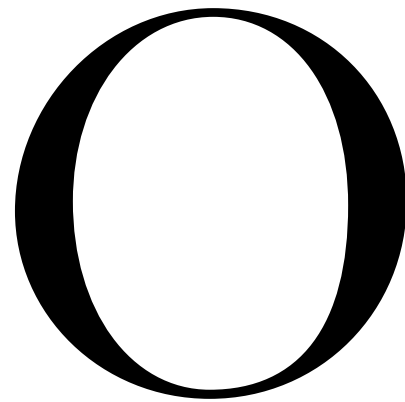


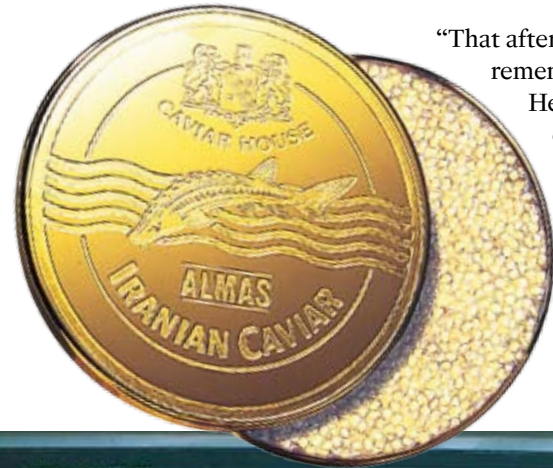


Roe to Ruin?

CAVIAR MAY BE ONE OF THE MOST EXPENSIVE DELICACIES KNOWN TO MAN, BUT THE COST IS PROVING TOO GREAT FOR THE ENDANGERED STURGEON. **ANDY ROUND** DECIDES IT'S BETTER TO GROW YOUR OWN



IN LONDON'S PRESTIGIOUS PICCADILLY is a simply decorated restaurant where two women once ate one of the most expensive meals in British history. They floated into the Caviar House & Prunier on a blustery afternoon in a whirlwind of designer shopping bags, plonked themselves down under the warm, muted lighting and ran manicured nails down the menu. Oscietre, Sevruga, Beluga... Nope it wasn't there. They decided to order off the menu. ¶ They called for Almas Beluga caviar. In case you don't move in the exclusive circles of caviar connoisseurs, Almas is the rarest fish egg on the planet, farmed (incredibly) from albino sturgeons that are at least 80 years old.



"That afternoon the ladies ate US\$31,000 worth," remembers Caviar House & Prunier's Lucie Herring. Yes, US\$31,000 worth of fish eggs. Pound for pound, at the time of this astonishing afternoon feast, it would have been cheaper to eat gold. Why? Perhaps, simply, because they could. "For connoisseurs there's nothing like that light delicate flavour, that creaminess, that subtle flavour of the ocean," says Herring. "We have one regular

customer who comes in and sits at the bar and enjoys eating 250 grammes of Beluga every visit. That's a lot of caviar for one person; when I'm with a friend I usually only share a 50-gramme tin. That's enough."

At present there's a four-year waiting list for Almas and it costs about US\$1,800 per 50 grammes. For the same quantity of Beluga you'll need to find US\$1,000. No wonder sturgeons are so rare and so valuable. Forget the golden goose, this fish is packed with black gold.

Still, depleted sturgeon stocks make for depressing reading. Julia Roberson of the environmental awareness group Caviar Emptor says that numbers have declined by nearly 90 per cent in the past 20 years. Between 2004 and 2005 alone, Beluga populations fell by 45 per cent. For an ancient species that can trace its heritage back almost to prehistoric times, that's a huge pity. The problem is, the only way to harvest your caviar is by killing the fish and it takes at least five years for a sturgeon to reach a level of maturity that produces decent caviar. The replacement of stock is a long, drawn-out business.

In the 19th century, the fish were so plentiful in Russia that caviar was served as bar snacks. Today, wild sturgeon is the preserve of the wealthy. To protect the large, sharklike fish, the Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) has, with the cooperation of sturgeon-producing countries, introduced strict export controls on caviar

through, for example, registered processing plants, improved tin labelling and enforced quotas. For example, in some areas of the world such as Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine, export quotas are down to zero. Three years ago a complete import ban on Beluga was introduced in the US to protect the species although in January 2007 the ban was partially lifted.

"Pollution, illegal fishing, damming, lack of local resources, plankton and alien species have all put pressure on the sturgeon," CITES' David Morgan tells *Asia Tatler*. "There's also incredible demand for caviar, particularly from new Russia. We want to see the continued fishing of wild caviar because we believe it incentivises sustainable trade, but we would always urge people to buy from CITES-approved sources."

The bad news for sturgeon is that the illegal trade is thriving. In the book *McMafia*, author Misha Glenny writes how annual production on the Caspian Sea fell from 26,000 tons of sturgeon



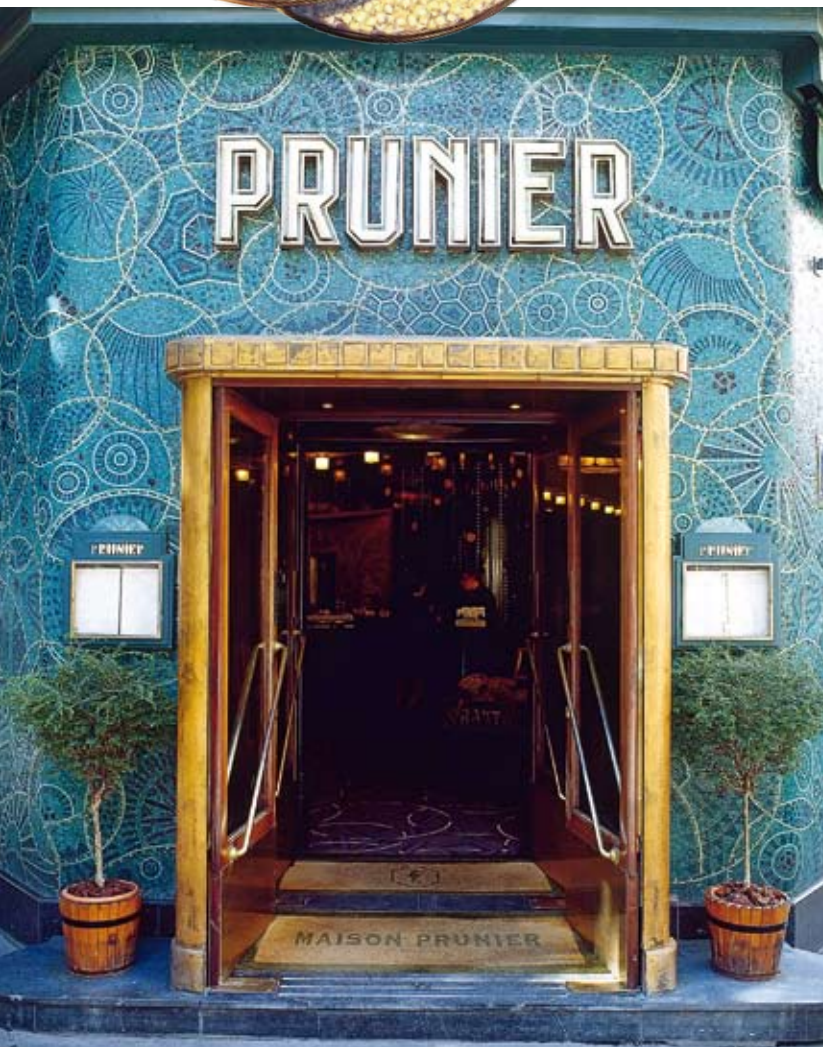
ABOVE Environmentally sustainable alternatives from sturgeon, paddlefish and wild Alaska salmon

in 1992 to 760 tons in 2004. "When the eggs have made the long journey from the Ural to dining tables in Paris, they will be worth US\$7,000 a kilo. The mark-up of 100,000 per cent is the sort of price hike that can tempt even the most law-abiding citizen... and the only investment needed to harvest the caviar is a net and knife."

So where does this leave connoisseurs like those Caviar House ladies? Are millions of dainty mother-of-pearl caviar spoons gathering dust? Hardly. Shrewd businessmen have been creating home-grown sturgeon in aqua farms around the world. "There are farms throughout Spain, France, Italy and the US," Roberson says. "There are producers that anticipated the problems of supply and demand long ago and invested in sturgeon production. I remember one place in France that couldn't get finance 15 years ago. It's doing exceptionally well now."

Cornel Ceapa, owner of Acadian Sturgeon and Caviar Inc in Canada, admits it's not an easy

"For connoisseurs there's nothing like that creaminess, that subtle flavour of the ocean"



FROM LEFT The front of the Caviar House & Prunier in Piccadilly; close up of a Beluga sturgeon



FROM LEFT Sturgeon fishing in the Caspian Sea; non-lethal removal of eggs from a sturgeon in Kazakhstan

NEST EGG
Armen
Petrossian, CEO
of Petrossian,
one of the
largest providers
of caviar, in his
Paris caviar and
vodka boutique



The Beluga is the most valuable fish in the world, the best way to save it is to cut it out of the market completely

business to start. "It's challenging because it takes at least five years to obtain caviar then there's the long-term financing and technology that is still under development," he says. "But the market supply is way under demand. The last data I know from 2006 said that aquaculture supplies 80 to 100 tons of caviar, the wild produces about 20 tons, while the demand is estimated at 500 to 3,000 tons."

Ceapa says there is room for expansion in the aqua-farm caviar market and he expects greater competition from leading meat producers, such as China, in the future. "I think aquaculture will completely replace the wild products but it will take time until supply meets demand. We do believe that farmed caviar will increase in popularity as people are more aware of the necessity that the environment has to be preserved and sustainable food produced."

It is a philosophy followed by Caviar House, which joined forces with caviar producers Prunier four years ago. The company, which had enjoyed investment from designer Yves Saint Laurent, was the first aqua-farm in France to start producing caviar in 1920. It now markets six brands in addition to a recently launched Yves



ABOVE Three-month-old Beluga sturgeon bred through artificial reproduction at a Kazakhstan fish hatchery

Saint Laurent limited-edition 125-gramme tin for US\$600.

This is all very well and good, but the increased trend for sturgeon farming has not gone down well with all environmentalists. Ellen Pikitch, director of the Pew Institute for Ocean Science describes the process as a "grievous mistake," she says "The Beluga is the most valuable fish in the world, and when a fish reaches that level of value and is so threatened, the best way to save it is to cut it out of the market completely."

Clearly it's a debate that will rage across dinner tables around the globe. However, an interesting twist has been the development of Sturgeon Ltd, a company based in Saint-Genis-de-Saintonge in France. This firm, owned by the Boucher family, has been producing caviar from its Russian stock for more than 15 years.

Originally, the company used to farm trout until an aquaculture expert showed them how to mine black gold. Sturgeon Ltd's success has been so phenomenal that it's raising young fish to be sent back to restock Russian rivers. Good news for caviar lovers everywhere. ■

Seriously Good Taste

MANY CONNOISSEURS believe the best way to taste the quality of roe is from the back on your hand. There should be no oily residue or fishy smell. Never use a metal spoon as this oxidises caviar and ruins flavour.

KNOW YOUR CAVIAR

■ **ALMAS** "Golden" caviar is the rarest variety, taken from the eggs of albino sturgeon around 80 years old. Prices start from US\$1,800 for a 50-gramme tin.

■ **BELUGA** is the biggest of the sturgeons and is so rare that barely 100 are caught every year. The Beluga has the biggest eggs, which are prized for their large grain and fine skin. From US\$840 for 50 grammes.

■ **OSCIETRE** offers a great variety of caviar size, flavour and colour.

Even in young fish, the eggs are large with a flavour described as "walnuts and cream." A 50-gramme tin costs US\$420.

■ **SEVRUGA** is the smallest and most populous of the sturgeons with grey-black eggs that have a powerful flavour. Of all the caviars, it's usually the least expensive, with prices starting from US\$350 for 50 grammes.

Information and prices: Caviar House & Prunier



IMAGES: CAVIAR EMPLOYER; CAVIAR HOUSE & PRUNIER; GETTY; CORBIS

