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SOCIETY ::

Old eggs, snakes in booze: extreme food tasting comes to Morges

Everyone was interested in the aphrodisiacs.

100 year old duck egg (really a few months old), covered in sulphur to age it properly

Morges, Vaud, Switzerland (GenevaLunch) - Hundred-year-old eggs are not part of the daily diet in China, but they are not considered odd, and *eau-de-vie de vipère*, or brandy with a snake in it, might pass in some parts of France as a sensible way of getting rid of your fear of snakes. In Switzerland, both are unusual. Morges this weekend is offering lessons to the brave or curious on how to unlearn cultural notions about food and drink, with [Jean Michel Durivault](#) leading workshops on how our taste buds work ([photo album from Morges Aliment bizarres workshop](#)).

Durivault is a biologist and noted French teacher in the tasting business, a founder of [CQF Degustation](#), consultants to the French food and wine industry. This is his first foray into Switzerland to teach professionals in the food industry, as well as interested amateurs, how to move beyond their eating habits to explore the wider world of taste.

encapsulated lobster powder, olive flakes

A first workshop Thursday night offered several surprises. The session began with the point that while nourishing food that tastes like the original can be reduced to a medicinal-looking tablet, human beings are clearly programmed to want something that satisfies a wider range of senses. A combination of olive flakes and lobster powder in a tablet did leave a sense of emptiness before anyone tasted it.

From there the students at the "Aliments bizarres," workshop tasted things that are acceptable in some cultures, but not in others, starting with flowers. The pansies, fresh and delicate, had little flavour but a surprisingly pleasant texture, while the dried rosebuds smelled wonderful, gave a pleasant flavour - and felt like sawdust in the mouth.

The idea was not just to see how weird food can be, but to match flavours and textures, which we're not used to, with wines. Yves Paquier, a wine consultant who gives wine-tasting classes at the [Changins](#) federal research station's wine school, had several suggestions. He explained the rationale behind each choice of wine and food partner.

Baby lizards eau-de-vie

But first: a small lesson in how culture influences our notions about what makes an acceptable alcoholic drink. No one in the room offered to try the startling first bottle brought out, a jar filled with baby mice soaked in alcohol, nor its twin eau-de-vie, a jar filled with baby lizards. Both are considered precious drinks in some cultures, for their presumed health-giving properties.

The viper eau-de-vie looked less threatening to the class, perhaps because it arrived after the mice and lizards and the group was becoming used to them, or maybe because there was only one snake in the jar. This is a traditional family alcoholic drink in some parts of France, used for many reasons, one of which is to teach children to overcome their fear of snakes by having a tot now and again.

From your brave reporter, the verdict: *very* strong at 55-60 degrees and a teardrop's worth of the drink warms one remarkably. The viper's presence did not dismay nor encourage me to drink more. Not on my shopping list.

And then there were the aphrodisiacs bottled and labelled in ways that are more familiar: the group's response to these was more positive.

Having become a little used to the idea that drunken mice might be good for you, the class studied packets of exotic and costly items that hover on the fuzzy line between food and medicine, such as shark's fin, used to make the famously traditional and very pricey Chinese soup. Ginseng and exotic mushrooms, smartly packaged, are very much aimed at a high-end consumer market. Some of these are now illegal and the class discussed briefly the challenge to Durivault of getting through Swiss customs with these tools of his trade.

The rosé was very good, Gaston's famous dish not quite up to the wine

The evening wound its way through a remarkable [Gaston Lagaffe concoction](#) (he's a French cartoon character), a classic Vaud dish of cabbage sausage with leeks and potatoes, a beautiful 100-year-old duck egg served with pork floss, to end with a very bland sea cucumber with seaweed. On a nearby table were several condiments to liven it up.

For many foreigners in Switzerland, part of the fun of living here is experimenting with neighbours' and co-workers' foods from around the world and learning to appreciate new taste combinations. Alimentation bizarre takes this a step further, encouraging students to be bolder in mixing flavours, smells, textures.

Holidays such as American Thanksgiving, Hanukkah and Christmas are coming up, a season when people tend to cook traditional foods and serve them with their traditional wines. For people who have brought old family customs with them from elsewhere it isn't always easy to find the ingredients and reproduce a classic meal.

This could be the year to spring a surprise on family and guests. You might want to learn a bit about how our taste buds work first.

[Aliments bizarres, La Longeraie](#) hotel and conference centre in Morges, was held 20-22 November 2008

Photos can be viewed larger by clicking on them, or view the complete album on the [GL photos pages](#).

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