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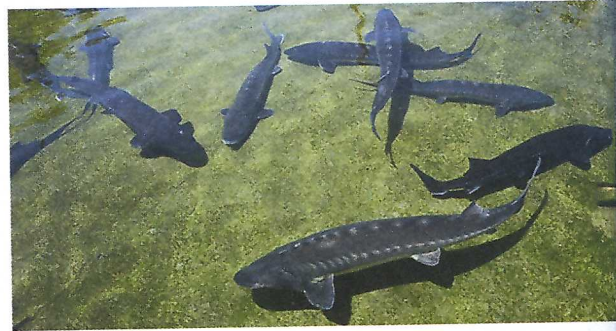
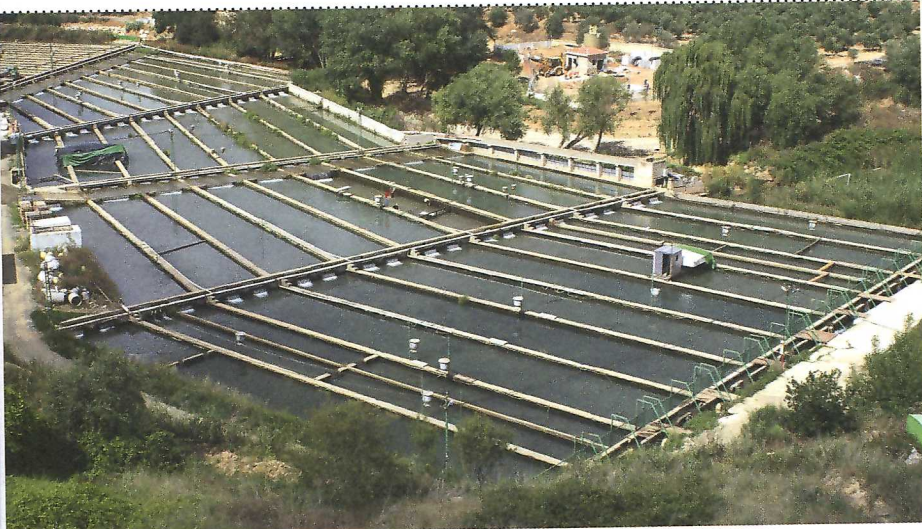
Is this the best
restaurant in
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We meet the man behind Noma

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Sustainable luxury

The lucrative Russian caviar industry has hit hard times because of overfishing, pollution, crooks and greed. The only solution is sustainable, farmed caviar, as OLIVER THRING reports

Let's be clear about one thing: caviar comes from sturgeon. Lumpfish, catfish, dogfish, flying fish: each carries a little store of popping roe. But the real stuff, what the Turks called khavyar, comes only from sturgeon – that scaleless kraken unchanged since the time of the dinosaurs, individual specimens of which can roam the deep for 150 years.

Not that they ever do nowadays. Numbers of the fish in the Caspian Sea have fallen by 90% in recent decades, while the price of beluga eggs – the highest-esteemed species – has leapt to £10,000 a kilo. Ossetra and sevruga caviar have fared no better.

Until the 1980s, the USSR, which held 80% of the world's caviar, controlled the delicacy with harvest limits and export quotas. When the Union collapsed, the most lucrative market in the natural world tumbled into the hands of crooks and hooligans. Industrial waste, a thriving black market, rampant overfishing and

utter greed now threaten to obliterate the wild sturgeon. Ecologists admit that only an outright fishing ban for a whole generation will replenish stocks in the Caspian, though even that would face the challenges of poachers and pollution.

Farmed caviar may offer a sustainable solution. And, in recent years, sturgeon farms have emerged to meet this demand, although the quality of their product often remains uncertain. A modern intensive chicken farm rears a

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bird for slaughter in six weeks: a female sturgeon needs at least a decade to mature. The fish, moreover, are picky about the waters they'll live in, which reduces the number of viable sites.

Among the leaders of these new farms is Riofrío in southern Spain, midway between Malaga and Madrid. Here, a third-generation fishing family rears a species of sturgeon native to the Mediterranean, its eggs comparable in

size to ossetra. *Acipenser naccari*, now extinct in the wild, can grow to 100kg; the eggs are harvested when the fish are 12 to 14 years old. A single female can yield 15kg of caviar, with a market value of thousands of pounds.

The eggs are exquisite: pearlescent buds of salt and sea, dextrously produced, the purity of their habitat clear in their stippled complexity. Leonid Shutov co-owns Bob Bob Ricard in central London, a high-end restaurant with a strong Russian influence. He says, "I have been eating caviar all my life, but I genuinely can't tell the difference between the best farmed eggs and high-grade Russian ossetra. The quality of sustainable caviar has transformed in the last two or three years."

Shutov believes that, before long, wild caviar will exist only in memory. "The future of the industry has already been decided. The countries with access to the old species have proved themselves unable or unwilling to control illegal trade. The only solution is sustainable caviar."

From food miles to foie gras, ethics intrude on the enjoyment of good food. Sustainable caviar offers a potential remedy for this, with the added advantage of being far cheaper than the wild product. To all but the fussiest oligarch, it's an exquisite delicacy. 🍷

➔ Riofrío caviar is available from Kings Fine Food: www.kingsfinefood.co.uk

