

ABOUT GRAVY

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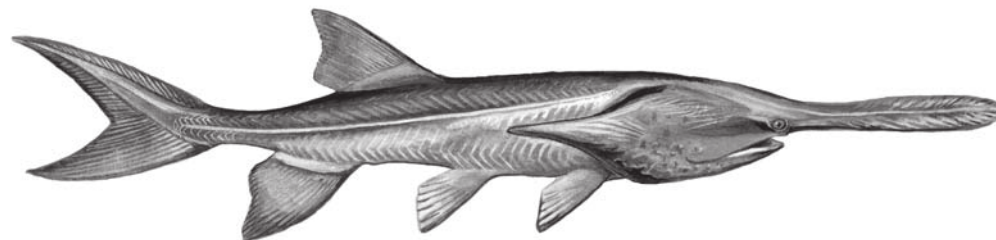
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BELUGA, OSSETRA, AND PADDLEFISH?

Harvesting caviar in the Arkansas Delta

by Joe York



GROWING UP IN ALABAMA with my steel-worker dad and my high-school-teacher mom, we didn't eat that much caviar—and by "that much," I mean "any." Caviar just wasn't for us. It was for action-movie villains who shoveled it into their big, evil mouths and then shot people dispassionately for trivialities like forgetting to feed the cat or not liking caviar.

But not long ago, I heard that folks from Arkansas were working the Mississippi River to harvest sacs of roe from a peculiar fish that looks like a small dolphin sans blowhole with a canoe oar for a nose. I thought I'd better give caviar a chance.

Lee Ross is one of those folks. He runs a catfish joint in De Witt, Arkansas, but between November and March he also deals in caviar. On cold winter mornings when reasonable folks are settling into their third cup of coffee and thinking about calling in sick, Lee and his sidekick, Billy Ray Manues (who Lee says looks exactly like the Red Baron as portrayed on a box of Red Baron-brand frozen pizza), are already howling down the river in search of these fish with black gold in their bellies. One morning, I went along for the ride.



BILLY RAY WORKS A CIGARETTE with one hand and the Evinrude sixty-horsepower outboard motor with the other. The motor spits a rooster tail into the river and the river spits back as we break through the light chop. It's cold. Very cold.

Lee reclines across the bench in the front of the boat and takes a call on his cell phone. The river races by while he calmly arranges to ship several pounds of caviar to a customer in Los Angeles. "We send some to New York," he tells me when he's off the phone. "But most of our stuff ends up out in L.A. for the movie stars."

Billy Ray eases off the throttle and we slide near the bank, toward a row of plastic jugs bobbing in the mad current. Reaching from the bow of the metal boat, Lee lifts a jug and the leaded line of the net comes with it. The net is a grab bag of twigs, Styrofoam cups, and a few small catfish. We move on to another net, and then another. Finally, we hit pay dirt.

Lee pulls the net out of the current, and for the first time I get a look at a paddlefish (or spoonbill, as they're also known). It comes up backwards, revealing first its long, flat tail fin, and then its thick, muscular midsection. The eyes emerge, and then, just as I think there couldn't be any more fish to this fish, the wild, prehistoric-looking bill keeps coming and coming out of the water like a handkerchief pulled from a magician's palm. The entire fish is six-and-a-half or seven feet long.

"Egger!" hollers Lee as he hauls the giant fish into the boat.

"Egger?" I ask.

"Yeah man, this sucker is loaded with eggs," says Lee, grinning.

"How can you tell?"

"You can just tell. If you look at the sides of them, you can see where they're fat through the middle. That's where the eggs are."

Lee reaches into the bottom of the boat and comes up with a knife. He opens the fish's belly. On either side of the backbone, like two big lungs full of poppy seeds, are the egg sacs. Lee cuts carefully along the edge of one sac.

"The biggest fish ever I brought in had thirteen pounds of eggs in

it," says Lee, holding his latest prize. "This one here is a monster, and it's probably got about nine or ten pounds of eggs in it. We get about ninety to a hundred dollars a pound for the eggs once they're processed. We process them ourselves, freeze them, and ship them out to L.A. It ain't easy at all, but you can make a living at it." Lee turns back to his thousand-dollar fish and removes the other sac. He rinses it in the Mississippi before bagging it up and placing it in an ice-filled treasure chest.

Over the next few hours, we pull in a couple more eggers. By the time we realize we're hungry, we've got about sixteen pounds of eggs in the boat.

Billy Ray pilots the boat toward the Arkansas bank and we pull up alongside another pair of fisherman who've been out working their nets for paddlefish. The men in the other boat eat crackers and Snickers. Lee reaches into a bag and pulls out a can of Vienna sausages. He cracks open the can and pours the sausage juice into the river, then expertly removes the first sausage.

"Do y'all ever eat caviar out here?" I ask as Billy Ray pops a sausage into his mouth.

"I don't want that crap in my mouth," he replies between bites.

I ask Lee the same question.

"I eat it up there when we process it, but I don't really know how to eat it," he says, digging out another Vienna. "People have told me they eat it with toast and butter and smear it on there, or on them little pancake things. I like it all right, but it just ain't something I want to eat." 🍷

Joe York works at the University of Mississippi's Media & Documentary Projects Center. He has made over twenty-five short films with the Southern Foodways Alliance and is currently at work on the feature documentary *Southern Food: The Movie*. Photographs by Joe York. Paddlefish art courtesy clipartof.com.