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FOOD

Handmade Caviar at Home

April 21, 2012, 10:55 am • Section: Food, Signature Dish

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Salmon Caviar, Onion Crisp, pickled shallot, egg yolk

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It may be hard to believe, but making good caviar from salmon roe is actually quite simple. The only thing you need is high quality roe.

At Diva, I have the pleasure of working with an amazing cook named Brandon Pirie (also referred to as "The Caviar Man"). Pirie grew up making caviar in his parents' seafood processing plant. His first memories of working on the caviar production line date back to when he was six years old; he admits that he may have slowed people down more than help them in those days. Brandon learned some valuable lessons while working under the watchful eyes and stern guidance of caviar technicians who flew in from Japan seasonally to oversee the process.

Pirie's knowledge combined with the excellent product that we get from our suppliers has led us to create our own caviar. I wanted to share some insight and a simple recipe on how to make this delicacy at home.

It's surprising to many to hear that the most valuable roe comes from the Chum salmon and is followed in order by Pink, Coho, Spring and Sockeye (almost the reverse order of its meat popularity). The reason being, Chum salmon produces the largest eggs with the most melt-in-your-mouth quality. They're at their best in October when the fish are nearing maturity and are almost (but not quite) ready to swim upstream to spawn. It's at this point that the eggs are actually worth more than the fish that hold them.

As I mentioned, quality is important. Salmon roe is graded from one to three: number one being the highest quality grade. In order to achieve a number one grade, the egg sacks, otherwise known as skeins, should have a milky pale-pink hue and must be free of bile stains and visible blood vessels. The individual eggs should be large and well defined through the skein, with no glossy opaque points, which are signs of freezer burn or freshwater contamination. The skein should be easy to open like a book because there won't be too much connective tissue between the eggs (which would be a sign of immaturity), but not so easy that the eggs spill out of their own accord (a sign of over-maturity).

Step one: When making your own caviar, is to rub the eggs out of their skein. This is usually done on a taut, mesh screen with holes slightly larger than the diameter of the eggs (though we've found that our deep fryer screen works just as well).



Step two: Marinate or brine them. To marinate them (as we do in the restaurant), you first choose a medium flavor (soy, sake, smoke, etc.), add it to the eggs and let sit. Be sure there is about 20 per cent flavored liquid in proportion to the weight of the eggs and that there's anywhere from 2 per cent to 10 per cent salt (depending on your taste) in proportion to the weight of the liquid and eggs combined.

At Diva, we marinate ours in freshly smoked water with a three per cent salt ratio, which keeps them fresh for about three days at a time (10 per cent keeps over two weeks but is intensely salty whereas 2 per cent is light and subtle but only lasts a couple of days).

You can also brine the eggs. To brine them you mix the eggs in 100 per cent salt solution until they've firmed up slightly (roughly three to five minutes), then drain them thoroughly and call it a day.

The roe we use comes from the fall Chum run, and is frozen in a plate freezer that brings it down to -40 C in under half an hour, thus, preserving the freshness as much as possible.

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Caviar is a luxurious delicacy that we are proud to serve. If you ever find yourself in possession of some fish roe, we hope you'll try your hand at making your own caviar.

Smoked Salmon Roe Recipe:

- 500g salmon roe, rubbed free from their skin
- 100g water, smoked two hours in a conventional smoker
- 18g kosher salt

1. Whisk salt into smoked water until fully dissolved.
2. Add smoked water to roe and mix gently by hand.
3. Refrigerate and wait at least three hours before serving.



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