

# From a spoonful of seaweed caviar to a designer pineapple leather bag: is fake the new luxury?



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**More and more luxury brands are embracing innovative materials, such as animal-friendly faux fur and vegan leather. Will those "new" products ever have the same exclusive look as what they hope to replace?**

Would you like to be proposed to with a diamond that is manufactured in a factory in Lommel? Do you ever close your eyes in delight when tasting a spoonful of seaweed caviar? Are you willing to pay a few months' wages for a pineapple leather designer handbag? And does the faux fur collar touch you in the same sensory way as the soft, animalistic version? Our interpretation of what is luxurious is no longer based solely on concepts such as exclusivity, scarcity, opulence and aesthetics. Sustainability, that other value, is also playing an increasingly prominent role. Big names in fashion, the jewelery industry and gastronomy are therefore more and more willing to apply innovative techniques, resulting in an unprecedented evolution in materials and raw materials.

The only question is whether those 'new' products will ever have the same exclusive look as what they hope to replace. To conclude the questionnaire: will your taste buds ever be able to forget how creamy real foie gras was and settle for a vegetable version based on coconut fat?

## 1 | faux grass

Within Europe, Belgium, together with France, Hungary, Bulgaria and Spain, is one of the few countries where foie gras is still produced. But the end is near: at the end of 2023, force-feeding of animals will also be definitively prohibited here, and foie-gras production in Flanders will be completely stopped.

A decision welcomed by all who care about animal welfare. But what are the chances that ardent foie gras aficionados will switch to an animal-free alternative like Gaia's "faux gras"? It is an innovative product, but it cannot quite match the mouthfeel and rich taste of animal foie gras.

Star chef Gert De Mangeleer (Hertog Jan): 'I have indeed always liked to serve foie gras, made from authentic Bekegem duck liver, which I think is the best on the market. But they stopped production and I didn't want to use any other foie. At the same time, I am also not the person to kick others in the shins. If it is no longer responsible to use foie gras in the kitchen, I would rather omit it altogether. I swear by the real deal and don't need an alternative.'

In the Netherlands there is an interesting company that has developed an alternative method. At Foie Royale, the geese grow up quietly in German farms. When slaughtered, they have a small, perfectly normal liver. Only after their death is the liver injected with goose fat, under extremely high pressure. This results in a 'foie gras' that is indistinguishable even on a molecular level from traditionally cultivated foie. Not a vegan version, but a full-fledged compromise.



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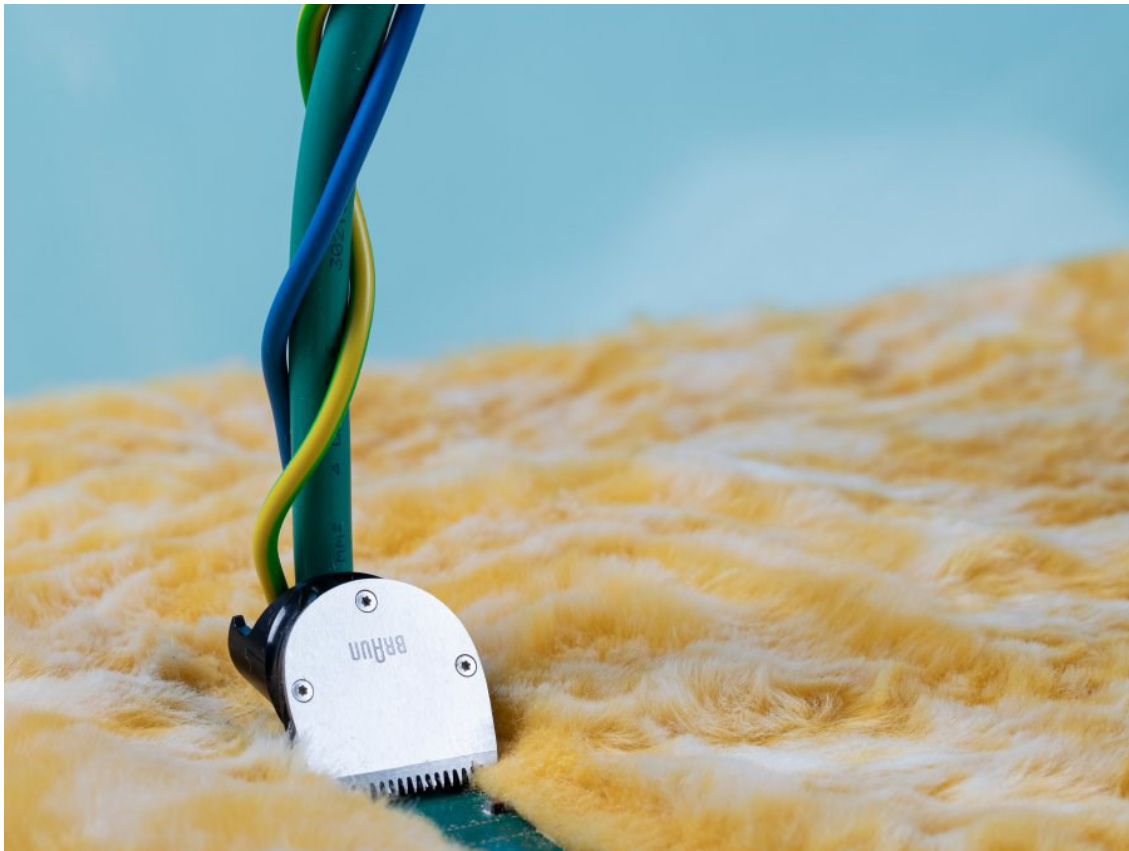
## 2 | Variegated

Thrift shops are full of fur coats with nostalgic labels from the 1960s. But these flamboyant garments, for a long time the symbol of prestige and luxury, hardly sell even for less than fifty euros. The once iconic fur empire of Pelsland went down ingloriously in 2016. The Dutch Susan Sjouwerman (from Instagram account @modeconomie), who writes about the economy and sustainable fashion for the *Financieel Dagblad*, *Vogue* and *Elle*, sees a logical reason why people no longer want to wear fur today. 'The big problem with fur is very tangible, because you literally see the animal suffering when you wear it. That is why there are many alternatives to fur today: the so-called faux furs. Unfortunately, these are usually synthetic materials that you don't associate with luxury. The quality is often inferior and they wear out quickly.'

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Yet in 2022, the major luxury brands are clearly moving away from animal fur. Luxury group Kering announced that from this fall no fur will be used in any collection for all its brands, including Gucci, Bottega Veneta and Saint Laurent. The search for full-fledged alternatives is therefore in full development, to offer us more beautiful animal-free furs. Some companies are working on exciting techniques, such as 'lab-grown' cultured fur, which can be compared to cultured meat that they make into hamburgers. This spring, LVMH announced that it is starting a two-year research project with Fendi – the Italian luxury brand par excellence that once made fur its signature – together with Imperial College London and the fashion academy Central Saint Martins. The aim is to develop new biomaterials for the fashion industry. "Learning from the biological world is essential to preserve and regenerate the environment," LVMH said. The focus will be on growing fur fibers based on keratin, the protein that is an important building block for hair and nails.

Another extra advantage: yeasts from the wine industry are used to cultivate the keratin, which means a circular production process. The resulting fibers can be 'spun' into fine hair, down and fur. The technology is still in its infancy, but at LVMH they are hopeful that in the future they will be able to work with real fur, not from animals, but made in a lab instead of synthetic fur.



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### 3 | Ersatz caviar

Let's not hide the reality: caviar is another luxury product for which animals have to die. Catching wild sturgeon, trading and even owning wild caviar has been banned since 2010. Anyone who now tastes a spoonful of caviar is therefore dealing with cultured caviar.

Belgian caviar has been produced in Turnhout since 2002. That Royal Belgian Caviar is the favorite of star chefs such as Peter Goossens (Hof van Cleve). At Zilte, Viki Geunes serves custom-ripened fish eggs from the competing company Imperial Heritage Caviar, owned by the Belgian Colman family. If you take a look at the menus of respected restaurants, you will immediately see that caviar is far from being written off. The delicacy is served heaped spoonfuls at a time.

However, a counter-movement has also emerged. Even at the better fish shops you can find alternative jars of 'animal-friendly' fake caviar, with brand names such as Cavi-Art, Tzar Caviar or Cavinoir. These fake eggs are ingeniously made from vegetable ingredients such as seaweed or molecules from other fish, such as mackerel or salmon.



Those products may look like caviar, but they can't match the subtle, layered flavor of the original. Chefs prefer to look for tastier alternatives. Like Nicolas Decloedt, chef of Humus x Hortense (Brussels) and pioneer in vegan gastronomy. "I am not in favor of counterfeiting. Not for meat, fish or fish eggs. 'Fake' has a negative connotation and we prefer to tell a positive story. I don't think caviar can be

Decloedt uses the famous 'texturas' that were put on the map in 1997 by top chef Ferran Adrià: vegetable gelling agents with which soft, gelatinous eggs can be formed from just about any liquid. 'We recently made beetroot caviar. We started with a tasty beetroot jus mixed with agaragar. If you drop them drop by drop into ice-cold oil, they immediately solidify and take on the shape and texture of caviar. You can do this with any liquid.'

For those who want it a little less complex, there is another plant-based alternative from Japan: tonburi or so-called country caviar. Those are seeds of the houkigi or summer cypress. They also look like little eggs and taste like a cross between artichoke and broccoli.



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## 4 | Lab diamonds

No luxury product is surrounded with so much romance as diamonds. Naturally mined quality diamonds are rare, the processing process is cumbersome and not without controversy. And what do we do if the stones ever run out? Diamonds produced in a laboratory nowadays offer an answer that is ecologically responsible, transparent, sustainable, faster and cheaper. In Lommel, work is currently being done on a real 'Diamond Valley': the Indian company Heyaru is specializing in the production of diamonds. The Antwerp jewelry brand Idyl is conquering the world with lab-grown diamonds and has celebrities like Jessica Alba among its fans.

More and more brands use these gemstones, which you cannot distinguish with the naked eye from diamonds that come from nature. There is no difference at all on a molecular level. Only an analysis in the lab can determine whether a diamond comes from the ground or from the lab. At Labgems, a diamond company in Antwerp, they currently sell both types of stones: natural and lab-grown. Sales representative Gerard Vandereyt confirms that demand is increasing. 'The price is a lot lower, while the quality is the same.'

Still, the diamond world is wary, fearing that these types of lab diamonds would be sold as natural diamonds. They emphasize that you may not see a difference between these stones, but that does not mean that they are worth the same. 'Only real diamonds retain their value,' says Vandereyt. No other object sharpens the discussion about what luxury is like diamonds. The value comes from scarcity, says Steven Boelens, co-founder of the Belgian diamond and jewelry company Baunat. "People who buy real diamonds have long stopped doing so because of the brilliance. The essential reason to buy real diamond is the value. An average natural diamond is three million years old and scarce. A diamond created in the lab is three months old and you can produce as many as you want. So it's not about the aesthetics – both objects are beautiful – but about the intrinsic value. For example, an authentic painting by Picasso is worth millions of euros, and a perfect replica is only a few thousand.'



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## 5 | Vegan leather

Quality leather has long been seen as a durable material, because it is almost indestructible. With the exception of exotic leathers from animals that are used purely for their skin, such as snakes or crocodiles, the vast majority of classic cowhide leather is a by-product of the food industry. You could take comfort in that if you prefer a leather perfecta that gets a nice patina over the years: as long as meat is consumed, we will have animal skins, so it wouldn't be a shame not to use that 'waste'? A leather sofa, bag or jacket was always seen as a quality item, a version in 'skai' or plastic fake leather anything but. That image is now being drastically adjusted and in recent years the animal-free leather alternatives have been innumerable:

A pioneer in this field is the British Stella McCartney, the animal activist who has not used any animal products for her collections since the beginning of her career. Her company has been investing in material innovation for years, and this summer Stella McCartney launched the first designer bag made from mylo, a new material based on fungi. Called 'mushroom leather' for the sake of simplicity, because the basis of the promising material is mycelium, the underground network of threads from which mushrooms grow. Even Hermès, the ultimate luxury leather goods brand, is exploring mushroom leather as an alternative. Together with the American company MycoWorks, they worked for three years on an animal-free material, which was used for the first time in a new version of the 'Victoria' travel bag. The prospect of completely vegan Hermès bags is still very far away, but the symbolic importance of such experiments is great. While 'fake leather' was once seen as an inferior plastic fabric, 'vegan leather' has been given a luxury stamp.



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