

The Exotic Glamor of Eggplant Caviar

Opening a jar of aromatic eggplant caviar is the perfect way to remember the golden splendor of autumn long after it is over.

By [Jennifer Eremeeva](#)

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Jennifer Eremeeva / MT

The very mention of “eggplant caviar” will make even the most recalcitrant Russian smile. This is not an indication that they love eggplant, but rather a devotion to classic Soviet cinema. The phrase reminds them of a fabulously funny moment in the hit 1970s time-travel film, “Ivan Vasilyevich Changes Profession,” based on a play of the same name by Mikhail Bulgakov.

In the film, a typical Soviet building superintendent — Ivan Vasilyevich Bunsha — is sent back in time to the era of Ivan (Vasilyevich) IV, better known as Ivan the Terrible, whom Bunsha resembles. To survive in the cutthroat world of Ivan the Terrible, Bunsha poses as the tsar, and in this guise is invited to a sumptuous banquet.

Among the heaping dishes of both black and red caviar, Bunsha is shown with a great flourish, “exotic caviar from across the sea — eggplant caviar!” To underscore the rarity of this delicacy in the time of Ivan the Terrible, there is only a tiny smear of one of the few foods always available in Soviet supermarkets even in the leanest years.

Glamorous or ubiquitous, eggplant caviar is a wonderful dish — when done properly.

At its best, it is the epitome of autumn. Smoky, fleshy eggplant roasted into glossy perfection, spiked with salt, garlic, and often other autumn vegetables such as peppers or tomatoes. This is the perfect spread that can double as a relish, liven up a bowl of hummus, transform a humdrum turkey sandwich or even jazz up a plate of scrambled eggs.

Done badly, it is watery and tasteless — except for too many chunks of raw garlic and onion, and in this iteration, it just wastes far too much valuable surface area on a *zakuska* table. You can still get a jar — or even a tin — of eggplant caviar in the shops, and that’s fine, but the store-bought version bears no resemblance to a well-prepared eggplant caviar you make at home.

Eggplant caviar needs a bit of smoke, so whenever possible, prepare the eggplants on a grill to allow the smoky flavor to creep in to the flesh as it caramelizes over the flames. Eggplants are very watery, and even after a thorough grilling will require some time on the stove top to really cook down.

To mellow the bite of garlic, I roast a whole head of it along with the eggplant, rendering the cloves into an almost sweet paste, which makes the perfect subtle side note. Sauteing the shallots in olive oil for a good long time mellows their flavor as well.

I like to add red peppers to the mix, which makes this version more southern than northern, with a heavy lean towards the beloved Balkan red pepper spread, ajvar, which is sometimes made with eggplant.

And though I’m not opposed to putting in some roasted tomatoes, I find that tomato paste is a better choice to introduce a blast of umami and keep the color bright.

This condiment is ideal for slathering on grilled bread, set out with crackers or flatbread, or enjoyed on top of labneh. If you are faced with an autumnal glut of peppers and eggplants, make a large batch of the eggplant caviar to keep through the winter — processing the mixture in sterilized jars for 15 minutes.

In the depths of February, opening a jar might not transport you back to the reign of Ivan the Terrible, but it is the perfect way to remember the golden splendor of autumn long after it is over.

Ingredients

- 2 large eggplants or 4 medium-sized ones
- 2 red peppers
- 1 head of garlic
- 1 large shallot
- ¼-cup (60 ml) of olive oil, divided

- 2 tblsp of tomato paste
- 2 tsp of salt
- 1 tsp of Aleppo pepper

Garnish with:

- 1/4-cup (60 ml) of chopped parsley
- Lemon wedges

Instructions

- Preheat a grill to its high setting or preheat the oven to 450°F (230°C).
- Prick the eggplant with a knife in several places. Slice off the top of the head of garlic and brush the exposed cloves with olive oil. Wrap the head of garlic in aluminum foil.
- Grill the eggplant until the outside is charred and it has collapsed on itself. Grill the peppers until they are blacked all over and also take on the appearance of a party balloon three days after the party. Place the wrapped garlic head on the edge of the grill as you are grilling the vegetables.
- When the vegetables have cooled sufficiently to handle, scrape the insides of the eggplant into a saucepan and simmer on medium low heat for 20–25 minutes until all the liquid has evaporated.
- Peel the charred skin off of the red peppers, remove the seeds and pith and chop the pepper into small pieces. Use a small knife to extract the roasted cloves of garlic from their husk.
- Heat half of the olive oil in large skillet and when it is sizzling, add the chopped shallot. Sauté slowly on medium–low heat, allowing the shallots to become soft and slightly golden.
- Add the roasted garlic and the tomato paste and stir until combined.
- Add the eggplant, salt and Aleppo pepper, and the roasted red peppers and cook over medium–low for 10 minutes, stirring to ensure that everything is well combined.
- Cool the mixture to room temperature before serving. Eggplant caviar will only benefit from a night in the fridge, so by all means make it ahead of time if you can.
- Serve with the remaining olive oil and chopped fresh parsley and lemon wedges.

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