

Strange but Savoury! The Little Encyclopaedia of Amazing Luxury Foods from All Over the World

Gracie Maynard Ephraim

THE AMAZING SERIES

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Strange but Savoury! The Little Encyclopaedia of Amazing Luxury Foods from All Over the World

**feat. caviar, foie gras, edible gold flakes, truffles, Kobe beef, pressed duck,
lobster, ortolan bunting, birds' nests, tarantula, escargot pearls, jellyfish,
huitlacoche, balut, ivory egg, marble egg, century egg, surströmming, lutefisk,
witchetty grub**

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INTEGRAL

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World's Most Expensive Dishes—Connoisseurs Know Why!

If—as a classic of *gourmanderie* once said—you do not eat for living but you live for (high class) eating and, of course, if you have at least platinum credit cards, you will understand why these dishes exist and are ordered in some of the fanciest locations around the world. (Ankita Bhowmick collected them for LuxHabitat.ae and my team of editors did a lot of research in order to find more and more juicy details.)

GRAND VELAS TACOS with Kobe beef, rare caviar, truffles, gold flakes and other delicacies—\$25,000

(Maybe) The most expensive dish in the world, this taco features Kobe Beef, Almas Beluga Caviar & Black Truffle Brie Cheese and is served on a gold flake-infused corn tortilla. The taco is also served with an exotic salsa comprised of dried Morita chili peppers, Ley.925 ultra-premium añejo tequila and topped with civet coffee beans. Costing a whopping US\$ 25,000, the dish is available in Mexico at the new Grand Velas Los Cabos Resort's Frida restaurant.

Kobe Beef is Wagyu beef from the Tajima strain of Japanese Black cattle, raised in Japan's Hyōgo Prefecture according to rules set out by the Kobe Beef Marketing and Distribution Promotion Association. The meat is a delicacy, valued for its flavor, tenderness, and fatty, well-marbled texture. Kobe beef can be prepared as steak, *sukiyaki*, *shabu-shabu*, *sashimi* and, of course, *teppanyaki*. Kobe beef is generally considered one of the three top brands (known as Sandai Wagyu, “the three big beefs”), along with Matsusaka beef and Ōmi beef or Yonezawa beef.

Cattle were brought to Japan from China at the same time as the cultivation of rice, in about the second century AD, in the Yayoi period. Until about the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, they were used only as draught animals, in agriculture, forestry, mining and for transport, and as a source of fertiliser. Milk consumption was unknown, and—for cultural and religious reasons—meat was not eaten. So, the Japanese weren't always allowed to enjoy the taste of the special kind of animal. The production and consumption of beef was banned in Japan until 1868 because of the strong Buddhist influence on the culture. After the Meiji restoration with its emphasis on modernization, rules against beef consumption were lifted, but it took decades for the production of beef to gain momentum.

Japan was effectively isolated from the rest of the world from 1635 until 1854; there was no possibility of intromission of foreign genes to the cattle population during this time. Between 1868, the year of the Meiji Restoration, and 1887, some 2,600 foreign cattle were imported, including *Braunvieh*, Shorthorn and Devon. Between about 1900 and 1910 there was extensive cross-breeding of these with native stock. From 1919, the various heterogeneous regional populations that resulted from this brief period of cross-breeding were registered and selected as “Improved Japanese Cattle”. Four separate strains were characterized, based mainly on which type of foreign cattle had most influenced the hybrids, and were recognized as breeds in 1944. These were the four wagyu breeds, the Japanese Black, the Japanese Brown, the Japanese Polled and the Japanese Shorthorn. The Tajima is a strain of the Japanese Black, the most populous breed (around 90% of the four breeds).

Kobe beef was not exported until 2012. It was exported in January 2012 to Macau, then to Hong Kong in July 2012. Since then, exports have also been made to the United States, Singapore, Thailand, the United Kingdom and Canada. In some countries, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, Wagyu cattle imported from Japan are farmed, either purebred or cross-bred with other beef breeds such as Aberdeen Angus.

The flavor of this meat is so rich that the typical serving size is smaller than a regular steak. The fat on the steak itself also dissolves at a lower temperature than typical beef fat. So it literally melts in your

mouth. The purest, “true” Kobe beef comes only from the Hyogo prefecture, the Japanese region where the city of Kobe is located. Miyazaki beef comes from the same breed and is produced in the same way, but comes from the Miyazaki prefecture of Japan. Wagyu cattle produce meat that has a high content of intramuscular fat, giving the meat a marbled appearance. The visibly high fat content can often “freak people out,” according to Kate Mead from Yoshi’s in Oakland. But it is mostly unsaturated fat.

Kobe’s rocky landscape restricted movement among cattle and provided isolation from random breeding. Once the initial breeding took place, further crossbreeding was nearly impossible, eventually generating a unique kind of meat. Introduced as work animals in the rice cultivation industry during the 2nd Century, Tajima-gyu became isolated from other breeds, hiding away in Japan’s mountainous landscape in small pockets of cultivable land. This isolation is said to be responsible for a completely unique taste and texture; one that depicts Kobe beef as the ultimate meat when it comes to flavour, tenderness, and high amounts of intramuscular fat.

Kobe and Miyazaki beef producers are secretive about their methods. But many ranchers in Japan feed beer to their livestock to induce appetite. They also massage cattle daily, sometimes with sake. According to Yo Matsuzaki, Ozumo Japanese style restaurant in Oakland executive chef, some Wagyu cattle listen to classical music, a method used to relax them.

“They are treated as kings”, Matsuzaki said with a smile. Some have argued that limiting a cow’s movements and feeding it beer is far from the royal treatment, especially for an animal that likes to roam and prefers grass to beer. As for the massages, some say it is to relieve stress and relax the cow in order to maximize the marbling of the beef. It may also serve as a proxy for exercise, since Japan’s cramped quarters make it hard to allow cows to move about freely.

The legend surrounding Kobe beef has long been a source of fascination. Folklore tells of cows enjoying classical music, massages with sake and diets based on beer. Some legends are merely stories that have taken a life of their own, but these three examples are actually based on some truth.

It’s said that Tajima-gyu cattle benefit greatly from classical music, with it being common practice to have classical music played during feeding times. The music is played to the cows as a relaxation technique, and aims to connect eating with positive emotion, therefore increasing appetite.

Massages are common practice for these very special cows, largely because of limited space. When cattle are tied to one place for months, with little opportunity for exercise, massage is said to make the animal more comfortable and able to relieve stress due to stiffness resulting from inactivity. The sake is used to increase the softness of the skin and shine of the hair, which the Japanese believe is of economic importance and related to meat quality.

Beer is fed to cattle during the summer months, when the interaction of fat cover, temperature and humidity depresses food intake. Used as part of an overall management program, beer is said to stimulate appetite, encouraging cattle to eat when they normally wouldn’t. Basically, the beef may eat hay, corn and tofu leftovers.

This imagery, which depicts the cows living as kings in the Kobe region, adds to the decadence of a Kobe beef meal, and plays a part in its high cost. But not all Kobe beef is authentic. To be authentic, Kobe beef must: be of pure Tajima-gyu lineage, have been born and raised in Hyogo Prefecture, be a steer (castrated bull) or virgin cow, be fed with only grains and grasses that come from within the Prefecture Hyogo, be processed in approved slaughterhouses within the Prefecture, have a fat marbling ratio (BMS) of level 6 or above, have a Meat Quality Score of A4 or A5 (top-grade), have a

gross carcass weight of less than 470kg and have its own assigned 10 digit ID number for its authenticity to be traced.

Many restaurants use the term Wagyu as being synonymous with Kobe beef. Sure it's connected, but it doesn't mean the same. Wagyu simply means "Japanese cattle" and despite what some restaurants may claim on their menus, it's not a breed itself. Instead, it's classified into four breeds: Japanese black, Japanese brown, Japanese poll and Japanese shorthorn. Tajima-gyu cows, from which Kobe beef comes, specifically belong to the Japanese black breed. While all Wagyu beef is considered high quality, only meat of the Tajima-gyu cow that fulfills the strict lineage and quality criteria can be called Kobe beef.

Kobe beef is prized for its flavour, marbling, and texture. It's buttery, smooth, melt-in-your-mouth texture and qualities make it different to any other meat on Earth, and so rich it is that around a 100g portion would be plenty. If you're lucky enough to try authentic Kobe beef, you're one of very few. Kobe beef makes up just 0.06% of all the beef consumed in Japan, and considering very little leaves the country, you can be assured that any overseas restaurant serving Kobe beef is pretty exclusive.

Another special ingredient of the Grand Velas taco, Almas Beluga Caviar has a fabulous story, too. Beluga caviar is caviar consisting of the roe (or eggs) of the beluga sturgeon *Huso huso*. The fish is found primarily in the Caspian Sea, the world's largest salt-water lake, which is bordered by Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan. It can also be found in the Black Sea basin and occasionally in the Adriatic Sea. Beluga caviar is the most expensive type of caviar, with market prices ranging from \$7,000 to \$10,000/kg (\$3,200 to \$4,500/lb).

The beluga sturgeon is currently considered to be critically endangered, causing the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to ban in 2005 the importation of beluga caviar which originated in the Caspian Sea and Black Sea basin. In 2006, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) suspended all trade made with the traditional caviar-producing regions of the Caspian and Black Seas (Beluga, Ossetra and Sevruga—Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Romania, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro, Turkmenistan and Ukraine) due to the producing countries' failure to apply international regulations and recommendations. Caviar from Iran is exempted from the ban. Iran is considered by CITES to practice effective conservation and policing of its fisheries. In January 2007, this ban was partly lifted, allowing the sale of 96 tons of caviar, 15 percent below the official 2005 level. CITES maintained the 2007 quotas for 2008, drawing criticism for doing little to protect the declining sturgeon population.

The beluga sturgeon can take up to 20 years to reach maturity. The fish harvested for caviar are often nearly 900 kg (2,000 lb). The eggs themselves are the largest of the commonly used roes, and range in color from dark gray (almost black) to light gray, with the lighter colors coming from older fish, and being the most valued.

The most expensive caviar is beluga-albino caviar often called "Almas". Almas is produced from the eggs of a rare albino sturgeon between 60 and 100 years old, which swims in the southern Caspian Sea where apparently less pollution exists. Very few of the albino variety are left in the wild since the lack of melanin is a genetic disorder that only affects a few members of the species. A kilogram (2 lb 3 oz) of this almost white "black gold" is regularly sold for £20,000 (then \$34,500). Any additions by producers diminish the value of the roe, and the caviar usually reaches the market without any additions or processing whatsoever.

As with most caviars, beluga is usually handled with a caviar spoon made of mother of pearl, bone, or other nonmetallic material, as metal utensils tend to impart an unwelcome metallic taste to the

delicate roe. Beluga caviar is usually served by itself on toast, unlike other less expensive caviars that can be served in a variety of ways, including hollowed and cooked new potatoes, on a blini, or garnished with sour cream, *crème fraîche*, minced onion, or minced hard boiled egg whites. These items can, however, be served with beluga as palate cleansers.

Caviar creates chemistry; it transforms conversations and eludes success. It indicates mystique here, good taste there and elegance everywhere. It astounds some, bemuses others and consistently forges a long-lasting impact. It is Caviar! Rarely a commodity has climbed the summit of the luxury pyramid without promotion, a marketing stunt or a business-plan forecasting its outcome. Finest Caviar, a dinner tables talisman. The Shah of Persia and Tsars of Russia all enjoyed the King of foods for years and this became a symbol and credential of affluence. Finest Caviar, the ultimate demonstration of worldly achievement and suave attitude to life was a high-ranking consumer product for the ecstatic few. The moment Caviar appears and served at large functions, there is a major transformation in the atmosphere, the guest often all of a sudden become different, jovial, more affable and so much more fun. The mood of the room will be that of a party, and all troubles seem trivial, affirming the host's decision to Buy Caviar. Caviar has a tendency to bring out the best in peoples attitude, it leaves few indifferent, with a mere mention of "Beluga Caviar", "Imperial Oscietra" or even "Sevruga Caviar" evokes luxury, royalty and prominence. Cold poached scallop served with fresh green fava bean puree topping with Almas Caviar may be another elite culinary idea.

Black Truffle Brie—also used for the creation of the luxurious taco—is a premium special French specialty considered to be "Cheese Heaven". A buttery wheel of Brie de Meaux is carefully deconstructed and stuffed with a thick layer of creamy, black truffle-studded mascarpone to create a delectable, three-layer sandwich of rich, silky cheese. Bursting with truffle flavor in every mouthful, this gooey delight has hints of olive oil and mushroom, and its fudgy, speckled center is as good-looking as it is delicious.

French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin called truffles "the diamond of the kitchen". The black truffle or black Périgord truffle (*Tuber melanosporum* is named after the Périgord region in France. Black truffles associate with oaks, hazelnut, cherry, and other deciduous trees and are harvested in late autumn and winter.

Because truffles are subterranean, they are often located with the help of an animal possessing a refined sense of smell. Traditionally, pigs have been utilized for the extraction of truffles. Both the female pig's natural truffle-seeking, as well as her usual intent to eat the truffle, are due to a compound within the truffle similar to androstenol, the sex pheromone of boar saliva, to which the sow is keenly attracted. Studies in 1990 demonstrated that the compound actively recognized by both truffle pigs and dogs is dimethyl sulfide.

In Italy, the use of the pig to hunt truffles has been prohibited since 1985 because of damage caused by animals to truffle mycelia during the digging that dropped the production rate of the area for some years. An alternative to truffle pigs are dogs. Dogs pose an advantage in that they do not have a strong desire to eat truffles and can therefore be trained to locate sporocarps without digging them up. Pigs will attempt to dig up truffles.

Because of their high price and their pungent aroma, truffles are used sparingly. Supplies can be found commercially as unadulterated fresh produce or preserved, typically in a light brine. As the volatile aromas dissipate quicker when heated, truffles are generally served raw and shaved over warm, simple foods where their flavor will be highlighted, such as buttered pasta or eggs. Thin truffle slices may be inserted into meats, under the skins of roasted fowl, in *foie gras* preparations, in *pâtés*, or in stuffings. Some specialty cheeses contain truffles as well. Truffles are also used for producing truffle salt and