

*China, a country of 1.3 billion increasingly sophisticated palates, has a lot to prove when it comes to luxury food*



# GOURMET CHINA

BY *Crystal Reid*

Close-up of sturgeon eggs in a caviar processing plant

In a scene eerily akin to Hollywood depictions of alien experiments, a man—dressed completely in white, from his face-hugging hood to his surgical mask, gloves and rubber boots—runs a razor-sharp knife lengthways down the belly of a scaly upturned beast. Another worker, dressed exactly the same, swiftly harvests a mass of eggs from inside, leaving the creature's empty carcass to disappear down a conveyor belt. What we've just witnessed isn't shady government interference with a higher life form, but the harvesting of caviar in China.

The black eggs taken from the innards of this seven-foot-long beluga sturgeon—a critically endangered fish native to the waters around Iran and Russia—are collected, salted and tinned in just 15 minutes at the Kaluga Queen fish farm in China's eastern Zhejiang province. The 2003-founded Chinese company breeds thousands of sturgeons in floating pens on the province's manmade Qiandao Lake and is the largest producer of caviar in the world, churning out 80 tons of the pricey pearls last year alone.

Kaluga Queen has made a name for itself, feeding world leaders at the 2016 G20 Summit in Hangzhou, supplying 21 of the 26 three-Michelin-starred restaurants in Paris and finding its way into the first class cabins of German airline Lufthansa. Alongside caviar, a new generation of high-end Chinese producers is also serving up foie gras, oysters and even pork fed on rose petals to domestic foodies with a taste for

the finer things in life. Conversely, with several high-profile scandals attached to Chinese-made food, the gourmet brands of the the world's second biggest economy must work harder than most to secure their place on the planet's most luxurious tables.

There's good reason for such hesitations. China's most famous food scandal was picked up by the world's media in 2008 when six



Rachel Gouk



Oysters

## "CONSUMERS HAVE HESITATIONS ABOUT LUXURY FOOD ASSOCIATED WITH FOREIGN COUNTRIES SUCH AS CAVIAR AND FOIE GRAS COMING FROM CHINA"

babies died from kidney failure and 54,000 were hospitalised after drinking milk formula laced with melamine, a toxic chemical used in the making of plastics and fertiliser. Two people involved in the scandal were executed in China as a result, and the governments of 11 countries, including the UK, stopped importing Chinese milk products. Other stomach-churning transgressions include soy sauce made from human hair, tofu mixed with sewage slop, and duck meat masquerading as lamb after being soaked in sheep urine.

Rachel Gouk, a Malaysian writer and photographer who's been working in China's food and beverage industry since 2011, says

foodies across the globe are obsessed with where their produce comes from and are generally put off by a "Made in China" label. "Consumers have hesitations about luxury food associated with foreign countries, such as caviar and *foie gras*, coming from China. They trust that delicacies being made in their country of origin will have a higher standard of quality because that quality control has been set in place for years. China's various food scandals haven't helped either," she says.

But this isn't just a case of the world shunning Chinese products. More than a decade on from the milk scandal, Chinese parents are still so wary of domestic formula that quotas have been enforced in Hong Kong,

Australia and even Britain to stop Chinese shoppers stripping shelves bare and leaving nothing for the local market. Many Chinese consumers see foreign goods as a status symbol and have the mindset that “just because it’s imported, it’s better,” says Gouk. Even she, a champion of cutting air miles by eating local produce, balks at the idea of drinking Chinese milk.

Explaining how every tin of Kaluga Queen caviar comes with a QR code which, when scanned, reveals the entire production process and lifecycle of the fish it was harvested from, vice president Han Lei tells us how such fastidiousness is paramount to their success in the gourmet food industry despite their Chinese postcode. “Customers trust companies who put the emphasis on quality control, from farming, to processing and delivery to the table. This is what we have always done,” says Han. “But to be honest,

Ari Jadwin



even today it still takes time to improve the international image of Chinese food.”

Soon after the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species classified 85 per cent of sturgeon species as endangered, the fishing of wild varieties was banned. That, combined with US sanctions on Iranian exports, presented a

lucrative opportunity for caviar farms to flourish. Kaluga Queen produces six types of caviar, with the beluga variety, which goes for \$2,100 for one small box, the most expensive in the world. As 15 per cent of a sturgeon’s body weight is made up of eggs by the time it reaches sexual maturity (after a decade), each fish is worth a fortune and must be kept under the

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strictest of conditions. Such attention to detail has paid off, at least overseas. Kaluga Queen exports 95 per cent of its caviar. “In China, the caviar culture has only just started,” Han explains.

The Chinese are no strangers to gourmet food, however, gobbling up with gusto delicacies with eye-popping price tags that are practically unheard of in the West. Examples include abalone, a meaty shellfish found in cold waters across the world; edible bird nests, made from the solidified saliva of Indian

Kaluga Queen  
Sturgeon farm



Steamed Abalone

## "OUR FISH ARE KILLED AND DELIVERED IN AN AVERAGE OF 16 HOURS WHICH IS PART OF THE MIRACLE OF CHINESE LOGISTICS—YOU COULD NEVER DO THAT IN EUROPE"

swiftlets; and caterpillar fungus, a larvae parasite plucked from the Tibetan mountains.

Crystal clear waters from these same lofty peaks tumble into the fish-filled pools of China's southwest Sichuan province. Here, Ari Jadwin, the managing director of Aqua Select, works with local farmers to produce international-standard salmon and trout to leading hotels and restaurants across the country.

After starting out by importing sustainably-sourced, non-GM fish feed from Denmark, Jadwin now collaborates with more than 100 small farms around the provincial capital of Chengdu, helping the previously poor peasants get their produce into Michelin-starred restaurants and high-end hotels.

But securing such contracts has not been easy, especially since Jadwin's domestic salmon comes

at a higher price than its imported counterparts due to the stringent tests he must carry out to prove its quality. Jadwin pays for government-sanctioned labs to certify that his product is free of hormones, heavy metals, parasites and antibiotics, and has worked doggedly to sell top chefs on the safety and freshness of his fish.

"The testing makes a big difference to hotels and restaurants. It's the only shot we have of showing we're markedly different from other Chinese suppliers," says Jadwin. "All our fish are also killed and delivered in an average of 16 hours, which is just part of the miracle of Chinese logistics. You could never do that in Europe or even the UK. It takes at least two days for fish to get from Scotland to London."

But while the Chicagoan, who plans to export his fish to Germany and Southeast Asia in the coming years, has found foreign chefs and



consumers receptive to his Sichuan salmon, Chinese gourmards have proved harder to convince. "Usually a foreign chef will be very open to the idea of domestically farmed fish as they know that freshness and quality are connected. But the Chinese chefs can't get their heads around something quality coming from China," he says. "My interest in exporting is less about getting into foreign markets and more about convincing the Chinese that the stuff they produce is actually good."

Both he and Gouk agree that as China's agricultural infrastructure increases and industry testing improves, it's only a matter of time before the stigma attached to "Made in China" foodstuff bites the bullet, both domestically and abroad.

"China has space but not yet the right conditions to excel as fast as everyone else," says Gouk. "But they'll get there, and the world would be mad not to embrace it." ■



### COLD WAR RELICS

Fearing invasion during the Cold War, Albania's leader Enver Hoxha forced his country to build 750,000 bunkers. Today, many of those bunkers have been converted for a variety of uses, including turning them into pizzerias, espresso bars and makeshift pubs