



FROM THE SEA CAVIAR, JUST A HINT OF THE SEA

Champagne Wishes and Caviar Dreams

BY LAEL HAZAN, PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELLIE CAMPBELL

Americans have a fundamental belief that we can all one day be millionaires, own our own homes and eat caviar. It is a belief in the future that makes our country forward-thinking as well as a bit materialistically focused on money and the good life.

Realizing that we all want “the good life,” Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium in Sarasota has taken American desires and married them to fish and aquariums needs. Mote was founded to further marine research. However, being a non-profit, they also needed to figure out how to keep their doors open. A fish that represented an opportunity to do both has been the sturgeon, from which the world gets its caviar.

I was lucky enough to go to the Mote marine aquaculture park on Fruitville Road. Yes, it is 17 miles inland! I was able to see their amazing fish farm. Mote has been farming sturgeon

for almost a decade. They are not only working to create commercially viable fish farms, but they are also creating “healthy” farming with cutting-edge technology.

**Some people wanted
Champagne and caviar
when they should have
had beer and hot dogs.**

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

Fish farming has been getting a lot of bad publicity lately. After all, who really wants to eat a fish that has been swimming around for months, if not years, in the same dark and dank tank? Mote is trying to create healthy and sustainable farm fisheries. Their hatchlings are given enough room to grow and mature. The water is recirculated through a sophisticated filtering process, with the waste finally scrubbed by a human-made marsh. The entire farm is enclosed and only a small part of the water reaches the Florida aquifer. The fish are healthy, active and, unlike many farmed fish, their meat is full of flavor. Although for now replicating the process may be too costly,

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metal touching the eggs, as it changes their flavor. Utensils made of naturally occurring materials should be used; often the spoons are made of mother-of-pearl. Traditionally caviar is served on a blini, a light little pancake that is topped with crème fraiche and then the eggs. We prefer to serve it on buttered toast points. Many chefs are inventive in the ways they serve caviar, but I must admit to being a purist. In my ideal world, with no one watching, I would eat it straight out of the tin.

At Mote, they wait until the female fish are 5–7 years old and then judiciously taste for texture and flavor. They only harvest when the fish are at their peak so that the eggs are firm and delicious. Because of their care and expertise, Mote caviar has become favored by some of the most discriminating caviar companies. The majority of their product is sold to Petrossian (rated by the New York Times as having the best farmed caviar), which sells it as Siberian classic; Caviar Star, which sells it as American Beluga; and the Seattle Caviar Company, which sells the product as Siberian Sturgeon / Sustainable Caviar.

You can also purchase it locally at Captain Brian's and a few fine Sarasota restaurants are using Mote caviar and sturgeon in their repertoire; please see the accompanying recipe from Libby's in Southside Village.

So the next time you are in New York or searching the web for caviar, you might find that the best product is one from your own backyard. And with that I bid you “Champagne wishes and caviar dreams.”

For more information visit www.mote.org



PEACHTREE FARMS DEVILED EGGS WITH MOTE MARINE CAVIAR

From Francis “Fran” Casciato, Executive Chef
Libby's Café + Bar

- 15 eggs
- 1 cup mayonnaise
- ½ cup pickle relish
- ¼ cup chipotle in adobe, puréed smooth
- 2 tablespoons dry mustard
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ¾ teaspoon kosher salt
- ¾ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 tablespoon chopped parsley

Cover the eggs with water in a saucepan, bring to a boil and simmer 5 minutes. Remove pan from heat and allow eggs to remain in the water for an additional 5 minutes. Then place the eggs in an ice bath to chill.

Peel the eggs, cut in half lengthwise and spoon yolks into a small mixing bowl. Pass the yolks through a fine strainer. Combine remaining ingredients in a separate bowl and mix thoroughly. Fold yolks into mixture, spoon into cooked egg whites. Refrigerate.

To serve, top with your favorite caviar. Libby's happens to prefer Mote Marine Sturgeon Caviar!

the scientists at Mote hope to one day figure out a way to make it commercially viable. Sturgeon, like many fish, has been over-harvested. Mote hopes to help bring this species and others back from the brink of extinction.

I had the opportunity to meet a number of people on the farm staff and it is hard to imagine people more excited about fish. Let me tell you, a sturgeon is beautiful only to another of its kind. They truly look like the pre-historic creatures that they are. I'm sure they have been the inspiration for many a nightmare or movie demon.

I was fascinated to learn that there are sturgeons native to Florida. However, the wild population is so small that Mote couldn't use these species for food production and instead shifted to non-indigenous Siberian and Bester varieties.

Caviar, the cured sturgeon roe, comes in many varieties. Although the most common kinds are Beluga, Osetra and Sevruga, there are others. Mote's main species is the Siberian sturgeon *Acipenser baeri*, which produces Osetra-type caviar, although they also

have some Bester sturgeon, which produces the “American Beluga.” I've been lucky enough to have a variety of caviars. A number of years ago, my father-in-law, Victor Hazan, for a very special occasion shared with us a bit of Osetra caviar that had been imported from Iran. The difference between that and the hard, black, salty pellets that are normally served at buffets is, well, the difference between near beer and a good lager.

Tasting caviar is an art form. I recently spoke with award-winning chef Azmin Ghahreman, who bought caviar for the Four Seasons Hotels. He said that you should taste caviar from the back of your hand, and only a few eggs at a time. You are supposed to roll the egg around in your mouth and then gently “pop” it. If it explodes with a fishy flavor, your caviar is too old; however, if it detonates with a clean, sweet, slightly briny flavor with just a hint of the sea, you have experienced the mouthwatering reason why caviar is so prized.

Once you get your caviar home, it is important to eat it properly. Not just any utensil will do. Experts cringe at the thought of any