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Russian It’s Not, But Randy Montegut Says
His Choupique Caviar is Pretty Good.

This is no rich man’s food. Not any more, anyway.

Caviar, long associated with the rich and famous (and even Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous), is fast becoming an affordable Louisiana delicacy.

Indigenous to Louisiana waters, and especially the Atchafalaya Basin, the bowfin (more commonly referred to as choupique) is now being used by a New Iberia company for caviar.

Randy Montegut, a marine biologist and owner of Bon Creole Seafood, says he’s been selling the caviar he processes to wholesalers in Lafayette and New Orleans and shipping it to California and New York. He’s also targeting markets overseas. “I have shipped samples overseas on numerous occasions, to Europe, to Japan,” he says.

Marketed under various other brands and Montegut’s own brand, the “Imperial Orleans,” a 4-ounce tin retails for about $25. Compare that with the best Russian beluga caviar—produced by the sturgeon fish caught mainly in the Caspian Sea—which can cost as much as $250 for the same amount. Caviar prices vary from company to company, both Russian and American sturgeon being the best. But when compared to the price of the better brands and fish, Bon Creole’s product is significantly cheaper.

It’s difficult to determine how long people have been eating the eggs of the choupique, Montegut says, because he’s heard rumors that it has been substituted for American sturgeon and marketed as such. One fisherman told Montegut he had sold choupique eggs 10 years ago. “It’s safe to say the product has come out under its own identity in the last five years.”

Paddlefish, another Louisiana fish that has been sold as American sturgeon, has also been used in caviar in the United States, Montegut says. But because it was placed on Louisiana’s endangered species list and is no longer legal to harvest here, there’s been an increased interest in bowfin, he adds.

Montegut maintains that Bon Creole’s caviar is as good as any sturgeon and much better than what grocery store shelves offer. Much like the Russian and American sturgeon, the choupique produces very dark gray-to-black eggs, and according to Montegut, they have a very mild, lightly salted taste.

“Nobody tells how they do it [salt the eggs]. That’s our secret.” Most people who describe the taste use the word “nutty. One person said it tastes like pecans.”

All caviar tastes best when consumed a week or two after being processed, he says. That allows the eggs to

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develop their taste but is not long enough for a fishy taste to set in. Montegut says his caviar is lightly salted, using less than 5 percent salt. He claims caviar on grocery store shelves is usually dyed dark and salted heavily to camouflage the fish taste. “Those have a very strong fishy taste,” he says.

The eggs Montegut buys are from fish caught by local fishermen who remove the eggs for him. “Most of the eggs will come from an hour’s drive from here. . . . In fact, they all do. And we get ‘em in everyday.”

Contrary to what a lot of people think, Montegut says, many people eat the meat of the bowfin. He says people are sometimes turned off by it because its flesh, which has a soft texture, is different from most fish people usually eat. “Everybody I know takes the fish and mashes it up with potatoes and onions.”

Though the bulk of Bon Creole Seafood’s business is still in crawfish, Montegut has big plans for his caviar line. Currently, he’s only selling to wholesalers. “To sell my own product under my own label—direct to the consumer—that’s my goal. That’s where the money is.”

Bon Creole’s caviar season began in early December and will run into February. The company, now 10 years old, also used to process alligator meat and crabs but is now only a crawfish/caviar processing facility. Because the crawfish take up most of the hours during the day, Montegut says he’s forced to produce the caviar at night. “That’s what I was doing during the Super Bowl,” he says. “Eggs.”