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The oyster pie at Bellemore Chicago
Photo: Courtesy of Anthony Tahlier



Few sights are as extravagant as a spoon heaped with glossy beads of caviar. But at a time when a 10-table joint with concrete walls and a Beastie Boys soundtrack can signal fine dining just as much as a gilded dining room once did, caviar is no longer an import designated solely for big-ticket anniversary splurges. In fact, it might just be 2018's most desirable ingredient.

Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises recently reimagined the Pump Room on Chicago's Gold Coast as Booth One, a swank, cream-hued space lined with black-and-white photographs serving updated retro specialties like salmon tournedos and steak Diane. Naturally, classic caviar service graces the menu, too, inviting diners to fold Golden Osetra from the Parisian House of Kaviari into fluffy eggs and buckwheat blini. This glamorous approach is also on display at Major Food Group's The Pool Lounge, the mirrored Midtown Manhattan cocktail nook overlooking The Pool restaurant. To match the mood conjured by cocktails elegantly layered with overlapping slices of cucumber, chef Rich Torrisi assembles a grand caviar platter, pairing French Baeri Royal, from Kaviari as well—"we love the mild flavor and firm texture"—with playful accoutrements beyond the predictable trappings of crème fraîche, chives, and blini. There are soft-boiled Jidori eggs, their yolks glowing deep orange, and duck fat confit potatoes additionally roasted in the oven. "We have one guest who regularly has the caviar to begin and then again for dessert," Torrisi reveals. Why not?



Air's Champagne Parlor

Photo: Courtesy of Air's Champagne Parlor



But such plush settings aren't mandatory for modern caviar consumption. Consider Oak + Rowan, in the Fort Point neighborhood of Boston, a cavernous restaurant heavy on exposed brick. When it opened in 2016, executive chef Justin Shoults was determined to bring caviar into the everyday realm by constructing approachable flights. His ever-changing tastings—maybe combining Louisiana-harvested bowfin and Royal Belgian Platinum with farm-raised Chinese Siberian and German Osetra Supreme variations—aim to demystify the category as much as invite experimentation.



SaltBrick Tavern

Photo: Courtesy of SaltBrick Tavern



Caviar’s accessibility is now manifested on down-to-earth restaurant menus across the country. Chef Christopher Kim gives comfort food a spin at [SaltBrick Tavern](#) in downtown Brooklyn, lavishing tater tots with caviar and herbed sour cream. At Stephen Starr and Aimee Olexy’s [The Love](#), off [Philadelphia’s](#) Rittenhouse Square, American caviar accompanies a homey pierogi and buttermilk panna cotta, while at the Apparatus Room, inside the [Detroit Foundation Hotel](#)—a former firehouse—deviled eggs dressed with American Hackleback caviar and the Japanese chili-yuzu-salt condiment, yuzu kosho, are served in a setting of shiny white subway tiles and blown glass. [Gibson](#), at the downtown San Francisco Hotel Bijou, is a restaurant propelled by live fire cooking. Here, chef Robin Song encourages patrons to kick off dinner with 10 grams of “gateway” caviar, whether California or Siberian sturgeon or fancy Golden Osetra, complemented with lowbrow bar snacks including a smoked egg yolk with honey cream and chives, a chicken nugget, and a mashed potato stick.

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Caviar even gets the confectionary treatment in Washington, D.C., at [Siren by RW 9](#) inside the [Darcy Hotel](#) on Scott Circle. Chef Robert Wiedmaier, in addition to wooing folks with classic caviar service, whimsically integrates it into a trifecta of delicate cookies. There is Hackleback tucked into a roasted white chocolate macaron and dolloped over shortbread, and a hazelnut-almond Linzer torte plumped up by sea buckthorn jam and trout roe.



Photo: Courtesy of the Darcy Washington, D.C.



Appropriately, caviar also appears all over the menu of New York lounge [Air's Champagne Parlor](#) in the West Village: atop frites, nestled inside a whipped-egg sandwich on homemade brioche, and by the half-ounce—American Grinnell, Kaluga Osetra, or Siberian sturgeon—with crème fraîche and chive potato chips. Its robust presence complements restaurateur Ariel Arce's mission of bringing reasonably priced bottles of bubbly to the masses. "Every luxury market has changed, mostly because they used to be dominated by a few players. Now there are so many more competitors, quality products, and the access and demand," she explains. "No longer are things like caviar, truffles, and Champagne just for a select few. It's really now available at a fair price for everyone, but some people don't know where to get it and a lot of businesses take advantage of marking it up." Arce's solution for offering democratic caviar? Showcasing it in smaller but more affordable portions.



Air's Champagne Parlor

Photo: Courtesy of Air's Champagne Parlor



Tinkering with serving size is just one approach restaurants are taking to reach a wider swath of caviar-happy customers. In D.C., chef Fabio Trabocchi's new restaurant Del Mar at District Wharf celebrates the flavors of his wife Maria's native coastal Spain. This dramatic green-and-white space resembling a Mediterranean villa offers Calvisius Royal Siberian and Royal Oscietra caviar for nonplussed high rollers content with shelling out \$110 and \$165 an ounce. Those with leaner budgets will be delighted to see that the coveted Calvisius also makes a cameo in the form of the \$24 Carabineros, a red king prawn tartare with saffron aioli. Likewise, chef and partner Jimmy Papadopoulos, of Bellemore in Chicago's West Loop, unites two venerable delicacies in his good-looking oyster pie: an oyster custard topped with Osetra and crème fraîche, heightened by green apple, lemon, and dill. "Caviar has never lost its notorious lap-of-luxury identity, however, I feel that more chefs are finding ways to make it a little less intimidating," says Papadopoulos, noting that the oyster pie's \$65 price tag also includes a pour of Moët & Chandon 2009 Grand Vintage Champagne. "That wouldn't normally be a 'healthy' food cost, but we give our guests the opportunity to not have to drop a hundred dollars for a generous share of caviar, and also to experience it on a unique vehicle."

Heritage Restaurant & Caviar Bar, a tribute to Chicago's vast immigrant culture spanning Russian, Czech, Polish, Korean, and German culinary influences, has a soft spot for caviar, even weaving it into brunch-time eggs. Guy W. Meikle, executive chef and president of the Humboldt Park restaurant, says that he and his partners "wanted to take caviar off a high-end pedestal and make it enjoyable at every price point. Often, caviar presentations can be fussy and dainty. Ours are prepared in many ways—with chicharrón, black bread, pickles, homemade butter, or topped on oysters." A range of products, sustainably sourced from different locations, has allowed caviar to become more pervasive than during its limited past. At Heritage, some caviar is obtained through specialists, others directly from farms, like the Siberian Reserve Polanco, or an escargot variety from Poland. "Our wild caviar, which is available à la carte, is harvested from ecologically abundant species like bowfin, trout, and salmon."



Poppy's Caviar

Photo: Courtesy of Henrietta Red Nashville



Alternative versions of caviar may be more environmentally sound or attractively priced than the traditional setup, but chefs also love the depth they bring to dishes. Gavin Kaysen's hit Minneapolis restaurant Spoon and Stable, for example, prepares trout roe with crème fraîche and Bartlett pear, topping it with the Norwegian flatbread lefse. Growing up, Julia Sullivan, chef/partner of Henrietta Red in Nashville's Germantown, remembers her father constantly whipping up "an addictive snack" for dinner parties. "He combined sour cream with a scallion vinaigrette, topped it with salty fish roe, and served it with crackers. The combination of the cream and the salt kept you coming back for more and more," she recalls. Sullivan's rendition of the dip, fondly named Poppy's Caviar, stars spring onions and paddlefish caviar from Kelley's Katch in Savannah, Tennessee. "The texture stands up to finer types of caviar. It has nice salinity and the flavor is clean," she says. "I hope guests walk away feeling like they had a bit of fun and opulence"—two words that best sum up why caviar is relished so heartily today.



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