

# Food for Thought: Disappearing Taste --- China, Farms Step in to Fill Caviar Gap

By Robert Templer

[ProQuest document link](#)

---

## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Increases of between 40% and 100%, depending on the type of caviar, were driven by the downward spiral of production from the former Soviet states around the Caspian sea, home to the three species of sturgeon from which the best eggs come. Rampant overfishing in the past decade and pollution from the oil industry have reduced sturgeon stocks to about a third of what they were 20 years ago.

Once only the best caviar was exported. But quality control has collapsed now that the strict Soviet authorities no longer monitor the trade. What passes for Russian caviar is often low quality or sometimes cheaper paddlefish roe. Airlines, once buyers of about half the world's caviar, are quietly dropping it from first-class menus because of cost and quality problems. Russian caviar is set to go the way of American and European caviar, once considered among the best but long ago lost to overfishing. The Worldwide Fund for Nature has predicted that Caspian stocks could run dry by 2003.

## FULL TEXT

If you're planning a moment of indulgence by savoring the rich, complex tastes of caviar and the sensuous popping of tiny eggs against the roof of your mouth, you'd be well advised to do it soon. Caviar prices went up last year at the same speed as dot-com stocks, but unlike tech shares, prices are showing no sign of a correction.

Increases of between 40% and 100%, depending on the type of caviar, were driven by the downward spiral of production from the former Soviet states around the Caspian sea, home to the three species of sturgeon from which the best eggs come. Rampant overfishing in the past decade and pollution from the oil industry have reduced sturgeon stocks to about a third of what they were 20 years ago.

Once only the best caviar was exported. But quality control has collapsed now that the strict Soviet authorities no longer monitor the trade. What passes for Russian caviar is often low quality or sometimes cheaper paddlefish roe. Airlines, once buyers of about half the world's caviar, are quietly dropping it from first-class menus because of cost and quality problems. Russian caviar is set to go the way of American and European caviar, once considered among the best but long ago lost to overfishing. The Worldwide Fund for Nature has predicted that Caspian stocks could run dry by 2003.

It wasn't always this way. In the last century, caviar in the U.S. was served in taverns in the way salted peanuts are today to encourage people to drink more. In France before World War I, it was cheaper than bread.

With sturgeon under threat around the world, the best prospects for continued production are the rivers of Heilongjiang in northeastern China and the emergence of farmed sturgeon. Mats Engstrom has been a pioneer of both the early production in China and of new farmed caviar that comes from an American sturgeon in the Sacramento River in California.

In 1984 he started working with the Chinese to produce caviar from sturgeon in the Amur river that marks the tense border between China and Russia. Working in a zone normally closed to foreigners, he taught the Chinese how to process the delicate eggs. This requires stringent hygiene and a light touch with salt to create a malossol caviar that is the most delicate but also the most perishable. When the female sturgeon are caught, their eggs, which can be up to 15% of their body weight, are removed, separated from the placenta, salted and packed.

The early caviar from China was not great, according to Mr. Engstrom, who sells American, Russian and Chinese varieties under his Tsar Nicoulai brand. But standards have been improving. Much of the Chinese caviar, sometimes known as kaluga, has large golden eggs that look similar to osetra, and it has a clear, nutty taste. Some eggs are said to glow in deep jade and tortoise-shell colors, and diners have described its taste as younger and fresher than Caspian beluga.

Because China, too, has problems with river pollution and overfishing, the future of caviar may be farming, which is just starting to produce commercial quantities although not nearly enough to meet demand. Sturgeon can take 25 years to grow to maturity and can live for 150 years. By raising the water temperature and offering a continuous supply of food, Mr. Engstrom has cut the time from egg to egg to eight years. The investment required before you can fill a single mother-of-pearl spoon with caviar has proved a major barrier.

Farmed eggs, which sell for the same price as wild caviar, have proven popular with chefs for their reliability. Some experts say farmed caviar doesn't have quite the same taste but its quality is much more consistent, which is becoming increasingly important. Mr. Engstrom says that in blind tastings, diners were unable to distinguish between farmed and wild caviar.

---

Please send comments to [awsj.food@awsj.com](mailto:awsj.food@awsj.com)

---

Ten Rules for Buying Caviar
-- There are no bargains when it comes to caviar. Buy it cheap on the street in Moscow and you will end up opening a can of shoe polish. Buy it in a general gourmet store and you could end up with rancid caviar or paddlefish roe. One study that did DNA tests on caviar bought in New York gourmet stores found that a third of it was not sturgeon caviar. If it's cheap, chances are it's not the real thing.
-- Buy caviar from a specialized caviar seller. Firms like Petrossian

know what they are selling, they have the best contacts around the
Caspian Sea, and if what you buy is not up to snuff they will let you
return it. Retail stores will have the highest prices. Wholesalers may
be better value but you will need to find a reliable source. Find out
where a top restaurant gets its caviar.
-- Know what you are buying, but be wary of grades. The best caviar
will have a malossol tag on it, meaning it's lightly salted but in
reality the salt can vary from tin to tin. Likewise there are grades
for beluga -- triple zero being the best, going down to single zero.
Osetra is rated A and B grade, while Sevruga is graded 1 and 2. The
differences are in price, egg size and color but are more marketing
gimmick than reliable guide to quality.
-- Taste before you buy. A good caviar merchant will give you that
opportunity. Better yet, sit down and try a range of them to decide
which you like the most. Buy based on what tastes best to you, not on
price or prestige. The first taste should be oceanic followed by a
range of tastes often described as nutty or fruity. A final taste will
have a note of brine or copper. It shouldn't just taste fishy, salty
and oily.
-- The eggs should be whole, should glisten, and should all be the
same size and color. The grains should be firm and should not smell
fishy.

-- Check the CITES certificate for high-end caviar. CITES is the
Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species and it
protects all species of sturgeon and their eggs. Caviar should be
accompanied by a CITES certificate. The certificate will give the
Latin name of the fish: Huso huso for Beluga, Acipenser gueldenstaedti
for osetra, Acipenser stellatus for Sevruga, Huso dauricus for Kaluga
from China, Acipenser Transmontanus for U.S.-farmed caviar.
-- Check the CITES certificate date of harvest. You want the caviar
to be as fresh as possible, meaning it should have been harvested the
previous spring.
-- Beluga is often touted as the best caviar but it's also the most
difficult to handle and the most likely to disappoint. If in any doubt
about the supplier, stick to osetra or sevruga.
-- Buy only what you will consume in a single sitting. It lasts about
a week once opened but will lose its freshness. Eat good caviar plain
on lightly buttered toast or blinis, without any other accompaniments.
-- Consider a cheaper substitute. Caviar should be savored because
it's delicious, not just because it's expensive. Some paddlefish roes
from the United States are good substitutes. Pressed caviar, an
intensely flavored jam-like mix of broken eggs, is also delicious.

## DETAILS

<b>Business indexing term:</b>	Subject: Stocks
<b>Subject:</b>	Stocks; Sturgeon; Prices; Eggs; Rivers; Taste
<b>Publication title:</b>	Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong
<b>Pages:</b>	P8
<b>Number of pages:</b>	0
<b>Publication year:</b>	2000
<b>Publication date:</b>	May 5, 2000
<b>Section:</b>	Personal Journal
<b>Publisher:</b>	Dow Jones & Company Inc.
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Victoria, Hong Kong
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, Victoria, Hong Kong
<b>Publication subject:</b>	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
<b>ISSN:</b>	03779920
<b>Source type:</b>	Newspaper
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	NEWSPAPER
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	315462085
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-disappearing-taste-china-farms-step/docview/315462085/se-2?accountid=11311">http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-disappearing-taste-china-farms-step/docview/315462085/se-2?accountid=11311</a>
<b>Copyright:</b>	Copyright Dow Jones & Company Inc May 5, 2000
<b>Last updated:</b>	2023-11-20
<b>Database:</b>	ProQuest One Business, ProQuest Central

## LINKS

[Linking Service](#)

Database copyright © 2024 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

