

SOUP TO NUTS

Roe by roe: A caviar primer

There's wild or farm-raised, foreign or domestic, in a wide range of prices ... so no need to put all your eggs in one tin.

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John Ewing/Staff Photographer

Richard Hall, above, is caviar director at Browne Trading Co. in Portland. Next to beluga caviar, the priciest roe harvested from the largest species of wild sturgeon, Hall's favorite is Iranian osetra from the Caspian Sea.

Even in bad economic times, people always manage to find reasons to celebrate.

If you have a graduation or wedding to attend this month, chances are you're going to indulge in a champagne toast or two. Starting a new marriage with flutes of bubbly somehow seems more hopeful than clinking together a couple of bottles of Bud.

Caviar has the same cachet. It's obviously not something you eat every day, but there's nothing like the pop of those little eggs in your mouth to complement the bubbles in champagne and celebrate in style.

But what if you've never tried caviar before, and you don't know what kind to choose? Is it worth it to pay \$200-plus an ounce if you're a caviar virgin, or should you choose a less expensive American roe, such as spoonbill, which will run you about \$25 an ounce? And what if you're worried about fish eggs tasting, well, fishy?



John Ewing/Staff Photographer

Richard Hall spoons roe into tins, which will be sold at the Commercial Street store as well as to restaurants and catalog giants like Williams-Sonoma.

For some tips, I went to the experts at Browne Trading Co. on Commercial Street, where caviar is shipped every day to fine restaurants in New York and Las Vegas. Browne Trading supplies caviar to foodie catalogs Dean & DeLuca and Williams-Sonoma. Rod Mitchell and his wife, Cynde, have traveled the world checking out aquaculture operations that focus on farm-raised caviar.

The Mitchells also have individual customers who just love caviar. Some people order it so they can have something special to indulge in on their birthdays. Their busiest time is Christmas and New Year's.

What does Mitchell suggest for the caviar novice?

"My advice is that if you're going to try caviar, you should try real caviar first," he said. "Real caviar is only from sturgeon. Anytime you say salmon caviar or golden whitefish caviar, you can't just call it caviar. Caviar used as a word by itself means sturgeon roe."

When they think of caviar, many people think of beluga caviar, a wild caviar harvested from the largest species of sturgeon. It is indeed the most prized of all caviars, but because the fish is endangered, its roe can no longer be imported into the United States. (The fish has to be killed to harvest its eggs, and beluga populations are in big trouble.)

Better to stick with something more sustainable. There are other wild caviars to try, harvested from the Caspian and Black seas and exported by Iran and the countries of the former Soviet Union. The coveted flavors of the osetra (Mitchell's favorite) and sevruga caviars come from the varied diets of the wild fish.

Iranian osetra caviar is also the favorite of Richard Hall, caviar director at Browne Trading. Next to beluga, of course.



John Ewing/Staff Photographer

Caviar tins on display at Browne Trading Co.

ON THE WEB

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I watched recently as Hall transferred mounds of shiny golden eggs from a large container into Browne's 500-gram tins (that's a little over a pound) in the caviar room.

"This is an osetra 1B," he explained. "Iran is currently the only country that grades their caviar. They actually have three grades of osetra. This is an *Acipenser persicus*, or the common name is the Persian sturgeon. It's the one species of sturgeon that's actually doing fairly well in the Caspian Sea, mainly because Iran has been raising fingerlings and dumping millions of fingerlings back into the Caspian Sea."

He hands me a tiny taste of this treat, which at that moment was going for about \$250 an ounce.

"You know what I think it's a lot like? Butter. It's like salty butter," Hall said. "And beluga? Beluga tastes creamy sweet. It's a sweeter flavor than this. And I always say that beluga is the caviar for someone who has never had caviar."

But, of course, beluga is restricted right now. Wild caviars that are not beluga go for around \$250 to \$300 an ounce, which is going to add up fast if you're buying for a party. An ounce of caviar, according to Mitchell, will serve two people who really love the stuff.

LOWER-PRICED IMPORTS

If that's totally out of your price range, try an international farm-raised caviar, which sells in the range of \$75 to \$100 an ounce. Browne imports it from Italy, Germany and France and will be introducing a new variety from Israel during the holiday season.

Caviar snobs (excuse me, I mean traditionalists) once turned up their noses at farm-raised caviar. But farm-raised varieties are getting better every year and have a certain consistency that comes with controlling the diet, water temperature and general happiness of the fish. These are the caviars Browne sells to Williams-Sonoma and Dean & DeLuca, and they are also increasingly the choice of chefs at fine restaurants.

"The wild is like a home run, and the farm-raised is like a double or triple in terms of euphoria," said Nick Branchina, marketing director at Browne. "But the reality is, the cost can be very prohibitive for the average person that still wants to do this, and even the above-average-income person."

Still, both Branchina and Rod Mitchell advise that farm-raised is the way to go if you're new to caviar and trying to figure out what you like. Start with one of the better ones, such as a farm-raised osetra from Germany that goes for \$106 an ounce. All of the farm-raised caviars at Browne are close in price, and the store will let you sample them to be sure you won't suffer from buyers' remorse.

Branchina said his second recommendation for newcomers to caviar would be the Italian white sturgeon caviar that is one of Browne's biggest sellers. This sturgeon is also raised for caviar in California's Sacramento Valley. The Italian version, Branchina said, is just \$6 more per ounce and is very dark, has a very big grain, and is consistently flavorful but not overpowering.

THE BEST OF THE REST

Branchina's third recommendation brings us to the rest of the domestic caviars, where the prices fall once again. (Remember, these are not true caviars because they do not come from sturgeon.)

Spoonbill caviar, the name given to paddlefish roe, is harvested from wild fish in the Mississippi and Tennessee rivers and, according to Mitchell, is Browne's most popular non-sturgeon caviar. It's a small-

grain caviar similar to the wild Caspian Sea sevruga, and it's a comparative bargain at \$27 an ounce.

Branchina was not a fan of spoonbill just three years ago – "I just didn't think it held up" – but has since changed his mind.

"I think the quality is skyrocketing," he said. "I really do. I don't know what it is, but every year it just seems to get a little bit cleaner, a little more flavorful, a little less muddy. Of course it's a wild fish, and now they've got their eyes on making sure it's protected, and that has drawn the price up."

Other options are golden whitefish roe and salmon roe, both of which sell for \$35 for 7 ounces. Whitefish roe looks great and has good texture, making it nice for a garnish, but it is much less flavorful than true caviar.

Salmon caviar is large and has a nice pop to it, but "tastes very fishy," Branchina said. "They taste like salmon. So if you're not prepared for it, it's not classic caviar."

Angst over fishiness is a big reason some people won't give caviar a try. But better-quality caviar should not taste fishy, Mitchell said. Briny like the ocean? Yes. Fishy? No.

"If it tastes fishy," Mitchell said, "it's old, and it's not any good."

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