

# Cowabunga Yarchagumba

By Hugo Restall

KATMANDU—Samuel Johnson once said that it was a brave man who first ate an oyster. Well, what about the first man who found a dead maggot with a plant growing out of it and popped it in his mouth?

Strange as it might seem, many people around Asia regard just such an unappetizing snack as a potent pick-me-up. *Cordyceps sinensis* is better known as *dongchong xiacao* in Chinese, *semi-take* in Japanese and *yarchagumba* in Nepali, all meaning “winter insect, summer plant.” In reality, it is two organisms, the larva of the Himalayan bat moth and the *Cordyceps* fungus. The spores attack the larva while it lives beneath the ground, effectively mummifying it before the mushroom sprouts out of its body.

Even though it is found primarily in Nepal and Tibet, and is easy to buy in most Chinese apothecary shops around the world, the herb was largely unknown in Nepal until just a few years ago. But as demand from China expanded dramatically, collecting and exporting *yarchagumba* has quickly become big business and an important source of income for poor Nepali farmers in the Dolpa district.

The picking season is from May to June because the snow melts, revealing the larvae. Farmers sell the worms for about \$1,500 per kilogram, and the price then multiplies as the product passes through multiple middlemen. Both the Nepal government and the Maoist rebels try to take their cut, with the result that most of the *yarchagumba* is smuggled over the border into Tibet.

Still, some Nepali businessmen are looking for ways to capitalize on their country's newly discovered natural resource. Aloo Shrestha's family was originally in the carpet-making business, but the competition from low-cost producers in India and China got too fierce. So he decided to found Everest Herbs and produce a line of teas based on ingredients found at home. Thanks to his entrepreneurial drive, you can get your dose of *yarchagumba* in a teabag, instead of having to cook in a soup.

So what does *yarchagumba* do

for you? Mr. Shrestha, who has an MBA degree from American University, is deliberately shy about making claims of miraculous powers. When his tea first came out 14 months ago, some of the local media hyped it as a “herbal Viagra.” Naturally that sparked a surge in sales, but he tried not to encourage prurient interest. “We thought about using this selling point, but it is a long-term business, it would be very risky.”

The drug got a big boost

try has its own regulations governing herbal medicine.

Meanwhile, herbal tea is a surprisingly high-risk business in Nepal. Mr. Shrestha says he doesn't buy directly from the farmers, since that is “tedious and sometimes dangerous.” Already there are power struggles in the countryside to control the *yarchagumba* supply, not to mention the inherent dangers of roaming around at such high altitudes. But the biggest obstacle to the trade is the



Nepalese tea with a twist.

when Chinese coach Ma Junren used it in the mid-1990s as one of the main ingredients in his cocktail of performance-enhancing herbs that supposedly helped his runners win a string of gold medals in international competitions. Some believe it enhances immunity and helps prevent heart disease and strokes.

But Mr. Shrestha promotes *yarchagumba* only as a “natural rejuvenator,” much like ginseng. “It adds mental, physical and sexual energy,” he says coyly. And of course people need to consume the tea for a long period to see any effect. The tea itself has a fairly low concentration of the herb, about 5%, with the rest made up of other ingredients that have a stimulative effect, such as, well, tea.

Mr. Shrestha is struggling to establish his brand in other Asian markets where consumers are already familiar with the medicine. In Katmandu the tea is available, but is mainly a curiosity, since at almost \$5 for 25 tea bags it is too expensive for most Nepalis. So far the tea is available primarily in Japan and Malaysia, but finding other distributors is slow because each coun-

try has its own regulations governing herbal medicine. Even Everest Herbs was forced to delay moving to a new factory just 20 kilometers outside Katmandu because of Maoist activity.

*Yarchagumba* is already well known and popular in Russia, Mr. Shrestha claims, and in Korea it is sometimes eaten with rice. Another possibility is to create an alcoholic drink with the worm at the bottom, much like tequila. Eating the worm in this case could really have some aphrodisiac effect.

Mr. Shrestha has also thought about branching out into a sports drink like Thailand's Red Bull, but importing the machinery would be difficult in Nepal, and making a profit early on would be challenging in such a small home market. Still, it's not hard to imagine a *yarchagumba* drink catching on among Western kids looking for something new to gross out their friends. A German company is apparently sniffing around, offering to help with quality control. Is it only a matter of time before we're all drinking *yarchagumba* tonics on the way to the gym?

Mr. Restall is editor of *The Far Eastern Economic Review*.