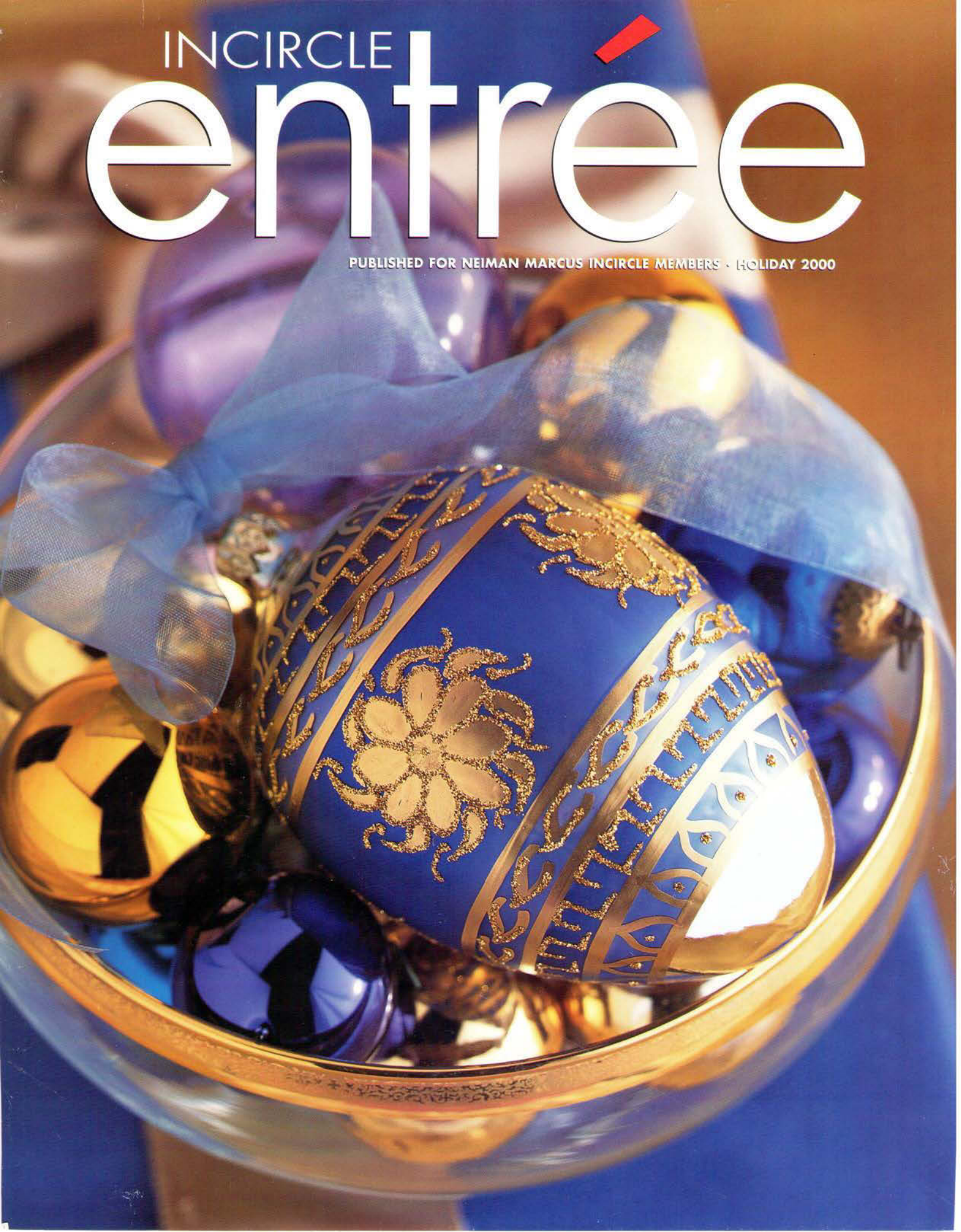


INCIRCLE entree

PUBLISHED FOR NEIMAN MARCUS INCIRCLE MEMBERS · HOLIDAY 2000





Caviar Emptor

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The Russian delicacy has been around since the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome, but it is in this day and age that the act of consuming it has become a ritual all its own

ALL LUXURY IS AN ACQUIRED taste. Primitive man generally avoids the unknown, but it is an odd quirk of civilization that the rarer the object, the more we are attracted to it. For a thousand years the most effective way to promote

some new and costly taste among novelty-prone Europeans was to use the adjective “oriental,” which almost always signified the Near East.

That the word “caviar” is believed to derive from the Turkish *khāvyār* hardly

surprises. Precisely, caviar is the roe found only in sturgeon. It was known to the Greeks, and since the Romans practically venerated sturgeon, they must have been familiar with it as well. Oddly enough, Apicius, the greatest source on ancient cookery, makes no mention of it. In ancient Rome, a grand sturgeon was thought fit only for the emperor, and this royal tradition carried forward into the



Since the 1920s, Petrossian's blue tins have held the promise of the finest in caviar.

Byzantine empire. Caviar was apparently accessible enough to the privileged for a doctor in 15th-century Constantinople to advise his noble patient not to eat it at breakfast for it could leave one breathless—advice well heeded today. By the time of the Romanovs, certain kinds of caviar, especially the pale golden caviar of the Volga sterlet, were reserved exclusively for the tsar.

A primordial-looking fish that has evolved very little in the last hundred million years, sturgeon has many species, but the sevruga, beluga, ossetra, and sterlet produce the most expensive and desired caviar. The nearly extinct sterlet gives us the rarest, although some connoisseurs hold it lacks the rich flavor of the others. Of the quartet, beluga, the largest of these fish, is often accorded primacy. A beluga can weigh up to a ton, and one is recorded rendering more than 600 pounds of caviar.

In the simpler days when skies were clear and the earth clean, sturgeon teemed at the mouth of many European rivers, including the Rhône in France. It was not uncommon for medieval Provençals to enjoy great quantities of caviar, and it was often deemed appropriate as Lenten fare. O happy penance! A 15th-century Venetian edition of Pliny's *Natural History* bears an illustration of a woman removing roe from a fish. It could well be caviar, for Russian sturgeon lived in the Adriatic Sea, and Venice was known for this delicacy.

When Leo X, that voluptuous son of Lorenzo de Medici, served caviar at the papal table, it was accompanied simply by *tranches de pain rôties à la flamme*—pieces of bread toasted on the open flame. Nor did it grace only princely tables. We know from his letters that Galileo sent a package of caviar to his beloved daughter, who was cloistered in a

convent. It was sometimes sold by apothecaries, who also sold a variety of products, including capers, which may explain the very old origins for some of the condiments that traditionally accompany this dish. However, the most refined palates of the last 500 years have agreed that it needs no embellishments.

Recipes began to appear in the 16th century for ways of preparing and serving it. Antoine Furetiere's 1690 *Dictionnaire Universel* gives instructions for salting caviar and advises leaving it in the sun for a day. By the 18th century it was being eaten with olive oil and good vinegar or lemon; sometimes with bread crumbs or toasted bread.

Sturgeon was still found in many rivers, including the Seine, as late as 1900. It thrived in American waters as well, and until the 1890s, tons of sturgeon roe were packaged in Pennsylvania and Delaware. However, the caviar of the Black and Caspian Seas had been recognized as the best since the 18th century.

Much of the modern rage for caviar is credited to the Brothers Petrossian, Russo-Armenian exiles. Around 1920, in a fit of nostalgia, they telephoned from Paris and asked a Russian bureaucrat to send them a case. But overcoming obstacles of taste among the French was not as simple; after all, two centuries earlier, the

adolescent Louis XV had been unimpressed by the tsar's gift, spitting it out after the Russian ambassador gave him a spoonful. Little changed in the early 20th century. When the Petrossians installed themselves at a gastronomic exhibition in the Grand Palais, they soon discovered that a spittoon was helpful in dealing with disgusted Parisians. But exoticism and snobbery won over all resistance, as it almost always does, and caviar became the newest culinary fashion.

Specific accoutrements for caviar are mostly of recent vintage, although there is an English example of a caviar serving dish from the early 19th century. The Belle Epoque approached serving caviar as it would any salty or sulfuric food, using egg spoons of gold, ivory, or mother-of-pearl. Later, in the early 20th century, silver dishes with racks to support tins above ice or hold inner liners of glass were created. The early ones were often quite large, but by midcentury they had become smaller affairs, and flat spoons or paddles became à la mode.

From Shakespeare and Rabelais to Charlie Chaplin, the romance and luxe of caviar have obscured its expense, ignored political upheavals, and driven the serious gourmet to every subversion in its pursuit; for those who love this salty dish will neither be daunted nor denied. **E**

Tsar Quality

"I call our caviar the food of the gods," says Eve Vega, who has the enviable job of eating caviar on a daily basis as the executive director of the Americas for Petrossian. The pick of the company's offerings is Tsar Imperial Beluga, an elite grade of rare Russian caviar that is hand-selected on site from the finest of the catch from the Caspian Sea. The eggs, which are harvested from beluga sturgeon that are at least 18 to 20 years old, are large, light-colored, and delicately flavored. To fully appreciate its taste, Petrossian suggests serving the caviar on lightly grilled toast points and forgoing accompaniments of egg, onion, or sour cream. Sip vodka or brut champagne between tastings to cleanse the palate. Petrossian caviar and *présentoirs* are available through Neiman Marcus, 800/937-9146.