

Caviar Of The East

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Edible bird's nest '*yan wo*' has been referred to as the 'Caviar of the East'. Like caviar, the salt-cured eggs of sturgeons, the edible bird's nest is expensive and prized as a delicacy, but more than caviar, it is also highly regarded as a health food. Premium nests come from Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. The edible bird's nests are essentially constructed from the salivary secretion of swiftlets, small birds that usually dwell in caves.

Nests are collected after they have been abandoned and are cleaned to remove feathers, twigs and other impurities. They are then dried before sales or processing. A kilogram of edible bird's nest can cost up to USD2,500. The health values of the bird's nest have been espoused in Traditional Chinese Medicine for a long time and concoctions are classified as tonics that improve appetite and digestion, promote recovery of chronic illnesses, provide relief to dry coughs, respiratory ailments, and fatigue, maintain youthfulness, and enhance the complexion. As such one can easily find many products containing an extract of edible bird's nest that double up as health products and a culinary ingredient. The nest is rich in glycoproteins, epidermal growth factors which are responsible for skin and tissue repair, sialic acid, amino acids such as glutamic acid, and minerals (high contents of sodium and calcium). The Chinese prepare edible bird's nests in many ways: savoury soups with chicken, desserts with rock sugar either with or without fruits such as mango, congee with bird's nest, soups infused with herbs and now, even coffee.

