



# Caviar

A culinary (and environmentally sound) punctuation point to the holidays



Not all caviar is — or should be — wild. Wild salmon, for example, are abundant and create the world standard in red roe. However, sturgeon caviar must, by definition, come from a slow-growing, easily decimated species. If you must have black roe, use any of the wild catch species (paddlefish) or go for American sturgeon. But remember: Only wild fish carry the flavor and textured nuance of the sea.

By Amanda Chater



**A**mericans bid a sad farewell to beluga caviar last fall, but most people are taking the grief pretty well.

There is a host of alternatives in our own waters, inspiring chefs around the country to new creations and combinations — and, in the process, pleasing their patrons.

This renaissance of interest in roe came on the heels of a shortage of traditional caviar.

Around 90 percent of what’s consumed in this country used to come from the Caspian Sea by Iran. But the amount of sturgeon in those waters is said to have declined by 90 percent in the past 30 years, so the U.S. ban was instituted as a conservation measure.

It’s not necessarily a bad thing, though.

“It’s nice that we have so many new varieties to choose from,” says Scott Boswell, owner and executive chef of Stella in New Orleans. “[Caviar] makes an experience more special, and people these days are looking for more interesting dining experiences. It also makes a dish more indulgent.”

Boswell uses hackleback, paddlefish, bowfin (a local Louisiana variety, also known as Cajun caviar), trout roe, salmon roe, and American sturgeon caviar.

Franklin Becker, executive chef with Restaurant Associates at Brasserie in New York, has switched to mostly trout roe, American *Transmontanus* (white sturgeon), colossal salmon roe, and a small amount of paddlefish.

Since the beluga ban, Becker saw prices of American products rise overnight by 20 percent to 30 percent. *Transmontanus* is the most expensive of those he now uses, followed by paddlefish, salmon roe, and then trout roe.

When buying caviar, he looks for clean, bright pearls, with an even color that’s not mottled. The eggs should be uniform, and there should be a slight salinity, but never a fishy smell.

“It should be nice and vibrant and tasting of the sea,” he said.

Becker offers some advice when serving caviar:

- \* Keep the flavors surrounding it simple.
- \* Keep the acid levels in the other food a little higher than usual to bring out the salinity and the flavors of the caviar.
- \* Do not pair caviar with something salty.

Another Restaurant Associates location, Brasserie 81/2 in New York, is serving U.S. caviars “that are just as good” as the imports, said Julian Alonzo, executive chef. “I’m playing with it a little more now. When you have beluga, you don’t want to put it on the top of fish; you want it on its own.”

Tsar Nicoulai is a supplier in San Francisco. American sturgeon



**For food service**

A Midwest caviar company produces a handy product that combines the elegance of caviar with the efficiencies needed by a production kitchen.

Caviar Crème Spread mixes a cream cheese-based spread with caviar (your choice: salmon or legal lobster roe) and other ingredients in pre-filled pastry bags with star tips inserted. ■

[www.collinscaviar.com](http://www.collinscaviar.com)

roe is the most sought after, particularly *osetra*, says Deborah Keane, director of sales and marketing, and more requests are coming in for *sevruga* (both grades of sturgeon eggs), but for now, hackleback and paddlefish are the favorite. The two are similar cousins, says Keane.

“Hackleback is creamier and black-colored and has a short finish — happy, easy, novice caviar.” Paddlefish is a small, gray caviar, sometimes a little wet depending on the time of year it’s been harvested. It has a little more brine, so more of a caviar-type flavor and a sharper finish.

More than half of Tsar Nicoulai’s sales are farmed caviar, she said, and any wild they sell is from sustainable sources. “Hackleback and paddlefish are both wild, but they could be regulated soon, and we may turn to farms.”

Another supplier, John Burke, founder of Louisiana Caviar Co. in New Orleans, says that paddlefish and hackleback are popular, but the best-seller is his local product, Cajun caviar, a dark-brown almost black product, with a robust flavor. This is a particular favorite from Christmas through Mardi Gras, he points out. ■

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1oz (28g)   Total 1oz (28g)	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 70	Total Fat 10g
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 10g	20%
Cholesterol 100mg	20%
Sodium 200mg	40%
Total Carbohydrate 0g	0%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Protein 10g	20%

**Don't spare expense in storing caviar**

One of the world’s most expensive foods needs to be stored properly.

Chef Franklin Becker of New York buys in small quantities and goes through it pretty quickly. “I always store it on ice, in a little glass jar with a metal cover, or in a plastic container with a breast milk pad, which absorbs the excess liquid and keeps the caviar from becoming too liquidy,” he said. He rarely has to keep his caviar past three or four days, but using these methods, he can store it for up to two weeks.



Other establishments use ice baths and vacuum sealers.

John Burke, the New Orleans supplier, doesn’t recommend keeping caviar on ice, although if you do, it should be sprinkled with salt to keep it super-cold at 28 degrees. “You should keep water away from caviar because it absorbs it and discolors, and doesn’t remain good quality,” he said. “Ideally,” he said, “it’s best to keep caviar refrigerated at 28 to 32 degrees — and dry!” ■