

# Faux or real? The debate over lab-engineered caviar

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Caviarum, a small batch producer of man-made caviar in Toronto, has thus far manufactured three types of sturgeon caviar, a wild snail caviar, and a wild scampi prawn caviar and is working on a vegan caviar.

GALIT RODAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Growing up in Uzbekistan, Igor Kuntzevitsky would eat caviar on a regular basis, smearing a teaspoon-full on top of fresh butter and rye bread. It was a household staple in the former Soviet country.

But after coming to Canada as an adult, he was surprised to learn how rare and expensive the seafood delicacy is here.

So Kuntzevitsky, an engineer by training, decided to make his own. In 2013, he and business partner Josef Bener started Caviarum. The Toronto-based company produces “man-made caviar,” which is meant to look, feel and taste like the real thing.

It’s a niche product they’re hoping will finally catch on – though the response, so far, has been mixed.

Price, of course, is the most immediate draw: real caviar costs tens of thousands of dollars per kilogram; Caviarum’s costs just hundreds. But they also point to the challenges around sourcing real sturgeon caviar – sustainability, traceability and supply.

Since the 1990s, conservation groups have sounded the alarm on overfishing of wild sturgeon for the purpose of harvesting caviar – particularly in the Caspian Sea. As of last year, all remaining species of wild sturgeon face the threat of extinction, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Two-thirds of those are considered “critically” endangered, meaning they face an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild.



Moshe Oz strains rinsed strained eggs in a liquid salt solution at Caviarum on March 14.

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As such, most caviar sold on the global market today comes from farmed sturgeon – most of it from China. It’s an expensive and time-consuming process. And while Canada has a small farmed caviar industry (most notably from producer Northern Divine in Sechelt, B.C.), supply is only a fraction of demand.

To create their “caviar,” Bener and Kuntzevitsky turned to science. They hired a chemical engineer to experiment with different mixes of fish broth, fish oil and stabilizing ingredients. They built their own custom equipment and a manufacturing plant in the northwest part of the city.

The first challenge was to get the look – the right colour, shape and gloss. Real caviar has a shine to it, and they understood how important that was to recreate.

“We eat with our eyes,” said Bener. “People today, before they even eat, they take a picture and post it on Instagram.”



The next was texture. It's one of caviar's most distinctive features – black caviar, which melts like butter; or red caviar, with its distinctive pop. Then came flavour: saltiness, brininess and creaminess.



Eggs are strained for size at Caviarum.

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It took about four and a half years to get a product they were happy with. Today, they sell five varieties: “caviar” to resemble the eggs of beluga sturgeon, albino beluga sturgeon, Osetra sturgeon, escargot and prawn. As far as they know, they're the only producers of such “man-made caviar” in the country.

They don't sell to retailers or customers. Instead, their target market is restaurants and catering chefs. And the varieties they've chosen to produce are the rarest, most expensive ones.



Josef Bener squeezes an egg to check its firmness.

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Take Caviarum’s “albino gold,” for example. It’s meant to reproduce the roe of white sturgeon, which are only found in the Black and Caspian seas and are exceedingly rare. Real white caviar costs about \$36,000 per kilogram.

When they first started creating their own version, Bener and Kuntzevitsky were still able to buy the real thing. But just a few short years later, Bener said, it’s become almost impossible to find.

The idea, he said, is to provide an experience that wouldn’t be possible, either because of cost or availability – an experience, which, for those like Kuntzevitsky, otherwise exists only in memories.

Just a decade or two ago, the idea of selling “fake” caviar might have seemed radical. In the early 2000s – and around the time that caviar fisheries were showing signs of

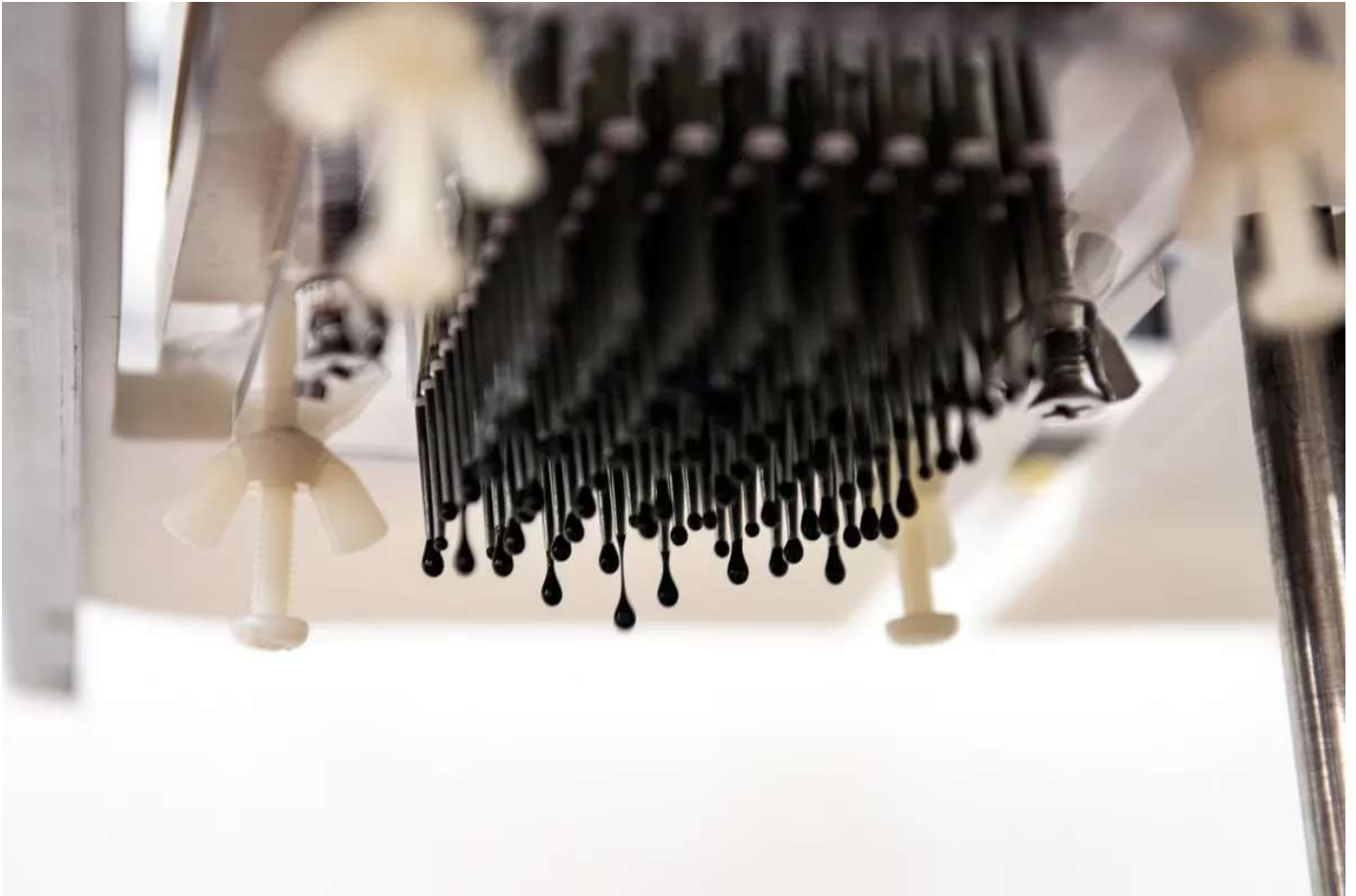
collapse – the industry was thrown into turmoil after the widespread appearance of counterfeit products.

These products – often the eggs of cheaper varieties of fish, dyed to look like caviar – were sold as the authentic product, often with labels that imitated the most popular and expensive brands.

At the time, headlines warned of “fake” caviar flooding the markets. News of illicit wild caviar, sold through the black market, only added to the sense of distrust.

But the crucial difference now, Bener said, is that his company is not trying to pass their products off as actual caviar. Every tin says clearly, in large block letters, “man-made caviar.”

And in recent years, with the increased acceptance of substitute or “analogue” food items, he hopes that attitudes toward products like his will have changed too. He points to the popularity of plant-based “meat” products on the market as one example.











Caviar drops are created, which then combine with a liquid bath to create eggs man-made caviar.

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Still, there are skeptics.

Cornel Ceapa, the founder of Northern Divine in B.C., was bewildered to learn of Caviarum's product (which he hasn't tried).

"Why would they do that?" he asked repeatedly. He questioned whether they should use the word "caviar" on the label.

"There is nothing like caviar, in my opinion," he said. "Caviar only comes from sturgeon."

Mr. Ceapa said that the rarity of the food is part of what makes it special. "There is no shortcut," he said. "Caviar should be memorable."

And at a specialty food convention in Las Vegas earlier this year, Bener was confronted by an attendee who was similarly unimpressed.

He wanted to know what was on the plate in front of him – little spoons filled with heaps of Bener's glistening "caviar."

Bener explained, but the visitor wasn't interested. It's not the real thing, the man said. You shouldn't be here.

Nearly a month later, Bener recounted the conversation with a shrug. "That's okay. That's fine," he said.

"I told him, 'It's not the real thing. But we don't pretend to be the real thing.' "

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