

# Caviar Farming Catching On In North Carolina

Last year, Atlantic Caviar & Sturgeon near Lenoir, N.C., sold its first caviar after more than 10 years of research and development in collaboration with North Carolina State University. The impressive indoor aquaculture farm has 32 20,000-gal. tanks. Each tank supports about 10,000 lbs. of fish.

Size is important. The fish — Russian, Siberian and Atlantic sturgeon — don't produce caviar until they are at least 7 years old and weigh 20 to 40 lbs. After sonograms (to confirm eggs) and biopsies (to confirm egg size and firmness), it's a one-time harvest with females producing 2 to 4 lbs. of caviar. That's why caviar is so expensive, at about \$590/lb. wholesale.

Just 10 years ago, farmed caviar was still scorned, says Elisabeth Wall, marketing, media and sales manager for the company. Now with wild caught sturgeon endangered, 90 percent of caviar is farmed and the taste is considered equal to wild caught.

Beluga caviar is considered the best, with Russian sturgeon caviar, Ossetra, right behind it. While there are high overhead costs and risks, farming for caviar holds economic potential. It's one of those luxury foods that tend to remain stable through all types of economic climates.

Wall says the caviar is sold to distributors who sell to cruise lines, restaurants and hotels. The company also sells directly to customers.

"Our first Christmas season was very busy," she says.

Besides adding an export market for the caviar in the future, Wall is developing a market for sturgeon meat. With no external sex organs, males can't be culled out until they are about 4 years old (after sonograms).

"We call sturgeon 'the pork of the sea' for its texture," says Wall.

Because it doesn't have a pronounced flavor (or a strong fishy taste), chefs prepare it in a variety of ways and with different saucing. The other half of the market has been for smoked sturgeon, which is becoming a delicacy in the South, she adds. It has always been popular in New York City and other urban areas.

As markets develop, research continues at the farm, including an internship program, to help it become even more sustainable. Fry are currently imported, but Atlantic Caviar & Sturgeon plans to have its own breeding stock, and possibly expand to other farms.

Located in rural Happy Valley, area cropland also benefits from the aquaculture facility. Filtered water from the tanks is used for irrigation.



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