

[How Immigrating to Canada Built One Entrepreneur's Dream](#)

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When you work with something for so long—a living thing in particular—you become attached to it. That's what happened to Dr. Cornel Ceapa, Founder and President of [Acadian Sturgeon and Caviar](#). Launched in 2005, the company is the culmination of Dr. Ceapa's extensive training and lifelong interest in sturgeon.

Originally from Romania, Dr. Ceapa began his career working with fish from the Danube River while completing his PhD in Sturgeon Biology. Realizing New Brunswick provided an opportunity to do something special with sturgeon, he moved to Canada with his wife and son in 2003, setting up shop in Carters Point on the Kingston Peninsula.

Twelve years later, his company is receiving great national exposure thanks to a recent appearance on CBC's *Rick Mercer Report* (linked below).

Opportunities NB (ONB) recently spoke with Dr. Ceapa to learn more.

ONB: You lived here for two years before the company's launch. How did your New Brunswick journey begin?

Ceapa: *I started here at an entry level Research Assistant position at the [University of New Brunswick \(UNB\)](#) in Saint John. I then began an Industrial Post-Doctoral fellowship focused on Sturgeon Aquaculture through [NSERC](#) Canada.*

Initially we had an industrial partner for this venture, but they bowed out after deciding it would be too difficult to get off the ground. So, in 2005, we struck out on our own to start the business ourselves.



ONB: What brought you from Europe to New Brunswick?

Ceapa: *I finished my PhD in 2001 in Romania and France, and was frustrated that nobody would listen to the results of my research. The first thing I said as part of my defense was that sturgeon was in peril, and it was almost too late to save them. I still believe we'll never get sturgeon fully restored in the Danube, which is a shame as it's a very special species of fish. I could see I wasn't going to realize my dreams if I stayed, so I quit my job at the University of Galati in Romania and set out for Canada.*

I came to see New Brunswick as the place to build our dream. Like many immigrants I saw it as a place of real opportunity, and still do. We started here living out of suitcases, with nothing but good educations and a lot of hope. I knew there were two sturgeon species here and they weren't being too well studied. There were enough published studies, however, to provide background data on them.

It's tough starting a business like ours that is capital and operational-intensive, long-term and high-risk; you have to be very driven, show some imagination, and have a little luck on your side. We started this operation with no credit and minimal financial resources. It takes time to build a sturgeon aquaculture business. It takes about 10 years to grow sturgeon from egg to adult, or egg-to-egg if you think of the caviar. If you are looking for investors, you need very patient ones, because it takes a lot of time to start seeing results.

ONB: Where does one start with this type of operation? What were the biggest challenges as you got started?

Ceapa: *The first step was building our hatchery, that's where we produce and grow our baby sturgeon. We now sell them all over the world, some for restocking, others for aquaculture, still others for research. It's not a very large market by itself but it provides some profit. The production cycle is short for the babies, so it helps make for quick cash flow.*

One big issue we faced—and still do—is not having a well-developed market in this country for sturgeon and caviar. Canada doesn't have the same desire yet for caviar like they do in much of Europe. Building the market takes time, and if you wait to build your marketing strategy at the end of a 10 year production cycle you could be doomed. You'll have beautiful, full grown fish but no market to sell them in.

Here we became innovative again by using our sustainable harvested population of Atlantic sturgeon to build our market and brand while we develop the sturgeon aquaculture. We've got our website up for online sales, increasingly use social media, and keep one eye on brand building at all times.

ONB: Sustainability is important to you and your business. Can you expand on that a bit?

Ceapa: *New Brunswick has had the Commercial Fishery for Atlantic Sturgeon from the St. John River in place for over 130 years. The fishery was mostly dormant for 10 years, and in 2007 we helped reactivate it. We decided to use the region's wild fish to grow our market while developing our aquaculture in parallel. That gave us a model that we hope to see used all over the world for other species.*

I think aquaculture is often developed when it's too late. We fish, we overfish, the species starts to disappear and then we start growing that species and call it "sustainable." Any time a species is fished

at all we should develop aquaculture, because any species that is selling well has a chance of seeing its demand exceed its supply, so we'll always have incentive to fish too much.

ONB: You've also talked about rebranding caviar and the idea of no-guilt caviar.

Ceapa: *Yes. Caviar is only five percent of the fish. I believe the meat market is the key to developing a strong sturgeon aquaculture, not caviar. Most caviar in western countries used to come from the Caspian and Black Seas. Countries like Russia, Iran, and Romania would ship caviar to the west but keep the meat local. For the past 100 years western countries have had little proper exposure to the meat of the sturgeon. People know so little about the fish they almost seem to think caviar comes from a Petri dish or something.*



I want to promote the fish itself which is why we use and sell every part of it. We want to show what the fish looks like, show people where their food comes from. We actually sell preserved sturgeon skins to be used as decorations and they are beautiful. We need to use more than the caviar. The rest of the fish is not garbage; it's not just a wrapping you throw away. Why waste any part of the fish when it's all so delicious?

*It's a work in progress but rebranding means showing that it's not just harvesting caviar and selling it to rich people. **The caviar is a high-end piece of a total package, with little of the fish wasted.** We harvest a limited number of fish, and adhere to a quota. It's strictly regulated; we harvest 175 females and 175 males total. Regulation is good because I want our harvest to be sustainable and non-detrimental to the fish population.*

ONB: What exactly are you exporting beyond New Brunswick?

Ceapa: *A big chunk of our export activity now involves the baby sturgeon. We are shipping other parts of the fish to places in Europe, however. The male gonads for example get exported to Italy for use in cosmetics.*

The meat and caviar I export mainly within Canada because, again, I want to develop our domestic market.

ONB: What would you say about the quality of life here, and about the business advantages of operating in New Brunswick?

Ceapa: *These are questions that don't get posed enough. They're great questions for people like me that arrive as immigrants. People don't know what they have sometimes, particularly if it's all they have ever known. We decided quite consciously to come to New Brunswick. **As an immigrant and someone who's lived in many places, I think New Brunswick is an incredible place to live and work.** It depends what type of person you are, of course, but as someone who loves the outdoors this province is spectacular. The Saint John River and Bay of Fundy are stunning and our scenery is beautiful.*

In terms of doing business, land is less expensive here than in many locations out west and that's been a huge plus for us. For my work specifically this province provides access to the best sturgeon in the world; I can't imagine being anywhere else now.

There's also been great support from so many people here, including government and your team.

ONB: Let's briefly touch on that relationship with ONB.

Ceapa: *That relationship has been great. I had to build relationships with government and demonstrate that our plan could succeed and that we knew what we were doing. That took time but we've gotten there. We've received support from your organization on a number of smaller projects. Every time we think about growing the business in some way, we approach government with a solid plan. ONB is very collaborative with us, and along with our local [CBDC](#) have supported us throughout various business plans.*

I attempted business ventures in Europe and I can tell you there isn't always strong support for aspiring entrepreneurs there like what exists here. Many small businesses that fail don't do so because the founders lacked ambition or work ethic. They fail because they weren't able to get the initial support that could get them to the point where they're cash positive.

ONB: What's your best piece of advice for aspiring entrepreneurs?

Ceapa: *Anyone who wants to start a business needs to be realistic about their strengths. They also need to find a niche they can focus on, their area of expertise that a business can grow around. The value-added food industry offers plenty of opportunity in terms of carving out a niche; think how many culinary options are out there.*

You have to focus on the market demand, not total sales. People always ask me how much we sell, how much product is moving; it's not relevant. What's important is developing a market and staying realistic about what's out there. It may take time to create demand. It may be about the long game.

In other sectors you see people building companies in order to sell them quickly; that's not my plan.

ONB: Getting national exposure certainly took time. How did you end up connecting with the Rick Mercer Report?

Ceapa: *It was quite out of the blue, one of the producers heard about us and reached out. There was no silver bullet. There was no one thing that led to them spotting us; we've just built a brand little by little. Social media helps as we're able to reach more people now. You need a great product of course, but you also need to be able to tell your story every day, and social media has helped with that.*

It was an amazing experience. His brand is so strong, and it was great to be a part of that. Rick is such a nice, funny guy, and seemed genuinely excited to be here.



ONB: Rick is from Newfoundland so he doesn't shy away from telling stories about Atlantic Canada.

Ceapa: *Yes, and that's actually another connection we had to him. He's tried our caviar on multiple occasions. We are on the menu at [Raymonds](#) in St. John's, which has been recognized as one of the best restaurants in the country. They offer our caviar served with crème fraiche and buckwheat blinis. Raymonds has been using us from the beginning. They also use our sturgeon in other dishes now.*

ONB: What's your personal favourite caviar or sturgeon dish?

Ceapa: *It's like asking someone to choose between their children, really. I think caviar is still my favourite part of the sturgeon. I like it simple, served straight up with a little bit of toast. No need to add anything, it's terrific as is. On the meat side I really love [Ceviche](#), such a refreshing summer dish.*

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