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THE BEST OF MAIL-ORDER BEEF

JOHN FRASER, chef of New York's Dovetail restaurant, bites into a juicy slice of grass-fed Uruguayan beef. He closes his eyes and chews. "Now, that's a beautiful piece of meat," he says, then pauses to chew a bit more. "It's so... beefy."

We've invited Fraser to cook and eat high-end, mail-order beef. And not just any beef, but grass- and grain-fed, organic and natural-style cuts—the hottest and fastest-growing niches in a market that, until the past few years, didn't have niches. Making up less than 1 percent of the billion-dollar beef market, specialty beef has seen huge growth of late: The amount of grass-fed cow meat alone sent to market has more than doubled since 2005. Prized for its earthy flavor, low fat content and antibiotic- and hormone-free profile, it offers steak lovers unadulterated beef taste.

But order with care; the smaller quantities produced by these ranchers can lead to inconsistent flavor. And grass-fed beef, for many the sine qua non of red meat, has a nutty, even gamey, flavor that some may not be used to. That said, our favorite, **Niman Ranch's USDA Prime Filet (\$63 a pound)**, was absolutely ravishing on the palate. "Y'our saliva goes wild," Fraser moans. Honorable mention goes to grass-fed Uruguayan beef, imported by Verde Farms, which, at only \$20 a pound, proves that biting into succulent beef doesn't have to take a bite out of your wallet.

■ RUNNERS-UP

Verde Farms Grass-Fed	\$27/pound (filets) \$20/pound (strip steak)
Lobel's Natural Prime	\$80/pound (filets) \$67/pound (strip steak)
Roseda Beef	\$36/pound (filets) \$27/pound (strip steak)
Montana Legend	\$56/pound (filets) \$38/pound (strip steak)

THE BEST OF CHAMPAGNE

IT'S A LITTLE BEFORE 10 a.m., and we've just popped open our first bottle of Champagne. At this hour we're usually clutching a coffee mug rather than a flute, but morning bubbly is nothing new for our drinking buddy, Aldo Sohm, wine director of New York's famed Le Bernardin and the American Sommelier Association's reigning Best Sommelier in America.

Champagne, of course, is a favorite of everyone from moguls to rappers, with sales up for the fifth consecutive year. But with top-shelf bottles surpassing the \$500 mark, we needed professional taste buds. Sohm fits the bill, explaining that most Champagnes are nonvintage (made with a blend of grapes from various years), while the most sought-after—and priciest—are created from a single vintage and aged at least three years. Aging generally creates a more concentrated taste, he says, but a few nonvintage choices—like Krug's Grand Cuvée (**\$150**, pictured)—can compete with the big boys. Rosés can get short shrift, often pegged as cloying and sugary; actually, the best are dry with just a hint of sweetness.

What really wows us, though, is the sole Champagne of the prestigious but little-known House of Salon. **Salon Le Mesnil 1996 (\$350)** is a blanc de blancs, meaning it's made entirely from chardonnay (most also include pinot noir). Sohm admires how it manages to be both bold and creamy, with flavor that "literally explodes on the palate." Voilà: our winner.

■ RUNNERS-UP

Dom Pérignon Rosé 1996	\$400
Perrier Jouët Blanc de Blancs 1999	\$400
Krug Grand Cuvée	\$150
Louis Roederer Cristal Rosé 1999	\$480