



Caviar: Taste Luxury everywhere

When your name is synonymous with a brand that embodies class, decadence, and luxury, and you've been perfecting your palate and your ability to detect the nuances of caviar since you were old enough to walk, is there any chance you would become an accountant? "No, not really," laughs Alexandre Petrossian, whose degree may be in numbers but whose heart has always been in the family business, Petrossian caviar. "I was always in love with the company. I started working when I was about ten or twelve, doing everything from putting stickers on the tins to taking deliveries—we've all sliced salmon, packed cans, everything—and put so many stickers on, the skin on your fingers comes off!"

The handsome young scion of this legendary family, just 26 years old, sits comfortably in his pinstriped suit in a quiet corner table of the Art Deco palace that is Petrossian in New York, but he takes seriously the responsibility of maintaining and growing the business. "When you're a kid, you don't un-

derstand why you have to work your way up—'My dad owns the company, why do I have to do this? Blah blah blah'—but now I do. When I see someone not doing the stickers just right, or when they say we can't get something in that we need, I say, I know we can, because I have done it a million times. It gives me a big advantage." His other advantage is the lineage of service that he was raised in, and when he talks about his work, he has a presence and a command far beyond his years. "The history is very heavy, the background is very heavy. My grandfather started the company in 1920 and my father still runs it. My father is very strict, and my mother is very beautiful, but she trained me for years too, how to work in the boutique and talk to people. She taught me that you can talk to everyone—everyone is just a person, two legs, two arms, two eyes, a nose, whether they are a businessman or a famous actor, everyone is a person. When you feel comfortable around them, they will feel comfortable around you. And in this case, you have

Interview by Kate Winick



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the knowledge, you can teach—usually they are the ones who everyone wants to learn from, so now they start watching and learn.”

The story of how Melkoum and Mouchegh Petrossian brought caviar to Western Europe is a tale of perseverance, hard work, and very savvy marketing. When the Armenian brothers arrived in Paris in 1920 as a part of a larger exodus after the Bolshvik Revolution, they discovered that caviar, long a part of the Russian diet, had no presence in France. “They used to serve sturgeon, but throw the caviar into animal feed. One fisherman they spoke to, he said, ‘I hate caviar! Always caviar, every-

where!’” says Alexandre. They carefully positioned their product, attending gourmet food shows, introducing their caviar, which was met with an initially cold reception, until Cesár Ritz, the proprietor of the Ritz in Paris, was convinced to offer caviar at his hotel. It caught on quickly after that, and they carefully maintained control of their product to insure its success. “They had to introduce it as a luxury product, and then a very exclusive luxury product, until finally they created it as the ultimate luxury product,” says Alexandre, explaining the dramatic evolution of their success in just a few generations.

The wholesale operation began in the basement of the retail store, then grew into a small factory, and finally moved into a large, new factory outside of Paris. “We didn’t want to lose our old ways, though. So many companies, they get a shiny new factory, they want to be in the new place to make things more efficient, do things differently—we do what we do with love, because each time we sell something, it has our name on it. It’s not about making it more efficient. It’s wonderful to see someone throw a piece of wood in the smoker, a little metal thing, you know, an actual smoker? So many places use these big things, with pipes



full of smoke to flavor the fish—that is not how we do it, and yet we produce a very consistent product.”

Consistency in quality is the trick in caviar, and the Petrossians have perfected their methods, though like all good tradesmen, Alexandre is careful to keep his secrets. “With caviar, it’s like taking care of a little, little baby. It arrives in a big tin, a 1.8 kilo tin. We have to open it, try it, because we want to sell it at its peak, to make sure there will be no bitterness, just a clean seafood taste. We turn the tin to cycle the oil, to mix it and keep the taste consistent throughout the tin. With our Amer-

ican caviar, for instance, it comes in from Sacramento. From some, we know it has to be sold faster, they are all kept between three and six months, but maybe this one, we taste and we know it has to be just three. After that, we can do a really nice selection, not just based on ‘Oh, this one has big, beautiful eggs,’ because who knows, maybe in five years, all the eggs will be small but they will still be delicious.”

This is a point he returns to several times, and it is an almost unconscious recognition of the power their brand has to significantly change the caviar market. The influence of the Petrossian family in caviar is such that they

avoid pushing any cosmetic standards for their product, because they know, after years in the business, that things change. They retain their role as authorities; they know when caviar is good and when it is not, and to promote an artificial standard of judging quality disregards the connoisseurship of their house. This is the only moment when Alexandre’s insistence that they are “just fishermen” seems remotely possible—that at the heart of this gilded temple to luxury is the fisherman’s intuitive understanding of the flux of nature—that the sea provides its bounty as it chooses, not as we would have it.



Alexandre's title is Vice President, "but I don't like saying that, because everyone thinks they know what that means. I like 'caviar specialist.' Half the day I am downtown at our facility there, trying caviar—it's a good job! I try to be at the restaurant for at least lunch or dinner, so people can see its not just a name, and I try to be here at least a couple of nights a week as well. The really good thing about working here is that we work as a team. We

don't just have one person say 'hey, this is my idea,' and then that's what we do. We like to suck out the creativity and share it with everyone." The collaborative process is not just professional, which would be a nearly impossible feat in such a tight-knit group. "I'm on the phone with my dad every day just to check in, even if it's nothing in particular going on. It's very open, I know his cell is always on and I can call him at any time, even if I wake him

up, he'll call and tell me 'it's fine, we can fix it this way, don't worry.'"

His father's presence in the company is still the dominant one, and while he has ceded his son to New York, Armen Petrossian is working hard to ensure his company's future. There are strong feelings surrounding the overfishing of beluga and other sturgeon to supply the world's caviar, and the elder Mr. Petrossian has spent a great deal of time in Russia work-





ing for his cause. “I have not personally been to Russia,” says Alexandre, “but my father goes often. There is no Russian caviar legally in the United States right now, and it is a big issue for us. Each time you buy a tin of caviar a percentage goes back to the hatchery—so by banning the sale of it, you’re not saving the fish, you’re killing it. And you’ll never control the black market,” where tins of caviar, while not cheap, can go for significantly less than their legitimate counterparts. “My father advocates control and regulation of sturgeon fishing in all the Caspian Sea countries—he advocates for responsibility. He is fighting to have baby sturgeons put back in the sea and protected so they can grow. Our goal is not to take all the fish; it’s to grow the stock so that we can sell it for a long time without affecting the population. He’s founded so many groups to overlap and protect each other, to form a little bubble around the fish. He was just given an award, the Legion d’Honneur, for his work. We consider ourselves fisherman—we sell fish, after all.”

One of the other priorities in recent years, since the ban on beluga, has been cultivating other sources of caviar. Petrossian has been promoting its excellent Iranian caviar, as well as building the market for farmed caviar, beginning with a partnership with Sterling Farms in California about ten years ago. “We really began the trend of farm-raised; before that no one would touch it. The people there are very good at raising the fish and taking care of them, and taking the caviar out is our game. We share our knowledge, and since it began, we’ve really created a great thing.” Alexandre’s focus is always on building and maintaining their customer base as well as their product, and he is constantly aware of who is coming and going. The clientele is as upscale as ever (as we sat, the manager recounted an afternoon earlier in the week when two ladies



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in their 80s made a lunch out of two tins and a bottle of vodka, for an \$8,000 check) and Alexandre remarked that the customer is actually getting younger. “We’ll never say no to someone who wants to try it; if you are buying caviar, you are always welcome to sample from your tin. There are those who grew up with our caviar, who had it every Christmas or New Years—it’s a tradition, and they usually buy the same kind their parents bought. Then there are the 30 and 40 year olds who have good jobs, and if you really want to buy something expensive, you will buy caviar. For newer customers, farm-raised is easier to enjoy, it’s not as robust—a more accessible taste. It’s also less expensive, and allows you to develop an appreciation. The more you eat it, the more you’ll like it.”

So what is next for this young man, who divides his time between his restaurant, his Soho apartment, and his friends downtown in Manhattan’s chic, international Meatpacking Dis-

trict? Since arriving in New York in 2004, speaking no English, he’s developed a network of friends through work and play that keep him in New York nearly full-time, with short trips to Paris to indulge his passions for custom shoes and watches. As he watches his cooks work right next to his office all day, he’s developed

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an interest in developing his knowledge of the restaurant beyond the front of the house, and plans to take classes at the French Culinary Institute as well as in his own kitchen. But he knows better than anyone that he’s already got the greatest culinary trick of all up his sleeve, half-joking that, “if you put out a tin of caviar,

everyone oohs and aahs and you are the best host in the world. It’s funny to see how people react to a tin of caviar than how they react to something you spent half a day cooking, which is gone in a second.” He’s committed more than ever to the quality of his caviar, and feels that it has primed him to experience all sorts of new things. “It took me at least 15 years, in a private course with my dad to learn everything,” he says, laughing. “He taught me the secrets, the temperatures—I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you. It was a gift he gave me, a gift before he sent me to the United States. But it’s also in the blood, I think; I have a good palate. I had parents who forced us to try things, they didn’t let us be picky. ‘Don’t die without knowing what it tastes like,’ they would say.” And with the love and attention Alexandre puts into creating his caviar, he ensures that many parents will be passing his legacy onto their children with that same insistence for years to come. ■

