



fishing EXPEDITION

WHEN CHEFS
EXPLORE THE
POSSIBILITIES OF
CAVIAR, DINERS
DISCOVER ITS
DELIGHTS.

BY AMY PATUREL



PHOTO CREDIT Petrossian

Caviar is going through a sea change. The delicacy still has an aura of privilege and wealth attached to it, but it's no longer the sole purview of the rich. Diners of more modest means are getting a taste.

Caviar's pricey eggs come from sturgeon, a white fish that has been swimming in the Caspian Sea and Black Sea for 200 million years or more. The trouble is that caviar production is notoriously difficult. It takes anywhere from six to 25 years for the fish to grow large enough to produce eggs. That makes sturgeon roe one of the most expensive culinary delicacies, commanding up to \$400 an ounce.

"There's nothing in the world like caviar," says Christopher Klapp, general manager of Petrossian, West Hollywood, California. "It adds elegance to any dish with a range of colors, textures and flavors."

Dubbed "black pearls" by culinary connoisseurs, these extravagant eggs are appearing in dishes that appeal to the masses. They're even sometimes stocked in vending machines in suburban shopping malls. With increased availability and a slightly reduced cost, thanks to farming technology, a growing number of chefs are showcasing the luxury ingredient in new, daring, even bizarre ways.

CAVIAR 101

Caviar should look glossy, plump and beautiful. And when you open the tin, it should sing—like the snap, crackle, pop of Rice Krispies, but more discreet.

Once you place the brilliant beads on your tongue, eating caviar becomes a sensual experience, says Ben Pollinger, executive chef at Oceana, New York. The texture should be firm, but turn creamy when it pops in your mouth. And the consistent-sized round eggs should have a clean sea-like flavor without bitterness or excess salt.

There are myriad species of sturgeon caviar, including beluga, transmontanus, osetra and Siberian, and different grades of roe within those species. "We look at these species in the same way you look at different varieties of grapes for wine," says Klapp, who carries five different species at Petrossian. "Each species has different colors and textures and flavor profiles."

The transmontanus, or white sturgeon, for instance, is available in five grades: classic, royal, imperial, alverta president and special reserve. "In that particular species, you see a wide range of color, size, texture and flavor," says Klapp. "But if you go to a different product, like Siberian caviar, there are only two grades, and both are relatively consistent. You don't see as wide of a variation in flavor or color. They're mostly jet-black, with a few hints of gray."

Each of five different species of caviar at Petrossian has its own color, texture and flavor profile.

IN THE PANTRY fishing expedition

Connoisseurs revere beluga as the best of the best. “There’s no duplicating it,” says Klapp. But beluga is critically endangered in the wild and has been banned for more than a decade. And it isn’t the only species of sturgeon in short supply.

A SEA OF CHANGE

Industry experts view sturgeon fishing as “gold mining,” because the caviar trade is so profitable. It’s also corrupt. Caviar-producing wild sturgeon of all types have been smuggled, poached and overfished to the brink of extinction, according to the Washington, D.C.-based World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

During the 1990s, the total catch dramatically increased due to unprecedented illegal harvest. WWF estimated poaching activity in the Volga/Caspian basin alone at 10-12 times the legal catch. Since then, sturgeon fishing has fallen under a series of strict international quotas, and in 2008, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species banned the practice entirely.

Today the only caviar on the market comes from fish raised in tanks at farms. Industry leaders believe farm-raised sturgeon will ultimately replace wild entirely, not only stabilizing the industry, but also preserving the ancient fish in the wild.

“The last 15 years has really been a complete shift from wild caviar to farm-raised,” says Klapp. In 2005, only five farms produced caviar, compared to 12 in 2012, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Even with the farmed variety, producers must invest significant time, energy and precision technology to produce quality caviar. “The selecting of the eggs, the salting of the eggs, the storing and maturing of the eggs, all these processes require significant expertise,” says Klapp. And that’s after the fish are mature enough to produce eggs. “It’s definitely more art than science.”

Indeed, farms that raise sturgeon are like the Fort Knox of fisheries. Tanks are outfitted with intricate computer systems. Fish sport microchips that monitor temperature, oxygen levels and nutrient levels.

Once the sturgeon matures, producers have a painstaking process for creating quality caviar. They extract the eggs, wash them in cold water, and sieve them to remove the roe sack and fatty membrane. Then they salt the eggs, pack them in lacquer-lined tins and chill them before distribution. It’s no wonder industry experts say caviar will always be a luxury product.

As for beluga, few farms are willing to take on the challenge of raising such a gargantuan fish with no guarantee of success. “It’s not like you start raising fish and, magically, at 16 years you have caviar. There are a million and one things you have to do to get it right,” says Klapp.



Top: Kuro's crispy rice makes caviar approachable in both price and presentation.

Middle: Caviar is served at Oceana.

Bottom: Many dishes on the menu at Petrossian feature caviar, including this salad.

A producer who gets 15 years into the process and realizes that none of the eggs are good would risk financial ruin. “There’s much less value in the market for sturgeon meat. It’s all about the eggs,” says Klapp. “So you can see why there are few investors in the world looking to take on the challenge of farm-raising beluga sturgeon.”

The good news is, experts agree that certain varieties of farmed caviar taste as good as wild. Producers often can’t distinguish between the two.

PUSHING EGGS

Traditionally served with toast, blini or creme fraiche, caviar is now appearing in everything from soup to tacos. While experts believe that high-quality osetra, Siberian and transmontanus varieties should stand alone, today’s chefs have more opportunity than ever to experiment with lower-grade caviar.

That more affordable price point enables chefs to explore caviar in a playful way that not only tickles the palate, but also allows diners to indulge without breaking the bank. So, caviar that has a stronger flavor, a bitter note or a texture that’s less than perfect, for example, can transform a pasta dish or a salad, or something as simple as scrambled eggs.

“As a chef, you have to make caviar approachable in both price and presentation,” says Alex Becker, executive chef at Kuro at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, Hollywood, Florida. He serves caviar with pasta, rice, even fried chicken in Kuro’s signature Crispy Chicken Bun. “The goal is to make an impact on the flavor without making the dish too expensive,” Becker says.

Incorporating caviar into American staples such as scrambled eggs, salads or grilled cheese makes it more palatable to consumers who might otherwise be put off by eating fish eggs. At Petrossian, for example, caviar finagles its way into nearly every dish. Even the dirty martini is served with a caviar-stuffed olive.

“We’re trying to get people around to the idea that caviar can be an affordable luxury,” says Klapp. “Caviar shouldn’t be reserved only for fine dining and special occasions.” To that end, Petrossian tops a \$14 soft scrambled egg with caviar, and offers a \$32 caviar salad and a \$32 flatbread that gets a dollop of 20 grams of caviar.

“The flatbread is an easy way for people to experience caviar for the first time, because they’re technically eating a slice of pizza,” says Giselle Wellman, Petrossian’s executive chef.

The real challenge, of course, is to make caviar sing in a dish to ensure its delicate flavor and texture isn’t upstaged by other flavors. The best way to achieve that goal, says Wellman, is to view it as a flavor profile and go from there.

Caviar is salty and has a clean ocean flavor and a signature pop that needs to balance with other ingredients. Safe bets include things such as eggs, onions, chives, creme fraiche and sour cream. Once you feel comfortable there, you can get a little more creative.

To make the experience less intimidating, Petrossian sells dried caviar powder, with a shelf life of six months, that chefs can easily incorporate into myriad dishes. “You can sprinkle it into your eggs, just like pepper,” says Wellman. Or make a caviar-dusted rim for a signature martini.

Because Wellman has unlimited access to the powder, she has infused it into taco shells, shortbread cookies and macaroons. “It’s a play on salty and sweet,” she says. And the results are interesting. “Some people love it, some people hate it. But few have tried anything like it.”

Still, traditionalists maintain that caviar is best appreciated on its own, or with frozen Russian vodka or dry Champagne. These days, you might see caviar paired with Belgian ale—something light and crisp that doesn’t compete with caviar’s flavor.

But if you ask a true connoisseur, caviar is best enjoyed cold and eaten with a spoon. ■

AN EGG BY ANY OTHER NAME

Traditionally, the term “caviar” referred only to roe from wild sturgeon in the Caspian Sea and Black Sea (beluga, osetra and sevruga caviars). Today, chefs use roe from the other fish to add a dash of the exotic to dishes.

TROUT ROE Bright-orange in color, mild in flavor and with a great pop, trout roe is a classic accouterment for sushi. “Not a lot of chefs take on the challenge of using it outside the sushi bar, so you can incorporate it into a recipe and create a stunning dish that a lot of people don’t come into contact with,” says Christopher Klapp, general manager of Petrossian, West Hollywood, California, whose menu boasts jicama-smoked trout tacos featuring trout roe infused with tequila.

SALMON ROE With a stronger, bolder flavor than other roe, salmon roe makes a statement in pasta or on a baked potato. It’s a much bigger egg than caviar—almost the size of a pea—and it tastes like salmon.

PIKE ROE The crunchy golden grains of pike roe are less common, but they add a mild, nutty flavor to salads, potatoes and pasta dishes.

KEEPING CAVIAR

Most household refrigerators are too warm for caviar. The ideal temperature for these delicate eggs is 28°F–30°F—ice-cold but never frozen. (Because of the high fat and oil content, the eggs don’t freeze at 28°F.)

An unopened vacuum-sealed can of caviar will last up to two months at this temperature. But once you crack the tin, it’s best consumed within four or five hours, says Christopher Klapp, general manager at Petrossian, West Hollywood, California.

To serve, use spoons made of glass, bone, tortoiseshell or wood, and if you want the best, mother-of-pearl. Metal utensils of any sort are thought to degrade the taste of caviar, but some say that’s a myth.