

Posh food scams – and why buying counterfeit caviar can trigger real feelings of grief

Fakes are everywhere, so it pays to know exactly where your Bordeaux, truffles and caviar come from



By Ben McCormack

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Few foodstuffs are as fraught with the potential for faux pas as caviar. Should it be licked off the thumb or spooned atop a blini? Ought there to be crème fraîche and chopped onion too or should the eggs be eaten au naturel? And is the perfect palate cleanser a flute of champagne or a shot of chilled vodka?

All these social niceties pale into comparison, however, with the possibility that your caviar might not be what it says on the tin. Gunther Corsten-Gerhards, co-founder of luxury food retailer Princesse d'Isenbourg et Cie, reckons that at least 50 percent of tins of beluga contain eggs from less prestigious sturgeon. “Marketing and a certain amount of snobbery is crucial

to the entire caviar industry,” he says. “The more elusive the supply, as is the case with beluga, the higher the kilogram to price ratio.”



Beluga commands the highest price for caviar because it can take the female beluga sturgeon 20 years to produce the roe that, once salted and aged, will become caviar. Corsten-Gerhards sells beluga from £189 for 50g; 1kg will set you back £3,780. His west London premises has 40kg of beluga locked away behind steel doors.



50g of Royal Beluga

Caviar labelling must not only include the species of sturgeon – ‘HUS’ for beluga *huso huso*; ‘STE’ for sevruga *stellate*; ‘GUE’ for the Russian sturgeon *gueldenstaedtii* that produces oscietra – but the country of origin code, year of harvest and lot identification number.

Corsten-Gerhards sources his caviar from a sturgeon farm in northern Italy fed with freshwater from Lake Garda. His company has a financial stake in the farm, so he knows that the eggs are genuine. Once the tin is opened, authentic beluga is easy to identify, he says. “You can see a triple circle inside each egg of beluga, and the inner circle looks like an eye.”

Caviar is not the only luxury foodstuff where it pays to know exactly where the raw material has been sourced. White truffle can fetch almost £3,000

per kilo in the auctions of Alba in northern Italy, which has made the Piedmont town synonymous with the luxury tuber. Yet this reputation for producing the world's best truffles is overrated says Zak Frost, the owner of Wiltshire Truffles, which supplies most of the UK's Michelin-starred restaurants and has been selling truffles to consumers online since last year.



Jamie Ritchie, worldwide head of Sotheby's Wine

“A huge proportion of chefs and even more home cooks think that Alba white truffles are the best,” he says. “It’s true that there are some truffles found in the woods around Alba, but there are fewer and fewer of them. The best truffles that we sell come directly from the Istrian peninsula in Croatia. What they can’t sell goes to Italy to be sold as Alba truffles five days later, which means they’re not as fresh.”



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Frost reserves his greatest opprobrium, however, for truffle oil rather than the truffle market of Alba. “Truffle oil is the real scam,” he says. “It is made from a chemical variation of one of the 200-plus flavour compounds that go into white truffles. It is very one dimensional and has an intensely powerful flavour. People think that it’s only cheap truffle products that contain the chemicals but a £200 bottle of white truffle oil is just as fake.”

Nowhere is verifying the contents of a bottle more essential than the world of fine wine. Jamie Ritchie, worldwide head of [Sotheby’s Wine](#), says that breaking the news to clients that their wine is not what it says on the label is a significant part of the business. “The vast majority of counterfeit wines that we see are focused on the rarest part of the marketplace – trophy wines that are the greatest wines from the greatest vintages,” he says. “If you’re going to go to the effort of counterfeiting a bottle of wine, you might as well counterfeit something that’s worth £50,000.”



White truffles CREDIT: SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST

He points to the fact that counterfeit bottles from the two most famous wine scandals of recent years continue to appear in the marketplace, especially through private wine merchants. In 1985, German wine collector Hardy Rodenstock claimed to have discovered the 18th century wine collection of US president Thomas Jefferson, including Château Lafite, Yquem and Branne-Mouton (now Mouton Rothschild). Christie’s sold the first bottle, allegedly a 1787 Lafite, for £105,000, but the authenticity of the collection – as well as much of the other wine that Rodenstock sold – has long been questioned.

Rudy Kurniawan is even more notorious. The Indonesian-born collector became the first person to be convicted of wine fraud in the US when he was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in 2014 for defrauding clients of £22m by producing fake versions of top Bordeaux and Burgundy in his Los Angeles kitchen. Most famously, he was exposed for attempting to sell eight magnums of 1947 Château Lafleur when only five had originally been produced. "If something looks too good to be true, it probably is," Ritchie says.



Hunting for Wiltshire truffles CREDIT: SAM FROST PHOTOS

Buy your wine from people you trust – and verify that they are trustworthy, is Ritchie's number one piece of advice to avoid being scammed. "Sotheby's has a retail side as well as the auction business," he says. "We recognise that we are not the only place to buy wine and that clients will use other sources. Our specialists give advice to clients and help guide them towards trusted sources to build their collections."

Ritchie says that clients who discover that they are in possession of counterfeit wine pass from disappointment to anger, disbelief and a desire for retribution, rather like the stages of grief. If there is any consolation, though, it is that the fake wine is usually of excellent quality. "These wines have been made in a sophisticated way that is actually enjoyable to drink," he says. "Comparing them in the bottles to the real thing is a really interesting way to have some fun with friends." In vino veritas, as the saying goes.

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