

the times

Mother-daughter duo bring domestic caviar to the masses

By Molly Woulfe | Posted: Sunday, January 22, 2012 12:00 am

The Caviar Queen of the Great Lakes does not stand on ceremony. Just side by side with burly fish-cutters with long sharp knives.

Rachel Collins, 47, rolls up her sleeves and guts salmon and whitefish in commercial fisheries every fall in the Upper Peninsula. Her mission: "To cherry-pick the best caviar as it comes in," she explains. "The other companies get what we don't want."

Not that the owner-president of Collins Caviar, based in Union Pier, Michigan, is a micro-manager. Just a chip off the old block.

Back in the mid-1980s, her mom met charter boat skippers in parking lots in Kenosha and Racine, Wisconsin. Carolyn Collins sized up catches and wrote checks on the hoods of cars. Mother and daughter then lugged coolers of raw roe (fish eggs) to their gold Trans Am "with the big Firebird decal on the front," Rachel laughs.

"We started out with salmon caviar, adding whitefish the first year," she recalls. "By the second year, we discovered by accident how to infuse caviar and began expanding our line of flavored caviars. We now had six flavors: Peppar (infused with Absolut Peppar vodka); citron, truffle, grand passion—that's a dessert caviar, nearly salt-free—ginger, and mango-infused."

The pair has since sold a boatload of their signature delicacy, establishing the Great Lakes as a premier source of American freshwater caviar. Fancy that: Lake Michigan as a pipeline to gourmet fantasies.

MOTHER-DAUGHTER ACT

When the tall, blond Rachel says "we"—and she says it often—it's genuine, not a royal pronoun. She credits her semi-retired parent for turning a hobby into a six-figure business twenty-eight years ago. "Mom," she says simply, "was the one who created this."

Mom also bequeathed her hands-on work ethic to her kid. Carolyn Collins tripled as chef, sales rep and courier when the pair founded Collins Caviar in 1983 in their kitchen in Crystal Lake, Illinois.

The daughter of Italian immigrants, Carolyn learned how to fish, grow vegetables, and forage for dandelion greens and mushrooms. Rachel did in turn. As a teen, she also accompanied her mother on salmon runs on Lake Michigan.

During the fall spawning season, they'd clean fish "and out would fall a three-, four-, or five-pound skein of roe," Rachel remembers. "When fish are gravid—pregnant—the roe can be 25 percent of their body weight. Skippers threw the roe away. About 1 percent of sports fishermen take it home."

And her mother was among them. "She said, 'I'm going to figure out how to make caviar out of this if it's the last thing I do.' There were a lot of horrible mistakes before we figured it out."

The pair learned to hand-detach roe from skeins (egg sac membranes), rinse the "berries," and lightly cure them with superfine salt. They learned to freeze the highly perishable stuff quickly. And they learned to market it. Carolyn befriended skippers to ensure a steady influx of raw roe, staking a Midwest claim on the tiny, tangy pearls once reserved for tsars.

Her mother "would throw some caviar in a cooler, put on her mink coat, and go to the fanciest restaurants in downtown Chicago, knock on the back door, and ask to see the chef," Rachel recalls. "This was in the early '80s when you could do something like that."

WHETTING APPETITES

North Shore chefs bit hook, line and sinker. The widowed Carolyn went into business, building and expanding her cottage industry into a six-figure empire. Demand from North Shore restaurants spawned a Chicago headquarters-warehouse in 1985, a mail-order service in 1992, and an ever-expanding line of classic and smoked caviars. The mother-daughter duo has since been written up by the likes of *Vogue* and the *New York Times*.

Unlike traditional caviar houses, Collins is light on the salt, the traditional way to "cure" the highly perishable roe. As a result, the sweet to earthy-tangy taste of caviar swoons the senses.

Rachel, who served as general manager and oversaw daily operations for more than a decade, decided to expand her culinary horizons in the mid-1990s by working as an apprentice chef at Jenny's Restaurant in Union Pier. When her mother opted for semi-retirement, Rachel returned to the family biz. In love with Union Pier—where she'd moved, and where she shares a 1920s cottage with two rescue mutts—she relocated Collins Caviar to a brick ex-brewery in Michigan City in 2005.

When the recession nibbled at sales like toast points, Rachel decided to downsize, casting her eye toward the East Coast. She partnered with an established New York caviar house in late 2009, striking a pact that keeps her lines independent yet consolidates packing, shipping and billing operations. Her mother, 74 and living in Crystal Lake, remains active in promotional events.

BLACK GOLD, ORANGE GOLD

Among gourmets, beluga caviar is black gold, one of the rarest delicacies on earth. The roe of the endangered beluga sturgeon, a fish that swims in the Caspian Sea, is banned in America. The caviar commands \$3,500 to \$5,000 per pound overseas.

Not so the caviar of its U.S. cousins, which has the advantage of being legal, delectable and highly delicious.

An ounce of light-gold Collins whitefish caviar is \$10; an ounce of soft, sweet, orange berries of the Great Lakes chinook (King) salmon is \$14. Collins Caviar also carries paddlefish, bowfin and hackleback sturgeon caviars and crème spreads.

Peanut butter is cheaper, but caviar adds instant panache to any event, Rachel observes. To know caviar is to love it. She herself loves to discuss tastes, hues, grain size and textures.

The hackleback sturgeon "is the true American sturgeon. Flavor-wise, the caviar is similar [to beluga]. Visually, it's natural black. It has a very smooth, nutty taste, buttery finish.

It has a warm flavoring," she advises. "The paddlefish is a little bit stronger, with a slightly metallic finish. The lexicon is very much like wine's."

Note: Champagne is fine, but the best pairing for caviar is vodka "straight out of the freezer, ice-cold," Rachel instructs.

Don't be shy with caviar, whether it is garnishing a toast point, Russian blini or canapé. Treat it as a one-bite gift from the gods.

Pop it into your mouth and savor the rush of sensations. "Caviar transcends food," Rachel says. "It has flavors and textures you just don't have every day. There's nothing else like it."

She believes that caviar makes every occasion an event. Suck it off a spoon. Dab it on a hoecake to seafood. Dollop it atop pasta and watch guests' eyes pop. Tell them to twirl the caviar into the pasta with their forks.

Her own favorite, non-princess-y combo: caviar and spuds. "Garlic mashed potatoes," she says dreamily. "Fabulous."