



AS THE DAUGHTER OF ONE OF EUROPE'S GREATEST CAVIAR PIONEERS,
NATALIE REBEIZ-NIELSEN WANTS TO MAKE CAVIAR YOUR FAVORITE FOOD –
 EVEN IF IT'S ONLY FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS. CAMILLA ALFTHAN
 VISITED HER SHOP TO GET A TASTE OF THE GOOD LIFE

PICTURES BY EVA EDSJÖ

PROFILE

To Natalie Rebeiz-Nielsen, caviar is a way of life. In 1950 her father founded the Caviar House company after an Iranian owed him some money and paid him in caviar.

"My dad spent a weekend eating it and appreciating it. Then, some time later, when he was stranded at Geneva airport, he decided to open a caviar shop there. At the time there were only liquor and perfumerie shops, and he was one of the first retailers. In 1983 when I opened a shop at Heathrow I was one of the first," recalls Rebeiz-Nielsen who was only 20 at the time.

"The year before, I had just got my certificate as a jeweller, when my father gave me two options: I could make jewelry in Copenhagen and lead a very nice life. Or I could come to London, have a nifty little sportscar and open his first shop at the airport. Today, 23 years later, we have shops all over the world," she says with a smile.

Eight family members work in the company. Her older brother Peter is the firm's overall CEO while her sister Michaela just opened a shop at Copenhagen Airport. As the director of Caviar House in London and in all the airports along with her cousin Suhail, Rebeiz-Nielsen employs 280 people.

WE MEET AT CAVIAR HOUSE on London's Piccadilly, which has notoriously been named as the site of Britain's most expensive meal. Here, the kilo price of the golden Alma caviar – formerly

reserved for Tsars and even the Vatican – reaches 47,000 dollars.

Exquisite silver cans and handmade caviar cutlery catch the eye in the goods display of the art-deco-furnished restaurant, where some young people are having lunch.

Customers include well-to-do celebrities and bankers and, most frequently, regular people who want to indulge themselves. An average client spends 3,000 dollars on caviar, while others spend much more, tells Rebeiz-Nielsen.

"Last summer a woman bought Beluga and Balik caviar worth 121,000 dollars to host a relatively small dinner party. But it's nothing unusual, it happens all the time," shrugs this half-Danish, half-Lebanese brunette and mother of three, while removing her long, furry coat – "fake" as she readily points out.

SHE IS 43 BUT LOOKS HALF HER AGE. Is it because she puts caviar on her face, I wonder, hoping for an extravagant beauty tip? But, no, caviar is for eating. Or tasting.

"I never drink or smoke or eat spicy foods to keep my taste-buds intact. And when I taste many different kinds, I spit it out afterwards. I try anything from sevruga eggs which are small and gray to the beluga, which are huge and round and come from sturgeons that are sometimes over a hundred years old. The eggs from the oscietre," she says, her eyes revealing a deep passion for her trade, "can change their color from white to gold, depending on when the fish is caught."

When Rebeiz-Nielsen a few years ago went fishing with local Iranian fishermen, it was an oscietre that she pulled out from the sea at four o'clock in the morning.

"The bus trip from Teheran was hell and lasted eight hours. I was covered in a blue polyester *abaya* and didn't wear any make-

Here, the kilo price of the golden Alma caviar reaches 47,000 dollars

up. An hour and a half after catching the fish I was having tea and eating its caviar with the fishermen and looking over the Caspian Sea. It was an amazing feeling."

Rebeiz-Nielsen was at the time working on a book and had brought along a photographer.

"In one of the pictures, the fisherman's son had placed himself in the fish's belly, to show how big it was. It looked so macabre that I did not publish it."

After a sturgeon is caught, she explains, it is carefully transported to the lab, where it is killed and its eggs are retrieved and cleansed, then salt from the sea is added. If a caviar is too salty, it is because it's old and people have tried to preserve it.

"The Iranians catch the fish as they have been doing it for centuries. They know which sturgeons to keep and which to let go, »



It's tempting, isn't it?
Natalie Rebeiz-Nielsen
offers Britain's most
expensive meal in her
Caviar House

Don't be fooled by the old-time interiors.
The price for a kilo of Alma caviar is
nothing but up-to-date – 47,000 dollars!





"If you've been fooling around, or if you've been away too long on a business trip, it's better than a perfume bottle"

everyone is expected to give their very best every day. A self-confessed workaholic, Rebeiz-Nielsen passes through her terminals every day to open cupboards and check expiration dates.

"If things are not in order it's a reprimand. If you get three of those, you're out."

When she works from home, after having tucked her youngest children in bed, she's connected to her many shops and restaurants through little surveillance cameras, she says, pointing to a camera in the ceiling.

If her children one day want to join the firm, they have to work for it. "I'm much tougher than my father. I don't think that they should have any particular advantages. They have to work for the position they want," she says. That figures, as the caviar trade is above all hard work and includes catering to the eccentric needs and wishes of the clients.

"When a couple recently hired the entire Picadilly restaurant, we had to wait upstairs until they were done and we could close up the place. They were obviously enjoying themselves."

What else, with treats at tens of thousands of pounds a kilo? ©

CAMILLA ALFTHAN

is a freelance journalist based in Copenhagen. Her most memorable caviar catch came from the glove department of a Russian taxi driver – a very salty and highly unrecommendable fishing procedure. camillaalfthan@business.tele.dk

» and each year put out millions of little fingerlings. The Russians haven't got the same respect for the product," she says.

Two years ago, when the market got rough due to Russian overfishing, Caviar House merged with the French caviar company Prunier which had its own sturgeon production. "We had our own Balik salmon production, so it made perfect sense," tells Rebeiz-Nielsen, who apart from delicacies from the sea also sells truffles, fine wine and *fois gras*.

Most clients, however, stop by for her caviar which also makes a popular gift. "If you've been fooling around, or if you've been away too long on a business trip, it's better than a perfume bottle. And it's a great meal which is easy to prepare. You just open the can and toast some bread."

THE SEAFOOD BARS FOLLOWED when a shabby-looking man fifteen years ago entered the shop in Heathrow and bought a huge can of caviar, which he ate outside with his fingers.

"He bought 1,8 kilo and paid with wads of cash from his money belt. I was thinking, there was something to do. So I opened a seafood bar with 18 seats on the same day that Iraq invaded Kuwait. No one was at the airport and I was thinking that I'd made a big mistake. Ten days later the bar was full and I needed 25 seats. Within a year I needed 60. Now I have seafood bars in four terminals and several contracts in London and Dubai."

The incident also taught her not to judge people on their appearance. "Today you just can't tell any longer who's got the money and who doesn't. An expensive bag or a flashy watch means nothing, so I always tell my staff to treat people the same."

The same egalitarian work ethics apply to the shops where ev-

A Taste of the Caviar Queen

NAME | Natalie Rebeiz-Nielsen

BORN | In Copenhagen, 1962

FAMILY | Her husband Mogens who sells fine wines, and their children Philip, 17, Alex, 13 and Nina, 8

TRAINED | At the royal jeweler Hertz in Copenhagen, and later at a London school to be a chef

PUBLICATIONS | *Caviar – The Definitive Guide* (2001) with her own caviar recipes

MOST EXTRAVAGANT SALE | When a Kuwaiti royal bought her entire stock of olive oil for 69,000 dollars. "I always thought it was funny that I should sell oil to the Arabs"

CAN'T LEAVE DENMARK WITHOUT | Red hot dogs, roasted onions, liver paté and lots of salted licorice

PERSONAL PET | A sturgeon, Oscar, at her Heathrow office which she's had for eight years