

Sacramento making a name for itself in the world of caviar

By Debbie Arrington, Sacramento Bee

In its claim to farm-to-fork fame, Sacramento has another distinction to add to its credit: caviar capital of America.

Locals may not know that the Sacramento Valley has become home to the nation's surging caviar industry, as California fish farmers capitalize on a shortage of wild caviar.

This holiday season, Sterling Caviar hopes its home base will discover its gourmet product, coveted by chefs and enjoyed by diners nationwide. It's rolled out new labeling, a new website and a higher profile as another sustainable crop that's Sacramento grown.

"San Francisco, New York, Miami, that's where we sell a lot of caviar," said Enrique Castano, Sterling's managing director. "Sacramento? Not so much. But we hope to change that."

At its Elverta fish farm and processing center, Sterling recently hosted 16 Northern California chefs so they could learn firsthand about the pluses of local, sustainable caviar. In addition, Sterling produces an abundance of caviar's byproduct: farmed sturgeon.

"Think global, act local," said farm manager Peter Struffenegger. "We're the leading U.S. producer of caviar. Internationally, we're known as one of the best alternatives (to wild caviar). This is our identification, yet to most of Sacramento, we're still a best-kept secret."

Sterling caviar already is on the menu as an appetizer or an ingredient at Mulvaney's B&L, Ella Dining Room and the Hyatt Regency in Sacramento. Thomas Keller's famed restaurants –

Bouchon Bistro and French Laundry in the Napa Valley and Per Se in New York – serve Sterling.

“Most people don’t even know where caviar comes from,” Castano said. “They say they tried it and it was too salty, fishy, yucky – but that wasn’t good caviar. We’re educating chefs and the public.”

High-quality caviar is not fishy or overtly salty. Instead, it has a buttery, almost nutty flavor that develops through aging.

Supplier to caviar giant Petrossian, Sterling now accounts for about 80 percent of the domestic caviar market. Its demand has skyrocketed following restrictions on imported wild caviar.

Those bans are intended to protect the dwindling wild sturgeon population. The best caviar comes from sturgeon, an ancient fish that – like salmon – spawns in fresh water, and then travels out to sea.

Overfishing in the Caspian Sea pushed several species of sturgeon – including those that produce Russia’s prized beluga caviar – to the brink of extinction. Since 2005, the U.S. has banned imports of wild beluga caviar.

California’s own green sturgeon is endangered (and an illegal catch). Sport fishing of wild white sturgeon is allowed, but commercial fishing is prohibited.

Native to the Sacramento River, California white surgeon can be farmed successfully in fresh water and actually thrives in controlled conditions.

Farmed caviar has made the delicacy more available and sustainable, a plus for consumers and restaurateurs. Chefs traditionally love caviar. Its complex taste and texture add an exquisite note to haute cuisine. Alone as an appetizer, it symbolizes the ultimate luxury food.

“Caviar plays an extremely important role in my cuisine,” Timothy Hollingsworth, who is wrapping up his stint as chef de cuisine at the French Laundry, told the Wall Street Journal. “Russian caviar is, unfortunately, pretty much obsolete. So having an alternative that is local, and sustainable, is simply – great.”

The switch to domestic caviar has another upside. Besides a growing local supply, prices are lower.

Sterling’s caviar is priced at \$62 to \$88 for 30 grams (about 1 ounce), depending on grade. An ounce of imported Russian Osetra caviar can cost \$300 and up.

San Francisco-based Tsar Nicoulai Caviar also farms its product in the Sacramento Valley. An ounce of its California Estate caviar – from Wilton-raised sturgeon – costs \$70.

How did Sacramento become the caviar capital? Location and luck.

Struffenegger points to UC Davis. Serge Doroshov, an animal science professor, brought Russian insight to California aquaculture. Doroshov’s research and studies on sturgeon helped local farmers get a huge head start on caviar production as an alternative to wild catches.

America’s largest freshwater fish, white sturgeon predate humans in the Central Valley. Roaming at sea from the Aleutian Islands to Monterey, they can live for decades and reach mammoth proportions – up to 20 feet long and more than 1,000 pounds. They return to the river to spawn.

Covered with bony armor, sturgeon have a serpentlike appearance that make them the “monsters” of the Delta. They’ve changed little in 175 million years.

“We really don’t know how long they can live,” Struffenegger said. “We know they can live to be 70 or 80 years old, but in

the depth of the river, it could be 400 years. They have no natural aging process.”

Sterling got its original breeding stock – just a few fish – from the Sacramento River with permission from the state’s Department of Fish and Wildlife.

“It’s technology at work,” said Fish and Wildlife’s Randy Lovell. “These farms take pressure off the wild catch. When you consider how long it takes these fish to reproduce, they’re very vulnerable.”

Sturgeon thrive in warm groundwater, which at Sterling’s hatchery stays at 65 to 75 degrees.

“It’s an eternal summer for these fish,” Struffenegger said. “People ask, what’s our secret? Our fish have a much easier life.”

With an excellent diet and human help, the huge fish reach maturity in half the time.

“In the wild, they’re bottom feeders – they’ll eat anything,” Struffenegger explained. “They have tough winters when they struggle for food and don’t grow. Here, it’s like they have two summers in every year. They’re always growing.”

The proof swims in large above-ground tanks, sheltered in warehouses 15 miles north of downtown Sacramento. Leaping and splashing, thousands of sturgeon swim circles around 40-foot tanks, 9 feet deep. They’re separated by age, size and eventually sex.

“They have a hierarchy,” Struffenegger said. “The biggest ones lurk down at the bottom.”

No matter their swim speed, these fish are slow food. It takes three years to determine which fish are male or female. Caviar is harvested from fully mature females, usually at age 10.

Only the biggest and best females will become caviar mamas. (The others: smoked sturgeon.)

Harvested in spring, the eggs typically make up 20 to 25 percent of a fish's weight. A 100-pounder can yield 20 or more pounds of caviar. Like dark pearls of tapioca, the eggs can range in color from olive green to obsidian black. Salt is added as a preservative.

Lucy Bowman, Sterling's quality control expert, tastes caviar from every fish harvested. That was about 3,000 spoonfuls this year.

"At 40 calories a tablespoon, it adds up," joked the 27-year-old Louisiana native. "That's why I work out a lot.

"Not many people have this job," she added. "Even my mama can't believe it."

Every fish at Sterling is numbered and tracked; so is its Sacramento-grown caviar. "We know everything about that fish," Castano said. "We bred it, we raised it, we harvested it. We know that it's sustainable. You can't say that about wild caviar."