

Napoleon once said, “A man’s palate can, in time, become accustomed to anything.” A saying, which holds true for the world’s two most famous delicacies – fish roe & duck liver. That is putting it crudely. In gourmet world, they are known as Caviar and Foie Gras and are the leading names in fine dining. Of course, most people don’t take to the taste immediately but once you acquire it, there is no looking back.

Caviar is the salted egg from three types of Sturgeon fish- BELUGA, OSETRA & SEVRUGA found in the Caspian Sea. In fact, the oldest and largest Caviar fisheries in the world are in Astrakhan, Russia. Caviar has a buttery flavour and melts in your mouth. Aficionados pledge that the taste is like “a breath of fresh, clean ocean air!”

Though caviar was already being eaten in many parts of the world, it grew in prominence after Russian Czars developed a passion for it. In fact, many link the birth of caviar to the Russian nobility. However, the earliest eaters of caviar were the Persians who called it Chav-Jar, or “Cake of Power”. According to them, these particular fish eggs had healing properties for a variety of ailments.

Beluga is the most prized and the rarest of Sturgeon fish. It is the largest of the family and produces large, loose, shiny Grey black eggs. Before Beluga, the Sterlet, also of the Sturgeon family, was considered having the best small grained golden caviar but this species is now almost extinct. Of course, its extinction is being attributed to the Czars who wanted caviar of only that particular fish. Osetra caviar is slightly smaller than the Beluga with colour ranging from brown to golden yellow. Osetra caviar has its own fan following who prefer its strong nutty flavour to the mildness of the Beluga. Sevruga is freely available and produces small Grey eggs.

Caviar is processed by removing the roe from the fish and placing it over a fine sieve. The eggs are gently rocked to and fro to separate them. The separated pieces of eggs are collected in a large bowl and rinsed with fresh water to remove any impurities. The master salt blender or IKRJANSCHIK (caviar maker in Russia) classifies and adds precise amounts of pure sea salt to the eggs. Being an Ikrjanschik takes nearly 10 to 15 years of apprenticeship. Before adding salt, the caviar maker notes down the different sizes and colour of the eggs. Depending on that, he decides how to salt them. Salt is added to prevent freezing, as caviar must be stored at a very low temperature. The best eggs will be treated as Malossol (“little

salt”) which means that not more than five percent by weight of salt will be added to the eggs. The malossol caviar has the most delicate flavour and is also highly perishable. The special type of salt added to the caviar comes from Astrakhan where the salt from the sea is stored in a dry room for over five years.

After the salt is evenly distributed, the caviar is once again passed over a fine mesh to remove any excess liquid. The finished caviar is then packed in lacquer- coated tins, sealed with elastic bands and ready for shipping.

### **STORAGE AND HANDLING**

- Fresh caviar has a short shelf life and should be stored in the coolest part of the fridge, at a very low temperature.
- Pasteurized caviar can stay good for three months prior to opening.
- Fresh caviar will last about a week or two in the refrigerator. Once it is opened, it should be eaten within two to three days.
- Place a sheet of plastic wrap over the surface of the opened tin. Turn the tin over each day so that the oil reaches all the eggs.
- Do not touch the caviar with metal objects, which will impart a metallic taste to it. Traditionally, mother of pearl palettes or spoons are used to eat the caviar. If you are consuming it at home, you can use plastic, glass or wood.

### **SERVING IT UP**

What is the right way to eat caviar? Different rules for different people. While many believe the right way to eat caviar is over a lightly toasted piece of bread, the adventurous ones like to alter the flavour with special garnishes like chopped eggs, onion, sour cream, crème fraiche, etc.

Depending on the grade of caviar, the flavour of lesser grades can be enhanced with a dab of fresh lemon juice.

Normally, caviar has its own server but if you don't have one, you can place it in a glass or porcelain bowl inside a large bowl filled with ice.

Frozen vodka and champagne go along fine with caviar.

### **FOIE GRAS**

Sometimes, overfeeding can be a good thing. Ask those who think Foie Gras is the best entrée or aperitif. Fattened ducks tend to produce liver, which is known as Foie Gras in the gastronomy world. Foie Gras is believed to have been discovered in Egypt centuries ago, when migratory geese spent the winter in the Nile valley. When the Egyptians fed on these birds, they were surprised to see the huge size of the liver. After studying the birds, the Egyptians realised that they naturally created their fattened liver by overfeeding in order to accomplish long migratory flights.

Foie Gras can be either of goose or duck. While some enjoy the delicate, cream like taste of goose Foie Gras, others prefer the musky flavour with a hint of lasting bitterness of duck Foie Gras. Fresh Foie Gras can either be used for warm preparations or to prepare preserves. It is generally cut into slices, cooked in high heat and served with sweet sauce. Preserved Foie Gras is sterilized, thoroughly cooked and can be stored for a few years. It is the most traditional preparation and is served at the beginning of a meal.

### **MAN MADE**

Migratory birds overfeed to endure the harsh winter and the long journey. Man has copied this natural operation to obtain Foie Gras. Young duckling and gosling are fed continuously, three times a day for two to three weeks. Corn is considered the best feed because of its high starch content. Special care is taken to maintain optimum heat and proper ventilation.

**SERVING IT UP**

Chill Foie Gras before serving.

Foie Gras, although perhaps best served on its own or accompanied by buttered crisp toast or French bread, may also be used as an exquisite accompaniment to a wide range of mouth watering egg, meat and fish recipes. The benchmark of fine dining, Caviar and Foie Gras are two designer foods that will not go out of fashion.