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The Fish That Lay the Golden Eggs

By ANGELA SHAH
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ABU DHABI — Abu Dhabi is talking caviar on a scale that would make czars blush.

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Guests sampled various types of farm-raised sturgeon eggs at the Royal Caviar Company, the Middle East's largest caviar farm.

The emirate, already home to the world's first gold-bar automatic teller machine and a Christmas tree so chock-full of bling it earned a place in the Guinness Book of World Records, has now said it will be host to the world's largest indoor caviar farm. At full production, expected in 2015, the factory will churn out 35 tons of the prized fish eggs — more than a quarter of current global production.

Royal Caviar Company makes its home in a low-slung building the size of six soccer fields in the Musaffah industrial area of Abu Dhabi and counts cement factories, rental car depots and distribution companies as neighbors. Yet, inside, organizers say, conditions are even better than the Caspian Sea that sturgeon call home.

"In the wild, sturgeon are available only four months of the year," said Christoph Hartung, chairman of the board of United Food Technologies Group, the German company that is providing the technology for the farm.

"In here," he added, "it is always summer for the fish."

Perpetual summer has the aesthetic of a laboratory, only the gurgle of flowing water to be heard. The $120 million indoor farm contains 80 tubs, in three sizes, to accommodate the fish from the tiny tadpole-like sturgeon emerging from its egg to the fully grown fish that spans up to three meters and can weigh 7 kilograms, or about 16 pounds.

From hatchery to harvest, the pricey fish are coddled in the piscine version of five-star luxury. Food robots dispatch brine shrimp for the newly hatched and dry feed for the older fish at synchronized times. Water in the tanks is recycled through a triple-filtration system at least 20 times a day.

A computerized monitoring system makes sure temperatures remain between 59 and 68 degrees Fahrenheit (15 and 20 degrees Celsius), depending on where the fish is in its life cycle. Should anything go awry, a control room in Germany is alerted and text alerts immediately appear on the cell phones of those on shift in Abu Dhabi.

"If you don't have good fish, they will not give you anything," said Muhaned Abu Awad, the plant's production manager. "You have to pamper the fish."

Abu Dhabi's taste for caviar has grown alongside its economic prowess.

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While Russian and other European expatriates are the biggest customers locally, Emiratis and other Gulf residents are increasingly seeking out the roe, which can cost as much as $9 a gram, as a symbol of their wealth.

Royal Caviar also sees its location in the Gulf as a strategic advantage in servicing the booming appetites for the newly wealthy in Far East markets, especially those in China.

Demand for the culinary delicacy is estimated to be 400 tons, or about 360 metric tons, a year, while current supply is topping at 120 tons, according to Royal Caviar. The move to limit the export of the over-fished wild sturgeon from the Caspian Sea in 2006 by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species has created business opportunities for investors in sturgeon farms, even those in the desert.

People associate caviar with an affluent lifestyle, said Pierre El Hakim, marketing manager of Caviar Court, a sturgeon farm in neighboring Saudi Arabia. “They buy it to show off, as a fancy and expensive food item on their tables,” he added.

Caviar Court’s owner, Sheikh Abdallah Al Faris, was a frequent customer of Mr. Hakim’s Persian carpets shop in Lebanon. While negotiating carpet prices and styles, the men would enjoy the caviar Mr. Hakim brought from Iran. A mutual appreciation for the roe led to the opening in 2001 of Caviar Court in Dammam, the kingdom’s third-largest city, on the eastern shore along the Gulf.

Caviar Court had its first harvest of ossetra malossol caviar in 2007, but the economic downturn the next year dampened ideas for expansion. But Mr. El Hakim said they were now dusting off those plans. Today, Caviar Court produces about five tons of roe each year and ships to customers primarily in North America and Russia at about $2 a gram, depending on grade.

In Abu Dhabi, the Bin Salem Group, a family-run conglomerate based in the emirate, teamed up with United Food Technologies. The two companies boast that their water-intensive farm is environmentally friendly. Any wastewater that cannot be reused through the filtration system will be turned over to the Abu Dhabi Municipality for use in irrigation throughout the city. After the eggs have been harvested and the fish fillets cut, the rest of the fish — the skin, bones and head — will be ground into compost and used as fertilizer.

Right now, about 8,500 fish flown in from Germany earlier this year swim around in a few tanks at the farm. Royal Caviar expects a delivery of another 47,000 sturgeon this year. The first caviar and sturgeon fillets could appear in local restaurants and stores by next summer.

In the meantime, United Food also gave the Abu Dhabi farm a gift of 120,000 sturgeon eggs — which will eventually be Emirati-born caviar selling for between $4 and $6 a gram.

“We will help more people obtain caviar and make it a part of their special occasion protocol,” said Robert Harper, group commercial director for the Bin Salem Group in Abu Dhabi.

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