

# GREAT LAKES, GREAT CAVIAR!

BY JAMES E. HELD



As the heavily laden nets are hauled aboard, silvery fins and tails stir from the depths. Fisherman Ralph Wilcox smiles because the catch is a good one—whitefish, the Great Lakes' signature culinary fish. He plucks one prime example from the pile accumulating on the boat's deck. Sleek and fresh, gills still flaying against her inevitable fate, he points to the fish's bulging abdomen filled with roe. "Those eggs in there," he says on this brisk October day, "are almost twenty percent of her live weight, and worth some money," for processing into caviar—yes, Great Lakes caviar.

Serving guests American caviar has traditionally made more of a statement about frugality than opulence, but after the Soviet Union collapsed, a free-for-all of poaching and overfishing depleted 90 percent of the Caspian and Black Sea fisheries. To Americans who once consumed 60 percent of this region's production, Russia's best has since become an illicit indulgence, and amid the culinary void, chefs and connoisseurs alike are turning to sustainable domestic sources, just as our culinary mantra has begun chanting local, local, local!

The mere mention of caviar conjures images of the mighty Volga River or waves crashing on the Caspian Sea shores—not Lake Michigan. Great Lakes fishermen here have long harvested the roes of whitefish, bowfin, paddlefish, herring and other freshwater species. Ever since the caviar boom of the late 19th century, these hard-working mariners have supplied appreciative Europeans, but if sturgeon roe remains synonymous with luxury an all too human trait extols the distant and exotic while denigrating the familiar and near. Dennis Hickey out of Baileys Harbor, Wisconsin, proclaims, "We have nine boats and process caviar by the ton, but I got Swedes on the

phone begging me for more. Americans," this fisherman feels, "may serve some caviar to impress their neighbors but we really don't appreciate it. Ninety-nine percent of Hickey Brothers production from Lake Michigan is exported to Scandinavia."

"We are just not a caviar culture," states Rachel Collins, and she, if anyone, should know.

"We've been in the caviar business 20-odd years and what odd years they have been," she reflects. Rachel and her mother Carolyn became the first processors of hand-made American freshwater caviars in 1983 when they launched Collins Caviar from an avocation—these avid Great Lakes anglers sensed culinary potential in the eggs of Lake Michigan salmon and trout they landed. "The eggs were too beautiful to throw out," says Carolyn, a frugal Italian and ardent forager. "I knew I could figure out how to make caviar," she stated with determination, but no recipes existed in household cookbooks for this arcane culinary art and science. "A chef-friend, amazed with my results made in a kitchen sink, encouraged me to start a business, and I needed a job."

Originally based in Chicago, Collins Caviar has evolved into a 6,000 square-foot facility in Michigan City, Indiana, accommodating kitchens, processing and an extensive mail-order business. "My mom and I have really felt passionate about being an American caviar producer," daughter Rachel explains. "We could have become importers but that's what everyone else was doing. Collins Caviar was going to be an American Caviar house, period, and I'm very proud of that! We paved the way for others and may have stayed smaller for that reason, but we love what we do and we do it very well."

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Collins produces between 3,500 to 6,000 pounds annually, but educating the public about American caviar has been a journey she describes as nothing less than “Arduous!” Rachel explains that “even experienced, well-traveled chefs raised eyebrows at the idea of American caviar. The dynamic was ‘that’s nice, but it’s not Caspian.’” Rick Gresh, Executive chef at Chicago’s Primehouse agrees. “Many customers still think of Russia as tantamount to caviar. You can’t reverse that history easily, and now the profusion of products out there has led to mass confusion rather than any real understanding of this delicacy.”

Ironically, America a century ago produced more than 90 percent of the world’s production, much of it from Great Lakes sturgeon. In 1899, a 135-pound keg sold for \$105—caviar was so common that instead of salted nuts and pretzels, saloons served it gratis to stimulate the thirst of patrons. Cured roe was ladled from barrels and the unenlightened even fertilized fields with fish eggs or fed them to pigs. Only in the early 20th century, after North American fishermen decimated our native stocks of sturgeon did Russia’s international market burgeon. Throughout revolution, war and a communist economy, “the Soviets guarded their caviar industry with the same zeal as their space program,” writes Inga Saffron, author of *Caviar*. Rachel Collins feels, “Russian caviar was the best during the Soviet era, and to compete, we had to keep our standards premium. Collins Caviar had to be outstanding.”

Jeff Tomcheck remembers, “Early on I had a fascination with Chicago’s local culinary scene, and I believe I was Collins Caviar’s second customer. Because their products were inexpensive,” the executive chef at Green Acres Country Club explains, “I could use domestic caviar as a feature rather than just sprinkle a few eggs as a garnish. I went through tons of it, and customers felt, ‘wow, this is really good.’”

“Then,” he adds, “as prices of Russian roe plummeted I saw preferences shift back to imported caviar after 1990,” just as the entire business was becoming ever more sordid. Soon, imports both legal and illicit inundated the market, sending prices spiraling downward. Even respectable houses could not resist the temptation of dealing with poachers, and anyone with a website could sell caviar when supplied by smugglers using all the guile and ingenuity of drug mules. Instead of careful preservation in refrigerated containers, those tins and jars secreted past custom inspectors were poorly processed, exposed to extreme heat, and handled roughly, which compromised the caviar’s quality.

Rachel recalls, “There were companies making lots of money working with undesirable businesses,” hastening the precipitous decline of beluga sturgeon. Environmental organization Caviar Emptor cited a further 45 percent drop in their depleted numbers between 2004 and 2005. These noble fish, older in existence than dinosaurs, face extinction from our insatiable and uncontrolled appetite for their roe!

Worldwide aquaculture projects are underway to relieve the pressure on the Caspian sturgeon, but while every female fish produces eggs, not every species makes great caviar. “Catfish farmers,” Rachel explains, “handle tons of roe as waste because no one has created a good product from this fish.” By law, some European countries such as France allow only sturgeon eggs to be labeled caviar, but with an astounding variety of other species Americans are not so stringent. Great Lakes salmon, where the Collins’ culinary endeavors began, has large eggs with a vivid orange hue. The black roe of wild hackleback sturgeon (from the Mississippi-Missouri river system) possesses the intense, sweet, nut-like flavor of its Caspian cousins, as does the bowfin, a prehistoric denizen of southern rivers. Paddlefish caviar displays shades of gray and is similar in both color and taste to Sevraga sturgeon.

In the Midwest, however, Great Lakes whitefish is American gold, and every autumn Rachel performs the alchemy of transforming base



Rachel Collins circa 1981

Photo courtesy of Rachel Collins

fish eggs into caviar.

“The key,” she explains, “is to process the eggs quickly because you can’t hold them long.” She and a crew of two to six employees remove the membranes covering the eggs to prepare them for a gentle washing before adding the ultrafine flour salt. “Federal law requires the addition of 5 percent salt, which also preserves the texture since the small roe has a substantial egg wall,” she adds. To meet the seasonal rush of spawning runs the skeins (as the egg sacks are called) are run through an ice water glazing before flash freezing them for later processing. As for taste, Rachel says the high-protein whitefish caviar “...has a pop-in-your-mouth texture and a mild, clean flavor that hints of salt and lends perfectly to infusions or smoking.”

And what is the culinary consensus? Chef Rick Gresh says, “Customers at Prime love the flavored caviars which are great for creative garnishes and appetizers. My personal favorite, however, is still paddlefish caviar.” Jim Zeart, purchaser at Mackinac Island’s renowned Grand Hotel, explains, “We pride ourselves in serving local trout and whitefish and our chefs love the golden color of whitefish caviar as both garnish and hors d’oeuvres. The hotel also uses the large, orange eggs of salmon and fine-grained, black, bowfin roe.”

Still, no one wants to tap a new source only to deplete it; fortunately, regional caviar is not only delectable, but also ethical, because this fishery is sustainable. Michigan biologist Ron Kinnunen shares, “the Great Lakes fishery is closely monitored, and the season closes before the height of the fall spawning season when the herring and whitefish are on the shoals.” A legal and carefully regulated fishery also exists for paddlefish and sturgeon, but these gentle Jurassic giants still are only a fraction of their former numbers. Groups such as the World Wildlife Fund express concern that demands for domestic caviar will lead to the same poaching that decimated the Russian fishery. Here as well Collins Caviar was a pioneer. “We were the first to implement water contracts, legally documenting that our sources



Rachel Collins, Collins Caviar

“...whitefish caviar has a pop-in-your-mouth texture and a mild, clean flavor that hints of salt and lends to infusions or smoking.”

that caviar is not just for New Year’s Eve—it is approachable, non-elitist and fun.” Savoring domestic sources saves a beleaguered fishery and preserves a local one that is following the path tread by brewing, wine, cheese and spirits. With pride rather than apology we are gracing our tables with American caviar. ♡

Contact Collins Caviar at [www.collinscaviar.com](http://www.collinscaviar.com) or call 800-715-4034.

*Jim Held’s fascination with the Great Lakes began before the days of air conditioning when the family went to the shoreline to escape the Midwestern heat. For awhile, he made a livelihood sailing on ships that carried iron ore until the decline of the Great Lakes fleet forced him to ply the oceans. When not sailing as a Merchant Marine Officer, Jim is a writer, pursuing topics of...Great Lakes lore.*

are harvested in a lawful and sustainable manner,” Rachel explains. “How else are we going to sleep at night?”

As for the future, Carolyn, the matron of Midwest Caviar feels, “I don’t know if we will ever convert the beluga snobs, but we haven’t gained larger recognition for delicious domestic caviar because of under-marketing.” Still, Chef Jeff Tomcheck finds that “the whole caviar market is fascinating and the future looks bright, but while Collins Caviar is consistent in its high quality, not all domestic sources are so good.” Rick Gresh adds, “American caviar is only going to get better. It’s still in its infancy, just as California wine was not long ago.”

The tumult and bargains of the 1990’s gave exposure to many who previously found prices prohibitive. They have matured into a new generation of discerning consumers who have an appreciation of American caviar’s taste and receptiveness to both established and emerging domestic sources. Rachel feels, “The advent of the internet and the Food Network has created savvy consumers aware of new gastronomic trends. My mother and I are getting the message out there at culinary schools and guest appearances

## CAVIAR HANDKERCHIEFS

*Copyright Collins Caviar Company*

*Caviar Handkerchiefs can be served as an appetizer, or placed next to the entree on dinner plates for a spectacular additional element. Another plating option is to use in the center of the plate, surrounded by the other elements of the meal.*

1 box commercial phyllo dough  
1 stick unsalted butter, melted  
½ cup seasoned breadcrumbs  
4 ounces sour cream or crème fraîche  
3-4 ounces COLLINS Paddlefish Caviar  
(or caviar of your preference)

### Special Equipment:

Mini muffin baking pan, non-stick  
Pastry brush  
Baking beads/weights

Preheat oven to 300 degrees.

Thaw phyllo completely. Unroll and cover with damp kitchen towel. Place one sheet of phyllo on pastry or cutting board. Brush with melted butter, and sprinkle with breadcrumbs. Add another layer of phyllo and repeat until 4 layers are complete.

Cut 12 even squares from entire sheet. Using index fingers in center of square, fold outer corners upwards, and press center of square into base of muffin cup. Repeat until pan is full. Fill bottoms with baking beads.

Bake for 5 minutes. Remove from oven, and re-shape if necessary. Return to oven and bake for another 5-6 minutes, until slightly golden brown.

Let cool completely before handling. Can be made up to twenty-four hours in advance. Store uncovered.

Just before serving, fill cups with dollops of crème fraîche and generous portions of caviar.

Serves 12.

### Wine Pairing for Hankerchiefs Caviar Recipe

N.V. Lawrence Mawby Blanc de Blanc  
Sparkling Wine  
Leelenau Peninsula, Michigan  
L. Mawby Vineyards, [www.lmawby.com](http://www.lmawby.com)

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*—Rick Gresh*

*Executive Chef, Chicago’s Primehouse*

