). [youtube Photo: Jason Jaacks for SAVEUR]Sea sea urchins beat all taste pleasure points – salty, sweet and umami. In many places, sea urchins are overfished, but that's certainly not the case off the Coast of California, where there is such an abundance of purple sea urchins that it has become an aquaculture concern. Ali Bouzari is a biochemist and trained chef. He also happens to spearfish and freedives in his spare time, which is how he ended up writing a play for the Saveur title sea urchins in Mendocino. He talked to Francis Lam about researching, diving for, cooking with and eating purple sea urchins - and encouraging us all to do the same. Ali Bouzari Photo courtesy: Ali Bouzari Francis Lam: Sea urchins are the most frightening looking animals on earth. They look like headless ghosts of porcupines, but live and live in the sea where they move around – or their spines move. Then you eat them, and that's the most amazing taste. Ruth Reichel, I read recently, calls them her only favorite flavor in the world. First, I want to ask you, because you're a scientist, what makes a sea urchin leak? They taste like butter you harvested from the sea. I want to know scientifically how is that possible? Ali Bouzari: Sea urchins are certified heavy metal. They are covered in this armor of calcium carbonate, they have tags that help them move, they breathe out of their feet, and they are just weird. But they are so delicious because of how vulnerable and open to the elements they are. Keep in mind when you've been in the ocean for a long time. Your skin starts to prune, you feel dehydrated, and personally I always crave shrimp. A lot of changes happen to you because you are basically in the world's largest bathtub full of brine. Now imagine living your whole life immersed in the super salty, salty environment without the luxury of skin to keep all your insides working and where they should be. Sea urchins don't have skin, unlike fish or even an octopus. So, all the salt they sit in has free rein to pull all the moisture out and turn them into marine raisins. To combat that effect, sea urchins get into an arms race with the salt in the water. They store things that water likes to attach to. They store sugar, amino acids and salts, which is incredible to us because they are perhaps the three most delicious types of molecules in the edible world: sweet, salty and umami. The brine is basically ourselves for us. And so, when you hear people becoming thoughtful and poetic about their favorite oysters from wherever it is in the world, they will often talk about the salty, brackish water from which these oysters come; that isn't just prose, that's the reason why these animals are delicious. Purple sea urchins cling to Ali Bouzari's diving suit. Photo: Jason Jaacks FL: It's incredible. You dive for sea urchins and you just wrote this truly fascinating story about diving for purple sea urchins off the California coast for Saveur. In the story, you talk about how it's good to eat them. I live on the East Coast where there are Maine sea urchins, and I hear they're overharvesting and that's a problem. Sea urchins, sometimes called uni, have become more and more popular with chefs, so they get into all these chef-y dishes. They have become a cliché where chefs put uni in everything and we overrun them all. But part of your story is about how they transcend the ecosystem on the coast of Northern California. What's going on there? AB: The west coast is a completely different sea urchin history than the east coast. Here there are thousands of times more sea urchins than there have been or should be, historically, and that is due to a combination of factors. Obviously, several of them are our fault as humans, some of them are just freak accidents, but it's a combination of climate change warming the water and causing problems with how kelp get nutrients. It was a freak outbreak that killed a bunch of sea urchins' natural predators, who are starfish or starfish. We are also still reaping what we sown in the late 1800s by almost exterminating sea otters in this part of the coast, as they also naturally prey on sea urchins. And so, what's happening is this explosion of sea urchins has taken them from filling a very docile niche – hanging out and vacuuming up the pieces and remnants that need to be taken care of on the seabed – to becoming these zombie hordes that literally cut down 95-plus percent of kelp in Sonoma and Mendocino County. There has been an immediate already, where the local recreational abalone fishing, which is where most non-commercially fished abalone comes from, is closed, perhaps forever, because abalone also feeds on kelp and they just can't compete with sea urchins. And after that, all that depends on kelp as anchor to the food chain will be quickly kicked out. FL: Kelp is basically the forest of the oceans, so you deforest the entire underwater ecosystem there. AB: And it's a deforestation that happens crazy fast. I moved to Sonoma County a few years ago, just before my friend and colleague Kyle Connaughton was opening his restaurant SingleThread, and his chef de cuisine Aaron Koseba – who I co-wrote the play with – taught me how to spearfish, which was just the coolest hobby for a chef to have as you can imagine. When we started four years ago, it was like diving through this canopy into a sunken tropical jungle. There was fish flitting in and out of the shadows of kelp, and there was this amazing thing. This spring, when we started going for the season, it's almost like diving down to the lunar surface. It's a bunch of steep, rocky outcroppings that are just dotted with bright flashes of 1980s Prince purple. Purple sea urchins inhabit rock formations along the Pacific coast. Photo: Jason Jaacks FL: Normally, when you have invasive species, you say, We should eat them, but it's hard because you have to convince people to eat things like lionfish or Asian carp that they didn't have before. But sea urchins are incredibly delicious, they are expensive, and chefs want to use them. Why isn't there a huge commercial fishery for these purple sea urchins? Why don't we grab them all and eat them? AB: First of all, they are not invasive; They're from here, but they're out of control. One of the issues with purple sea urchins versus the green sea urchins that you can get on the East Coast, or the larger red sea urchins that people also harvest out here, is that they are a smaller cousin, they are a smaller species, so their rum, which are the reproductive organs that people call uni, is also smaller. However, that does not mean that they are not commercially viable; it definitely doesn't mean they're not delicious. So, in the 1990s there were actually a couple of years where there was a huge documented push to improve this purple sea urchin fishing on the west coast. I think we exported 300,000 or so pounds of purple seaurito Japan, where they were actually highly prized because they were smaller and more sensitive, and you could incorporate them into dishes in a way that was more subtle rather than just plopping this big, giant, greasy tongue on a piece of rice. FL: Like your uni sushi. AB: That's still what the regular foodie consumer thinks of when they think of uni; they think of sushi, they think of Japanese food, think of what they usually see on social media like these big, fat, sturdy uni tongues. The reality is their applications in the kitchen go far beyond that. Chef Aaron Koseba (SingleThread) shows off part of his catch - an armful of purple sea urchins. Photo: Jason Jaacks FL: We have talked to you as a researcher and as a diver, now let me talk to you as a chef. What can you do with them apart from just plopping them on some nice sushi rice? AB: Chemically and culinarily, you should think of them as a wonderful hybrid between an artichoke and an egg, or an avocado and an egg can be a better comparison. Again, you ask someone 10 years ago, what are you doing with avocados? and nine out of ten times they will say guacamole. Now they are in everything, almost to a point of self-parody. Same with uni. They are full of fat and protein, so you can use them as a source of browning. You can incorporate them into a barbecue marinade or a yakitori marinade. You can use their fethet to enrich doughs; they make some of the best brioche that I've ever tasted. I sweated down sea urchins with andouille sausages and used its fat to make probably the best dirty rice I've ever made. FL: This also sounds like millionaire food. AB: It sounds like millionaire food, but it doesn't have to be. If you live on the West Coast, for a \$44 a year fishing license, you can even pick these things off the beach. You can collect 35 per person per day right now. And we should be, is what you say, because we need that kelp to come back. AB: And we should be. We have this terrible track record of just decimating everything we get excited about, so this is the universe that offers up a chance, a small chance of redemption, where we can put our fozul to good use. FL: Ali, this is awesome; you are awesome. Thank you very much. AB: Thank you. Come out to Sonoma County and I'll feed you a sea urchin. Ali Bouzari wrote saveur the article Sea Ur in Mendocino. He is also the author of *Ingredient: Unveiling the Essential Elements of Food* and is one of the founders of Pilot R&D, a restaurant research and collaboration project. Projects.

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