Bringing Caviar Dreams Back to the U.S.
Irina Ivkina Writes the Book on Fish Eggs

By MARSHALL HEYMAN
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Irina Ivkina leads her caviar class at the New York Palace Hotel. Kevin Hagen for The Wall Street Journal

Champagne wishes are regularly satiated on the social scene these days. The Moët and the Veuve are always flowing.

Caviar dreams, however? Not so easily fulfilled.

It's rare to attend a party abundant with fish eggs. Even the tiny blini with caviar is regularly replaced with contemporary spins on tuna tartare, bruschetta and pigs in a blanket.

It's become the mission of Irina Ivkina, a Miami-based caviar expert at gourmet-food purveyor Marky's, to make caviar fashionable again. To that end, she has begun teaching a caviar class to ordinary civilians. (She conducted a similar training program to staff at hotels, cruise lines and luxury supermarkets like Whole Foods.)

Growing up in Russia, in an area near the Caucasus Mountains, Ms. Ivkina was exposed to caviar on a regular basis. There, she said, "it was like having lox and a bagel in the morning. You'd eat it all the time, especially if you live close to the river."

When she came to the U.S. in 2004, she discovered that caviar, here, "is a very, very luxury food."
"Caviar 101" started, she said, when a friend celebrated a birthday and wanted to learn about the delicacy. Ms. Ivkina prepared a mini-caviar lesson plan for her. That friend suggested Ms. Ivkina offer the same kind of experience to other people.

Now she works from an extensive PowerPoint presentation and a caviar "textbook." The course typically starts at $350 per person and can last a few hours.

Ms. Ivkina recently brought a shortened version of her caviar class to New York, specifically the $25,000-a-night Martin Katz Jewel Suite at the New York Palace Hotel. Mr. Katz, himself, and his wife, Kelly Fisher Katz, were particularly interested in the seminar. As soon as they arrived at their own suite—which Mr. Katz designed, and where he often stays when he visits the city—Ms. Ivkina handed them their caviar paraphernalia.

"A caviar textbook?" asked Mr. Katz, as he flipped through what amounts to a 46-page binder. "That's amazing."

"I love a textbook on caviar," said Ms. Katz, who was ready with both her bedazzled iPhone to take photos of each spoonful, and a pen to take copious notes.

Ms. Ivkina began by explaining the different kinds of caviar, in particular the red and the black. She said she had a "full flight of caviar tasting" planned for the afternoon but wanted to make sure everyone had a sense of the history of caviar, the regulations involved when it came to trading sturgeon caviar and how one can recognize good quality. In particular, she said consumers should beware of something labeled "black caviar," which can disguise unsatisfactory product.

Among caviar circles, there is a lot of talk, in particular, about Albino Beluga caviar, she said. She has heard it is popular in the United Arab Emirates and in Las Vegas, "where they want everything gold."

"I know it exists," Ms. Ivkina added. "I've never seen it."

"Does it taste better?" Mr. Katz asked.

"I think it will taste the same," Ms. Ivkina said.
"You can apply a lot of these same aspects to gemstones," Mr. Katz said. "Like a canary diamond. There's gold caviar and a canary diamond."

Is a canary diamond better than a regular diamond? "You're sort of splitting a hair to decide," answered Mr. Katz. "If you're not in the know, you can pay a lot of money for the wrong thing."

"It's an interesting comparison," said Ms. Ivkina. "I always call caviar 'gemstones in a jar.' "

In truth, the caviar class was a little bit tedious. About 20 minutes in, we weren't sure it was really necessary to know so much about caviar. But the tasting portion of the afternoon livened everyone up. It started with Paddlefish, which typically retails for $20 an ounce, said Ms. Ivkina, and "is your common caviar for catering buffets and parties."

"Put it in your mouth and pop it in your tongue," she instructed.

Ms. Ivkina moved on to Hackleback, which, she said, looked kind of like a black diamond, and then to white sturgeon, which was more of a chestnut brown. There was a Sevruga caviar and a Kaluga caviar from Hangzhou, China. Despite having just completed Caviar 101, with a signed and dated certificate to prove so, it wasn't necessarily easy to tell one from the other.
"I gotta say, I like it all," said Ms. Katz. Her husband seemed to be enjoying it as well.

"He's not a big caviar eater," she said of Mr. Katz. "If he becomes a fan of caviar from this, eating caviar at home could be something that happens a lot more often."

"When has that stopped you?" he asked.

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