Serpents in jars: the snake wine industry in Vietnam

R. Somaweera
N. Somaweera

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11609/JoTT.o2361.1251-60

Abstract

Exploitation of snakes in Vietnam takes place for different purposes, and among them the snake wine industry is prominent but has received far less attention than other dealings, such as the pet trade. Despite widespread commercialisation there is a general lack of information about this snake trade, which makes it difficult to evaluate its magnitude and impact on snake populations. This study documents the use of snakes in snake wine in four cities in Vietnam through surveys conducted in 127 locations selling snake wine in September 2009. This study provides a list of species used along with the number of individuals observed. While none of the species involved are listed in the IUCN Red List, seven species are listed in the Vietnam Red Data Book, of which five are regulated by CITES. On the other hand, the most abundant species used in the trade, Xenochrophis flavipunctatus, is not listed in any conservation document. The popularity and economic importance of snakes in the form of snake wine demonstrates the need for the development of sustainable use programs for these species.
Drinking homemade snake wine can be lethal, so I sought out some professionals who know what they're doing. The Cheung family's version—with added geckos—was sweet and salty, with just a touch of amphibious flavor. The wine has been in the same large glass Chinese medicine jar as some herbs, coiled cobras and... geckos. Lots of geckos. A visually disturbing cluster of geckos, their corpses suspended in the amber liquid that raced down my gullet mere moments ago. The snake wine was like a meal in a shot glass, but it actually tasted alright. A good snake wine shouldn't have a medicinal taste, and the 30-plus-year cobra and gecko tincture made by Gibson Cheung's father actually reminded me of a spiked version of the salted lemonade that is served in Thailand. Careful: In rare cases, the serpent is just hibernating. Wine-makers typically use one large snake per bottle. They might throw in roots, berries, and herbs to enhance the flavor or healing properties, or add smaller snakes, scorpions, or geckos. After filling the bottle with rice wine (whiskey is a popular alternative in Thailand and Laos), they'll leave the resulting brew to steep for months. The resulting elixir is meant to be sipped slowly and savored. The flavor of snake wine been described as earthy and likened to "rice wine with a protein finish, like a fishy chicken." Snake restaurants are mostly concentrated in Vietnam and Hong Kong. Avoid homemade brews or online sellers. Sign up for our newsletter and get the best of Gastro Obscura in your inbox. Thanks for subscribing!