The great California caviar rush

By Stinson Carter, Wall Street Journal

On a breezy April afternoon in the grassy delta flatlands of Galt, fins and tails were churning the waters inside raised tanks the size of above-ground swimming pools.

The bellies of the 100-pound, six-foot-long sturgeon of the Fishery aquaculture farm were white, their vacuum cleaner-nozzle mouths toothless and slightly be-whiskered. The fish have shark-like skin. Down their wide flanks run reptilian spikes, called "scutes," ancient prototypes of fish scales. They are brutal in appearance, ugly even, living fossils from a prehistoric evolutionary crossroads.

Sturgeon — Acipenseridae — have outlived whatever killed the dinosaurs. They've survived everything in the past 250 million years, only now to fall prey to man's desire for their clusters of glistening roe. Their eggs sell for as much as $270 per ounce in gourmet shops world-wide, and garnish the $50 entrees of white-tablecloth plates everywhere.

Caviar—the other black gold—sublimely salty, sweet, earthy, an acquired taste, to be sure, and pleasant to the eye, has been a delicacy of khans, tsars, monarchs and aristocracy for millennia. But in the past decade the market for wild sturgeon caviar—the crème de la crème of the delicacy—has been wracked by poachers, smugglers, polluted waters and the threat of extinction for the most prized of the world's 27 sturgeon species, those producing wild beluga caviar.

Besides protecting endangered sturgeon, import bans on Caspian Sea caviar have another upside. They created an opportunity for a group of entrepreneurial biologists and fish farmers in California's Central Valley region, where cattle ranches have

given way to sturgeon farms. Now domestic roe farmers have birthed a sustainable caviar industry, winning over, however reticently, the collective palate of the haute-cuisine stratosphere. And greenmarket grocery chains such as Whole Foods Market have dropped Caspian Sea caviar mainstays for the sustainable domestic brands.

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