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Good Eggs

Domestic caviars come to the rescue of the endangered Caspian Sea sturgeon

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"Take a blob of that," urges Rick Moonen, executive chef at Oceana, a richly turned-out temple of seafood in midtown Manhattan. The dark roe on the platter before us glistens alluringly. "Good, right? You've got the texture, the acidity, a good amount of fat, and it's nutty, almost like you're eating pumpkin seeds. Large eggs, delicious pop -- the whole experience is just stellar. This is caviar."

He's right. It's the real, delicious thing. Osetra? No, it's American, taken from farmed California white sturgeon.

Since Wine Spectator last reported on domestic caviar, in November 1999, American producers have been busy burnishing their methods in an effort to compete with the celebrated caviars from the Caspian Sea. Moonen and his staff first noticed the improvement at a blind tasting in the spring. He immediately pulled all imported caviar off his menu and replaced it with American roes -- from paddlefish, trout and white sturgeon.



Salmon Tartare With Smoked Salmon and American Caviar

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This was no exercise in flag-waving, he insists. He feels that the top-end domestic roe -- such as that we just tasted -- is "as good or better" than premium Caspian beluga and osetra.

Moonen is also an ardent marine conservationist, and was a leader in the restaurant industry's charge to save the beleaguered Atlantic swordfish in 1998. Now he's on a crusade to rescue the near-extinct beluga, osetra and sevruga sturgeons of the Caspian Sea. These species are so overfished, in large part by poachers, and so thwarted by pollution, that environmental watchdog groups now say they could easily

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disappear forever. Moonen is hardly alone in his commitment to this cause -- a number of other leading chefs, including Jacques Pépin and Tracy Des Jardins, have also thrown their weight behind it.

When first offered American roe, Oceana customers, many of whom are accustomed to being pampered with the very best, were a bit hesitant. But now they're happily lapping up as much roe as ever -- more, in fact, since the restaurant can now afford to serve bigger portions. Caspian caviar, because it's become so scarce, now retails for \$45 to \$120 an ounce, in contrast to \$4 to \$30 an ounce for premium American roes. Oceana's caviar sampler, comprising three domestic roes, is \$20 -- half the price of the former, imported-caviar sampler. (The term "caviar," strictly speaking, refers only to sturgeon roe, though many people, Moonen included, tend to use the word when speaking of any roe that tastes elegant.)

In recent years, limited availability and rising cost haven't been the only issues for caviar fans. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, many have complained of a precipitous drop in quality. Sloppily processed contraband caviars have entered the market, and are being passed off to consumers as the real thing.

"Texture was one of the first things to go in the Russian beluga," says Moonen, "and then the flavor started getting muddier. It didn't have that rich, deep, lingering ocean flavor and that nice pop and excitement that beluga used to bring. And so osetra started becoming, at least for me, the better value from the Caspian. And then that even started to go by the wayside."

Some top restaurants have responded to this drop in quality by switching to Iranian caviar. It also comes from the Caspian Sea but is more consistently excellent, as Russian caviar once was. The Iranian government strictly regulates its fisheries and enforces very low quotas, making this caviar, in some respects, a more environmentally responsible choice. But since sturgeon caught in Iranian waters know no national boundaries, environmentalists say that Iran's commendable efforts to maintain a sustainable fishery are making little difference.

Moonen doesn't like Iranian caviar anyway. It's cured with trace amounts of borax, an alkaline compound, giving it a high, sweet note that many aficionados admire. Borax, which is safe in minute quantities, also extends shelf life considerably. But to Moonen, caviar treated this way "tastes like pool water. It's definitely not my style."

Of the three roes on his sampler plate, the white sturgeon caviar from Stolt Sea Farm in Elverta, Calif. (marketed as "Sterling Classic"), is far and away the best -- good enough to enjoy straight off a mother-of-pearl spoon. The balance of rich, nutty elements with its clean ocean character is nearly perfect. But at \$30 an ounce, it's still out of reach for some consumers.

The paddlefish roe, from L'Osage Caviar Company, in Osage Beach, Ill., is humbler fare -- plenty fresh but not complex, with a not-unpleasant hint of lake water in the finish. Pair it with something toasty and a little fatty and it makes a fine companion for Champagne. "Introduce the richness that's missing here," suggests Moonen, pushing forward a plate of blini and a crock of crème fraîche. "It would be even better on a twice-baked potato, with a crunchy, nutty-tasting skin. And of course you can use as much caviar as you want, because it's very affordable" -- about \$10 an ounce.

Oceana's signature appetizer, a round of salmon tartare wrapped with smoked salmon (recipe follows), comes generously garnished with this economical roe. The salmon and the herbed emulsion sauce in the tartare filling do introduce richness, making a pricey caviar on top unnecessary -- indeed, it would be a waste.

In between the two dark caviars on the sampler plate (the sturgeon is jet black, the paddlefish dark gray) is vivid orange roe of rainbow trout, from the Sunburst Trout Company of Canton, N.C. At just \$8.99 for a 2-ounce jar, this is the best value of the three, with a bright, briny flavor that is balanced enough to enjoy alone -- though it's better on a toast point, since it's still no beluga. It has a most festive mouthfeel, as well -- the eggs roll around like little jewels on the tongue before they pop. Some people find the color garish, says Moonen, who is especially enthusiastic about this product. "But if the lights were to go out and I gave you a spoonful of this, it would blow your mind."

Ultimately, it's all about changing public perception. "Just like we started creating great wines in California, we're going to be producing great caviar. Forget what you've heard -- take a more intellectual approach. What we've got is a great-quality product that's finally coming into its own."

Mail-order sources for the caviars mentioned above include Sterling Caviar (800-525-0333, www.sterlingcaviar.com), Connoisseur Brands (for paddlefish roe, 877-922-8427), and Sunburst Trout Company (800-673-3051, www.sunbursttrout.com).

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Rick Moonen's Salmon Tartare With Smoked Salmon and American Caviar

- 1 egg yolk
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1/2 tablespoon each of fresh lemon and lime juice
- 1 tablespoon fish sauce (available in Asian or specialty food markets)
- 2 1/2 tablespoons diced shallot
- 2 1/2 tablespoons chopped capers
- 1 teaspoon Tabasco sauce
- 1/4 teaspoon white pepper

1/2 cup vegetable oil
12 ounces raw, very fresh salmon (preferably from the belly), skinned and in large dice
3 tablespoons chopped chives
3 tablespoons chopped parsley
1 teaspoon fresh dill
4 slices smoked salmon, sliced into 1-inch wide ribbons
Paddlefish roe (or other American caviar), for garnish
White bread for toast, crust removed and sliced into 4 triangles
4 ounces pea shoots, mâche or watercress, tossed with lemon juice (1/4 lemon), 1 tablespoon olive oil, salt and pepper

Whip the egg yolk, mustard, lemon and lime juice, fish sauce, shallot, capers, Tabasco and white pepper together. Add the vegetable oil drop by drop at first, whisking the mixture vigorously until the oil begins to incorporate into the mixture. Then, pour the oil in a slow and steady stream, while constantly whisking until sauce emulsifies. Taste for seasoning, and add more citrus, fish sauce or pepper (if needed).

Spoon half of the sauce into a bowl and add the diced salmon, folding until it is well-mixed. Add enough additional sauce to just coat the salmon. Fold in the fresh herbs. Place a ring mold of the desired portion size (you can use a tuna can with its top and bottom removed) into the center of a serving plate. Fill the mold to capacity, pat down with the base of a spoon, and then gently remove the mold. You should have a perfectly round disk of tartare to wrap with smoked salmon.

Wrap one slice of smoked salmon around the outside of the tartare, overlapping the ends to seal, and top the presentation with a dollop of caviar, shaped like a quenelle (egg-shaped). Serve with an ounce or so of the greens (present three little piles around the tartare) and 4 toast points per person. Serves 4.

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