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## A new dawn for caviar

One European firm says it has both the quality and the eco-credentials to draw new customers to the highly-prized delicacy.

Caviar and sustainability is a pairing that many people would feel uncomfortable making, but a UK-Latvian operation believes it has both the quality and the eco-credentials to draw new customers to the highly-prized delicacy.

Mottra Caviar, which trades out of London but farms sturgeon and produces its caviar in Riga, Latvia, has, through considerable effort and investment, developed a black caviar that is fast making a name for itself in the UK.

Established in 2002 and founded by a group of Russian and Latvian caviar experts, Mottra produces year-round supplies of osetra (*Acipenser baerii*) and sterlet (*Acipenser ruthenus*) in a fully-undercover facility. Sterlet is a small, rare species of sturgeon that disappeared from the market for almost 50 years, but Mottra devised an aquaculture program that allows it to commercially farm the fish.

What makes Mottra's caviar really stand out is it's harvested without killing the sturgeon. In fact, because the fish are neither culled nor given a cesarean section, their eggs can be harvested time and again over many years.

Once the sturgeon reach maturity at about five years of age (about 4 kilograms), they undergo a procedure whereby the caviar is gently hand-milked (or massaged) out. The fish are then returned to their pools unharmed.

According to Mottra Director Sergei Reviakin, this process is not being done anywhere else in Europe or the United States.

Mottra's 14 sturgeon pools are filled with clean artesian water taken from 150 meters below ground, which the farm further purifies through a sophisticated double filtration cleaning process. It also takes its feed very seriously and has devised a special organic feed in partnership with a leading producer.

The rearing and harvesting techniques are, of course, major aspects of the operation, and it should be noted that Mottra doesn't source its broodstock from the wild. But the product still needs to be of very high quality. This is why extreme care and attention goes into the washing and preparation of the harvested caviar.

"A lot of knowhow is needed," remarked Reviakin.

Mottra currently has 50,000 fish in the water, and last year the company produced about 1 ton of caviar. It has the capacity to increase this to 5 tons, and through a planned extension it will be able to produce 10 tons or more, explained Reviakin. A figure of 30 tons is possible in time, he said. "But it's not just a growing exercise; we need to be able to sell the caviar too."

In aquaculture, there's a bottomless well of entrepreneurs who will testify to the fact that their ideas, as good as they were, failed to generate the necessary interest to take them onto the next level of commercial market recognition. Mottra seems different. In the UK, it has won over the high-profile chef and restaurateur Mark Hix, who has been a strong advocate for the caviar and was at the Riga facility again as recently as last week.

(Mottra's caviar was also believed to be used on the menu as part of this year's 90th birthday celebrations for Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh.)

With popular and progressive chefs like Hix in support, it's apparent there's a culture for change as far as caviar is concerned. It's understood the chef will soon be changing the name of his restaurant in the Selfridges department store on London's Oxford Street to the Hix Champagne & Caviar Bar, and Mottra's products will likely be featured.

"Mark [Hix] is one of those people who likes to source ingredients from suppliers who care about sustainability and animal welfare — he wants fish that are well looked after in very clean water and are fed the best organic feed," said Reviakin, who also confirmed that he's seen a positive change in perception about farmed caviar and that product sales are steadily increasing.

Reviakin will have high hopes this trend continues as the buying public becomes more informed about the availability of these sustainable options. Of course, price and taste are hugely important factors that will also play a large part in the success of such products.

There are four main types of sturgeon caviar that are appreciated by consumers — beluga, sterlet, oscietre and sevruga. The price of these follows that same sequence (highest to lowest). The price of farmed caviar is considerably less than for wild, and as global farmed production continues to grow it's unlikely prices will increase. Meanwhile, the price of wild caviar is now four times more expensive than it was 15 years ago, Reviakin pointed out.

Mottra produces sterlet (90 grams retails for GBP 159, EUR 183, USD 260) and oscietre (90 grams retails for GBP 139, EUR 160, USD 227). Consumers should expect to pay double these prices for wild. And, according to Reviakin, "As far as the taste goes, I really don't believe there's a difference between our farmed caviar and that from a wild source."

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