



## GOLDEN EGGS

A farm in Latvia has developed a method of extracting caviar that keeps the fish alive – and is consequently helping to save the sturgeon from extinction. By **Rose Prince**. Photographs by **Jason Lowe**

**When it comes to choosing a moment, 2009** does not appear to be the best time to introduce a solution to the caviar problem. Demand surely should not outstrip supply in these straitened times? Well, no. Even to say so is to underestimate the desire for the roe, recession or no recession. In a building on the outskirts of Riga, the capital of Latvia, a new enterprise called Mottra is thriving. It offers caviar consumers an alternative to the way roe is harvested in the wild, where the sturgeon are killed during the process, resulting in stock becoming almost extinct, and the sturgeon being listed as endangered.

Using a unique method, Mottra caviar is massaged, or 'stripped', from the fish so they are not harmed. This means that the sturgeon, kept here in tanks in conditions that imitate the wild, can spawn again and again. In farms, the fish are killed for the roe or occasionally it is removed by caesarean section. 'We are certified by the

Convention for International Trade of Endangered Species, which sees our business as a way forward to preserving the sturgeon,' Sergei Reviakin, Mottra's agent in London, says.

The night before my visit, a blizzard hits Riga, dumping three feet of snow on to the city. When we arrive at Mottra's headquarters, an old concrete factory, it is at least -10C. A path has been dug towards the entrance, where I meet Sergei Trachuk, Mottra's Russian owner. Inside the building two men have removed an osetra sturgeon from a holding tank, where the water has been warmed to encourage it to spawn. Before it can do so it is whipped out of the water, and dashed into a small 'delivery ward'. 'We do not want the sturgeon to spawn in water, or we will lose the roe,' Reviakin says. Waiting around a table in the delivery room are three masked 'midwives'. One uses an ultrasound to detect the position of the roe inside, then another begins to

massage the roe out, through the fish's urinogenital opening. A tiny cut has been made to loosen the muscle. Sergei Trachuk assures me that this heals in a very short time, that the minor surgery makes the operation more comfortable for the fish and that the fish is out of water for only two or three minutes. 'This is the only farm in the world that strips sturgeon eggs this way,' Trachuk says. 'Some use caesarean, making a large incision which must be sewn up afterwards.'

When the caviar emerges quickly from the sturgeon, in a smooth black stream, it is collected in a bowl. 'We wash it in pure spring water that is pumped into the building, before adding salt,' Reviakin says. 'We calculate the salt quantity depending on weight, then put it immediately in jars and refrigerate it.'

But the story of Mottra's sturgeon begins in the many huge concrete tanks in the building. Each tank is fed a constant flow of clean water

**Above** caviar in a gigas oyster, see recipe overleaf.

**Right** Sahsa, a worker at the Mottra factory



The sturgeon, kept at Mottra in tanks in conditions that imitate the wild, can spawn again and again

from an artesian well, replicating river flow. (Sturgeon are migratory fish that spawn in fresh water.) Each tank contains fish of a different age. 'The sturgeon must reach 4½ years old before it is mature enough to produce a good quantity of caviar,' Reviakin says. 'The eggs can make up to a total of 15 per cent of body weight.' Trachuk rears two types of sturgeon, sterlet and osetra. They also keep a few rare albino versions that produce a sought-after 'gold' caviar.

Once mature, the sturgeon measure more than 3ft long, and in one tank you can see the bodies of the osetra, coloured dark slate to pale grey, slowly swimming in the clearest water. 'There are 10 tons of fish in this tank, which should produce one ton of caviar,' Trachuk says.

In the weeks before spawning, the fish are moved into cold tanks for four months, in water below 10C, to imitate winter. They naturally 'conceive' before this time (without the need of male fish – caviar is not fertilised) but the cold conditions are essential in the development of the caviar, during which the fish are almost comatose. Ultrasound is used to check everything is progressing as it should be, then they are moved back to pools at a spring-like temperature of 20C or more, ready to spawn.

If it seems a rigmarole to endure, in order to drop a few eggs on to blini, the alternative means the continued illegal poaching of wild fish. About 350 tons of wild caviar are illegally

#### Oyster and caviar

Another romantic favourite and, if you believe in that sort of thing, an aphrodisiac.

6 gigas or native oysters, on ice or fridge-chilled  
56g caviar

Open the oysters, placing one in your hand on a folded cloth with the flat of the shell uppermost. Insert an oyster knife, or other small knife with a thin, inflexible blade, into the hinge. Keep it level; it should slip in easily until it reaches and breaks the muscle holding the shells together. Be careful and be firm, but not aggressive, or your oyster will be spoilt by shards of shell.

When the muscle breaks twist the knife and discard the flat shell. Inspect the oyster – it should look clear, and have a sweet smell of clean seawater and fresh fish. Cut the ligament that attaches the meat to the shell and flip it over. Serve the oysters in their shells with a half teaspoon of caviar on each.

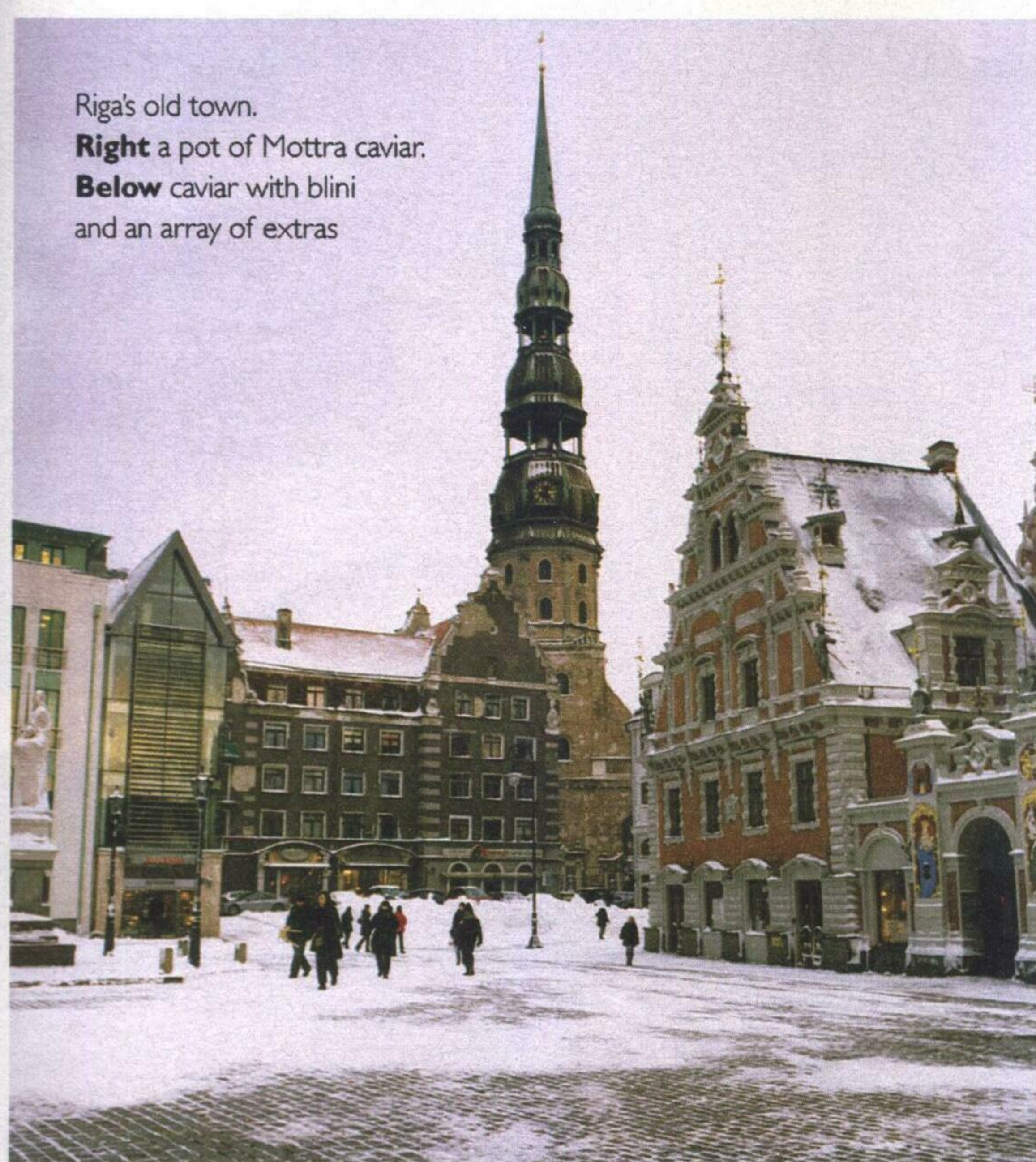
**Wine choice** Ayala Brut Majeur NV, Champagne, France £24.99, M&S. Champagne and caviar is a classic match and bubbles also happen to be fine with oysters. Do look to something that is poised and mineral rather than rich. Ayala's Brut Majeur will give pleasure on its own, while allowing the quality of your caviar and oysters to shine.



Riga's old town.

**Right** a pot of Mottra caviar.

**Below** caviar with blini and an array of extras



#### **Caviar with blini – and the works** serves 4-6

Caviar experts are rather disapproving when too many extras are served. But in Russia it is quite normal to expect a pretty arrangement of buckwheat blini or fried grated potato cakes, chopped hard-boiled egg, parsley and finely minced onion to arrive with the bowl of caviar on ice. Used lightly all these things add to the fun, and will also make a small amount go a little bit further. Ideally, caviar served from a bowl should be eaten using a little mother-of-pearl spoon as metal can taint the flavour.

#### **for the blini**

125g brown buckwheat flour  
250g fine white flour (if you want gluten-free pancakes, you could use rice flour)  
30g fresh yeast  
1 tsp caster sugar  
450ml lukewarm milk  
3 eggs, separated  
2½ tbsp soured cream  
2½ tbsp melted butter, plus extra for brushing

#### **for the rest**

1 red onion, very finely chopped  
3 hard-boiled eggs  
1 handful curly parsley, very finely chopped  
4 tbsp soured cream  
90g caviar

To make the blini: put the flours in a bowl with quarter of a teaspoon of salt. Mix the yeast with the sugar, then add the milk. Leave for 20 minutes until a foam forms on the top. Make a well in the centre of the flours and pour in the yeast mixture, beating as you go. When you have a smooth batter, leave the mixture to rise for about one and a half hours. Stir in the egg yolks, the soured cream and the melted butter. Leave to prove for 20 minutes. Whisk the egg whites until stiff and fold carefully into the bubbly pancake mixture. Heat a flat griddle or pancake pan and brush with a little melted butter; it should be hot but not smoking. Drop a dessert

spoonful of the mixture on to the pan and cook until bubbles rise to the surface and pop. Flip the pancake over and cook until puffed. Keep warm, wrapped in a cloth, on a plate.

For the other garnishes, put the onion in a separate bowl. Push the hard-boiled egg yolks through a fine sieve to make 'mimosas' gratings, and serve separately from the egg white which should be finely chopped. Serve with parsley and sour cream in two more bowls. Put all in the centre of the table with the blini. Serve the caviar in a glass bowl, positioned over a larger bowl of crushed ice.

#### **Vodka choice**

£14.99, Waitrose. The eggs, parsley and raw onion make this a tough bedfellow for wine. When it is presented in the traditional Russian way like this I prefer the other classic caviar partner, vodka. This Polish potato vodka is rich and creamy with host of herbal flavours that work a treat with the parsley and onion – serve cold, but not freezing.



harvested each year. So, in measures to protect the sturgeon, since 1996 there has been a voluntary ban on wild caviar production worldwide with some quota-controlled exceptions. Worldwide export of wild and farmed caviar is about 155 tons a year, 95 tons of which was wild caviar. Iran is the largest producer of wild caviar (last year 44 per cent came from Iran) because it takes care not to overfish; other countries that export it include Russia, China, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. The Russian government has also begun a ranching programme, rearing fish in ponds or tanks to maturity, then releasing them into rivers. It seems absurdly extravagant, but that is how important these fish are to the whole region.

Sergei Trachuk is just as devoted to rearing sturgeon in captivity and producing caviar. He first became interested in aquariums as a child. A Russian, he trained as an engineer, yet dreamt of developing an exotic fish business. When the Soviet Union collapsed, he was working on the oil and gas sites in Astrakhan. 'Astrakhan was the centre for fish research and this where I came across the technology to do what I do now,' he says. 'In 1993 I began to breed osetra, growing it for meat.' He then had to take a year out with illness, moved to Riga, and in 2001 he found the present site and established Mottra.

But how to describe good caviar, when I have eaten so little? Mottra's has a clean freshwater fish flavour and the eggs separate out easily. You taste salt first, but then the richness of the roe and small explosions of fresh butter when you bite. After three courses, where it features in every recipe, it becomes easy to see why devotees will go to astonishing lengths to obtain it. What a moment in time to develop a taste for something like this, but – what the hell. As the opera diva Beverley Sills once said, 'I've lived through the garbage. I might as well dine on the caviar.' *Mottra osetra 'malossol'* (meaning lightly salted) caviar, £49.95 for 56g; £80 for 90g, is available from Harvey Nichols, Knightsbridge, London SW1 (020-7201 8632) or from [mottra.co.uk](http://mottra.co.uk)