

A GLIMPSE INTO THE STRANGELY INTIMATE MAJESTIC WORLD OF SALMON MILKING.

BY KATHERINE SCOTT

NO, IT'S NOT THE LATEST HIPSTER MILK TO DEFILE YOUR MORNING CUPPA.

Salmon milking is the method in which salmon caviar—the fish's bright orange, unfertilized eggs, or roe—are harvested. And it's just as weird as you'd imagine. 9Kitchen caught up with Huon Salmon's General Manager of Freshwater operations David Mitchell to walk us through the curious process.

WHAT DOES SALMON MILKING INVOLVE?

Unlike the ill-fated caviar-producing sturgeon you're probably more familiar with, which are commonly killed for their lucrative black roe, Huon Salmon are one of the few aquacultural farms in Australia to gently hand milk their fish, before returning them to their natural environment until the following season. These vibrant, membrane-coated pearls that "pop" in your mouth are infinitely more affordable than their black caviar counterpart—around \$37 per 100g for their reserve selection, compared to \$200 and upwards for the sturgeon variety. "Our hand-milked caviar are between four to six years old, ranging from three to 15 kilograms. These Huon salmon live in ponds fed from Tasmania's mountain streams," Mitchell says. "When the time is right in May, the mother salmon release eggs into her body cavity ready for spawning. She is gently taken from the water and lightly anesthetized. Our experienced team then follow a process called hand-milking, which involves slow, gentle strokes and a small amount of pressure to release the large salmon roe," Mitchell explains. The fish all undergo ultrasounds prior to harvest to determine the best time to milk, and when they're ripe to release eggs the roe should effortlessly squirt out of the salmon. If you're still having trouble picturing what this murky squirting process might involve (after all, salmon don't have nipples), the behind-the-scenes clip above should remove any ambiguity—Mitchell admits for those new to milking, the oddly intimate process takes some getting used to, and when you view the explicit clip you'll understand why. "For first timers the process of hand-milking can feel slightly weird. Imagine holding a sleepy 15-kilogram salmon across your lap as you perform gentle but firm, long strokes down its belly to help the roe release," Mitchell says. Yep, that definitely qualifies as "slightly weird".

"The high level of concentration required from our special team of 'milkers' makes this quite a serious but beautiful moment between farmer and fish."

- David Mitchell

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ROE AND CAVIAR?

All fish produce roe, however it is the special brining process that turns them from (unfertilised) roe into caviar, Mitchell explains, adding there are species naming conventions attached to the different types of caviar. "Only brined roe from the species called sturgeon is called 'caviar'. All other brined fish roe must identify the fish species before the word caviar i.e. salmon caviar," Mitchell says. It's this brining process, coupled with the salmon's environment, that many caviar producers would boast as their unique point of difference. "Salmon roe takes on the characteristics of the environment they are living in at the time of roe harvest and as such our salmon caviar varieties [hand milked and ocean grown] are distinctly different in both flavour and texture. "The percentage of water and salt, the temperature of the water and the type of salt used in the brine is a tightly held secret by all producers of all types of caviar."

