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Caviar: An Explainer

Everything you need to know to be an expert on this creamy delicacy - including why you should eat “bumps” of the briny good stuff off the back of your hand (and where you can do it).



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No food embodies decadence more than caviar. There are close premium contenders of course, such as truffle, which is shaved and grated so liberally over dishes it often obscures what's underneath. Same with champagne - racing-car drivers spray it from podiums by the bottle. Caviar, on the other hand, is consumed only by the tiny spoonful.

But what exactly makes these miniature fish eggs so beloved, whether they're garnishing a delicate egg custard, spread on a little toast wedge or spooned directly into your mouth?

"Caviar is the salted roe of [female] sturgeon fish discovered in the Black Sea and Caspian Sea," says Simon Friend, the director and co-founder of Australian importer Friend & Burrell, which supplies specialty ingredients such as caviar and truffles to Melbourne restaurants including Ides, Vue de Monde, Estelle and Anchovy.

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Sturgeon eggs, Friend explains, are prized over the eggs of other fish due to their size,

creamy and briny flavour. And sevruga caviar “has [a] distinctive sweet/salty flavour, with grey-coloured grains and crunchy texture,” says Friend.

Then there’s Siberian caviar. “[It’s] well-balanced, with a slightly sweet flavour,” says Sally Gosper of Sydney’s Two Providores, which supplies caviar to Icebergs, Lumi and Ormeeggio, among other eateries. And “oscietra [also spelled ossetra] has a buttery, golden colour with subtle walnut characters.”

Chef Jordan Toft of Sydney fine-diner Mimi’s says caviar is akin to wine – and species, origin, handling and storage all play a role in its flavour profile.

Toft has been responsible for a caviar renaissance of sorts in the harbour city. While Mimi’s certainly wasn’t the first place to serve the delicacy, its highly Instagrammable roaming caviar cart has put the food front and centre for a new generation of diners.



When you order it, the cart is wheeled to your table. Staff then dip a mother-of-pearl spoon into a tin of Black River caviar (oscietra-style, from Siberian sturgeon farms in Uruguay), place a “bump” of the briny goodness onto the back of your hand, and serve it alongside a shot of vodka from a bottle encased in ice (\$36).

While it feels like a gimmick, placing the eggs on your hand serves a purpose: the warmth of your body raises the caviar to the ideal eating temperature.

Some history, and the future

Although caviar would become popular among the aristocracy of Byzantine Greeks in the 10th century and among British royalty throughout the Middle Ages, Aristotle was already espousing the splendour of sturgeon eggs in the fourth century. But we’ve been sliding these delicate eggs into our mouths for far longer than even that: fossil records suggest sturgeons (and, it’s fair to assume, their eggs) have been part of Middle Eastern diets for thousands of years.

Toft believes the transition from wild to farmed fish has helped usher in a new caviar renaissance in restaurants. “The mere fact we can enjoy it more of late is due to the effort to remain sustainable,” he says. “[The transition] from banning wild collection to farmed has had the biggest impact.”

The farmed fish, Friend says, take anywhere from six to 12 years to mature to the point where they develop harvestable roe, at which time the eggs are hand-picked from the fish, gently salted and carefully packaged.

Both Friend, whose Caviar Giaveri range is produced in northern Italy, and Gosper, who stocks Polanco Caviar farmed in Uruguay (the only caviar brand produced in South America), emphasise the importance of clean waters, generously sized outdoor tanks and tremendous attention to sustainability. Harvesting too requires faultless care, carried out in what Friend calls “a meticulous artisan ritual, perpetuated to maintain high standards of excellence”.

While some caviar products are pasteurised prior to packaging, most purists – Friend and Gosper included – believe this comes at the cost of flavour and quality. Vacuum-sealed caviar will last four to six weeks, but pasteurising extends that to six to nine months.

And the price? It’s \$116 for 30 grams of Black Pearl Siberian caviar, and \$89 for 30 grams of Polanco’s oscietra caviar. Experts recommend 30 grams per person, or 15 grams if you’re serving it as topping.

Eating and enjoying caviar

As for how best to enjoy these delicate, briny mouth-bombs, seminal French culinary tome *Larousse Gastronomique* suggests dishes that range from a humble slice of buttered white bread topped with Sevruga caviar, to lobster and crayfish bathed in a caviar-spotted *beurre blanc nantais* (a buttery sauce spiked with wine).

In his time at New York’s Brasserie Les Halles, Anthony Bourdain topped smoked-salmon scrambled eggs with a “healthy heap” of the tiny black pearls. Melbourne’s Vue de Monde once offered a quenelle of caviar with a native bunya bunya cream and sea urchin roe.

The classic serving suggestion of blinis and crème fraîche topped with a dollop of caviar has stood the test of time simply because it doesn’t distract your tastebuds, allowing the pearls to be the centre of attention.

Back at Mimi’s in Sydney, Toft has a decadent tart filled with scallops and topped with a layer of caviar on the menu. But he reckons it’s the bumps that bridge the gap between tradition and contemporary tastes. “Eating from your hand while feeling the warm rush of a little frozen [vodka] shot felt right,” he says. “I like the roots of traditions as much as I like breaking them too.”