The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Once a Peasant Food, Caviar Now Luxury Treat

By Lana Matafonov

September 22, 2014



Black caviar

ST. PETERSBURG — Blini, vodka and black caviar: No real Russian feast is complete without this tasty troika, which has become synonymous with Russian culture.

"Even during the time of the tsars, there was no dinner without caviar, especially in the Romanov era," says Alexander Dmitriev, a caviar specialist and vodka sommelier at Belmond Grand Hotel Europe's Caviar Bar & Restaurant. "It [caviar] was an absolute luxury. ... The tsars, who preferred to pair their luxury products together, paired vodka with caviar."

This pairing continues today as vodka is known to help bring out the flavor of the caviar. In addition, bland foods are also now commonly served to help complement the caviar's salty taste. "Traditionally, caviar is served with boiled egg, in particular egg white, and sour cream because this helps remove some of the saltiness. This combination is then served on top of, or inside, plain blini and is the most traditional way ... and has been so throughout Russia's

history," says Dmitriev.

References to caviar date back to as far as the Persian Empire. However, it hasn't always been regarded as the luxury item it is today. Russian fishermen learned to farm caviar as early as the 12th century and for centuries it was considered nothing more than cheap peasant food, served with porridge and eaten by the bowlful. However, once Ivan the Terrible got a taste for it, its status changed and it has remained a delicacy since.

Caviar is eggs, or roe, extracted from several types of sturgeon fish and then cured in salt brine. The most traditional and famous Russian black caviar comes from the beluga.

"The beluga is the oldest fish in the world. It's a prehistoric fish and dates back to over 250 million years ago and hasn't changed over that time," says Dmitriev.

As the largest in the sturgeon family, the beluga averages four meters in length, weighing 1,000 kilograms and producing about 20 to 25 percent of its body weight in eggs, equating to some 200 kilograms of usable caviar.

"Beluga can live up to 100 years and can start producing eggs as early as 16 years old, but only once every two years," says Dmitriev. "But unfortunately the beluga is becoming quite rare; only 120 or less are caught annually. In fact all beluga in Russia are now under protection and kept in protected areas."

The Caviar Bar & Restaurant offers the most extensive range of black caviar in St. Petersburg — 12 varieties in fact. It is also the only place in the city that offers a taste of the rare gold caviar from the albino sterlet, a pale yellow-colored caviar. With the hotel consuming almost 100 kilograms of caviar a year, it makes every effort to buy only from licensed suppliers and supports the country's conservation programs. "Russians have actually invented many different methods of caviar production to help protect the fish," says Dmitriev. "For example, farmers use a special method called a 'C-section,' which means milking the fish for eggs without killing them. Currently, only Russia is using this method.

Dmitriev also urges consumers to make an effort to buy from licensed suppliers as well avoid fakes. "You must buy from reliable suppliers because many simply dye caviar black. You also don't know the conditions under which the caviar has been harvested, and you can be poisoned.

"A common way to sell fake black caviar is to use the black eggs from a Japanese fish. It looks the same but has a different flavor. If you have experienced the taste of real black caviar, even just once, you will immediately be able to detect if you are eating fake," says Dmitriev.

When it comes to serving caviar, Dmitriev advises against the use of silverware because it alters the flavor. Instead, when conducting a tasting session, he prefers to use a special technique borrowed from caviar production specialists. "Using a small mother-of-pearl spoon, they put some caviar on the back of the hand because the skin doesn't have any flavor, making it the best for tasting. While caviar is served on fresh ice, it is best eaten a little warm, which is warmed by your hand. Then simply wait five to 20 seconds, eat the caviar and finish with a little bit of vodka because vodka helps open up the flavor. With all my guests, I recommend trying this method so that they can truly experience the flavors and subtle

differences ... and I have yet to meet a person who has not enjoyed the Russian black caviar we have on offer here," he adds with a smile.

For more information on caviar and vodka tasting sessions at Belmond Grand Hotel Europe, visit: www.belmond.com/grand-hotel-europe-st-petersburg

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/22/once-a-peasant-food-caviar-now-luxury-treat-a39642