
Caviar : the Black Market in Black Gold

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The sturgeon is so endangered that catching the pre-historic fish has been banned. But that won't stop Russia's richest from enjoying their traditional New Year's treat.

Shaun Walker reports on the growing hunger for contraband caviar Published: 28 December 2007

One morning in September, a Tupolev aeroplane touched down at a military airbase outside Moscow, where security is so tight that police are not allowed without permission.

But the interior ministry, acting on a tip-off, were waiting for this plane and, together with several security service operatives, burst on board as soon as it came to a halt. Arresting the passengers, they went immediately to several suitcases stored in the hold of the plane and found them stuffed with valuable contraband.

A crime ring involving gangs in several cities, smugglers and military insiders had been busted. But the cargo wasn't heroin, diamonds or weapons - it was fish. To be precise, it was black caviar, the salty roe of the sturgeon - the fish that lives in the waters of the Caspian Sea, and whose numbers have become so depleted that its roe was banned >From sale in Russia this year.

Its black market price has soared, police are cracking down on its illegal sale, and millions of Russians are left with the prospect of celebrating New Year's Eve without one of the most prized delicacies associated with the celebration. The holiday in Russia is the equivalent of Christmas in Britain - a time when families gather at home, exchange presents around the tree, and eat their most extravagant feast of the year.

Shots of vodka are chased down with sickly sweet Russian champagne, and the tables heave with mayonnaise-infused salads, pickles and cold cuts.

And for many families, in pride of place is a small tin of black caviar. Caviar is regarded as one of the ultimate luxuries across the world - the food of tsars and shahs, and not something mere mortals would want to spend hard-earned cash on. In the Soviet Union too, caviar was a carefully controlled state monopoly. Neatly piled on top of small pancakes, thinly spread atop a thick layer of butter on slices of white bread, or quaffed straight from the pot with a spoon, it was available only to top-level functionaries. But when the Soviet Union broke up, more people got in on the act.

Poaching started not just for personal use but for sale. The WWF (the former World Wildlife Fund) estimates that about 10 times more sturgeon was caught illegally than was caught officially according to quotas set to protect the sturgeon's dwindling numbers. Criminal gangs began operating in and around Astrakhan, Russia's main Caspian port. Shadowy figures arrived at villages to buy caviar from locals. They in turn sold it on to their bosses, who arranged for transport to Moscow.

"Poaching is as much a social and psychological problem as it is a criminal one," says Alexei Vaisman of the WWF. "A whole generation has grown up knowing no other life."

With the increase in poaching, caviar suddenly became an affordable luxury for Russians. A kilo, which might cost several thousand pounds in Europe, was available in Russia for £200 or less.

It was still fairly expensive in comparison with salaries, and definitely a food for special occasions rather than everyday consumption, but it was priced within reasonable limits. In fact, according to Mr Vaisman, research shows that the majority of black caviar consumed in Russia was eaten by ordinary Russian families allowing themselves a treat for special occasions.

A few years ago, £20 could get you a tin - albeit a tiny one - of black caviar; even a tin of beluga, the rarest and priciest variety. So, while no oligarch's birthday bash or elite party was complete without overflowing plates of caviar, it was also a must-have product for more modest celebrations, and a special treat to have at New Year.

The sturgeon is a relic species that has survived since the time of the dinosaurs, but it has been overfished to the brink of extinction. Some individuals live for more than 100 years, but they can take 15 years to reach breeding age. The dwindling population has been on the cards for many years.

But Russians had more important things to worry about than a species of fish being poached to extinction. A recent survey found that only eight per cent of respondents said they felt that people shouldn't eat black caviar for ethical reasons.

"They think, 'I'll just buy one little tin for New Year; what harm can one tin do?'" said Mr Vaisman. But this year, they will have to do without. Since 1 August, there has been a blanket ban on all commercial fishing of sturgeon. Now, the only black caviar legally produced in Russia is the tiny amount produced from a few fish at sturgeon reproductive centres on the Caspian shores. And most of this is sent for export to ensure maximum profit.

"Almost all the caviar sold in Moscow is illegal," says Andrei Pilipchuk, of the interior ministry's department for economic security, which fights organised crime. His department raided a central Moscow market last week and seized more than 300kg of caviar >From poached sturgeon. "Not only is it illegal, but also a health hazard," he says. "We did analysis on it and it contains all sorts of different bugs."

Mr Pilipchuk says that the criminal structures involved with the caviar trade can be compared in stature to drugs mafias. "It's a well-organised and well-financed operation," he says. The caviar police use speedboats and helicopters to track down poachers. In the summer, two of their agents died when a boat chase led them into a storm.

But now, sturgeon stocks in the Caspian are so low that even poachers are having a hard time of it. "It's so difficult to find sturgeon, that it's becoming unprofitable for the poachers for the first time," says Mr Vaisman. By some estimates there are less than 1,000 beluga sturgeon left in the entire sea, and few sturgeon of any variety that have matured to caviar-bearing age.

It could be the end of an affinity between caviar and Russians that goes back centuries. Initially, sturgeon roe was peasant food, scooped >From the belly of the plentiful fish by poor villagers living on the shores of the Caspian. But gradually it became a symbol of wealth and aristocracy; a delicacy reserved for tsars and aristocrats. In the early 18th century, Tsar Peter I the Great was said to have sent Louis XV a consignment, but the French King was so disgusted by the taste that he spat it out on the carpet at Versailles

It was only in the hedonistic 1920s that Europe at large fell for caviar when, naturally, Russians provided a vanguard for the new taste. As aristocratic émigrés fled the Bolshevik revolution and found their way to Paris, the city became a hotbed of avant-garde Russian culture. Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and Igor Stravinsky's compositions were the talk of the town as the années folles, the crazy years, were in full swing.

Depressed by news that their ancestral homeland was being overrun by vulgar proletarians, the White Russians did their best to recreate the life of the tsarist gentry in the French capital. One thing was missing - caviar. This was remedied by two brothers of Armenian descent who had been born on one side of the sturgeon-bearing Caspian in Iran, and raised on the Russian side.

Melkoun and Mouchegh Petrossian had emigrated after the revolution to Paris to continue legal studies but, unable to join French schools, they needed a cunning scheme to make money, and they spotted an opening. They pestered the Soviet embassy to sell them caviar and, eventually, the diplomats relented and arranged for a shipment of the black eggs to arrive in Paris. The Petrossians bought it for a suitcase of francs - hard currency the Soviets badly needed.

Initially, the French were distinctly unimpressed by the salty, fishy eggs, and the first customers were the White Russian émigrés, who could be found enjoying a spot of beluga at the Petrossians' shop on the Quay d'Orsay and the Caviar Kaspia restaurant. But soon the craze took off and, in the intervals of concerts and shows, Paris high society could be found shovelling spoonfuls of caviar, sold from stands in the foyer. Today, Petrossian is still a leading caviar company, based in the United States and run by the brothers' descendants, and the Caviar Kaspia restaurant still does a roaring trade in Paris, where 500g of beluga sells for £3,000.

As New Year approaches, what little caviar there is in Moscow is not cheap either. One branch of the supermarket chain Perekrestok had a 113g tin of beluga selling for more than £400. "It's almost certainly illegal," says Mr Vaisman, "and it has gone up in price several times even since the summer."

But if this will be a New Year's Eve largely without caviar, Russians can at least relax in the knowledge that one other celebration staple is still cheap - at £2 for half a litre, vodka is still highly affordable for almost all Russians. Perekrestok's cheapest bottle is significantly cheaper than a cappuccino in a nearby coffee shop.

And, after a few shots, it should be easy to forget that this was the year when the love affair between Russians and black caviar finally came to an end

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- * Vodka. It's Russia's national drink, swigged before, during and after courses and even the official stuff is cheap at £2 per bottle. The black market liquor will burn an even smaller hole in your pocket but beware - thousands die every year from drinking moonshine vodka.

- * Moscow has plenty of boutiques where the new rich can buy big-name brands but the markets still cater to people who will settle for bargain goods by Abidas, Gucki and Verscase.

- * In the 1990s fishing boats would arrive at Vladivostok loaded with second-hand Japanese cars. Illegal imports are still cheaper than legal goods.

- * Kamchatka crabs are not as rare as caviar, but are still subject to fishing quotas. In the far east of Russia, fishermen ignore the quotas and sell the giant crabs at knockdown prices by the side of the road. A decent-sized

specimen can go for up to £100 in a Moscow restaurant, but on the black market it'll set you back £20.

* Russians love fur in all its varieties, but for some fur, such as polar bear, there's a quota. Log on to the right internet chat room, however, and you can snap up a contraband skin - if you have £6,500 to spare.

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