

VIRTUOSO

THE MAGAZINE

FAR
&
AWAY



47

Caviar

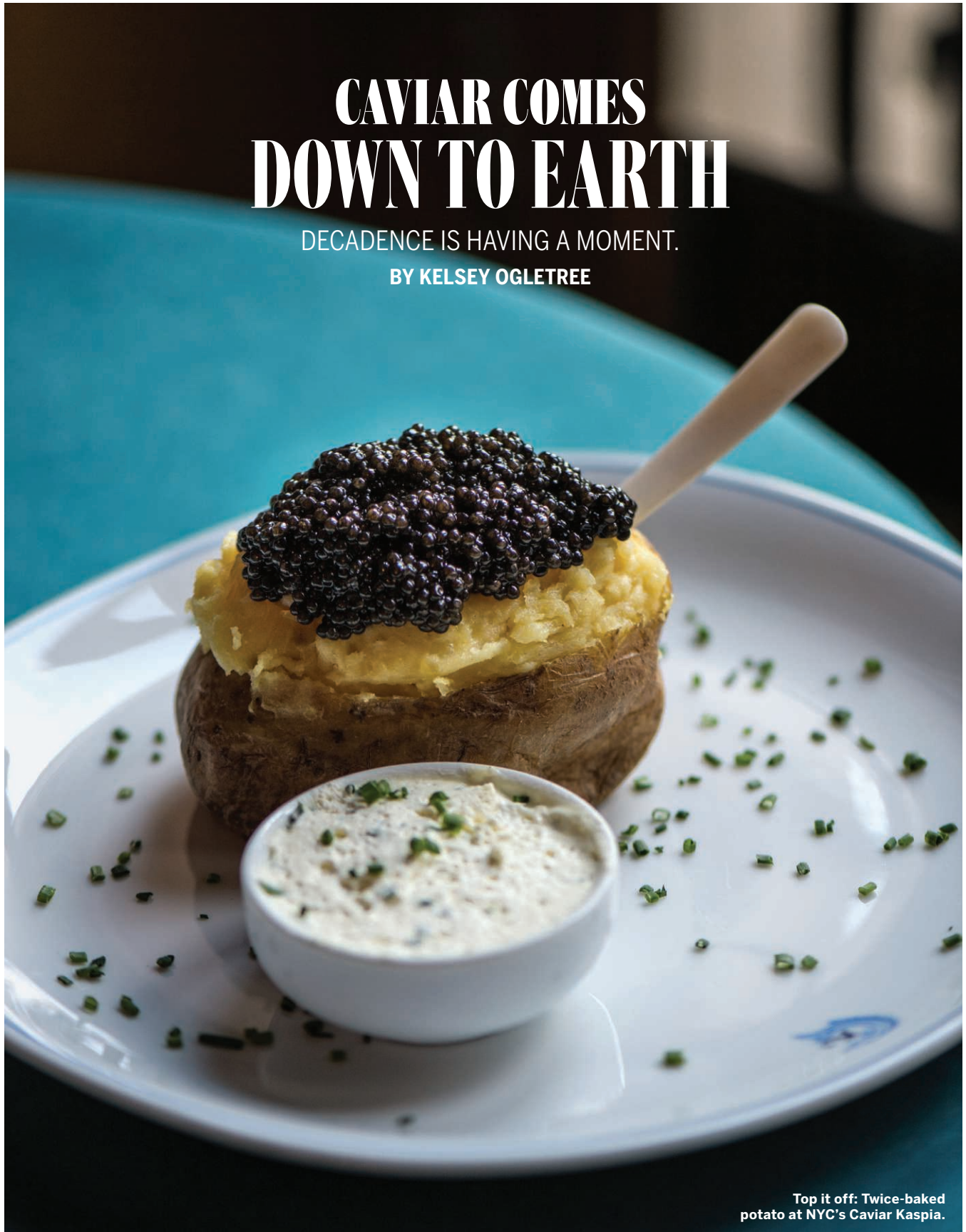
Save room for the osetra in Michelin-starred Esmé's Mother of Pearl dessert. (Hint: It's in the peanut.)



CAVIAR COMES DOWN TO EARTH

DECADENCE IS HAVING A MOMENT.

BY KELSEY OGLETREE



Top it off: Twice-baked potato at NYC's Caviar Kaspia.



COMBINING THE ART de vivre of Relais & Châteaux with the island's beach party pulse, the Myconian Ambassador becomes the oasis to escape the ordinary and indulge into memorable experiences of unexpected gastronomy and premium wellness in a new way of glorious living.

Dining



SUDDENLY, WE'RE all swimming in caviar. While sturgeon roe has long been a staple of Russian cuisine – and a precious starter at many a white-tablecloth affair – the delicacy is everywhere lately, anchoring tasting menus, sprinkled over ice cream, and even starring in your Gen Z niece's TikTok videos (#CaviarBump).

“Caviar is no longer this untouchable decadence, but a luxury ingredient people are ready to experience,” says Anya El-Wattar, a Moscow native and the chef-owner of San Francisco restaurant Birch & Rye.

When the United Nations banned most wild caviar exports in 2006 to protect the endangered beluga sturgeon, farmers stepped in, eyeing a new opportunity. But because it takes at least a decade for the fish to mature and its eggs to be ready to harvest, farm-raised

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caviar only became available a few years ago. Now that it's more accessible, chefs are seizing the moment – and getting creative. Case in point: El-Wattar's five-course tasting menus at Birch & Rye incorporate osetra and kaluga caviar varieties throughout, and even a vegan version made from beets, mustard seed, and black walnuts.

And while Russian caviar may remain the gold standard, sturgeon farming in the U.S. has made great technological advancements, resulting in higher yields and better-quality caviar available stateside. Good caviar never tastes fishy, but like “high-quality butter kissed by the sea,” says Marai Bolourchi, vice president of Tsar Nicoulai, a sustainable sturgeon farm in Wilton, California. Farms like Bolourchi's are working to remove the intimidation factor from caviar by offering it in a

variety of sizes and grades and encouraging people to enjoy it in unconventional ways. “Traditionalists will place a dollop of caviar on a blini with crème fraîche,” Bolourchi says. “My favorite way is truffle chips, crème fraîche, and a heaping spoon of caviar.”

Regiis Ova, a California-based company with its own brick-and-mortar caviar and Champagne lounge in Yountville, sees caviar consumption in the U.S. increasing, thanks to the sturgeon's greater availability. Cofounders Thomas Keller (of The French Laundry fame) and sturgeon farming executive Shaoching Bishop focus on simplifying caviar for restaurants and educating chefs on how to incorporate it into more-playful dishes: roe-topped waffles, tater tots, or – as at TheAmericano in Scottsdale, Arizona – fries.

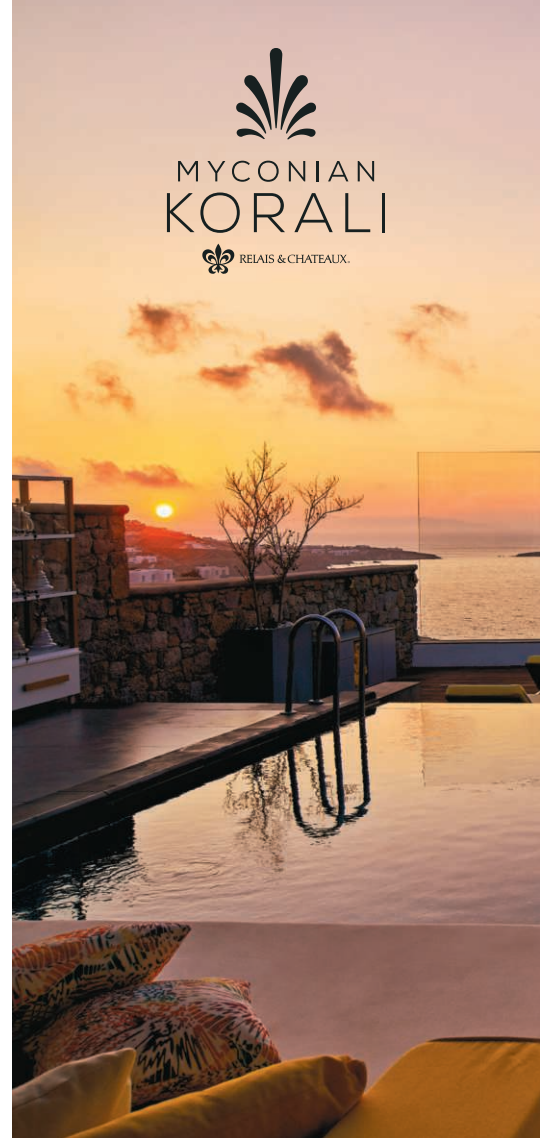
Scott Conant, TheAmericano's James



A Caviar Bar spread in Charleston and (opposite) Chicago's Esmé.

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Dining



Sweet and savory at Birch & Rye in San Francisco and (opposite) caviar fries at Scottsdale's The Americano.



SARAH FELKER



FYI

There's no need for sideways glances if you see a "caviar bump" on the menu: The snack, often served with a cocktail or shot of vodka, is a spoonful of caviar placed on and eaten directly from your hand – it goes between your thumb and index finger when you're making a fist. Not into licking your paw? Martiny's in NYC mimics the concept by serving a dollop of caviar on a wooden hand, with a mini gin martini on the side.

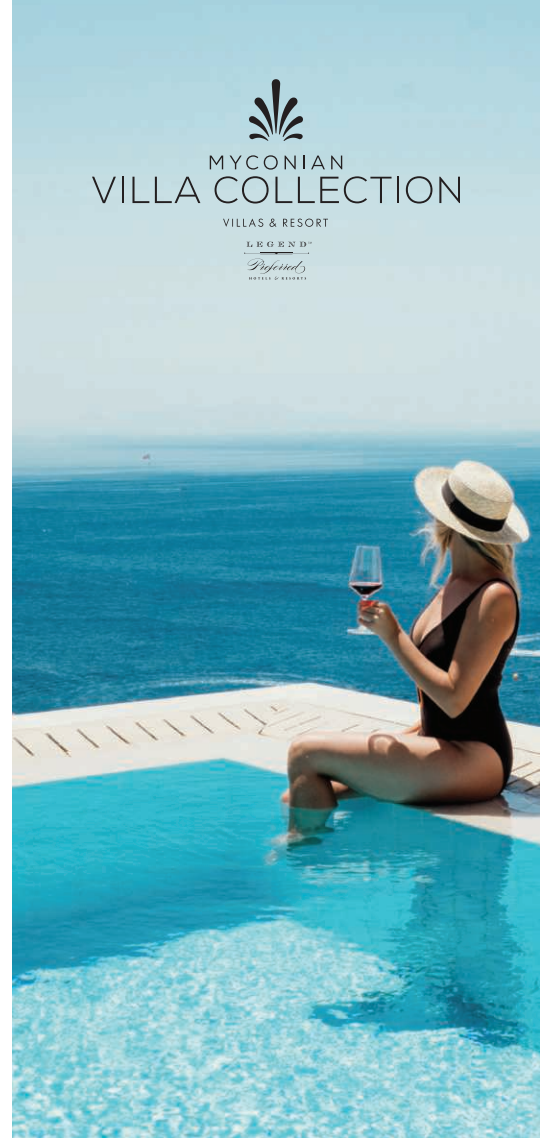
Beard Award-winning chef, debuted the latter at his steak house in 2021, and the high-low side quickly became a fan favorite. Made up of thick-cut fries topped with Italian-farmed Calvisius caviar, crème fraîche, shallots, scallions, and shaved cured egg yolk, the dish is an ideal appetizer for the table or an indulgent main course for one – depending on whether you're willing to share. "Add a glass of Champagne or beer to the mix," Conant says, "and it really doesn't get any better."

CAVIAR ISN'T JUST an opening act anymore – it's the entire show. The famously chic Caviar Kaspia restaurant, founded in Paris nearly a century ago, opened its first location in NYC inside The Mark hotel in February. Seated at mohair banquettes in the glitzy, Jacques Grange-designed space, diners savor traditional caviar presentations and caviar-topped twice-baked potatoes and pastas. With eight varieties on the menu, Caviar Kaspia aims to expand patrons' palates, delivering old favorites and new flavors.

The most coveted reservation in Charleston, South Carolina, right now is Caviar Bar, the eight-seat terrace bar

opened last spring in the Zero George hotel. Executive chef Vinson Petrillo wins over even skeptics with his approachable caviar service, which includes Regiis Ova supreme white sturgeon caviar served with soft-boiled eggs, pillowy brioche, crème fraîche, and potato chips. "I wanted to create a concept that focuses on caviar while being casual and fun," Petrillo says. "Sometimes guests come in thinking that caviar is fishy or salty, but when they try our offerings, a light bulb goes on and they finally understand what makes it special."

Even dessert gets a boost from that crisp pop of brine: Chef Jenner Tomaska of Chicago's Michelin-starred Esmé uses caviar as a flavor-enhancing seasoning. In a dessert called Mother of Pearl, he swirls peanut miso and slightly spicy celery hot sauce into a white-sweet-potato ice cream, topping it with a peanut-shaped white-chocolate shell filled with osetra caviar. It's a dish made for Instagram – fitting, as Tomaska credits social media with helping make once seemingly elite caviar feel more familiar. "The more people see it," he says, "the less trepidation they have in trying it." ♡



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