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Street Urchins: Chefs Find Inspiration In Spiny Creatures



By Sylvie Bigar

"Mom, there's a hedgehog in the fridge!" cries the child after peeking over the bowl that holds two plump sea urchins from Maine. If the exterior of the animal is made of pointy movable spines, the inside holds a sensual orange mousse, the "roe" – a word that describes the eggs of other fish but that in the sea urchin is the highly edible reproductive organs. Close cousins of the sea cucumber and the starfish, sea urchins can be found on the ocean floor all over the world but are considered a delicacy in countries such as France, Italy, Chile and Japan. This week, at the height of the sea urchin season, we visited a few top chefs in the city to scope out their favorite recipes.

A trip to the ocean masters starts at Le Bernardin with chef-owner Eric Ripert, just back from the South Beach Wine and Food Festival, where he and partner Maguy Le Coze were honored by their peers. "Live urchins are the best," said Ripert. "We serve them to the passionate, adventurous eaters." As of March 1, he is offering sea urchin ravioli with caviar sauce and sea urchin emulsion at a whopping \$95, in addition to the \$107 dinner prix-fixe. Why the high price tag? The caviar is pure ossetra from Iran. In "Le Bernardin Cookbook" (Broadway Books), the chef proposes baked sea urchins, mixing sea urchin butter with fish essence, cayenne and a touch of cream.

"We get uni (or sea urchin) every other day from Hokkaido Island in northern Japan," said chef Masayoshi Takayama from his four-star restaurant Masa in the Time Warner Center on Columbus Circle. As part of his "omakase," or chef's menu, he makes a luxurious uni risotto sprinkled with slices of black truffle – a luscious marriage of water and earth. It is also available a la carte at his more casual eatery Bar Masa. "Most patrons have not had uni before and they love it," he said. Feeling even more daring? He has devised an extraordinary roll filled with avocado and scallop tartare and capped by a raw sweet shrimp and a dab of uni.

At Aquagrill on Spring Street, chef-owner Jeremy Marshall, who buys them live from Maine, keeps sea urchins on the menu throughout the season. "I serve them back in the shell with shaved shallots and ajipon, a citrus soy sauce," said Chef Marshall, "but because their size varies, I often need three or four to fill one dish." The taste for these ubiquitous shellfish has grown over the years and he often sees patrons request four orders at a time. Aquagrill sells about 40 to 50 pounds of sea urchins per week.

"When they're good, they're really good," said Steve Schafer, fishmonger at the fine fish store Wild Edibles in Grand Central Market. "I carry them every day they're available between November and March," he said. In the past, urchins could be found close to the beaches and amongst the tidal pools, but fishermen now need to dig in deeper waters. Schafer sells about 1,500 pounds per season. "When I get shad roe in, I e-mail my special foodies list to tell them it's in. For sea urchins, I don't even need to do that," he said, "if it's there, it sells."

A visit to Aquavit on East 55th Street yields a sophisticated take. Placed strategically on top of a flat black circle made of charred leeks, the sea urchin roe crowns the dish. Under the circle a slice of yellowtail floats on Japanese mustard vinaigrette with a dab of lime foam. Executive Chef Johan Svensson said, "We get our urchins from the West Coast and they come on small trays. I personally like to use them as a garnish rather than as a solid dish." To complete the plate, try pickled duck tongue.

No article on sea urchin could be complete without a mention of one of the sexiest dishes in New York. Tucked inside the Four Seasons Hotel, L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon serves its urchin in a glass egg meshed with gold sprinkles, hidden under a wave of lobster gelée and covered with a layer of sweet cauliflower cream. Both tastes mix in the mouth. Gregory Pugin, executive sous-chef, said, "We get them directly from Japan every other day and were surprised by the number of orders we had. It's one of our best sellers."