



Paddlefish

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I was on hand yesterday for a rather exciting local food event: The first ranched paddlefish caviar harvest from Big Fish Farms. Renee Koerner, the owner of this local business, has made a kilo or two of caviar in the past, and 2013 will be her big harvest. (It takes 9 or 10 years for female paddlefish to start producing eggs) She has about 200 fish this year to harvest, but they're not all female and not all the females have eggs. She hopes to end up with about 200 pounds of caviar.



These are large, very ancient fish, with long paddle noses, a sharklike-shape, no bones (only cartilage) or teeth. The ones processed yesterday weigh about 30 pounds. (Koerner is checking in this photo to see if it's a female and whether there's a notch on the paddle indicating they've already caught it, tested it and found it has no eggs.)

I have posted below a story that I wrote two years ago about Koerner and her venture. It's fascinating how it works as a green, sustainable way to replace Russian caviar, which is anything but. I'll write more about this caviar harvest soon. It won't be available for a few more weeks, but then there will be a limited supply.





At one time, Koerner thought she'd also get into the paddlefish meat business, but has decided to concentrate only on caviar.

But there is fish to eat as a result of making caviar. Roe is harvested during a few months in the winter, removed from the fish, and the fish can then be filleted and eaten. So now she's thinking that paddlefish could be a seasonal, local food; available only during the few months (December-March mostly) that she's harvesting the eggs. It's now available in several places around town, if you'd like to try it. I think it's delicious: very firm, very moist. It's a lot like sturgeon, if you've ever had that, and something like swordfish (though I think less likely to dry out.)

Keegan Seafood in Anderson Township is selling paddlefish for \$17.99/ pound.

Honey will have it as a verbal feature for as long as Koerner has it. Tonight chef Shoshanna Hafner is serving it on a savory lemon scented bread pudding, with caramelized fennel and artichokes on sunflower shoots. It's \$26.

It's a special at Jean-Robert's Table, served two ways: either a French preparation with truffle cream sauce, root vegetables, butternut squash and warm mushroom ragout, for \$25; or as fish and chips with a Moerlein batter, confit lemon and classic tartar sauce, for \$17.

Steven Williams at Bouquet will have it next week as a Restaurant Week special; pan-sared with dirty rice with pork belly, purple cauliflower and a citrus-lime beurre blanc.

It will be on the menu at Nectar. Julie Francis is serving it through the weekend with farro salad, kambocha squash, a Chinese black bean and Meyer lemon relish.

Kentucky caviar could catch on

Wednesday, October 28, 2009

Bellevue's Renee Koerner hopes her paddlefish ranching is worth 8- to 10-year wait for roe

By Polly Campbell

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Deep in reservoirs around Kentucky, ancient, strange-looking fish are swimming

constantly.

They're called American paddlefish and they have long, spatula-like noses and shark-like tail fins. They feed like whales, straining the water for zooplankton. On this diet of tiny animals, they can grow to lake monster lengths of 5 feet long and 40 to 60 pounds. They grow so slowly that it takes 8 to 10 years for a female to begin to produce eggs.

When these do, in 2013, Renee Koerner is coming back for them. She stocked the reservoirs with them when they were fingerlings and planned for the day she could harvest their eggs. The tiny, black roe are almost identical to one of the world's most expensive foods: caviar.

Koerner of Bellevue, whose career has mostly been spent in the dining rooms of fine restaurants, has chosen a new occupation: She's become a paddlefish rancher. If that conjures a picture of her out on the range, lassoing fish, that's not that far off. But she uses large public bodies of water

as her range, and large gill nets to rope in the fish. She and others hope this will become an economically important industry in Kentucky, though only four people in Kentucky are involved in it now.

Stepping into the gap left by the demise of sturgeon caviar from Russia, she plans to produce an artisanal and sustainable American caviar. She is also raising paddlefish for its mild, meaty and boneless flesh.

Koerner's interest in caviar is a natural progression from her background in fine dining and wine. As assistant maitre d' at the former Maisonette downtown, and as a salesperson for both Cutting Edge and Vintner Select wine distributors, she has always appreciated artisanal products, lovingly grown and created by small producers.

"I wanted to produce something myself," she said. "I think Kentucky caviar can be like wine or bourbon, an artisanal product. And I think there's room for several producers."

She has had access to some previously stocked fish to make limited amounts of caviar. Richard Brown, maitre d' at Boca in Oakley, has tried it and says he found it delicious.

There is a global lust for high-status caviar, but there is little supply. The Caspian Sea between the states of the former Soviet Union and Iran, where all wild sturgeon caviar comes from, has been so over-fished, polluted, poached and badly managed that few of the slow-growing sturgeon are left. International quotas and restrictions have been installed to limit the damage, but a thriving black market thwarts them. Russian osetra can sell for as much as \$225/ounce. (There are three grades of caviar: Beluga is the best, osetra next, then sevruga.)

About a decade ago, as caviar became scarce, the roe of wild paddlefish began to be accepted as a good alternative to sevruga. There is a regulated commercial fishery in the Ohio River. Reservoir ranching takes pressure off those wild stocks. Roe from reservoir-raised fish is also higher quality than that from wild fish, closer to osetra caviar than to sevruga, according to Steve Mims, professor of aquaculture at Kentucky State University in Frankfort, who has been studying paddlefish for 25 years.

Because of the nature of the paddlefish, native to the Mississippi River system, ranching them has little environmental impact.

Once introduced as foot-long fingerlings to a body of water, they mature, undisturbed, for

years. Too big to be eaten by heron or by other fish, they eat no other fish themselves; only zooplankton, the smallest animals in the ecosystem. They need no other feed. “We’re using a passive resource,” said Koerner. “And it’s not intensive. We introduce 10-20 fish per acre.”

They won’t take a hook, so sport fishers can’t catch them. They can only reproduce in running water, so they can’t overpopulate reservoirs. They’re harvested for roe in the winter, when other fish are hibernating, with nets that are too big to unintentionally catch other fish.

Mims thinks that a huge economic potential exists in ranched paddlefish roe. One female paddlefish will yield two to five pounds of caviar. “This could be a multimillion-dollar industry,” he said. “It’s a low-risk, high-value proposition.”

For Koerner, the ability to create distinctive caviar with a true regional thumbprint is exciting. “It’s very simple: just eggs and salt. But the devil’s in the details. The way you handle it, when you harvest the roe, the kind of salt you use, it all matters.” She calls her business Big Fish Farms and will brand her caviar Ronin.

Paddlefish meat also has potential. It has no bones, and barely tastes like fish. “It’s so moist and meaty,” said Brown, who’s tried it. “It tastes more like veal than anything.”

Koerner says she’s slowly creating a market for it. “It’s getting a little buzz,” she said. “It’s been well-received by the chefs and customers who’ve tried it.” It’s easy to cook, hard to overcook.

Koerner is partnering with catfish farmers, who have been hurt by Asian competition. A catfish pond generates zooplankton for the paddlefish, who occupy a different niche in the artificial ecosystem. Farmers can harvest after a season or two, adding another source of income with no further inputs.

“I’d like to model this after Niman Ranch,” said Koerner. Niman is a meat brand that sets standards for farmer-partners for raising beef and pork that it brands and markets.

Koerner has harvested paddlefish for meat and plans to harvest more, taking orders and delivering it to customers. She’ll be harvesting in February.

The limitations to paddlefish ranching now are the amount of water available. Only water-supply lakes can accommodate them, but Koerner and Mims hope it will expand into lakes managed by the state Fish and Wildlife service.

Mims says that only about 2,000 acres is now available but that’s only about 10 percent of water that could be used. Koerner has joined the Kentucky Aquaculture Task Force to help resolve this issue.

“Russians think of caviar as health food,” said Koerner. “They buy it for a wedding, a birthday or when someone is sick. I know the morning after I eat some, I always feel like a million bucks.”

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