Cajun Caviar

By Jonas Breaux

LOREAUVILLE — If it looks like caviar, taste like caviar but doesn’t cost the same as an ounce of gold, chances are you are eating bowfin caviar.

Like $50-a-pound Beluga caviar from the Caspian Sea, bowfin caviar is dark in color, similar in texture and pleasing to the palate — the only difference is bowfin caviar runs from about $50 per pound.

Once only a backyard business (usually of a secretive nature so game wardens didn’t catch them), conducted by a few Cajuns along the Atchafalaya Basin, the development of Louisiana bowfin caviar is taking steps toward becoming a seafood industry to reckon with.

Although only in its beginning stages, the Bayou State bowfin caviar industry has the potential to wedge its way into a very select and lucrative market, according to bowfin caviar producer Randy Montegut.

It took Montegut, owner of Bon Creole Seafood, in Loreauville, two years and hundreds of pounds of discarded bowfin eggs to get his caviar salting process perfected. Today, Montegut, who has a master’s degree in fisheries biology, is trying to get his fledgling caviar business off the ground.

Like male bowfin (colloquially known as choupique) which care for newly laid eggs by guarding and fanning them until they hatch, Montegut has kept secret his preserving (salting) process, while developing a quality product for national and international markets.

Choupique are commonly considered a trash fish by Cajuns because the meat is soft and is not easily separated from the bone. Montegut, however, the value of the choupique roe makes the fish an attractive species for commercial interest.

Montegut said the caviar most people have eaten comes from the bellies of sturgeon, both European and American species. Sturgeon roe is dark, like bowfin, with the only distinguishable difference in eggs being that sturgeon eggs are slightly larger.

“The real difference in the caviar is derived from the individual processor’s technique for salting (preserving) the roe,” Montegut said. “Some caviar is Durand (D-St. Martinville) collected enough votes for passage of House Bill 785.

Durand’s bill, which was supported on the Senate side by Sen. Armand Brinkhaus (D-Sunset), allows for commercial harvest of bowfin with nets during the months of December, January and February.

“Being able to harvest choupique during December, January and February is important. It is very important that eggs be harvested from a live fish and then immediately put in containers and packed in ice for transportation to the plant,” Montegut said. “If the roe is mishandled, the eggs can become fresh and the fish rarely succeed in harvesting roe from undersized fish.”

Durand said the 22-inch size limit ensures that the fish has spawned at least once.

After the roe is taken from the fish it is brought to Montegut’s plant where the eggs are processed.

“First we wash and separate the eggs from the membrane which holds the roe together,” Montegut said. “The next step is to salt or pickle the roe. Each process, be it mom and pop or a major company, is unique to the processor.”

Some preserving processes (salting) leave the caviar with a saltier taste than others,” he said. “My process, for example, took me a couple of years to perfect.”

Montegut said he has a distributor in New Orleans who handles sales of Imperial Orleans Bowfin Caviar, the brand name he sells choupique caviar under.

“I do sell some caviar locally,” Montegut said, “but for the most part, I sell in bulk to distributors who then sell the product on a national basis.”

Montegut said the fledgling industry may get a boost from the Department of Agriculture, which has the expertise and means to develop markets for bowfin caviar.

“Before we were able to get the exemption on taking bowfin we were dealing with the Wildlife and Fisheries Department,” Durand said, “because we were considering the effects of commercial harvest of a natural resource.”

Now that we have a season in place and a viable industry, our next step is to get the state Department of Agriculture involved in promoting and developing this new fisheries industry,” Durand said, “and the state representative said.

Debbie DuBantis, an employee of Bon Creole Seafood, prepares the delicacy.