

# Let 'em eat caviar

ROMANIAN IMMIGRANT **CORNEL CEAPA** HAS SPENT SEVEN YEARS BUILDING AN INTERNATIONAL APPETITE FOR NEW BRUNSWICK STURGEON AT HIS OWN LONELY EXPENSE. NOW, THANKS TO HIS VISION AND DRIVE, HE MIGHT JUST PUT THIS PART OF THE PLANET ON THE MAP AS A PLENTIFUL NEW WORLD SUPPLIER OF AN ENDANGERED OLD WORLD DELICACY.

*By Alec Bruce*



Dr. Cornel Ceapa and  
Dorina Ceapa with  
Acadian Sturgeon caviar.



(FAR LEFT): Of the 600 to 700 sturgeon they capture each year, Atlantic Sturgeon harvests fewer than 300 — the remainder are tagged and returned to the ocean. Also pictured, Dr. Ceapa with shortnose sturgeon broodstock at the Atlantic Sturgeon hatchery.

**It's** clear I've caught Dr. Cornel Ceapa in the middle of something seminal. On this crisp January morning, the otherwise cheerful Romanian emigré appears a tad rushed, even distracted, as he answers questions about the passion that ensconces him in the prettily arranged riverside community of Carter's Point, just north of Saint John, New Brunswick. "It's all quite complicated," he breathes heavily. "Let's just say we've had to go through a lot of trial and error. I really should start on my memoirs or something, but I don't have time. Today, for example, I'm driving to Halifax with a shipment of male gonads."

Pardon?

"Yeah, I have to get them to my freight forwarder who will send them to one of my customers in Italy. It's amazing what you can do with these things. In this case, they'll be extracting some chemicals useful for making cosmetics. It's exciting when you think about it. But I've got to keep them cool, so I'm in a bit of a hurry."

By all means, I venture. After all, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. And, evidently, a sturgeon's ... um ... balls wait for no one. Still, the 43-year-old biologist-cum-businessman, who packed in a good job at the University of Romania and packed up his wife and son in to settle in this bucolic setting seven years ago, might also agree that his arrival at this stage in his entrepreneurial development has been less about "hurry" than hurry-up-and-wait. In fact, his journey has been a tough, often unorthodox, study in vision, enterprise and, most crucially, patience.

Indeed, his Acadian Sturgeon and Caviar Inc. has just won a three-year battle (Ceapa prefers to characterize this as a "series of discussions") with federal regulators to export its caviar outside Canada. The victory affords the tiny company, which employs five people during the frantic sum-

mer season and fewer in the winter, access to international markets where knowledge of, and appreciation for, the salty delicacy is better and higher than in The Great White North. This heralds a much-needed cash-flow boost for the operation's hatchery and processing plant.

Currently, Ceapa explains, the company buys wild sturgeon from fishermen along the Saint John River to produce frozen and smoked fillets and reproductive organs for sale to markets in Canada, Europe, Asia and the United States. It also ships, from its hatchery, fertilized eggs and larvae for augmenting both wild and farmed populations around the world. "For a small business, we do ok," he says. "Our annual sales run about \$350,000. You know, it pays the bills."

The agreement with Ottawa over caviar (which are, for the culinarily challenged, unfertilized eggs) suggests, to Ceapa at least, that business is about to boom. "It's going to be a very, very good year," he predicts. "And this will get me closer to my next step of building my own grow-out operation and becoming a fully-integrated aquaculture company. I already have 6.5 acres picked out close to the hatchery and processing plant. We are now in quite promising times."

Fishing, whether harvesting the leviathan depths or raising populations in pens, is not for the faint-hearted. Almost everything that can go wrong does — from running afoul of government regulations and environmental standards to confronting fickle consumer tastes and dilettantish markets. In this context, you'd have to be an entrepreneur in possession of extraordinarily deep pockets or in possession of nothing even casually resembling a full set of marbles to farm sturgeon, which are, in fact, endangered in many parts of the world.

As it happens, Ceapa is neither, but he does acknowledge the unique and exquisite difficulties in his chosen vocation. "First of

all, this is a very long-term return situation," he says. "In our climate, you are looking at a seven to 10 year investment before you can look at any big dollars from caviar. There's also the technology, which is still pretty new in many parts of the world. Then, there's the marketing angle, which is the most important thing in any business. And markets for luxury products are not always easy. You are dealing with a buying cycle that's not always consistent. And with non-caviar sturgeon products, like the meat, you are actually educating markets. So, in many respects it's been like building from the ground up."

Ceapa's personal circumstances haven't made the chore any easier. The PhD, who had taught sturgeon biology in Romania and worked in respected research centres across Europe for more than a decade, arrived in Canada only to live the classic immigrant experience: As far as the banks were concerned, he was a blank slate, a nobody. "I was like a teenager trying to borrow \$100,000 to get a business going," he laughs ruefully. "I didn't have a credit score. I didn't have a house. I didn't have anything. It would have been easier, I guess, to give up."

That he didn't says more about the virulence of the entrepreneurial virus than it does about the barriers he has been determined to bust along the way. And something else, perhaps: "You know, maybe it has been a leap of faith to come here," he muses. "But maybe it would have been a leap of faith to stay in Romania. Society, there, has been changing ever since the fall of communism, but not fast enough. It'll take a generation or more before it does, in my opinion. I have always wanted some excitement in my life."

His new homeland has been able to provide at least that, and from the moment he stepped off the plane. Back in 2003, he actually had choices: Which institute of higher education, the University of British

Columbia or the University of New Brunswick, would best support his post-doctoral research on the science and commerce of farming sturgeon? He received offers from both. "If I was looking for a change, I was also looking for a chance," he says. "Building my own business was never too far back in my mind. UNB came through with the best set of options. And I never looked back."

In retrospect, New Brunswick's traditional fishery in sturgeon seemed made to order for his purposes. Its harvesters respected the environment and understood the limits of the resource. They took no more from nature than nature would allow to maintain wild stocks. That, says Ceapa, was a revelation. "I spent my formative years trying to persuade people along the Danube River that they had to embrace conservation of the species, that they had to invest in and develop aquaculture before it was too late," he says. "Unfortunately, they didn't."

As a consequence of his and others' conclusions, a recent report prepared by several European experts — who had studied the condition of sturgeon stocks in the inland seas of the caucasian region of the continent — declared: "Because of their long reproductive cycle, long migrations and sensitivity to environmental conditions, many species are under severe threat from overfishing,

poaching, water pollution and damming of rivers. Over 85 per cent of sturgeon species are classified as at risk of extinction, making them more critically endangered than any other group of species in these waters."

Not so, though, in the tidal flats of the Fundy Basin where sturgeon remained (and still remain) plentiful when Ceapa arrived. In fact, the local resource was so promising, he formed a joint venture with an established aquaculture firm, a salmon grow-out. "They are very amazing guys," he says of his former partners with whom he parted company in 2004. "We got a lot of research money, however they acknowledged the difficulty of the business and that it takes so long to make a return. So, in the end, they assessed the risk and decided that it was too much for them. They quit, and I was left wondering what to do. Should I find another partner, or should I go it on my own?"

He knew the banks were obviously skeptical. So where could he raise the necessary start-up capital? "Yes, yes," he almost giggles, "I was pretty innovative in this, after all. What I knew for sure is that I understood the science and technology. Plus, I had some potential clients from my contacts in my previous life in Europe. But the client who made the difference was one in North Carolina who was pretty desperate to get their

hands on my fish. I had already done some consulting for those guys. So, I negotiated a deal with them, in which they paid me half of what I needed upfront. Eventually, they flew me down at their expense to meet the man they were communicating with through email. But I got what I needed to qualify for provincial funding and bank backing."

In 2005, he turned the taps on at his hatchery. In 2010, he presided over a \$300,000 expansion of his processing plant. Today, on this January morning in 2011, he relishes what he's been able to accomplish and what he's convinced is yet to come. "The sustainable future for us is not in harvesting wild sturgeon," he says. "It's in aquaculture. We are very careful about this. We capture between 600 and 700 fish a year. Of this, we harvest fewer than 300. The rest we tag and return to the water. We do the science to ensure that we are practising sustainability, because it's right and it's also our reputation, brand and responsibility that's on the line."

The breakthrough with the feds, the slow and hard course to commercial legitimacy, the rough and regulated trade he embraced as a newcomer — a stranger in a strange land with expertise to spare, if not easily to leverage — is finally paying off.

Just as soon as he gets those fish balls off to Italy. | ABM

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