

A new crowd cultivates a taste for caviar

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By Tina Dirmann, Special for USA TODAY

At some of the USA's hottest and hippest restaurants, young chefs are rediscovering a food once revered by their grandparents but largely ignored by today's jet-set diners: It's those salty little fish eggs, better known as caviar.

The trend comes as international bans tighten on imported caviar, leading chefs to turn to the cheaper — but some say equally flavorful — domestic caviar, sprinkling it into recipes previously considered beneath the upscale delicacy.

There are caviar spring rolls at the Hyatt Regency in Bethesda, Md. And caviar tuna pizza at New York City's Morimoto. Or fettuccine and caviar at Los Angeles' Locanda Veneta.

"Caviar is sexy," says Adam Stevenson, executive chef for Earth & Ocean restaurant at the swanky W Hotel in downtown Seattle. "When you enjoy it the right way, it can make people feel like they are indulging in something special.

"But I know what's going on in their heads at first," he adds. "Fish eggs. Ugh."

The secret to introducing caviar dishes to a new generation is to creatively incorporate the delicacy into familiar dishes.

Though Allison Andrews, 23, had tasted caviar before, on a cracker, she had never sought it out. It was stuffy food. Boring, she said. Something the queen and her court might munch on. "It seemed so regal," she says.

But now she regularly orders the caviar tacos created by executive chef Damon Gordon of Quarter Kitchen in San Diego. The restaurant opened last summer inside one of the area's hippest social scenes, the Ivy Hotel.

"The first time I tried it, it kind of knocked my socks off," she says. "Put it (caviar) together kind of taco style, and suddenly, well, everybody eats tacos."

And that's exactly the point, Gordon says.



Small and salty bites: Mini caviar tacos are popular at Quarter Kitchen in the Ivy Hotel in San Diego

"When it comes as a complement to something our younger diners are already comfortable with, then it's not so intimidating," he says. "And when they taste it, they say, 'Wow, great combination!' "

Gordon's now supremely popular mini caviar tacos are composed of thin, crispy potato shells filled with crème fraîche, horseradish, red onion, parsley, hardboiled egg and caviar.

The dish, topped with domestic caviar, is just \$26, though he does offer a \$99 imported caviar version upon request.

But access to the lofty imported kind is becoming very difficult.

In recent years, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna has imposed on-again, off-again bans on fishing from the Caspian Sea, where the population of sturgeon, including osetra, sevruga and beluga species, has dropped 70%. And in March, Russia proposed that all Caspian states enforce a five-year ban on sturgeon to help save them from extinction.

That has forced chefs to become more familiar with domestic and farmed caviar, which, some argue, offer nearly the same taste quality at a reduced price. An ounce of locally grown paddlefish caviar runs about \$40 an ounce, compared with \$120 an ounce for beluga.

Inside Stevenson's kitchen at Earth & Ocean, the chef concedes that he had to overcome his own bias against the tiny jelly-textured eggs, which he never enjoyed spreading on a traditional toast point. But he has learned to appreciate the delicate combination of salty sweetness. Today, the signature dish in his kitchen is potato gnocchi topped with crème fraîche and paddlefish caviar. And his diners in their 20s and 30s lap it up.

They like it "because we're not serving it in some drab kind of way," he said. "This fits very well with our target group. It's elegant, it's young, it's sexy."

Matthew Zubrod, co-owner and head chef at DishAspen in Colorado, acknowledged it was a hard sell when he experimented with a new dish for his self-described "casually elegant" restaurant: french fries with a side of lemon zest, chive and caviar cream dip. So he slipped out a few fries on a plate with a dollop of dip, complimentary, and watched his well-heeled patrons return to pay \$15 for a full order.

"I pushed it a little," he said. "Once they started ordering it on their own, I put it on the menu."

If hipster diners need more convincing, there's New York's Russian Tea Room, where the weekday "vodka hour" draws throngs of young professionals.

The \$25 Royal Martini comes with a caviar-topped cucumber slice floating gently over cold vodka. Actually, it's the classic Russian way to enjoy caviar, alongside a swig of fine vodka, although most customers don't know that, says Ken Biberaj, spokesman for the Russian Tea Room.

"Some of the new patrons might not know how to enjoy caviar yet," says Biberaj. "But we're easing them into it, with a martini."