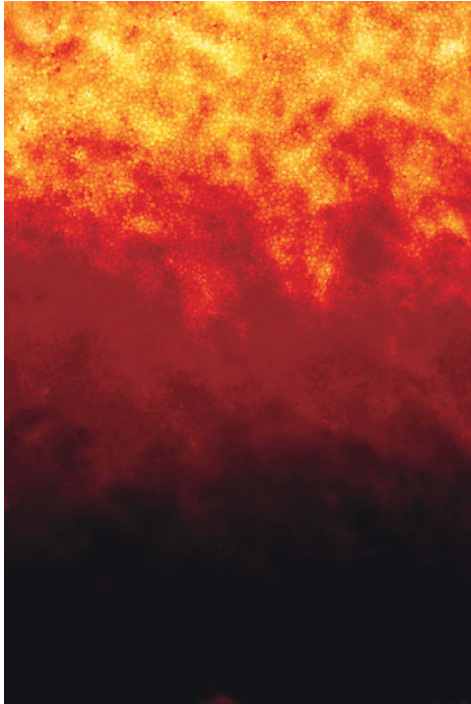


March 11, 2010 ET

Roe Finds Its Way

By William R. Snyder



Food Styling by Victoria Granof |
Photograph by Mitch Feinberg
The sacs of the *Alosa sapidissima* (Latin for “most delicious shad”) contain thousands of eggs.

Since the last Ice Age, the American shad, a 2-foot-long herring with a perpetually scared look in its eyes, has returned from its deep ocean wintering grounds to rivers along the East Coast every early spring. And Joe Zaiantz, who has lived his entire 71 years a mere cast from the banks of the Connecticut River, is there to meet it. He launches his boat at night and gently drops a 250-foot-long gill net into the dark waters, in pursuit of a prize countless generations have sought before him: the roe sacs of the shad.

If the beloved Pacific salmon is a bestselling novel, then shad is a Greek epic: It's dense, has stood the test of time and in recent years has been reserved for academics, or in this case a piecemeal society of culinary anthropologists. “Shad roe was a lost ingredient,” says John Fraser, owner of Dovetail in New York, whose ingredient-driven and pared-down French technique was honed in Thomas Keller's kitchen at the French Laundry.

That is until this younger generation of chefs, including Fraser, tapped not only its historical cachet but also its distinctive flavor and texture. “Now there is a cult of shad roe,” he says. “When people hear we have it on the menu, they come out of the woodwork.”

Unlike its aquatic cousin the sturgeon, with its caviar, shad roe is not prized for individual globules. Instead, two large sacs shroud thousands of diminutive eggs, which look almost like couscous. With one long vein running the length of each pouch and hundreds branching out from the center, each sac looks like a cross between a walnut leaf and a pasture animal's tongue. Before cooking, the color is a pale red with yellowed hints; after, it's a soft yellow with earthy tinges. “There's

no need to glamorize it—roe has a very natural look, almost like food folk art,” says Jim Cummins, a representative with the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin and a shad advocate.

Basted with browned butter, the outside of the roe pouch becomes crispy and firm to the touch. “When cooked properly, roe sacs bounce like a pillow-top mattress,” Fraser says. Part of that bounce comes from the fat of the eggs, he says, which blends with the captured moisture on the inside of the pouches to create a deep creaminess. Fraser serves butterfried roe on a slab of applewood-smoked bacon with a bed of pea tendrils and a simple bacon-infused vinaigrette.

Commercial shad fishing is more of a tradition than a business—as befits the only fish woven into the myths of America’s founding (shad saved starving Revolutionary War troops at Valley Forge, so the tale goes). The surnames of the elite shad fishermen have remained unchanged for over a century. There are the Byrums in North Carolina; the Lewis family in New Jersey. Zaientz doesn’t have a pedigree like those, but he’s been on the same half-mile reach for 40 years and outlasted many of the old clans. Now he’s one of only a dozen left in Connecticut, and just as Zaientz’s old competitors have moved to more financially lucrative fish like the striped bass, the demand for shad roe is spiking.

Zaientz does one drift a night on an incoming tide, which can yield a substantial haul of fish when the run is on. When he started as a young man, the Connecticut River was a quiet respite from his day job as a dentist, but a lot has changed since then. In the old days, when the prized roe made it to a restaurant, it would have been fried or broiled in recipes that simply spotlighted its grainy texture—almost like grits. Now David Myers’s work at his critically acclaimed Sona in Los Angeles proves that roe rewards more creative effort, such as in traditional Japanese treatment of fish eggs. “That culture has a great respect for roe,” he says. Myers has seen various roes steamed with sake or served raw, but his offerings blend this Eastern influence with the French culinary tradition. “I’ll combine shad roe with dashi, daikon and pea tendrils or sauté it in beurre noisette and serve it with a sauce of fennel confit and preserved Meyer lemon,” he says. The citrus and fennel help to balance the fat of the roe.

His general rule is this: “Roe should be firm and faintly smell of the sea.” Shad roe comes with a long list of caveats: Don’t overcook, don’t play up the graininess, don’t let it dry out. “It’s a food antique,” Myers adds. And as with any other antique, careful handling is a must and high prices are to be expected.

Shad roe’s ability to command top dollar has remained unchanged for 300 years. In a letter, George Washington referenced the price of a whole shad as 6 shillings. (A quick conversion puts that at \$27 today.) Nowadays in markets, like Yellow Umbrella in Richmond, Va., a set of roe at the peak of the season collects \$16 and even more if supplies thin.

Robert DeMasco, who owns Pierless Fish Corp. in Brooklyn, N.Y., one of the country's top shad suppliers, says he can move up to 500 roe sacs in an abundant week, mostly to restaurants in the Northeast, but also to spots on the West Coast. Those chefs pay a premium. "Shipping roe is harder than shipping glass," DeMasco says. The roe is packed with bubble wrap and shipped overnight.

Despite the regularity of the shad run each year, the numbers have fallen over the past century and so have the returns. "Roe used to be where you made your money in the spring," says Dave Whitby, owner of Yellow Umbrella. Once, 6-milelong seine nets lined the banks of rivers, even as upstream factories dumped sludge into watersheds, destroying the spawning habitat. "In 1965, hundreds of thousands of shad died in the Potomac because of the river's pollution," Cummins says. It was one of the impetuses for the original Clean Water Act, he adds. Through multiple efforts at habitat restoration, American shad numbers are just now holding steady.

At dawn along the shores of the shad's preferred river arteries—the James, Potomac, Delaware and Connecticut—fishermen work quickly. Removing the roe sacs involves a surgical cut along the length of the underside, taking care not to puncture the roe-sac membranes, which would leak the eggs and ruin them for sale. After the sacs have been opened, the roe is gently pulled out and placed in a plastic container for transport. (As for the fish? Sometimes it's used for bait, Zaiantz says. But he enjoys the fillets too, though their extreme boniness has kept them from being a modern mainstay.)

Once the water temperature reaches around 69 degrees, the fish spawn and return to the sea, running around the mid-Atlantic currents. This limited availability produces that most elusive quality in a great food item: an emotional connection. "Eating roe gives us a real feeling that a different time of the year is beginning," Fraser says.

Zaiantz agrees. "People are spoiled now. They buy whatever kind of seafood they want year-round," he says. "You can have all the money in the world to import tuna or caviar, but that money can't buy shad roe unless it's springtime."

What to Drink With Shad Roe

By Alice Feiring



HENDRICK'S GIN
AYRSHIRE, \$35

Butter-fried roe on a slab of smoked bacon calls for a cucumber-fresh, juniper-and-rose-flecked Hendrick's martini (with a lemon twist). Instead of playing with the flavors, the martini serves them up proudly on a silver platter.

2007 DR. FRANK RKATSITELI
FINGER LAKES, \$19

Seeking a grape that could survive New York winters, Dr. Konstantin Frank found Georgia's Rkatsiteli, the coolest thing going in Russia until Gorbachev recommended yanking it in order to get modern. Cheek-piercing zing cuts through fishy funk and fat.



2007 MICHEL LAFARGE BOURGOGNE
ALIGOTÉ RAISINS DORÉS, \$28

For years, Aligoté was the stepsister of Burgundy white grapes. Here it has the last laugh. The wine has a lemony saltiness and a melony fullness, dashed with both caramel and sweet parsley.

2008 RED HOOK SAUVIGNON BLANC
JAMESPORT, \$45

Californian Abe Schoener's first vintage from New York grapes. The harvest came in with every kind of mold, mildew and corruption known to Long Island. The result is layered, nutty, herbal and hefty, with a rice-vinegar tang.



Sources: Dovetailnyc.com; Sonarestaurant.com; Pierlessfish.com. Hendrick's Gin, Chambersstwines.com; 2007 Dr. Frank Rkatsiteli, Astorwines.com; 2007 Michel LaFarge, Chambersstwines.com; 2008 Red Hook Sauvignon Blanc, Brooklynwineexchange.com