

OEUFS DE RÊVE



Caviar

A Craving to **Last a Lifetime**

by Scott Rose





From the House of Caviar to The Breakers, and then from the Four Seasons Resort to Café l'Europe, caviar is to gracious living in Palm Beach as a Lalique Spirit of Ecstasy hood emblem is to a black Rolls-Royce -- you could do without it, but why in the world would you want to?

Now, imagine yourself raising a mother-of-pearl spoon that is adorned with a silver-tipped handle. You breathe in the bouquet of a premium caviar and, finding it has a poetic hint of the sea, let the orbs glide onto your tongue. Inhaling but a whisper of air, you press the eggs against your hard palate, reveling in the subtle marine foretaste, followed first by that truffle-tinged, nutty-fruitiness and then by those wavelettes of oceanic flavor. You linger over the cumulative gustatory sensations as were they a relaxing sunset.

Many different fishes produce roe worthy of our taste buds when it is respectably prepared and served. Yet only sevruga, osetra and beluga sturgeons produce caviar. Historically, the very best was sourced from the Caspian Sea, but increasingly, sophisticated aquaculture techniques in Florida, California and the Aquitaine region of France, among other zones including Germany, Israel and Uruguay are producing caviars that earn deeply satisfied head nods from the cognoscenti.

Caviar's reputation over time has actually had its ups and downs. Considered lowdown peasant grub in Medieval Russia, by Shakespeare's period it had acquired prestige throughout

Europe. Hamlet, for example, uses the phrase "'twas caviary to the general," to mean 'like pearls before swine'. In the late 1800s, by contrast, Hudson River supplies were so abundant that every barkeep in New York City placed complementary caviar atop his counter because its saltiness motivated customers to pay for more drinks. That had reversed by 1971, when Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, hosting a celebration of 2,500 years of the Persian Empire, dazzled the world by ordering up a literal ton of caviar for his guests' enjoyment. Let's not forget that the word caviar did evolve from the Persian Khag-avar, meaning 'roe-generator.'

You breathe in the bouquet of a premium caviar and find it has a poetic hint of the sea.

Painstaking efforts must be taken to produce this delicacy to a high standard. All equipment coming in contact with the fish and the caviar has to be thoroughly sterilized. The sturgeon are caught in nets, transported live to a fishery, washed several times and then anaesthetized in advance of having their egg sacs removed. Were a sturgeon to be killed before the removal of her sacs, she would release a bitter tasting chemical into the roe. The sacs once removed are lightly lashed open with birch switches. After a caviar master evaluates the grade of the eggs, he selects a correctly-sized mesh screen over which to gently pass them with his hand, separating them from binding tissues.

Each harvest of sevruga, osetra and beluga is graded according to criteria including uniformity in egg size, shell firmness, color, separation, fragrance and shine. When the eggs have been separated into a tub, a precisely calibrated quantity of salt is added and carefully but thoroughly mixed in. Next, the roe is placed on a fine mesh screen for drainage. Packaging caviar requires extreme fastidiousness; the caviar must be placed with utmost care inside a container and the lid manually pushed down so the inside air is forced out as the container gets sealed.

Once, when speaking with Petrossian company president Armen Petrossian, I mentioned that in her book *Caviar*, Susan R. Friedland claims there are exquisitely knowledgeable bon vivants who . . . just by rolling a few grains of any given lot of Caspian Sea caviar about on their tongues . . . are able to identify the caviar master that processed the lot. Smiling with ironic Parisian amusement, Mr. Petrossian said "Je n'y crois pas," I don't believe it.

While purists insist that premium caviar can only be properly enjoyed with no accompanying garnishes or foods, it would seem a tragedy to forgo indulgences such as caviar-topped sliced lobster tail, sea bass with a caviar beurre blanc, or scallops in a cream sauce inclusive of both sevruga and beluga caviars. As with wine, a rich, inexhaustible culture attaches to caviar qua victual. Think, besides, of all the precious materials and artistry invested in caviar accouterments -- the mother-of-pearl serving plates, the crystal présentoirs, the golden serving shovels. What's not to crave?

