

The Debate on Caviar Economics: Worth Its Weight in Gold?

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My throat dry with city soot, I steal away to my favorite neighborhood haunt for a cool pint and a snack. Scooping up a handful of complimentary ‘Albany Beef’ (caviar, or fish eggs, plucked from a Hudson sturgeon), I pop the salty, snappy berries onto my tongue, savoring the flavors as I marinate them in my mouth. They then go down with a gulp and a grin. Hmm. Caviar dreams you say? Hardly. Try New York, circa 1800, where the Hudson River teems with schools of American Sturgeon so vast that saloons serve the thirst-stimulating roe free-of-charge while children shelve pricey cowhide and pigskin balls to playfully boot around the discarded skulls and carcasses littering the streets. Today, New York caviar sales tell a different fish story. The finest imported caviar runs nearly a hundred dollars an ounce or, by comparison, you can trade four ounces of beluga ‘black gold’ for an ounce of the shiny yellow metallic stuff. And that’s the trouble with shopping too much at Mother Nature’s free market.

“Those glistening black globules are a culinary Rorschach that unleashes our deeply held notions about wealth, luxury, and life.”

- Inga Saffron

With its bony armor and blunted snout, the hulking sturgeon is like the stegosaurus of the sea. In fact, sturgeons have outlasted their land-based contemporaries, thriving on the bottoms of rivers, lakes, and coastal waters of the Northern Hemisphere ever since the last dinosaur choked on comet-dust. Among the twenty-five known species of sturgeon, certain varieties can live to be octogenarians, adding up to twenty five hundred pounds to their fifteen-foot-long bulk. Like humans, Sturgeon develop slowly and reproduce relatively late in life, reaching sexual maturity between the ages of fifteen and twenty. But when a full-blown adult sturgeon breeds, it can be a prolific experience; a beluga caught in 1908 yielded nine hundred and ninety pounds of eggs, a crop that might net upwards of a million and a half dollars in today’s market, perhaps even more through a spirited Ebay auction.

“Caviar should be kept as simple as possible and eaten in decent volumes. People will spend sums of money on wine without any hesitation; it should be the same with caviar.”

- Babek Hadi

The love affair between humans and caviar dates back at least as far as 2400 B.C., where carvings unearthed near the Sakkara Pyramid depict Egyptians experimenting with salting and pickling fish meat and roe not as luxury items, but as sustenance. Medieval nobles in nations like Russia, China, Denmark, France, and England anointed the sturgeon a ‘royal fish’; only the gentry enjoyed the right to sink their hooks and teeth, into sturgeon flesh. By the 1800’s, the United States monopolized ninety percent of the global caviar trade, annually combing sixty thousand pounds of eggs from Lake Michigan alone. But, by the early twentieth century, greedy over-fishing and the careless souring of natural habitats resulted in the near extinction of the American sturgeon, thus turning the focus to the burgeoning of the Caspian Sea caviar economy.

The Guinness Book awards the Caspian Sea the record of World's Largest Lake. Nourished by more than one hundred Russian, Kazakhstani, Turkmen, Azerbaijani, and Iranian rivers, the Caspian Sea is also Nature's ideal petri dish for breeding sturgeon. Five species stalk the Caspian sediment: Beluga (giant or great sturgeon), Russian (which produces osetra caviar), Stellate (sevruga caviar), Ship, and Persian. Indeed, even caviar's linguistic roots can be angled from the Persian word "khav-yar", meaning "cake of strength." The Caspian was once so chock-full of sturgeon that annual hauls from the late 19th and early 20th centuries regularly tipped the scales at over twenty thousand tons, and billions of rubles, seemingly enough to satiate every gourmand's appetite for a lifetime. But when someone discovered that the Caspian could be tapped (and barreled) for another 'black gold', the thankless economics of supply and demand would deal the sturgeon an all-too-familiar blow.

"The roe of the Russian mother sturgeon has probably been present at more important international affairs than have all the Russian dignitaries of history combined."

- James Beard

Like the Americans before them, the Soviet Russians (and now the post-Soviets and Iranians) have learned a poignant lesson in supply-side economics. Over the past two decades, an array of mangled industrial and commercial decisions have decimated ninety percent of the beluga sturgeon fleet. Damaging activities include the contamination of Caspian waters from an invasive cocktail of refined petroleum by-products mixed with sewage and fertilizer runoff; the damming of the Caspian's primary tributary, the Volga River, which blocks eighty-five percent of the beluga's upstream spawning grounds; and, perhaps most sinister, the unchecked explosion in the quarter billion dollar black market trade in caviar that outstrips legal exports ten to one. Russian officials estimate that in 1995, poachers gutted practically every sturgeon unlucky enough to migrate to the Volga. The environment has become so unbalanced that legitimate Russian fisherman can no longer find enough fish to meet their sanctioned quotas. Thankfully, recent efforts have begun to blow a fresh whiff of hope to help ease the stench of the past.

1998 marked the first good news a sturgeon ever heard when the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) recognized all Caspian Sea sturgeon species as internationally protected resources, requiring every export to have an identification permit detailing the grade, country of origin, and the year of catch. Under the CITES umbrella, customs agents at New York's JFK airport seize illegal imports on a weekly basis - over thirty one thousand pounds of caviar since 1998. Despite efforts like these to curtail smuggling, demand for caviar continues to rise off the charts (wealthy populations in the EU, Switzerland, Japan, and the US account for ninety-five percent of the multi-million dollar market), and the nets thrown out by the export police contain many loopholes. So, using CITES as a platform, a new campaign is being waged to save the sturgeon - this time, targeting the consumer.

"Some people wanted champagne and caviar when they should have had beer and hot dogs."

- Dwight D. Eisenhower

Textbook economics dictates that supply will increase to meet heightened demand, and when it can't, price skyrockets. In the beluga sturgeon case study, a smuggler can cash-in a single fish's roe for a month's salary. When establishing the Caviar Emptor campaign (www.caviaremtor.com) and slogan in 2000 ("Let the Connoisseur Beware"), the combined leadership of the National Resources Defense Council, the Wildlife Conservation Society, and SeaWeb not only leveraged a clever pun, but went after those of us demanding nothing less than crisp "malossol beluga" (Russian for "a little salt") by pulling a bit of bait and switch on the black market. The Caviar Emptor program strives for two primary objectives: highlight the dire circumstances facing the Caspian sturgeon and spur their recovery through conservation, aqua-culturing (fish farming) and, just as importantly, educate consumers about the delicious, and guiltless, alternative caviar options.

"One can be unhappy before eating caviar, even after, but at least not during."
– Alexander Korda

Although the beluga remains the flavor of choice for discriminating palates, North American suppliers have re-introduced an entire menu's worth of mouth-watering substitutes for imported caviar like: lake sturgeon (comparable in size/color to beluga), hackleback (native to the Mississippi/Missouri rivers), paddlefish (also called 'spoonbills'), "choupique" (Cajun for bowfin), Chinook and Coho salmon (gorgeous orange, juice-filled globs), trout, whitefish (American Golden), flying fish (for you sushi fans), and even lobster roe. These American choices not only burst with the similar colors and distinct buttery flavors as their Persian cousins, but ring up significantly lower prices at the register. At Zabar's on Broadway, a two-ounce tin of Caspian beluga costs the same as thirty ounces of Pacific salmon roe. Yet, Zabar's sell five times more imported caviar than domestic stock. Depending on your circumstances, and your appetite, you do the math.

"Caviar...the pause that says I love myself."
- New York Magazine

Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* protagonist, Yossarian, seeks his discharge from the Air Force by proving his insanity, merely confirming his sanity through his efforts. Heller's novel's title has become synonymous with paradoxical reasoning; contradictory logic that just might apply to the economics of caviar – the buying frenzy escalates as the price of caviar climbs – proving that it's neither the supply nor demand that makes the stuff taste so damn good. Fortunately, with conservation efforts put forth by organizations like Caviar Emptor and the eco-friendly breeding by entrepreneurial aqua-farmers, the near future seems bright for the sturgeon. In the meantime, while our domestic supply stabilizes, what are we to do about our caviar addictions – go cold turkey?

Let the debate begin.

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