

# We Took Our Toddler to Bugs Cafe in Cambodia

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## 'He reached for the tarantula and bit off its head'

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We weren't sure how our toddler would take to tarantulas. When it comes to bugs, we prefer to live and let live, as long as they are living somewhere else. Nothing against arachnids, but we don't generally use insects as ingredients when cooking in our Manhattan apartment. Unless a bug inadvertently falls into the spaghetti or gets smooshed into the peanut butter and jelly, we try to keep these kinds of creatures far, far from our mouths.

And yet here we were — my husband, our 3-year-old, and me — sitting down to dinner at Bugs Cafe, which purports to be the first insect-focused tapas restaurant in Cambodia.

A few streets away, Siem Reap's Night Market was in full swing. Plucky tourists noshed on bags of fried crickets or scorpions as they browsed the T-shirts and shot glasses for sale. We were not those tourists, and not just because we had a child in tow with little to no need for a shot glass. We were, however, interested in participating in a longstanding culinary tradition in the region.

Eating unusual-to-you ingredients might make for great stories, but we weren't looking for a great story, or, perhaps more truthfully, not just a story. Like a lot of people, we subscribe to a "when in Rome, eat all the pasta" attitude. Which is ideal (and easy) when you're in Rome, or drinking port in Portugal, or sampling pupusas in El Salvador. We want our kid to feel the same, and to take big bites wherever we go.

So, one nice spring evening, we took a seat outside of Bugs Cafe, on a minimalist concrete-and-steel patio that mimicked the interior's white and gray palette. Our server offered a patient, prepared spiel about what we could expect. (We found out later that he was an owner of the restaurant.) No liquids, no squishy stuff, no weird tastes, he explained. No "Survivor" or "Fear Factor" antics. Instead, Bugs Cafe takes seriously the task of turning creepy crawlies into yummy comestibles by using locally sourced ingredients and a flavor-first approach.

Our meal arrived. The Discovery Platter contained a spring roll stuffed with ants; a Mediterranean feuilleté festooned with pesto and flying ants; crickets and silkworms stir-fried with Kampot pepper and lemongrass; a water bug skewered alongside peppers and tomatoes; and a tarantula whose tempura covering did nothing to mask its many legs or bulbous middle. Skewered, deep-fried, garnished — we were staring down a plate of ants, beetles, and spiders, plain and simple.

Before that night's dinner, the closest I'd come to water bugs had been stepping on one in the shower. Better on a skewer than under my soles, I told myself, yet I averted my eyes from the very obvious one artfully arranged on the plate. My husband's attitude was more good-god-get-that-thing-away-from-me.

Both my son and I noticed his daddy trying to cover the water bug with an onion, so I speared it over to my plate, quietly repeating my mantra about skewers/soles. My subconscious must have had other ideas. My knife accidentally sent the bug skidding onto the floor. It looked so normal laying there that I could hardly bear to pick it up, let alone lay it on my tongue.

We adults were dealing with a very real psychological hurdle about what we consider food. When confronted with cockroaches et al., our up-for-anything attitude devolved into rapid-fire swallowing. We weren't sure we were going to make it through dinner.

Meanwhile, our kid surveyed the options arrayed on the table, among them multigrain crackers, some blueberry fruit leather, and a squeezable container of applesauce. Then he reached for the tarantula and bit off its head.

After gnawing for a while, he put the tarantula down and poked at some sweet potato fries. He watched as motorcycles went by and the sun started to set over the city. He managed a couple bites of the ant pastry before beginning an extremely long, extremely detailed monologue about airplanes.

Slowly, my husband and I set about tasting, then gobbling forkfuls of stir fry, the hard crunch of the Kampot peppers offsetting the softer pop of the silkworms. The spring roll was as spicy as the non-insect version we'd tried a few nights before. Occasionally, we squeezed in a word about Cessnas and Airbuses. Pretty soon, the bugs were gone.

As we were leaving, a family of four from Australia came in for one last dinner at Bugs Cafe before they headed home the next morning. Behind them was a British man with neck tattoos. He scrutinized the menu. "I'll be back later," he promised. "Once I've had a pint or two."

I nodded in solidarity, then looked at my kid, still droning on about airplanes. Like all parents, I wonder where he'll wind up. After 18 years of being forced to eat bugs and whatever else with Mom and Dad, he might decide to move to Montana and just live on oatmeal. I get it, I do. (One of the profound joys of my own early adulthood was discovering that not only did I never again have to watch the Super Bowl, I no longer had to participate in my family's football obsession at all.) His life, his choice, although I pray that our son maintains his love of travel and his willingness to try new things. We are the luckier for experiencing the world with him by our side; I hope someday he feels the same.

At any rate, the server at Bugs Cafe that night was right: the tarantula's belly *did* taste a little

like soft-shell crab. Not that my son would necessarily agree with the comparison. He's never had crab.