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The catch is that in any one part of the U.S., only a fraction of this new, improved food can be found in local shops. Take cheese, for instance. Few cities have shops devoted entirely to cheese, and even these offer a limited range of artisanal (more or less handmade) American cheeses. The only way to get hold of these milky treasures is to order them either from the cheesemakers themselves or from large distributors set up for mail order. The same goes for other foods available only at a distance. Postage—quick delivery by FedEx, UPS, or DHL—can nearly double the price. And the food itself will cost at least double the price of the products of industrial farming. So, those of us who chase after the best and the newest end up paying four or more times the price of supermarket food.

And so it better be terrific, whether you send it as a holiday gift or as a present to yourself, either to be eaten in secret, after midnight, by the light of the refrigerator, or to be served to the other members of your household and to good friends, but only those who can taste the difference. And it better arrive in one piece.

**i**n the early days of mail-order food, you could order live Maine lobsters, plus all the fixin's, packed in a black enameled lobster pot, and they would arrive four days later, dead and rotting. I once ordered several large bags of flour, and they split open in the UPS truck, and all the other packages were covered in flour, and the UPS man, whose brown outfit was now several shades lighter, blamed it on me. People used to ship costly foods in Styrofoam coolers that would often break open on the way to my doorstep. Since then, packaging has improved, but it's still far from perfect.

Which is why we conducted our crucial experiments with eggs. My assistant, Marisa, went out and bought a great quantity of cardboard boxes, a huge bag of biodegradable packing peanuts, two dozen organically raised eggs, and a package of small Ziploc bags. We sealed each egg in its own bag, nestled two of them among the peanuts in each of nine boxes, and sent them off to Marisa's father in San Diego and her sister in Los Angeles. (Why insist on organic eggs that we will never eat? For the same reason that we should always buy organic food—not because it tastes better, which it often doesn't, or because it is less likely to poison us, which is questionable, but because of our obligation not to poison the Earth with pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, or anything else. This should be ethically self-evident.)

First we sent three pairs of eggs to Marisa's father, Mike, by the quickest overnight service offered by each of the three carriers, but we purposely packed the eggs in an inadequate volume of biodegradable peanuts. One FedEx egg arrived intact; the other had disintegrated into a crunchy liquid within its bag. The UPS box looked more abused, but the eggs within it had suffered no worse fate. One DHL egg also broke, leaking badly from its bag and through the cardboard, and DHL had to be cajoled into delivering it at all. The results were pretty much the same for the three pairs of eggs we sent to Marisa's sister, Katie, at her office in Los Angeles by the slowest three-day air service offered by each carrier.

What a mess. I began to fear that the most delicate of our delicacies wouldn't travel well at all. And without travel, we would be cut off from most of the unique treasures available today. So we performed another trial, packing the eggs extremely firmly in an excess of peanuts, and sent them off to Katie, who seemed reluctant to repeat the embarrassment of unpacking broken eggs in front of her fellow workers. Lucky for us, the three new packages had already been dispatched. I'll tell you how it all turned out at the end of our shopping list.

### PURE PROTEIN

This has been the Year of the Flesh. (The Chinese think it is the Year of the Dog, but they consume a more varied diet than we do.) There is incredible variety of remarkable meat wherever you turn. Where should we start?

Fra' Mani: One of the glories of Italian cuisine is salumi (charcuterie in French, cold cuts in English)—delicious, spicy, deeply flavored, maroon salami, coppa, soppressata, mortadella, salameetti, and fresh sausages—all made with pork. Few of these can legally be imported, and most domestic versions are disappointing (with the occasional exceptions created by restaurants only for their customers). But now the salumi landscape has been transformed.

Paul Bertolli, the founder, curemaster, and chief partner of Fra' Mani, in Berkeley, California, was Alice Waters's chef for a decade at Chez Panisse (and among her finest in 35 years), then turned Olive-to in nearby Oakland into one of the great Italian restaurants in this country—where he made terrific salumi, better than much of the salumi you can find in Italy. Now Paul's doing it full-time, and the results are not only superb—strongly yet subtly flavored—but relatively inexpensive, and all are handmade from naturally raised pork. At framani.com you'll

find five types of salami and two of fresh sausages. They are all around \$23 a pound, including shipping (which could otherwise add 50 percent to your bill). The most impressive gifts are the eight-pound salami toscano and the nine-pound soppressata, each one plump, rotund, and two feet long.

La Quercia: The best prosciutto you can find in this country, imported or domestic, is made in . . . Iowa! (Prosciutto, you'll remember, is the sublime, salt-cured, aged, and generally unsmoked Italian ham. Parma and San Daniele hams are the most famous.) Herb Eckhouse spent five years figuring out what the best Italian producers do and adopting their methods to create Prosciutto Americano, with all the complexity and depth of taste of the best Italian originals, which Herb and his wife, Kathy, have been making and selling for about a year now under the name La Quercia (*KWAIR-cha*, Italian for "oak"). More recently they have been devising an unusually wide range of related products. While all La Quercia products are handmade from pigs raised by natural and humane methods, its Green Label is completely organic and uses pigs from the Organic Valley cooperative—it is the first and only organic prosciutto available in the U.S. Only the Berkshire heritage breed is chosen for La Quercia's dry-cured culatello, which consists of the prized rear muscles of the ham.

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Although La Quercia offers presliced prosciutto, I vastly prefer buying entire uncut hams, which are moister and full of flavor. La Quercia's are much smaller than average because many undesirable parts have been cut away. Go to [laquercia.us](http://laquercia.us), and you'll pay \$16.95 a pound for the six- to eight-pound prosciutto and \$23.95 a pound for both the six- to eight-pound culaccia (the cured culatello muscles) and the four- to seven-pound Green Label. Possessing an absolutely first-class ham to slice for the entire holiday season is a great but well-deserved luxury and not unspeakably expensive.

But here's the thing: Prosciutto is best served sliced very thin; it is concentrated and dense, and thick slices can be difficult to chew. My relatively inexpensive Waring Pro electric slicer works well for prosciutto (and speeds up the slicing of salamis and bread). I've heard the same of the Chef's Choice slicer, but the company sells such a bewildering variety, I can't recommend any one of them.

Wagyu: This is the generic name for the prized Japanese black cattle. At its best, it is the richest, tenderest, and most succulent beef in the world, and the most expensive. It is at its best in Japan, where its name indicates the place it's raised or processed, as in Kobe or Matsuzaka beef. When raised in America, it should be called American wagyu, not Kobe beef, both because it's not from Kobe and, in any event, because in most cases the pure Japanese genetics have been diluted with Aberdeen Angus in order to obtain a hardier and more productive breed of cattle—faster growing and more profitable but, as a side effect, less succulent and flavorful. A scientifically rigorous tasting would require thousands of dollars' worth of beef and an eager stomach, only one of which I possess at present.

After an absence of several years, real Japanese wagyu is again being imported into the U.S. As far as I can tell, it is not sold to retail customers, and restaurants charge a fortune for it. American wagyu is raised in Idaho, Oregon, and Texas, and it can be extremely good, costing between twice and four times the price of the finest USDA Prime, dry-aged beef. Bone-in rib steak is the most luxuriant cut, skirt steak and hanger steak are more economical and just as flavorful, but are more difficult to find either online or in retail shops. The mail-order department of Lobel's famous Manhattan butcher shop, [lobels.com/store/main/wagyumain.htm](http://lobels.com/store/main/wagyumain.htm), carries both, deepening the wagyu flavor of the rib steak with its well-practiced dry aging, the only butcher I know who does this. Both their skirt steak, one to 1.25 pounds of beef for \$30.98, and their 24-ounce, 2½-inch bone-in rib steak at \$87.98, are perfect for grilling: in wintertime, try this: Rub it with salt and olive oil, sear it in hot butter in a heavy pan over medium-high heat on the stovetop, flipping every 30 seconds until the meat is well crusted, then finish for five to ten minutes in a 300-degree oven until the center is just warm, 115° F, which after resting will increase to 125° F. This is likely to be as flavorful and succulent a piece of beef as you've ever eaten.

You can imagine my breathless excitement to discover on the Internet a pastrami made with American wagyu! You can also imagine my bitter tears upon discovering that none of the fantastic virtues of wagyu beef had permeated the pastrami.

Pigs: Niman Ranch was the pioneer in naturally and humanely raised pork, much of it from family farms in Iowa, and today when you order from [nimanranch.com](http://nimanranch.com), you can be sure that you'll receive naturally raised, hormone-free pork at extremely reasonable prices. Picking up where Niman leaves off is Heritage Foods U.S.A., [heritagefoodsusa.com](http://heritagefoodsusa.com), founded by Patrick Martins, of Slow Food USA, which introduced the idea of reviving old-breed, "heritage" turkeys as a fine alternative to supermarket turkeys that have been bred to deliver vast volumes of flavorless white breast meat. Explore the pork areas of Heritage Foods's Web site. These animals have not been bred down to the tasteless, dry, other-white-meat of the mainstream pork industry. You'll find quarter-hogs, about 35 pounds of meat, in your choice from among lush, flavorful old breeds: Tamworth, Berkshire, Red Wattle, Gloucester Old Spot, and Large Black, all humanely raised without hormones or subtherapeutic antibiotics. Of all the heritage or old-breed meats and fowl I've tried, pork shows the greatest, most delicious and most succulent difference. Red Wattle was the Popularity Pig this past year, but now seems to have been a flash in the pan. Before you get confused about breeds, you can't go wrong with Berkshire, which

the Japanese revere and venerate as Kurobuta, sometimes referred to as the wagyu of pork. Then diversify, and before long you'll view each breed as an old friend.

Foie gras: Now that you've fully digested the definitive, well-reasoned article in the spring 2006 issue of *Men's Vogue* concerning the ethics of eating foie gras, get down from your high horse and remember what the holiday season is all about. It's all about foie gras! Plus game and ducks and sausages, all specialties of D'Artagnan at [dartagnan.com](http://dartagnan.com). Most

economical and just as delicious is the foie gras mousse, eight ounces for \$34 and still 100 percent foie gras.

## AMERICAN CHEESE

Every year I get to taste 75 or 100 artisanal American cheeses, many of them new, at least to me; and they seem to get better all the time. ("Farmstead cheeses" are not only artisanal but are made from milk produced on the same farm as the cheese is made, in the highest European tradition.) Below are my recent favorites. Many of these cheeses can be ordered from the cheesemakers themselves. Also, I've recently noticed that a majority of my favorites can also be ordered from Murray's Cheese Shop in Manhattan (somebody at Murray's must have extremely good taste), which does a sizable mail-order business at [murrayscheese.com](http://murrayscheese.com). Many are also offered by the excellent Artisanal Premium Cheese at [artisanalcheese.com](http://artisanalcheese.com).

Grayson, from Meadow Creek. Semisoft, pungent, highly aromatic, creamy, deep yellow, washed-rind, raw Jersey milk, farmstead cheese from Virginia. This is the kind of cheese I love the most; [meadowcreekdairy.com](http://meadowcreekdairy.com), and from Murray's, \$18.99 a pound.

Grand Cru Gruyère Surchoix, from Roth Käse. This is like a wonderfully smooth, beautifully aged Swiss Gruyère, and despite a name drawn from two European languages, it's made in Wisconsin and is relatively *(continued on page 422)*

*A kitchen appreciates getting accessorized as much as a woman does. The problem is that most kitchen gadgets are junk*