

One man's mission to popularise sturgeon and caviar

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A New Brunswick sturgeon farmer is bringing his home-grown caviar to a new audience through a social media campaign and tie-ins with top chefs, with excellent results.

Romanian born Cornel Ceapa, who has a PhD in sturgeon biology, his wife Dorina and son Michael, set up Acadian Sturgeon in 2005, shortly after immigrating to Canada. Ceapa's dream had always been to have his own sturgeon farm and he set about realising this in a land based system on the banks of the St John River.

Sturgeon take ten years to reach maturity, and in the meantime, Ceapa started working with local fishermen to take sustainably caught wild Atlantic sturgeon from the river, for use as broodstock in the hatchery and as a source of wild caviar.

Once the business was established, he began selling fertilized eggs and larvae for restocking projects around the Baltic Sea, in countries such as Poland, Germany, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, as well as to sturgeon farms in Europe, Asia and the USA. He has developed an excellent reputation for the quality of his stock.

Ceapa also started to develop a growing market for his caviar, branded Acadian, and for sturgeon meat products, which were formerly little known amongst Canadian chefs and foodies. An unexpected market also opened up for the beautiful sturgeon skins, which are tanned in Northern Quebec and can sell for several thousand Canadian dollars each!

"We use these as part of our marketing materials when we attend shows and exhibitions to promote sturgeon and caviar, and they are a real talking point," said Ceapa.

Thinking about how to communicate better with his customers, led Acadian to set up Instagram, Facebook and Twitter accounts, which now have a huge following. Ceapa loves the way in which he can instantly reach people to inform them about life in the hatchery, the latest harvest, where he will be doing tastings and demonstrations, and which chefs have just signed up to use his caviar and sturgeon meat products.

Acadian currently produces around 500 kilos of caviar per year, but once the aquaculture program is running at full capacity, Ceapa hopes to produce up to 10 tons of high quality caviar annually. The eggs are produced using the Malassol, or low salt technique, are never frozen, and do not contain borax.

“This technique gives a delicate flavour and texture to the eggs, ensuring that the caviar melts in the mouth like butter,” he explained. “And as the caviar matures, it develops more flavour, just as a good aged raw milk cheese does.”

“Caviar is an experience. It is not an acquired taste; it is an educated taste. You want to eat it in the right atmosphere, to share it with the people you love and respect, to celebrate and cherish the gourmet experience,” he said.

This is the message the Ceapas relate to Acadian’s growing fan base, and to audiences on their travels to Toronto, Ontario and beyond. The current focus is on growing the market in Canada and to develop in line with production.

“We realised that we had to get out there and to meet people, talk to them about our project and our caviar and we find that our enthusiasm is an excellent sales pitch,” he admitted.

Ceapa ensures that nothing is wasted when he processes the sturgeon. Once the skin is removed, the body is cut into 1-3 kilo loins and belly meat pieces. This white meat, which has a mild flavour, is vacuum packed then blast frozen.

“Chefs have reported some really good results using sturgeon meat raw in sashimi, ceviche, carpaccio and tartare, and once tasted, diners can’t get enough of the fish when it is seared or grilled medium-rare,” he said.

Red meat on the loin located close to the skin has a stronger, more fishy taste, and this is removed using an electric wizard trimmer and sold as grind meat for fish burgers, sausages, cakes and meat balls.

Smoked sturgeon is growing in popularity, with customers likening its taste and texture to bacon. Ceapa brines the fish for 8 hours in a brown sugar and salt mixture, then smokes it using maple chips. He also makes a smoked sturgeon pate, using cream cheese and a special blend of herbs and spices.

Bone marrow is extracted by hand from the backbone, and the gas bladder, cartilage, tripe and fins are all harvested and sold.

“Sturgeon are not difficult to process because they have no bones; they are large to handle though!” he said.

Ceapa is collecting recipes from the growing number of chefs he works with and is pleased that they include tasty dishes using every part of the sturgeon, from nose to tail.

“We have just had our busiest weekend of the year, smoking sturgeon and packing caviar and sturgeon products for delivery all over Canada, and are thrilled that our fish will feature on so many people’s holiday menus,” he said.