

# Forbes

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## Bubbles and Beads

**NAPKIN NOTES** | It's an easy life swilling champagne and nibbling caviar, but it's no picnic buying it.

BY CLARK WOLF

UNLESS YOU'RE PLANNING on spending the millennial holiday season hunkered down with the complete James Bond video collection and a closet full of cheese doodles, you're going to need some help on how to stock up. Here, then, are a few caveats.

### Caviar

With the demise of the Soviet Union, caviar now runs a little freer—those nasties in the Kremlin aren't hoarding all the good stuff for themselves anymore. This does not mean that it's gotten easier to buy the best, or that shady dealings don't still bedevil the caviar trade.

At prices of \$60 to \$120 per ounce for the best beluga, you should know the person from whom you buy your beads. Get a name from your favorite regular restaurateur or a clever caterer.

Make sure somebody suffers if you're stiffed. Your caviar connection should care about you as least as much as your plastic surgeon. Remember: You have the right to see and taste what you're getting, especially if the roe is being carefully culled from a 2-kilo original tin.

And whatever you do, do not buy from anyone dishing up blobs of beluga from huge metal mixing bowls with oversized stainless spoons. Raw metal should never touch those fragile globes—the chemical reaction with the caviar makes the roe itself taste metallic.

That's why the insides of those sea-blue original tins are coated with epoxy glaze.

The eggs you buy should be firm but not hard, shiny and not broken, muddy or mushy. And the smell should be lightly of the sea, but fresh and clean.

Beluga, of course, carries the highest price tag and has the reputation to match, but maybe you don't take all your eggs from one basket. The fact is, while beluga has lovely, light flavors, it's really the caviar starter model. Connoisseurs prefer the variety, depth and nutty tang of osetra, which has a golden or slightly emerald tinge to it. Osetra comes



from a slightly smaller sturgeon—8 to 1,200 pounds instead of a ton for beluga. As luck would have it, the osetra population is more available and in better shape than it was a decade ago.

Unfortunately, the best there is can't be bought in this country. I still miss the banned black beauties from Iran. Although no longer legally imported, Iranian roe comes from that country's deeper, colder and cleaner end of the Caspian Sea (at least it used to be cleaner). A spoonful of perfect Iranian sevruga, the smallest and most plentiful roe, is one of the greatest mouthfuls of pleasure in life. I always try to scarf 4 or 7 lovely ounces at the Paris airport just before boarding my plane home.

### Foie Gras

Follow the above caviar rules when choosing a supplier—foie gras is every bit as precious and important. Choose a purveyor chefs prefer, or get the stuff they serve themselves.

Get dated items handed to you personally from the case, or on-line from the source. Something FedExed in foam can ruin an entire weekend.

Quality here is mainly a matter of common sense. Whether it's in a terrine or simply slabbed, the liver should be silky, smooth and melt-in-your-mouth soft. It should dissolve on the tongue, smell fresh and slightly sweet and be free of veins or blood. Color: pretty near pink, not gray nor a fashionable taupe.

The French stuff comes with a double-your-price tariff, and they don't always like to send their best to the likes of us. The stuff from Sonoma is on-again-off-again. Probably the best these days, outside of the southwest of France, comes from New York's Hudson Valley or, sometimes—believe it or not—Israel.

### Champagne

And now to bubbles. Here's a year to switch to gin. Import figures are up, as restaurants and retailers prepare to celebrate, but champagne

sales are flat and prices are generally steady, which means that to cash in on the crush, the top producers need to up the prices of their most popular show bottles.

I say buy early and on sale. Store your favorite champagne until the night in question, or explore new finds well in advance and lay in a supply. Score a magnum or larger—they often produce better balance and flavor. They also keep at a steady cool temperature before chilling for the main event. Have one good gulp, then switch to chardonnay, or vodka, or tequila or Evian. In fact, the best time to buy bubbles may be sometime in mid-January, when it all might go on sale. This gives plenty of time for the real millennial liftoff, which is on Jan. 1, 2001. **F**