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The Esteemed Caviar

Caviar has historically existed as a delicacy of prestige and luxury, tracing all the way back to historical Greece, but popularized by the Tsars of Russia. In contemporary times caviar still is a cultural symbol of wealth and esteem. Though for a time it was offered freely in American saloons to entice eaters to consume. In this writing, we will look at the coveted caviar to better understand how these raw eggs became a symbol of Royalty.

For the purposes of this paper, we will refer to Caviar as the ‘Roe’ or eggs of sturgeon. This roe is harvested unfertilized and lightly salted for preservation and flavor enhancement. The resulting eggs are then graded for appearance and clarity of flavor (the less salt the better), this grading is applied to all varieties of caviar. The top three varieties are, in order, Beluga, Ossetra, and Sevruga (Nichola). These names correspond to the specific breed of sturgeon. When speaking historically, we will generally be referring to Beluga caviar, its source of origin being pivotal to the earliest cultivation. Beluga sturgeon is native to the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, and the Adriatic Sea (Nichola). We can note the surrounding locations and caviars’ origins, first in ancient Greece, then Iran, and finally pulled north into Moscow from the black sea. We can already see within the top three true caviars there exists a hierarchy and elitism.

Caviar can be traced back as early as ancient Greece, with the delicacy being noted in the writings of Aristotle (Nichola). Even then the food was reserved for the Aristocracy, the coveted eggs being hard to obtain from northern and eastern traders. The first to properly salt and prepare the eggs were likely ancient Persians. It was however Russian Tsars who brought caviar to its status in Russia and the European royal courts (New World Encyclopedia). The eggs were reserved for only the highest courts and were largely controlled by Russian trade routes. This solidified Caviar as a Russian delicacy for centuries. In 1873 an American caviar business boomed off Delaware River sturgeon. This new American caviar acted to drastically undercut the market, allowing caviar in the U.S. to become a staple of dining (New World Encyclopedia). This boom was not to last, in 1910 the American sturgeon was brought to the brink of extinction through overfishing, causing the immediate halting of all American caviar production. This only solidifies caviar as a luxury item, from the 1900’s all the way to the modern context we know today.

Modern-day caviar, still exists as a symbol of the elite, referred to in numerous pop songs of the day, Spotify even has a generated playlist referred to as ‘Rap Caviar’. The delicacy goes beyond being a symbol though, one ounce of Beluga caviar can cost $185 (Amazon). In America, consumption is reserved for the highest levels of dining and often only in celebration. The price acts as the modern gateway previously held by prestige. It’s often to see caviar paired with champagne, another item of prestige revered in America for celebratory purposes. Caviar continues to be the marking food of the elite and fortunate.

The scarcity, innate elitism, and cultural adoption of caviar have solidified its place as a food of luxury. Its value, generated by those who coveted it the most, has persisted through western history. Even in the modern context caviar exists as the food of fortune and royalty

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