



PERKS

All in a roe

It once served as peasant food, even pig fodder. But in modern times, caviar has been reserved for the wealthiest tables, thanks to European royalty and the likes of Charles Ritz, who introduced it as a permanent menu item in the five-star Paris hotel bearing his name in the 1920s.

The delectable fish eggs come from the bellies of wild sturgeon. Beluga caviar, which is dark and large, is generally considered to be the ne plus ultra. Paler osetra and smaller-sized sevruga rate second and third. The roe can't be harvested without killing the fish that produce it, and stocks have dwindled dramatically in waters where the tastiest and most-prized varieties come from: the Caspian Sea in Russia and Iran. As a result, this past January, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a United Nations body, stopped virtually all legal export of caviar from those areas.

Fresh caviar won't last longer than about a year in commercial

storage or three months unopened in your home fridge. So be warned: by this winter, anyone who claims to be selling Caspian Sea caviar will in all likelihood be offering a product that's either poached or fake.

What's a caviar lover to do? Well, there are a couple of options. You can stock up now on the tiny bit that remains. Or you can

Be warned: by this winter, you will very likely be unable to find the best caviar for any price

follow the lead of the Endangered Fish Alliance, a Canadian coalition founded by top chefs and conservationists aiming to interest foodies in sustainable alternatives: farmed white sturgeon caviar; farmed paddlefish roe; farmed rainbow trout roe; whitefish roe and wild Pacific

salmon roe. The group's members hail from a cross-country list of high-end eateries: Vancouver's Raincity Grill, Edmonton's Blue Pear, Ottawa's Courtyard Restaurant, Michael Stadtländer's Eigensinn Farm in Singhampton, Ont., Fox Harb'r Golf Resort & Spa in Wallace, N.S., and numerous critically acclaimed fine-dining establishments in Toronto, among them Avalon, Chiado, the

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Jamie Kennedy Wine Bar, Scaramouche, Splendido and the formidable Susur.

Kevin Maniaci is head chef at Inn on the Twenty, a destination restaurant in Jordan, Ont., that is a member of the alliance. "We use a Canadian sturgeon caviar from Abitibi, Que.," he says. And as Maniaci insists, caviar lovers need not despair: the Canadian product "compares closest to the osetra—it's a medium-sized egg with an earthy flavour. Often we'll use it in a champagne-and-caviar cream sauce, one of our signature dishes."

In that recipe, champagne is reduced over heat. "We add a touch of cream, and at the very last minute, we throw in half a teaspoon of the Canadian caviar," Maniaci says. "You don't want to cook it, because then it tastes fishy. We also do a chive-and-caviar crème fraîche, which is an excellent garnish for fresh oysters or any kind of seafood."

Canadian caviar generally comes from the white sturgeon, which falls under provincial jurisdiction. It retails in season for about \$70 an ounce. However, the federal government has recently proposed white sturgeon as a candidate for protection under our federal Species at Risk Act. If that proceeds, even farmed Canadian caviar will disappear. "One of the interesting twists is that there's an illegal market for Canadian sturgeon," says Dan Sneep of Fisheries and Oceans Canada in Vancouver. "In some cases, they disguise it as beluga and sell it at a great markup. There are links to organized crime—I've even heard that the Russian Mafia and the New York Mafia may be involved."

Fear not, however. Some suppliers still have true, legal beluga, osetra and sevruga in stock, among them Amjad Ansari of Caviar Center International in Montreal's Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood. (He also carries salmon and trout roe, lumpfish caviar, wild sturgeon caviar from Canada, and farmed from the U.S. and Europe.) Ansari's clients include the casinos in Ottawa and Montreal, as well as such noted eateries as Queue de Cheval, Troika, the Ritz-Carlton and the W hotel in his home city. "Some of the farm-raised caviar is by far good enough," Ansari says. "It's very difficult to distinguish, even for someone used to eating caviar."

But for a true connoisseur? "The taste and look is different," Ansari concedes of the best of the best. "The way the caviar is in your mouth, that feeling that you have, the roundness and hardness of the eggs, and the taste—like wine—there is so much

in it." Ansari recommends eating caviar simply. "I like it just plain by spoon. The real caviar—that is really the way to eat it: just a big spoonful."

But where to find even a spoonful nowadays? Caviar Direct in downtown Toronto's St. Lawrence Market has no Caspian Sea product left, but does carry premium Canadian sturgeon caviar. A little further afield, the Caviar Centre in suburban North York estimates that they will have Caspian Sea beluga, osetra and sevruga (\$160 to \$200 an ounce) for "a couple more months," while the farm-raised European sturgeon caviar and Canadian varieties it carries (in the summer months) run about \$70. The Iranian House of Caviar in Burnaby, B.C., recently ran out of the beluga it had left.

"The price has skyrocketed—it's now four times what it was," laments Alex Austriaco, executive chef at Toronto's Windsor Arms Hotel, whose Tea Room specializes in afternoon champagne and caviar. "The only one we serve is the Iranian, which is unpasteurized, versus the Russian, which tends to be saltier but doesn't have the true flavour of the egg itself." Austriaco also offers farmed Canadian white sturgeon, but finds many customers actually prefer a "man-made" product called Avruga, produced from smoked herring. "The texture is somewhat compromising, but the flavour and the look are quite appealing," he notes. "It has a creamy texture, the colour glistens, it pops when you eat it, but there are no actual eggs in it." New products have also emerged, Austriaco adds, including Sea-Gem caviar, which is actually not fish roe at all, but kelp.

For the moment, Austriaco can still prepare a brunch or tea-time treat of champagne and Caspian Sea caviar, served with light crêpes, along with capers, crème fraîche, chives, shallots and eggs. "A mother-of-pearl spoon is quite essential," he says, "because it keeps the egg as natural as possible—as opposed to sterling silver." Austriaco is still getting orders for the vanishing delicacy; for two, he expects the bill would run about \$420 for sevruga, plus tax and tip, and about \$650 for beluga.

"Yes, there is no equal to the caviar from the Caspian Sea," Montreal's Ansari concedes wistfully. "I hope we haven't lost it forever. But if we could save the sturgeon species, that would be great, even if that means we don't sell the caviar or we sell less of it. If really and honestly there's an embargo to let the fish population recuperate, I welcome that." SARAH B. HOOD