

The new black

Caviar's extravagance is all part of its seductive charm. So can a revolutionary sustainable roe - the first to spare the lives of the sturgeon - make the grade? **John Walsh** gives his verdict

The play, I remember, pleased not the million," muses Hamlet in Act Two of the play, "twas caviare to the general." Even in 1601, when Shakespeare's First Folio was published, caviar (the English version of the French *caviare*) was thought to be a pretty special treat, for discerning nibblers only. Even earlier, in the 1550s, Francois Rabelais was calling it the finest pre-main-course titbit in the world. The fancy British and French restaurants of the late 19th century served it as reverentially as if it were the Holy Eucharist. In the 20th century, it was foodie shorthand for luxurious living, for characters from James Bond to Alexis Carrington in *Dynasty*.

The seductive little black balls of genuine caviar, which seem to vibrate on your tongue like fishy champagne bubbles, come from only one species: they're the salted roe (or eggs) of sturgeon. And *only* sturgeon. Not salmon, not tuna and certainly not Sainsbury's lumpfish, no matter how urgently the processors of ersatz caviar try to persuade you it's the same as the real thing. Only the "virgin sturgeon" (who, according to the music-hall song, "needs no urgin") will do, its spawn treasured as an aphrodisiac:

"I fed caviar to Louisa,
She's my honey, tried and true,
Now Louisa needs no urgin'
I recommend caviar to you."

Though sturgeon can be found in north America and southern France, the caviar industry is concentrated on two seas, the Caspian and the Black Sea, and has been almost entirely in the hands of Russians and Iranians for as long as fish historians can remember. Three sturgeon species predominate: beluga, sevruga and the "golden caviar" called oscietra. They are hauled out of the freezing waters, killed and opened up for the females' precious cargo. The finest-quality caviar is then processed using a light salting technique called malossol (you'll find the name on the packaging from top distributors such as Prunier) and packaged, with preservatives, in round tins, ready for their journey to the hotel kitchens of Piccadilly and the Champs-Élysées.

It's ideally served on very thin buttered-toast soldiers, or on blinis with a dab of soured cream. Adding anything more is an abomination, according to connoisseurs. Frequent flyers will know that US airlines used to serve caviar in their first

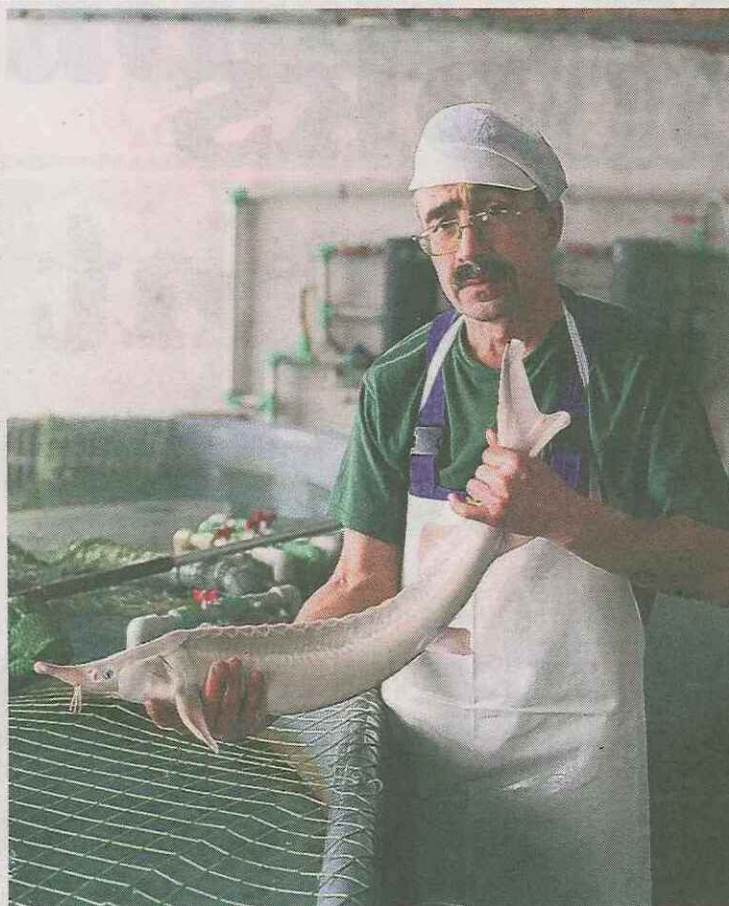
class cabins, dishing up the tins on mounds of crushed ice, to be served on blinis with chopped onion and hard-boiled eggs, both of which badly mask the taste - though not as badly as a sliver of lemon, another favourite, though disastrous, accessory.

There's been a vertiginous falling-off in caviar





Gone fishing: Sergei Reviakin (left) and Sergei Trachook, Mottra's founders (opposite). Sturgeon at one of their farms (right) and harvesting caviar the traditional way (above and left) JASON LOWE; GETTY IMAGES



production over the last three decades. In the 1980s, a cool 1,000 tonnes of the stuff was processed worldwide every year. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the figure dipped exponentially. "After 1989, people simply stopped thinking ahead," says Sergei Reviakin, a director of Mottra, the new caviar kids on the block. "In the 21st century, I doubt if there's more than 120 tonnes worldwide. Instead of the big processors, there are now 10 or 11 farming companies that process 'own-brand' caviar and sell it direct from their own farms. But they also help sturgeons to reproduce and go back into the Black Sea. They want to see a sustainable population of sturgeon."

Of course, you can't get round the fact that harvesting these expensive roes means killing wild sturgeon, a slightly shocking waste of fishy lives in order for mankind to get its greedy mitts on tiny black fish babies. But Mottra, the new boys, have revolutionised caviar production. In their specially managed pools in Latvia – pools of pure artisanal water drawn from 150m under ground – the company keep shoals of sturgeon enclosed, in steady temperatures. They breed the fish for five years and extract the caviar by a process

“The eggs are massaged out of each sturgeon from an incision in the abdomen”

called "stripping". It happens in clinical conditions inside a big IKEA-style warehouse, 15 minutes' drive from Riga, the Latvian capital. In a room full of concrete basins 3m deep, the eggs are massaged out of each sturgeon through an incision in its lower abdomen. It may sound like a piscine porn movie, but it works: the fish swims off, has the sturgeon equivalent of a good time for a year, spawns, and is brought back again after 14 months, when it has produced more eggs. Sturgeons can live for 30-35 years. Under Mottra's kindly ministrations, they could go all the way to a venerable old age.

Mottra are tremendously proud of their technique, which was invented by Sergei Trachook, an aviation engineer and theoretical physicist, whose hobby is "aquarianism". They point out that they produce the world's only sustainable caviar. They show off the praise they've received from ecological panjandrums such as the super-scrupulous CITES organisation (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna). They are careful to avoid dealing in hormones, antibiotics and growth accelerators, and consume very little energy in their farming strategies.

Does this caring, ethical, wholesome, sturgeon-hugging approach make caviar taste any better? I recently went to the Albemarle Hotel, where a

special caviar tasting was in progress hosted by Mark Hix (*The Independent Magazine's* food writer). We tried Mottra caviar on toast soldiers and on sliced, roasted new potatoes. It was, as I expected, deliciously textured, but was far more subtle than any caviar I remembered trying before. Less salty for one thing, and the eggs were fatter.

My neighbour at the tasting, Elena Lapteva, the thrillingly sharp-cheeked editor of the Russian-language *New Style* magazine, was raised in Vladivostok and grew up eating kilos of the stuff. "This is very mild-tasting," she said. "I'm glad to say it doesn't have that processed taste. Caviar can be too hard and chewy, like a lot of little raisins – or it can be slushy and disgusting, like salmon roe. This is neither."

We moved on to Scrambled Duck's Egg with Caviar, Smoked Sterlet with Potato and Green Onion Salad and Caviar (sterlet is a slightly smaller sturgeon, with a more concentrated flavour) and Veal Tartare with Toasted Sourdough and Caviar.

Our verdict? The Mottra caviar unquestionably lifted the scrambled egg to a new level of savoury bliss (it was a dish that combined eggs with other eggs, albeit from the Caspian Sea). Its delicate briny essence was, however, a little lost beneath the smoky attack of the sterlet (and if a sturgeon appeared in a film made in Burbank Studios, would that make it a Hollywood sterlet?). And alongside the slightly clammy veal

tartare, its slithery wetness felt right at home.

Mark Hix listened to the comments from people around the table, and decided we needed a comparative tasting. So he dispatched a waiter to the Caviar House in Piccadilly, where the finest, most expensive caviar in the nation has been served for decades. The man returned with a 30g tin of Pruniers, which we opened immediately. The difference was startling. "The Caviar House stuff is bitter, salty and had no caviar flavour," said Hix. "And it carries a weirdly metallic after-taste." Tracey Emin, who was sitting nearby, agreed. "It's very salty compared to the stuff they massage out of the fish. And it clings to your mouth as if it's got tannin in it." Me, I thought the processed version was more like caviar spread than a collection of eggs lightly banded together by Baltic technological expertise. But I appreciated its saltiness, which I rather missed in the more ethical version.

Lunch confirmed that it is possible to eat caviar with something other than toasted bread – although, at £35 for the smallest tin, I don't know why anyone would risk burying its subtle, fugitive flavour. Mottra confirms that it's possible to eat the world's most expensive delicacy without being pricked by your environmentalist conscience. Now all you have to do is work out a way you can afford to indulge your taste for it. At £119 for 90g of Mottra sterlet caviar in Harvey Nichols, you may still need a bit of urgin'.

Good eggs How to enjoy caviar at home

Forman and Field specialise in fresh, traditional British produce from independent producers. They supply salmon and caviar to some of the world's best restaurants. Charlie Hanks provides us with her tips for enjoying caviar at its best.

Bring caviar out of the fridge about half an hour before serving. Any longer and it will start to spoil. Caviar has a sense of occasion. Get your timing right.

Caviar is best served as a canapé. It's a delicate food and needs to be treated in the same way. We always suggest the classic: caviar served on a



smoked salmon blini. All you need is a small sprinkling on top. If you want something different, add capers and shallots. In extravagant circumstances it can be used in a main course. Use a pearl spoon to lap it up with a larger salmon fillet. We always prefer it as a canapé, however. Caviar is meant to be a little treat.

Match caviar with a sparkling wine or, of course, with champagne. If you're looking for a good British wine we can suggest Chapel Down. White wines keep the flavour fresh.

Don't use a metallic spoon. While some people say that this is one indulgence too far, metallic spoons alter the eggs' delicate flavours.

Do use a pearl one instead. It's particularly important to use the right spoon with smoother caviars. Pearl spoons don't damage beluga or oscietra's nutty flavour. SIAN ROWE

The Life Kitchen

Roast pumpkin and asparagus lasagne by Guy Mirabella



INGREDIENTS TO SERVE 8-10:

- 1 jap pumpkin, peeled and cut into 2cm cubes
- 125ml olive oil
- 4 garlic cloves, halved
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- Half a bunch of sage, leaves picked
- Half a bunch of thyme, leaves picked
- A few gratings of fresh nutmeg
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Half a bunch of chives, chopped
- 500g ricotta
- 10 dried lasagne sheets
- 350ml cream
- 12 asparagus spears, ends trimmed, sliced into 3cm pieces
- Two cups grated grana padano

Pumpkin and asparagus make a terrific double act. The sweet taste and soft texture of pumpkin plays beautifully with the crispness and flavour of asparagus. If you're feeling guilty, as I sometimes do, omit the cream and just use ricotta or mascarpone or both. Or forget the guilt and serve small portions of the lasagne prepared with just a little ricotta, grana padano and cream.

Preheat the oven to 180C/gas mark 4. Put the pumpkin on a tray and toss with olive oil, garlic, onion, half the sage and thyme, and nutmeg. Season with salt and pepper, then roast until tender and golden. Remove from the oven and allow to cool a little (keep the oven on). Discard the garlic and put the mixture in a bowl. Add the chives and ricotta and mash.

Meanwhile, cook the lasagne sheets in salted boiling water until just al dente. Drain and cool under running water. Lightly brush the sheets with olive oil on both sides so they don't stick together and lay them on a plate.

Oil or butter a baking dish and pour in a little of the cream. Place two lasagne sheets over the cream. Spread some of the pumpkin mixture over the top and scatter with some asparagus, then some of the remaining sage and thyme, then grana padano. Add more cream and lasagne sheets and continue layering. Top with the final piece of lasagne, the remaining pumpkin, asparagus, cream and grana padano. Scatter with the remaining thyme and press the last sage leaves over the surface. Place it back in the oven for 30-40 minutes, or until golden. Rest for 15 minutes before serving.

From 'Eat Ate' by Guy Mirabella (Hardie Grant, £20). Picture by Earl Carter

Sommelier's choice

Saint-Mont, En la tradition 2008, France Nicolas, £6.99
Notes of pineapple and lemon make this a perfect match to the pasta, cream and the asparagus.
www.nicolas.co.uk

