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DINING OUT

ABCs of Caviar

This elegant appetizer has an etiquette all its own.

BY BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG

Caviar has long been associated with exotic—and expensive—appetites. Madonna, for example, had 500 grams (about a pound) of her favorite beluga delivered to her hotel on each stop of a concert tour. Prince Philip of England and the Sultan of Brunei both bought copious quantities of Petrossian caviar while visiting in Palm Beach. For those who can afford it, caviar is unquestionably *the* appetizer of choice.

Because caviar is such an indulgent delicacy—when it is Caspian Sea sturgeon eggs and not a salmon's unhatched offspring—connoisseurs take as much care preparing and presenting the appetizer as they do procuring it. Serving or sampling fine caviar with the wrong food or the wrong utensils is the culinary equivalent of sipping Champagne from a Dixie cup after dropping an ice cube into it.

"I like to eat it directly from a spoon... preferably a big one," André Gayot, Paris-based publisher of *The Best of France* and other Gault Millau guidebooks, said at a reception on board the Celebrity ship *Galaxy* during its maiden voyage to Alaska. "Even a ladle," his slim and superchic wife, Odile, chimed in.

Andrew Carmellini, sous-chef at Sirio Maccioni's Le Cirque 2000, doesn't hesitate when asked how he prefers to serve caviar. "I enjoy it au naturel. No accoutrements." He pauses, then adds, "But once in a while I like to pair it with a delicate fish, such as a sea bass."

Genuine sturgeon—strange, almost prehistoric-looking fish found primarily in the Caspian Sea and other waters bordering Russia and Iran—supply the most desirable eggs. Jean-Marie LaCroix, executive chef of the Philadelphia Four Seasons, stands by Russian sturgeon. "Caviar is Russian, just as Champagne is French," he says. "Anything else is fish eggs and sparkling wine."

Beluga, osetra, and sevruga are the main varieties of Caspian Sea sturgeon.



A true appreciation for caviar as an indulgent delicacy requires proper preparation and presentation.

The beluga eggs, bluish in color and buttery in taste, are the largest size, or grain, caviar. Beluga sturgeon can weigh up to 2,000 pounds and grow to lengths of more than 15 feet. A female beluga sturgeon takes up to 25 years to mature and produce eggs. Eggs from the osetra sturgeon are smaller, golden brown, and have a nuttier taste. Female osetra sturgeon can take up to 10 years to produce eggs. The eggs from the sevruga sturgeon are smaller, darker, and more intense in flavor.

The eggs of the sturgeon's American cousin, the Mississippi River paddlefish, and lightly processed salmon roe from Russia or Alaska can also bear the caviar name. None of those little salty yellow, red, or black BB-like eggs are even remotely similar in taste or texture to sturgeon caviar.

The etiquette of eating caviar generally calls for it to be served on ultrathin toast points or delicate little raised pancakes called *blini*, with perhaps a squeeze of lemon or a dollop of crème fraîche or, in a serious departure, a sprinkle of chopped egg. It should never, according to caviar connoisseurs, be sullied with onion or other strong flavors. It must always be served cold. Utensils of choice for serving and eating are fashioned of mother-of-pearl, bone, or gold. Silver interacts with the caviar and alters the taste. Many caviar purveyors have issued catalogs that advertise not only the various types of caviar available, but serving bowls and utensils as well.

Where or when one eats caviar—at a reception, in one of New York City's premier restaurants, or in one's own dining room—isn't nearly as important as *how* one eats it. Serving it with the right food, in the proper bowl, with the correct utensils shows an appreciation for caviar as a truly decadent delicacy. ♦

French technique to his food, which many consider the finest on Maui. Seasons unquestionably boasts impeccable service as well as a stunning open-air setting high above the ocean and the resort's pools. The sounds of gentle breezes and crashing waves almost drown out the pianist. Mavro, consulting chef for the *Navatek I* dinner cruise ship out of Honolulu, offers many menu options, including a prix fixe dinner paired with wines by the course.

Wine rates high here on what may well be the islands' best list, coordinated by sommelier Alan Usler. Bonny Doon's Pacific Rim Riesling was poured with a plate of roasted Keahole lobster accompanied by Israeli couscous with a mysterious, elusive curry sauce, the shellfish slightly underdone, yielding excellent texture, the grains laced with bits of vegetables and lobster meat.

A white Bordeaux was the choice with *opakapaka* (snapper) charbroiled and served over pink lentils with oysters blended into the mild but fragrant garam masala sauce. A fish-shaped salt crust that kept the fish unusually moist enclosed *onaga* (ruby longtail snapper). The waiter broke the crust away table-side, revealing the extraordinarily tender seafood with its sauce of fine herbs, *ogo*, and shallots.

Seasons stocks about 20 cheeses, including Reblochon, bleu d'Auvergne, and various chèvres, on an impressive cart that is wheeled to the table after the meal. It's a great selection, unmatched on the islands, and one that sommelier Usler enthusiastically pairs with his arsenal of fine wines.

Many of the islands' restaurants have assembled major wine lists with French and California bottles (you can get almost anything in Hawaii—it just costs more), but the big Bordeaux and California cabernets rarely offer the best matches with these foods. Contemporary Hawaiian cuisine, with its complex, often multinational flavors and exotic spices, does not pair as readily with wines as do French and Italian dishes. You're sometimes better off with lesser known but more food-friendly wines, and you can comfortably rely on staff recommendations.

A Taste of Things to Come

Thanks to Hawaiian Airlines' in-flight meals for first class, it's now possible to

get a taste of Hawaiian regional cuisine traveling to and from, as well as on, the islands. Acclaimed chefs contribute their original recipes. Previous participants include chefs from Hilton Hawaiian Village on Oahu, the Kea Lani Hotel Suites & Villas on Maui, the Hapuna Beach Prince Hotel on the Big Island, and the Princeville Hotel on Kauai.

Chef Philippe Padovani from the Manele Bay Hotel on Lanai, for instance, dreamed up the well-presented dinner served on our flight. We had a choice of two entrées: a sautéed chicken breast encircled by exotic straw mushrooms with

spicy Szechuan sauce and macadamia nut pineapple rice pilaf, or sautéed beef tenderloin with pimienta sauce served with a small mound of ginger-laced mashed potatoes along with baby carrots and baby corn. Mango sorbet topped with shredded toasted coconut flakes was dessert.

In the end, it's only natural that Hawaii would provide some of the finest foods in the world from its very own shores. Whether en route to the islands or dining on the beach itself, travelers enjoy a cuisine as exotic and exclusive as the islands themselves. ♦

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