

Can insects help clean up palm oil's tarnished image?

DUBAI: A pioneering entrepreneur believes insects can help improve the reputation of the palm oil industry, which for years has been accused of causing widespread deforestation, while slashing commercial farming's voracious water use.

Patrick Crowley, founder of Chapul, the first insect protein foods company in the United States, is proposing a "circular economy" for palm oil farmers so that waste and byproducts are used for farming insects on plantations. "The problem is the human behavior of clearing rainforests and peat bogs. It's not palm. It's the practice. That's how I see it," Crowley said. Palm oil is the world's most widely used edible oil, found in everything from margarine to soap, but has faced scrutiny in recent years from green groups and consumers, who have blamed its production for forest loss, fires and worker exploitation.

Crowley's insect plan, already being piloted for four years in Indonesia, the world's biggest palm oil producer, involves using empty palm fruit bunches that are often burned or left to rot after being processed. This waste has little or no market value but is high in fiber, the 40-year-old former hydrologist-turned-CEO said on the sidelines of a conference in Dubai on food production in areas with poor soils and water scarcity. Natural fungi and bacteria are added to this palm fruit waste to start the fermentation process, increasing its protein content and making it more digestible for insects, he said.

Black soldier flies, which are good at converting waste into protein, are given this waste just once before they are then ready to be harvested and fed to farmed fish, probably the world's fastest growing food-producing sector. Such insects replace fish meal, which is becoming increasingly scarce and expensive, and palm plantations are

attractive because they provide "the largest concentration of homogenous waste" that can be converted into feed with consistent quality, said Crowley.

Scientists say insect waste, known as frass, is also a great natural fertilizer and can go back into plantations to help boost palm yields, Crowley said. "We're already seeing an increase in productivity and decrease in use of pesticides in our pilot," he said.

Crowley was looking at ways to cut agriculture's water usage - 70 percent of the world's freshwater is currently used for farming - when watching a TED talk on insects made him "a reluctant entrepreneur." He used crowdfunding to set up Chapul - the Aztec word for grasshopper - a year before the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) published a report on insects.

The agency highlighted that they emit fewer greenhouse gases and less ammonia than cattle or pigs, require less land and water - and there are more than 1,900 edible insect species. Crowley said a consortium of partners bought land on Sumatra island to scale up their 2,000 square meters (0.2 hectare) pilot facility into five farms of five hectares each.

These farms would use a total of 1 million tons of waste per year, produce 200,000 tons of larvae, and save 20 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions, he added. Eduardo Mansur, director of land and water division at the FAO, said it is not only important but also necessary to transform the economic systems into circular models. "Is it possible to do it at once in all sectors? No, but we have to start where we can and agriculture sector, especially water in agriculture, offers a lot of opportunities" he said. "But we have to do it at a scale that will have positive impact to the planet." — Reuters

French gastronomes savor sake

PARIS: The sommelier lingers over her glass, taking in the bouquet while clutching a spoon of caviar and cucumber jelly. The union of food and beverage is "magical," she declares. But Paz Levinson, head sommelier at the high-end Anne-Sophie Pic restaurant group, is not savoring a sought-after vintage from Bordeaux or Bourgogne. She is holding a glass of sake, the humble Japanese rice drink. "Sake works very well with French cuisine," says the Argentine.

France is only the 11th largest market in the world for sake: total sales remain below two million euros (\$2.2 million) per year. But its consumption is on the up — imports increased by some 160 percent between 2012 and 2017. Anne-Sophie Pic — head chef and owner of the eponymous restaurant group — has won eight Michelin stars in her career, and she is a sake convert. She first used the drink in her recipes before adding it to the wine list. Other hotels and restaurants are equally keen.

In a growing market, entrepreneurs have sniffed an opportunity: French sake. Two companies already produce the drink domestically — both in wine-growing regions. Takuma Inagawa, a French-educated Japanese brewer, has a different idea. He wants to start production in an old warehouse in Fresnes, a town just south of

Paris. Despite his Japanese heritage and the industrial surroundings of Fresnes, he is keen to imbue the drink with the best French traditions. "We wanted local, French rice," says Inagawa, whose warehouse holds hundreds of bags marked "Camargue rice".

"The French are ready to accept sake but, with the trend towards a sustainable environment, there is a potential for French sake," says the 31-year-old, whose company Wakaze was set up in Japan making flavored versions of the alcohol.

He hopes eventually to use Burgundy oak barrels to age some of his product — believing this will please French and Japanese drinkers, as he has already produced a run of 17,000 bottles in his homeland. Sake began to get popular in France about 15 or 20 years ago, according to expert Sylvain Huet.

He says a "sushi boom" led to a "sake boom" in the restaurants and dining rooms on Rue Sainte-Anne, a Parisian street near the Louvre known as Little Tokyo because of the proliferation of Japanese businesses. But the impact was initially limited to that small area of Paris.

Huet though believes France has got a taste for the drink: "Over the next 10 years, the market in France will increase fivefold, even tenfold," he says. Huet set up his own Sake Fair in 2014 and says he catered to over 5,100 visitors in this year's edition. Similarly, sommelier Xavier Thuizat has also been enchanted by the drink, establishing his own tasting competition — "Kura Master" — in 2016. He says he hit an impasse six years ago, unable to find the right drink to go with certain foods. — AFP

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