

cast-iron bottom part; it goes right over heat on the stove-top, and enables you to beautifully sear the chicken that's headed for your Chicken with Preserved Lemon and Black Olive Tajine.

Perhaps the most clever Staub piece of all, a teapot, is the only one that causes me a few problems—but also gives me the opportunity to tell you about the one Staub drawback in general. Their literature tells you, over and over again, to make sure the pots are dry before you put them away; I've never been overly finicky with my Le Creuset, but I am in the habit of carefully drying all of my regu-

lar (non-enameled) cast-iron before putting away, so as to prevent rusting and discoloration. Now, I love these Staub pots so much, I will dutifully dry away, just on the off-chance that failing to do so will cause rusting. But, I must confess that carefully drying a teapot after each use is not a happy proposition—because I use a teapot every day, and usually leave it on the stove-top with water in it!

Nevertheless, the Staub La Théière (\$80) has some amazing features. Because of the unique lid, held in place by metal clamps, you can get to the

inside of the pot—which means that you can drop a wire mesh cage of tea leaves (the cage comes with the pot) right in the teapot, and brew your tea there! Even more exciting: because of the wonderful cast-iron material, brewed tea will stay warm in this pot for hours! There is no other tea arrangement I know of that does this—nor do I know of any one that you have to dry out every day. Your call.

At the very least, you should contact the Staub company for a catalogue, so that you may see the extraordinary variety of smartly designed pieces on offer. ■

FOODS OF THE SEASON

CALIFORNIA CITRUS VS. FLORIDA CITRUS: YOU CAN'T COMPARE . . . IT'S ORANGES AND GRAPEFRUITS!

Say “citrus fruit” to most Americans, and you’ve inspired a cluster of images that includes flamingos, the Orange Bowl and Miami Beach—for Florida, due to its large citrus industry, and its historically large PR budgets, has grabbed the flag in the popular imagination as “the citrus state.”

All of which might lead you to believe that walking into your supermarket in January, the height of citrus season, is sure to net you some terrific navel oranges from Florida, no?

No.

If your experience has been anything like mine, you’ve discovered that Florida navel oranges are often watery, low-key in flavor, and, sometimes, kind of flabby in texture. Florida orange juice, yes—made from non-navel oranges—can be delicious. But the Florida navel season, which normally runs from November to January, is not something to get excited about.

But here’s the great news: the *California* navel season, which peaks in Jan-

uary and February, is the best navel season of all!

Why? Well, for one thing, the valleys of southern California are cooler than the Florida growing areas, particularly at night. As in the growing of wine grapes, a nightly blast of cool air helps insure the retention of lively acidity in the fruit. It also means that the plant will take longer to mature, so that its ultimate fruit will have deeper, richer flavor.

If you’ve ever experienced a great navel orange—with bright-orange, snappy, meaty segments carrying a perfect balance of sugar and acid and a profound load of flavor—the likelihood is that it came from California in January or February. There’s a reason why almost 9 out of 10 of America’s navel oranges are produced in The Golden State.

Does that leave Florida out in the cold, citrus-wise? Not on your life. Because Florida, to the connoisseur, has its own citrus superstar: Grapefruit! It is true that Florida oranges are a larger industry in Florida, to the tune of 8 billion dollars per year, and that grapefruits account for only one billion dollars per

year there—but what grapefruits they are, particularly from the Indian River area on Florida’s east coast! And how vastly superior to Florida navels they are! And, intriguingly, how vastly superior to California grapefruits they are! In fact, the grapefruits of California are often reminiscent of the navels of Florida: big, but watery and insipid.

So you now have your marching orders for the winter campaign: navel oranges from California, grapefruits from Florida.

But, alas, there is one more speed bump on the road to Citrus Heaven: the acquisition of these beauties in top form is no easy thing. For you know as well as I: when you’re buying citrus fruit at your local store, even in season, even from the right sources—it’s really frustrating how often disappointments outstrip citrus elation. I buy a lot of oranges and grapefruits in the winter—and, honestly, it’s only once or twice a season that I say, “Wow! That’s a great piece of fruit!” Most of the time I feel like I’ve been ripped off.

So now here’s the best news of all: you can virtually guarantee great oranges and grapefruits at your house

this winter . . . by ordering these fruits directly from their sources in California and Florida! Many of us grew up with Harry and David, the Fruit-of-the-Month Club . . . but not many of us have gone directly to the source with our orders, to the orange and grapefruit farms themselves! It is by far the best route to pursue . . . because the closer to picking time you consume your fruit, the better it's going to taste. And direct mail order means you cannot get closer in picking time . . . unless you go pick it yourself! Moreover, if you know what you're doing—that is, which farms to order from—you are the master of your own citric fate.

That's where I step in. Last winter, at the peak of the season, I ordered navel oranges and grapefruits from over a dozen sources in California and Florida. It was not hard to determine the best; a few farms boldly stood out. I'm a little nervous about bringing you the results—because that was winter 2002–2003, and this is winter 2003–2004! Citrus harvests are like grape harvests; the weather has much to do with success. And that is why I have refrained from publishing a full-blown report with all of my tasting notes. However, I think you'll want to know about the best of the best, from last year, on the assumption that this year we can expect the new fruits to be at least very good. And I, of course, am hoping for truly great!

The results from winter 2002–2003:

CALIFORNIA NAVEL ORANGES

Rising C Ranches, Heirloom Navel (#4390). OK folks, here it is; if you're looking to cherry-pick, and if you have faith in 2003–2004, you can stop reading after this entry. This damned orange from the San Joaquin Valley was the bang-up superstar of my tasting last year,

with nothing else even coming close. The specimens I sampled were medium-sized, with fairly dark orange skin and 1" stems still attached. You might notice the texture first—how firm the flesh is, how well it holds together. Then comes the flavor basics: this was a very, very sweet orange, but with wonderful, zingy acidity to keep it fresh. Then, at last, the realm of subtle flavor—which in this beauty ran the gamut from deep orange flavor, to funky-ripe, even to something



It's really frustrating how often disappointments outstrip citrus elation.

teasingly spicy! Most important: very rarely, a great orange has an almost fresh-air-like aftertaste—and this one had it in spades. I have never eaten an orange quite like this one, and I plan to order tons of them this winter. The only downside: my samples could have been a bit juicier, which is a common note about California's king of navel varieties, the "Washington," of which this Rising C Ranch Heirloom Navel is one. Never mind. Stock up now! Rising C will send you 8 lbs. for \$16, or 20 lbs. for \$40. Shipping is extra (I recommend air shipping for extra freshness, but ground shipping will do). Rising C Ranches also produces another famous California navel variety, the "Cara Cara"—but I was far less impressed with it than with the "Washington."

The Orange Store, Tree Ripe Navels. Undoubtedly, the second-place orange. Slightly tapered shape, only medium-dark skin. Intriguingly different in texture: finer-grained, no big pieces of pulp, almost relaxed in feel. Great orange-candy flavor with a hint of vanilla. You can get a box weighing 10–12 lbs. for \$29.99., including ground delivery—or for \$39.98, delivered by 3-day air.

Farquhar Farm, Navel Orange. If you're into texture, this southern California navel orange may be the one for you. Medium size, medium-dark skin—and very, very tight, meaty, juicy fruit, a pleasure to chew. The samples I had, unfortunately, fell down a bit on

taste: they were not super-sweet, a bit acidic, with correct orange flavor, but lacking depth. Still much better than your average supermarket navel. You'll spend \$30 for 12 lbs., or \$50 for 20 lbs., both with ground shipping included; air shipping is extra.

Paternoster Family Farms, Navel Orange. This orange, from the Sierra Nevada foothills—and, like the Rising C, of the "Washington" variety—was the opposite of the Farquhar, in a way. I loved the flavor of the Paternoster, but was less than enamored of the texture. True to its "Washington" nature, it could have been juicier—and it definitely could have been firmer, more snappy to the bite. But the

THE BLOODY BEST FROM CALIFORNIA

A few years back, I was in Sicily in February—the height of the blood orange season. I feasted, of course, on these tangy, blood-red citrus fruits, and developed a good sense of quality. So I'm delighted to tell you that last February—the height of blood orange season in California, as well—I mail-ordered a range of blood oranges from various California producers, and discovered that our great orange state is right up there with Sicily in quality! I love to make juice out of blood oranges—or, more simply, to slice 'em in half at the equator, and eat the dripping, staining flesh right out of the fruit. Bibs are good.

These were the best of the bloody best from California:

Rising C Ranches, Blood Orange. Rising C does it once again—delivering, to my door, not only the greatest navel orange, but the greatest blood orange too! Now, don't mistake this product with Rising C's "Tarocco Sicilian;" that was an excellent blood orange too, in my tasting, bursting with glistening segments of fruit, rather grapefruit-like in taste. But the runaway winner was simply designated "Blood Orange." Its flesh was much darker, almost beet-colored. Its fruit glistened like crazy. And its flavor? Absolutely wild, almost like young, fruity red wine, with hints of raspberries and cherries. Not overly sweet, and a little low in acid—but insanely delicious, nevertheless.

Melissa's, Blood Orange (#4381).

Melissa's, a mega-shipper of produce in Los Angeles, sent me a fine blood orange last year—albeit a much paler type of blood orange, with orange flesh only *flecked* with red. I loved its juiciness, and its high acid; the flavor was of the deeply fruity-funky variety.

Paternoster Family Farms, Sanguelli Blood Oranges and Moro Blood Oranges. Paternoster grows two varieties of blood orange at its Deer Creek Heights Ranch—and they're wildly different from each other. I can't decide which one I like best. The "Sanguelli" was the smallest blood orange I've ever seen, its very dark fruit outlined with gorgeous purple pigment.

Very tight texture, excellent grapefruit-y taste, not much juice. A great garnish orange. The "Moro," on the other hand, was the largest blood orange I've ever seen; its flesh was not quite as dark, it had a good sugar-acid balance, and it was fairly dripping with grapefruit-y juice. Your pick.

samples I had were very sweet, with excellent acidity, and, in addition to fine orange flavor, a hint of nuttiness. A lovely, complex orange. They will send you 20 lbs. for \$45, with ground shipping included. Air shipping's extra.

FLORIDA GRAPEFRUIT

Poinsettia Groves Indian River Grapefruit. I tasted lots of very good grapefruits from Florida's Indian River—too many, in fact, to mention most of them. However, this particular one from Poinsettia Groves, at least in 2002–2003, was clearly

the best. My sample was a medium-large grapefruit, bright yellow, very firm to the touch, with smooth skin and in generally great condition. The flesh was pale pink-orange, unusually firm and juicy. The taste was superb: sweet (though not super-sweet), with extraordinary zing and really deep grapefruit flavor. As far as I'm concerned, this is the one. Poinsettia ships packages of many sizes—and the value soars as the weight of your shipment goes up. They will send you 10 lbs. of grapefruit for \$33.90, 15 lbs. for \$38.90, 20 lbs. for \$43.90, and 40 lbs. for \$53.90. Ground shipping is included in all these prices, making your heavy bushel of 40 lbs. an especially great deal. ■

SOURCING THE CITRUS

Farquhar Farm
1898 Fifth Avenue, Redlands, CA 92374
909.794.3927 (tel) 909.389.0374 (fax)

Melissa's
P.O. Box 21127, Los Angeles, CA 90021
800.588.0151 (toll-free) www.melissas.com

Patemoster Farms
26689 Avenue 96, Terra Bella, CA 93270
559.535.4277 (tel) 559.535.2942 (fax)
www.patemosterfarms.com

Poinsettia Groves
P.O. Box 1388, Vero Beach, FL 32961-1388
800.327.8624 (toll-free)

Rising C Ranches
5800 S. Buttonwillow, Reedley, CA 93654
559.637.9546 (tel)

The Orange Store
26024 Rd. 212, Exeter, CA 93221
559.592.4304 (tel) www.theorangestore.com

FORK ON THE ROAD

ON THE COASTS: WHAT'S HOT IN NEW YORK AND SAN FRANCISCO . . . AND WHAT IT ALL MEANS

I may be deluding myself . . . but I LOVE to believe that fancy, obnoxiously, relentlessly creative, big-deal high-concept Chef Food is finally in a tailspin. That more and more diners are joining us geezers who claim that modern restaurant food is not unlike ancient restaurant food, specifically the food served in the last days of the Roman Empire. That someday soon I may not have to hear my waiter tell me that a “napoleon of monkfish cheeks with a reduction of cherimoya essence and soy bouillon alongside a stacked tower of baby Hawaiian seaweeds topped with miniature lotus sprouts” is the special of the day.

REAL FOOD: BRING IT ON!

I took a big leap forward in my optimistic belief when I looked around the food scene in New York and San Francisco recently—two touchstone American cities that are supremely useful in the fragile art of gastro-prediction. I drew the same happy conclusion in both places: reality is getting its due.

Here's what I saw:

1) NEW YORK CITY IS FINALLY TAKING THE 'CUE

For a city that just two years ago had a trendy fusion restaurant which offered savory white chocolate and baby lettuce

soup (the crazed chef ultimately left his helm), New York is doing very well indeed in settling down to earth.

One of the recent trends is down-to-earth Italian restaurants, with hearty Italian soul food. It's not a return to veal parmigiana just yet—but new places like Tom Valenti's 'Cesca on the Upper West Side are serving up the peasant side of the Italian dining experience, albeit with some residual gentrification.

There's even more encouraging news on the Spanish front: within the next few months you'll see at least two new Spanish restaurants in New York devoted to the elemental aspects of Spain's great cuisine, not to the fancy frou-frou. Count Mario Batali and Terrance Brennan among the *caballeros* leading the charge.

For the nonce—I can see no trend more compelling than the break-out of good, good 'ol boy, down-home BBQ all over the city. It sure augurs well for the eventual return of the foodie palate to sanity.

Now, New York was never a BBQ kind of place. In fact, until the early 1990s, it was a BBQ disaster. Then, the legendary Robert Pearson moved his pits from Stratford, Connecticut, and opened Stick To Your Ribs in Queens, the undisputed pioneer joint of New York BBQ. But to a certain type of foodie New Yorker, Queens might as well be East McKeesport, and the Queensboro Bridge went largely uncrossed. Then, in 1998 came the stinging news, to those