

## [For Acadian Sturgeon on the Saint John River, ‘food is a story’](#)

It’s not champagne wishes and caviar dreams when one takes a tour with Acadian Sturgeon and Caviar — you actually see the painstakingly plotted harvesting process.

By Liz BeddallSpecial to the Star Fri., Nov. 3, 2017



Cornel Ceapa leads guests up the Saint John River to examine the daily yield of 11 fishing nets in the area. (LIZ BEDDALL)

*To celebrate Canada’s 150th birthday, we’re devoting one issue to each province and territory. Today we explore New Brunswick. Check back Dec. 2 for our final issue on the Northwest Territories.*

CARTERS POINT, N.B.—“Champagne, caviar, repeat. Champagne, caviar, repeat.”

Under the bursting light of a New Brunswick summer morning, Cornel Ceapa is spoiling visitors to Carters Cove with generous dollops of wild caviar, which are being transferred from a mother of pearl spoon to the back of our hands.

At Ceapa’s careful instruction, we bring the caviar to our tongues, holding it briefly there to let the flavours develop before slowly crushing the delicate eggs in our mouths. The savoury ritual is followed by a reflection on the taste and texture, until the offer of another glass of chilled Canadian brut tells us it’s time for the next sample. This is a decadent ceremony, but one that Ceapa practises frequently as the founder of [Acadian Sturgeon and Caviar](#), and host of its Sturgeon Safari.

“We want people to love it — it’s our mission,” says Ceapa of the day’s offerings. “To appreciate the food and to have an experience.”



It starts with the skin: While sturgeons have a reputation for being unsightly, Cornel Ceapa aims to show visitors to Acadian Sturgeon and Safari that they are beautiful creatures.

It’s an experience that begins at dawn on the waters of the Saint John River in southern New Brunswick. Here, Ceapa invites visitors to join him and his colleagues as they make their daily rounds to examine 11, 60-metre-long fishing nets dispersed methodically throughout the area. In small motorboats, and surrounded by dense forest and early morning mist, the fishermen unravel massive Atlantic sturgeon from the mesh and heave them onto the vessels, mimicking fishing methods that date back 100 years.

“I was brought up as countryside — I always loved nature,” says Ceapa, who opened his business in 2005 after immigrating from Romania with his wife, Dorina, and son, Michael. “Fish, sturgeon — that was my passion, my interest.”

The legendarily enormous bottom feeders range in length from 6 to 9 feet and weigh in between 200 and 300 pounds, and once pulled on board, are checked by Ceapa and his colleagues for maturity and gender before being tagged with a microchip.



Local fishermen including Bill Ford and Cornel Ceapa harvest a maximum of 175 female and 175 male adult Atlantic sturgeon per year on the lake.

Safari members are invited to witness the process so intimately that they chance being slapped in the leg by a powerful tail fin.

Having spent his entire life exploring the water, Ceapa easily provides a wealth of information about the day's bounty before it is enjoyed at a picnic table by the river. The fishing season, he explains, takes place during the months of May, July and August, when Atlantic shortnose sturgeon make their way from the Bay of Fundy to the rivers to spawn.

But while Ceapa is quick to rhyme off facts about the creatures, he speaks slower and more deliberately when educating his visitors about the sustainability of his fishing practices — which he prioritizes above all else both on the water and on his 6.5-acre farm property.



Cornel Ceapa leads a tour of his aquaculture facility, where sturgeon are farmed, studied and shipped to various countries to help repopulate their overfished sturgeon population.

“For me, the word sustainable means to access a natural resource while being sure that the future generations will have the same access to same resource,” he says. “We don’t do any damage to it. We are involved in population studies, have quotas and are strictly regulated. The process is bulletproof and well organized — we have data, and we are on the water all of the time.”

A full morning with Ceapa is enough to show that the PhD in sturgeon biology practises what he preaches. The six sturgeon caught before our caviar buffet are systematically tagged and logged for government records, and will be added to a tally which caps at 350 adult Atlantic sturgeon fishable in the river per year.

He reminds us that he and his small group of colleagues will not harvest a fish unless it’s in perfect, mature condition. And in true nose-to-tail fashion, every single part of the catch will be harvested and sold.



A triptych of Acadian Caviar: Acadian Wild, Acadian Gold and Acadian Green.

“We’ll sell grind meat for fish cakes, fins for soup and stocks, cartilage and bone marrow for bouillabaisse and sturgeon chips, belly for ceviche ...” Ceapa says, naming only a few unique uses for the catch.

“Chefs and restaurant owners are sometimes worried about stocking with sturgeon,” says Ceapa, who counts area restaurants Oyster Boy and Langdon Hall as clients. “But once they start, they cannot go back.”

And while sturgeon itself is steadily gaining popularity as a go-to ingredient, Ceapa says caviar has never lost its upscale appeal.



Sturgeon ceviche made with small dice sturgeon belly and topped with fried shallots and balsamic pearls.

“It’s like a good wine,” he says, as we taste another dollop by the river. “Every fish is a little different than the other, there are fine differences.”

A difference we are encouraged to reflect upon as we’re fed a subsequent round of Acadian Sturgeon’s farmed caviar, which Ceapa produces in an on-location aquaculture facility at a rate of 500 kilograms a year.

“The experience of caviar is always very rich, very pleasant,” he says. “When you share it, it’s a very special experience. Even if I’m tasting it — people who have never tried it — I feel from their happiness. They are surprised that it’s so delicious. It’s not boring, even if you eat it by itself.”



Sturgeon steaks, cooked on the barbecue, are similar to pork in their texture and taste.

Here, as we watch the boat we were recently in bob on the water, we're treated to the delicacy on thin crackers, and on crusty bread with butter, then by itself alongside samples of sturgeon pâté, sturgeon ceviche topped with fried shallots, and balsamic pearls and barbecued sturgeon steaks

Champagne flutes in our hands and caviar on our tongues, yet dirt-strewn, damp and dizzy from early morning thrills, we see both the work and the reward come together by the river.

"Food is not only food — food is a story," says Ceapa.

"For me, it's about the education. People who participate will become our ambassadors — they will know what we're doing. We don't have anything to hide. I want to share that with other people."



Bread, butter and caviar make for the perfect combo.

*Liz Beddall was hosted by Tourism New Brunswick, which did not review or approve this story.*