

### *In a Class by Itself: the Sturgeon*

To be exact, I should have headed this: 'In a Sub-class by Itself'. We have just been surveying the non-bony fish. Previously we had looked at the more numerous bony fish. Now we come to the sturgeon, of which the skeleton is only bony in part, and which some authorities have therefore placed in a special sub-class of bony fish. One might call it a semi-bony fish.

The sturgeon which swim around today are remarkably similar to the sturgeon of 100 million years ago, as we can tell from the fossilized remains of the latter. Their backbone is cartilaginous; but they have five rows of bony scutes along their bodies and the head is covered with hard bony plates. This same head has a snout, underneath which sprout four barbels. By burrowing with the snout and feeling with the barbels the sturgeon can find its food on the sea or river bottom.

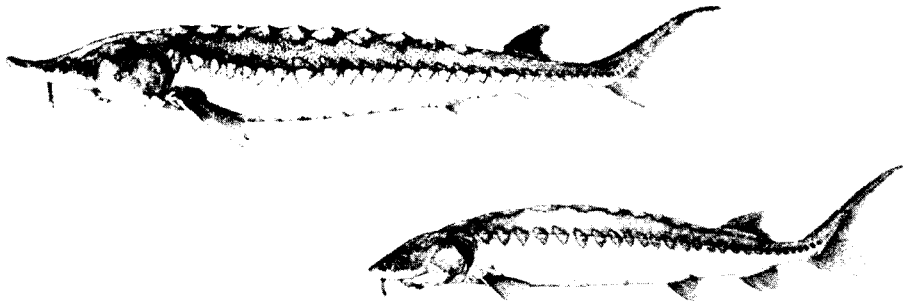
In previous centuries this valuable fish was fairly common in European waters. Quite large numbers were taken, especially when they entered rivers to spawn. Now, however, there are few. The only surviving eastern Atlantic populations are based on the rivers Gironde in France and Guadalquivir in Spain and at Lake Ladoga in the Soviet Union. The sturgeon fishery in the Gironde estuary is of some importance. Since Monsieur Prunier (of the famous Paris restaurant) took a holiday there after the First World War, perceived the neglected opportunity and dispatched a knowledgeable Russian émigré to the region, caviar has been produced there. French regulations about adding preservatives differ from Russian and Iranian ones and this French caviar is therefore sold after only a light salting. It is best eaten fresh in the region (during June and July at Talmont and Saint-Neurin), but it does travel under refrigeration and accounts for over a quarter of the twenty-five tons of caviar consumed annually in France.

The scarcity of the sturgeon on the European side of the Atlantic makes eating it a rare treat. However, the position on the American side is rather more favourable. It gave me quite a start when visiting the fish market at Washington D.C. in 1975 (a picturesque floating market, mounted on decommissioned fishing boats in the Potomac, the purpose being partly no doubt aesthetic but also to remove the fishmongers from the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia authorities) and beheld three sturgeon lying side by side, for sale at a most reasonable price. They were less than a metre long and were said to have been taken on the southern shore of Chesapeake Bay, in Maryland.

The sturgeon fishery in the United States was formerly an important one, producing caviar as well as sturgeon meat. ('Meat' seems a particularly appropriate term for pink flesh which resembles veal in taste and which was once known as 'Albany beef' in New York State, a name derived, according to De

Voe, who took a particular interest in this piece of nomenclature as he was himself a butcher, 'from its great plentifulness, cheapness and peculiar colour of the flesh'.) *A Report on the Sturgeon Fishery of Delaware River and Bay* by John N. Cobb (1899) recalls that: 'The earliest settlers to this country were especially struck at the immense numbers of sturgeon seen in the Delaware, and their letters to the home folk in England and Germany contain frequent references testifying to their wonderment.' William Penn himself made a special note of the fish; and there were times when a man could speak of having seen several thousand of them together. By the end of the nineteenth century the catch had declined, but the fishery itself was still quite elaborate. Legislation had been passed to prevent other fishermen catching or harming young sturgeon (known as mammoses). Over 1000 men were engaged in the sturgeon fishery in Delaware and Pennsylvania. Fishing was done by gill net; and the catch was classified as 'cows' (females with hard roe), 'runners' (females with soft spawn running out of them), 'slunkers' (females which had already spawned) and 'bucks' (males). The last three categories were valued only for the meat. The caviar from the 'cows' amounted to a quarter of a million pounds or more, by weight, in a season and was mostly shipped to Germany.

The catalogue entry which follows is devoted to the European Sturgeon, *Acipenser sturio*. The American Atlantic species is a different one, *Acipenser oxyrinchus* Mitchill. I show a drawing of it below, together with the smaller SHORTNOSE STURGEON, *Acipenser brevirostrum* Lesueur, which is found in limited numbers in northern waters; for example in New Brunswick in Canada. There seems to be no organized fishery for the shortnose sturgeon, but I know one marine biologist at St Andrews, N.B., who manages to keep himself and his friends supplied with caviar from this source .



## STURGEON

Family *Acipenseridae**Acipenser sturio* Linnaeus

REMARKS Maximum length over 3 metres. I have already given some description of this antique creature on the preceding pages. Here I point out that the German name Stör is the root of many other names, including the English and French ones; and that it is probably derived from the verb störer, to root about, which is what the sturgeon does when seeking food.

*Portuguese:* Esturjão  
*Spanish:* Esturión  
*French:* Esturgeon  
*Dutch:* Steur  
*German:* Stör  
*Polish:* Jesiotr  
*Russian:* Osëtr Baltiiskii  
*Finnish:* Sampi  
*Swedish:* Stör  
*Norwegian:* Stør  
*Danish:* Stør  
*Other:* Créat (Gironde)

CUISINE It is commonly said that the flesh of the sturgeon is like veal and that it may be accommodated in similar ways, e.g. by roasting it. This is so. (cf. my *Mediterranean Seafood*.) Here I offer the two recipes listed below and this admirably succinct one from Piscator, writing in the mid nineteenth century, when sturgeon was fairly common in England. 'Sturgeon should be cut up in slices of about an inch, or a little more, in thickness, which, being half-fried, should be placed in a stewpan with some good veal broth, an onion, and a bundle of sweet herbs, and be allowed to stew until it becomes perfectly tender. Having then fried an onion or two in the butter in which the fish was previously fried, pour this, and also the gravy in which the fish was stewed, into a saucepan, adding to it a glass or two of wine, some butter rolled in flour . . . and a spoonful of ketchup . . . As soon as the whole has boiled up well together, strain it through a sieve . . . and pour it over the fish. Garnish with sliced lemon.'

I also recommend smoked sturgeon, if you can get it.

## RECIPES

Créat mariné, 290

Fried Baltic sturgeon with compote, 355