

The Rosengarten Report

THE FOODS AND WINES THAT MAKE ME SWOON

THIS MONTH'S TASTING SCOOP

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For This, Our Fourth Anniversary Issue:

THE GREATEST HITS

The 25 Best Products I've Ever Recommended . . . Revisited!

As I once remarked after sitting through four hours of a magnificent truffle dinner . . . time flies when you're having fungus!

It is now approximately four years since I sent out the very first *Rosengarten Report* to a very small band of readers—and, yes, the intervening time, a veritable blur of mail-order BBQ and artisanal chocolates and mind-bendingly fresh oysters and precious micro-greens and esoteric Japanese ingredients and killer smoked salmon and the best butter in America and everything else that's worthwhile under the gastronomic sun has indeed flown by like a Concorde jet trying to make time on its way to Paris.

So it seemed a good moment, right about now, at the start of Year Number Five, to put the brakes on this runaway train, and to spend a month or so revisiting, and reflecting on, the literally incredible goodness that has flowed through my office since 2001. But sentimentality aside, there are other highly compelling reasons for this review:

1) Whenever you read my enthused squealings in *The Rosengarten Report*, you can be sure I'm truly lovin' the product at hand. However, faced with the approximately 500 products I recommend every year, how can you know which ones

are my ultra-favorites? If you're compiling a short list—for your own blow-out, say, or for gift-giving—how can you know whether I would rate the winner of the mail-order chocolate dessert tasting that appears in one issue over the

winner of the Greek food tasting that appears in another issue? You can't—but with this issue you now have a handy guide to the absolute All-Star dream team of the last four years.

2) Approximately 70% of my readers began their subscriptions within the last year and a half or so—which means that most of these readers missed my product recommendations from 2001, 2002, 2003, and some of 2004. There was a lot of great stuff in those years! This round-up will allow newer readers to discover the *Rosengarten Report* classics—and will remind older readers of some terrific food that they may have passed up the first time around.

3) Most important: *sic transit gloria mundi*—which means that

the food in transit to you that once was glorious may now be moldy and make you sick. Well, not literally. But you get what I mean: when it comes to food production, man, do things change. You can trust, thankfully, that when I write about something in, say, April, and you receive that write-up in *The Rosengarten Report* in May, the judgment is still valid. But that

AN UNPRECEDENTED FEAST OF SUPREME QUALITY!!!

- Best Croissants
- Best Jam
- Best Smoked Salmon
- Best Crab
- Best Pasta
- Best Chickens, Pork and Beef
- Best Fruit
- Best Ice Cream
- Best Chocolate
- ... and so much more!

PLUS:

WHERE TO EAT IN CHICAGO . . .

From Hot Dogs to Hot Foie Gras!

THE GREAT SOUTH AMERICAN WINE

... that's Virtually Unknown!

ain't necessarily so when you re-read a *Rosengarten Report* note from last May, or the May before that, or the May before that. Some of the companies I've recommended have gone out of business. Some of the products I've recommended are no longer available. Some of the products I've recommended have changed for the worse. On the bright side . . . some of the products I've recommended have changed for the better . . . and some of them now have scrumptious sister products that you should know about!

So here's what I did. I dredged up all my old notes, re-kindled all my old memories, laid out all my old *Rosengarten Reports*, and came up with about a hundred highly lauded products—which we proceeded to order all over again. What an array! Not only was I struck by the quality—but also by the geographical diversity, with purveyors from all over the American map participating.

We asked each purveyor if there were any differences between the product we were sent before and the product we were sent on this go-round. We also asked each producer to send us any related products that I might not have tasted before. Then, I got to work—if, in this incredible prize round, that's what you call it. Oh, man—imagine night after night of the country's very best products, with my only urgency to identify whether each one was better or worse than what I tasted before! When the tasting bash was over (it took a few weeks), I was able to identify 25 products that, without any doubt in my mind, make up the elite group of *The Rosengarten Report's Greatest Ever*. I'll now let them speak for themselves—except for encouraging you, if you've found my taste to be reliable before, to get as many of these damned things on your table as you can, and as quickly as possible.

The products below are listed not in ranking order, not in alphabetical order, but in the logical order that you might use if you were eating all of these things on the same day (starting with breakfast items, concluding with dessert items). Prices given are current prices, and shipping is usually not included:

WILLIAMS-SONOMA (SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA)

FROZEN CROISSANTS

► **THE INITIAL CONTEXT:** This amazing product first appeared as a Product I'm Lovin' Right Now in the April 14, 2003 issue of *The Rosengarten Report*. As my recent tasting demonstrated . . . I'm still lovin' it, big-time!

► **THE INITIAL WRITE-UP:** "There is no question that warm croissants, just out of the oven, are vastly superior to croissants that sit around for hours—as they almost always do in bake shops. There is also no question that making your own croissants at home, from scratch, is an intensely laborious and time-consuming practice, truly out of the question for most people. So what are you supposed to do, at home, when you want to feel like you're having breakfast in a plush Paris hotel room? Simple. You put on your sexiest robe, you

put up a pot of *café filtré* . . . and you put these marvelous new croissants from Williams-Sonoma (\$39.50 for a set of 15) right into your oven. Twenty minutes later . . . *voilà! La vie en rose, chez vous*. There are 15 of them per box, frozen solid, and they will keep for three months in your freezer. When you want to cook a few, or all of them, you take them out the night before, and leave them on a baking sheet at room temperature; overnight, the dough will not only thaw, but rise miraculously. In the morning, they'll be doubled in size. You brush the tops with beaten egg. The oven, pre-heated to 350 degrees, does the rest—creating croissants that truly have the fragile, flaky layers of real croissants, the buttery curls of dough within, the unbearable lightness of good pastry. You will, of course, have to make a choice when ordering. Purist that I am, I thought I would prefer the **Plain Croissants**—but, though I liked them a lot, actually found them the least exciting; in my test, at least, they were the least flaky, approaching the borderline between croissants and airy bread. No, the next croissant order I place, without a doubt, will be for the **Chocolate Croissants**—which look like burritos when frozen, but morph magnificently into *pain au chocolat*. There is a great hunk of chocolate inside each one, from Callebaut, but that was only a secondary attraction for me. The main event is the croissant itself: it's the one that really achieves the texture dynamics of a great croissant. Now, I know this product is pricy; after shipping, you're looking at about \$3 per croissant. But having these babies in your freezer is like top-of-the-line breakfast insurance; you're always 8-12 hours away from cooking up something truly extraordinary for family, for friends . . . or for yourself! One word of caution: don't hesitate to gobble them up once you cook them. They're best at about 10-15 minutes out of the oven; after that they become less and less distinguishable from what you can buy at the store."

► **THE 2005 UPDATE:** Quality has held, beautifully. In fact, the plain croissant seemed flakier, airier to me this time around—while the chocolate croissant seemed to have even more intense chocolate flavor. The major difference: a third type, cheese croissants, are no longer available.

BEST STRATEGY FOR ACQUISITION. This product is not available at Williams-Sonoma stores. To order, contact Williams-Sonoma via phone at 877.812.6235, or log on to www.williams-sonoma.com.

HEIDI'S PREMIUM PANCAKE MIXES (COEUR D'ALENE, IDAHO)

PANCAKES

► **THE INITIAL CONTEXT:** In the April 26, 2004 *Rosengarten Report*, which focused on the very best products for a killer brunch, I flagged Christine and Rob's Old-Fashioned Pancake & Crêpe Mix, from Oregon, as the gold-medalist in pancake mixes (the Northwest must be big on pancakes!). On the re-taste, another one of the original winners leapt to the

RIDGEFIELD FARMS (HURON, SOUTH DAKOTA)

PREMIUM HEREFORD BEEF TENDERLOIN

► **THE INITIAL CONTEXT:** I discovered this mind-blowing whole beef tenderloin a few years back, and wrote it up in the February 18, 2002 *Rosengarten Report* as a Product I'm Lovin' Right Now.

► **THE INITIAL WRITE-UP:** "Most of the beef sold in this country comes from cross-bred cattle, steers of no one genetic stock. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with that—except you sacrifice consistency, since you don't know what you're getting. Even the one pure-bred name that has made a market impact, Black Angus, has consistency problems—since the government allows beef from cattle that are only 51% Black Angus to be marketed as 'Black Angus.' Now, at last, you can know the consistent joys of buying beef from one breed only—because a new company called Ridgefield Farms is marketing steak that is from the legendary Hereford breed of cattle, with animals that are 100% Hereford. Hereford steers are smaller animals (800 lbs. vs. 1100 lbs. for Black Angus), and have less fat. In steakdom, those latter two words throw up red flags to me—but the producers claim that this meat is fabulously tender, and fabulously flavorful despite the lower fat. I tried a wide range of their steaks, and found their claims to be accurate—though, truth be told, unless I'm looking for a great low-fat steak I'd just as soon have a high-fat prime porterhouse or strip. However, the crucial difference to me is in the filet portion—normally a less fatty, less flavorful cut. This Hereford filet may be the best filet I've ever tasted—as rich and tender as they come, with much more steak-lover's flavor than I've ever experienced in a filet. Whether you're a filet-lover or not, I urge you to get this thing on your table as quickly as possible. Filet mignons (cut from the beef tenderloin) cost \$43.75 per lb., but the greatest value is in the **Whole Beef Tenderloin** (which you can cut into individual filets if you want); this amazing 5-to-6-lb. hunk of beef costs only \$78!"

► **THE 2005 UPDATE:** I ordered the whole tenderloin, and was totally wowed by this thing all over again. It seemed truly massive this time around, easily enough for 6 hearty beefeaters. I seasoned it with salt and pepper only, then cooked it over a hot lump charcoal fire on the grill to perfect exterior char, ideal internal warm-rare. The flavor, once again, was impossibly beefy for a tenderloin. But the true amazement was in the texture. You know how "filet" has that smooth, bland surface to it? Not this baby! This one has lots of creases, "accordions," folds, ridges—not to mention an uncommon amount of marbling for a tenderloin. Whether you cut this into "filet mignons," or "chateaubriand," or "tournedos" . . . or leave it whole . . . you're gonna be one happy steak-server!

► **RELATED PRODUCTS IN 2005 FROM THIS**

COMPANY: I had written before (December 9, 2002) about the awesome pre-formed hamburger patties also produced by Ridgefield Farms—despite the fact that I don't usually like pre-formed hamburger patties. Good news, this time around! The company will now sell you **Ground Meat in Bulk** (\$33 for a 5-lb. bag), which—after your rough-and-tumble shaping—makes even better hamburgers than before! The meat is purple-red, has a coarse, utterly winning, restaurant-type grind, and cooks up to divine butteriness/beefiness. I like 'em loosely formed, well-seasoned with salt and pepper, charred on a grill, very rare, and with onions and ketchup only on a big bun. Tastes like nothing you'd ever find in a supermarket.

BEST STRATEGY FOR ACQUISITION.

To order, contact Preferred Meats by logging on to www.preferredmeats.com.

CERIELLO FINE FOODS (WILLISTON PARK, NEW YORK)

DOMESTIC PRIME RIB LAMB CHOPS

► **THE INITIAL CONTEXT:** In the March 3, 2003 *Rosengarten Report*, I went hunting for the best lamb in the country. I was particularly keen on finding the kind of baby rib chops you get in Europe, the ones you pick up with your fingers and eat like sweet lollipops. I had trouble finding chops of the right size here—but I was wowed by the flavor and texture of this extraordinary product that I unearthed along the way.

► **THE INITIAL WRITE-UP:** "The major discovery was the item called Ceriello Domestic Prime Rib Lamb Chops (\$19.99 per lb.), from a terrific butcher with 5 locations in the New York area. Oh, baby! Now, these gorgeous chops—which Ceriello obtained from Crescent Packing in Long Island—were not nearly as small, or as thin, as the chops I've enjoyed in Europe. However: 1) they were considerably thinner than most in America, with a long, frenched, curving bone, perfect for burning your fingers; and 2) the meat was absolutely reminiscent of what you get in Europe on those baby chops. The succulent eye was astonishingly juicy and tender, with an evocative flavor that suggested the best of delicate lamb, beef and pork all at the same time. I tried lots and lots of rib chops in this test; believe me, these are the ones you want."

► **THE 2005 UPDATE:** I've had these several times since the original tasting, and the quality is consistent. This time, they seemed even lambier *and* beefier—something like the lamb equivalent of a buttery steak. A good exterior char from the grill, and medium-rare, would be my recommendations.

BEST STRATEGY FOR ACQUISITION. To order, contact Ceriello Fine Foods via phone at 516.747.0277, or log on to www.ceriellofinefoods.com.