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Hoppy New Year

Swilling the best of the holiday beers.

By David Edelstein

Posted Thursday, December 21, 2000, at 12:00 AM PT

As a Democrat, I fear I'm going to be crying into my beer a lot this holiday season, so I want the beer into which I cry to be good and strong and life-affirming: Hoppy, but with a cushion of warming, toasted malt—and perhaps, for extra lift, a jovial dash of spices. I'm pleased to report that the beer is out there. Since the renaissance of "craft" brewing in the last two decades, brewers in the United States and other parts of the world have dedicated themselves to concocting strapping, assertive, and deeply idiosyncratic holiday seasonals: "wassails" with mulling spices for mistletoe merriment; roasty, chestnut-hued brown ales for fireside sipping; and hop Godzillas to demonstrate the revivifying powers of bitterness. These are not beers to be stewed over in solitude but to share with lovers, friends, co-workers—even Republicans.

Because so many holiday brews can overwhelm both the palate and the liver, I decided it would be a good idea to spread my tasting over several evenings. Then I thought: nahhhh. And so my colleagues and I gathered one stormy December night to savor 40 seasonal beers from the Pacific Northwest, the Northeast, California, the Mid-Atlantic, Belgium, England—anywhere we could track them down. (We left out the superheavy brews known as "barleywines" to keep from re-enacting the climax of *The Lost Weekend*.) The informal panel included Jim Leff, passionate pooh-bah of [chowhound.com](#); *Rolling Stone* contributor and esteemed rock historian Fred Goodman; architect Mark Pennell; and *Slate* associate editor Jodi Kantor. Leff played Santa Claus and brought barbecue from Pearson's, maybe the Northeast's best rib shack. It was one of the few meals that could hold its own against so many brontosaurian brews.

Our methodology was a tad whimsical, which is to say that it wouldn't be

sanctioned in official beer-judging circles. (But who wants to move in official beer-judging circles?) Professional tasters set up troughs into which they deliver the contents of their glasses and, on occasion, their mouths, but I've never really fathomed how beer judges can confine themselves to a few sissy sips and throw the rest away. A beer reveals itself in progressive tastes, as the finish of the last gulp mingles on the palate with the aroma of the next, and the brew can be savored at once in its coming and going. This is a lyrical way of saying that I didn't do a lot of pouring out, which might be why my notes on the last few beers are difficult to make sense of but seem to revolve around Catherine Zeta-Jones.

Before I disclose the results, it would be useful to establish some unofficial categories of holiday or winter beers, a few of which overlap:

Hop Monsters. These are the beers with a brawny, roaring bitterness—an amplified version of an already loud style that has flourished in the West and Pacific Northwest.

Wassails. Think mulling spices: nutmeg, clove, allspice, cinnamon, and even weirder stuff like juniper berries or pine needles.

Enhanced Brown Ales. These are ales in which the grain has been roasted, imparting a nutty, sometimes chocolaty, occasionally burnt-caramelly aroma and flavor. Enhanced Browns might also be well-hopped and feature spices.

Mighty Stouts. Some breweries make stouts only in the winter months and put a lot of character (and alcohol) into them. The alcohol—6 percent, 7 percent, even 10 percent—is in contrast to, say, Guinness, which actually has less kick than Miller Lite.

English Winter Warmers. Much maltier than their American counterparts and with different, more subtle varieties of hop. (Think "pear-shaped diction" and "pearlike hops.")

Belgian Ales. Belgians use candy sugar and funky but felicitous yeasts to produce fat, near-barleywine-style winter beers that can send you spiraling into nirvana (or oblivion).

The surprise of our tasting was how quaffable almost all these beers were. A few had too much this or that, but only one was aggressively unpleasant: *Pete's Winter Brew* (Tumwater, Wash., and Eden, N.C.), a gruesome dark ale with raspberry extract and nutmeg—Robitussin Fizz. (You drink it and wonder, "What's it supposed to cure?")

We recommend virtually everything else we tasted. Beers that we *highly* recommend are in **bold-face** type.

I give away my hophead bias at the outset in saying my favorite winter beer—my favorite beer, period—is **Sierra Nevada Celebration Ale** from Chico, Calif. It's Godzilla, Mothra, Rodan, and King Kong in one. Miraculously, it also has finesse, not to mention a plot. It opens with a floral, spicy aroma followed by a big (near-Burgundian) body and a lingering hawthorn-grapefruit bitterness that makes the roof of your mouth seem to levitate. The hops by themselves are intoxicating, but it's the evolution that's the marvel. Fresh from the tap, with the hop oils coating my mouth, Celebration has made me higher than any other legal substance. (Hops, by the way, are members of the cannabis family.)

In the same hop-monster arena, **Fish Tale Winterfish**, from Fish Brewing in Olympia, Wash., is lighter than Celebration (what isn't?) and has a clean, drying finish that makes you want another sip, and another, and ... **Santa's Private Reserve**, from Oregon's marvelous Rogue Ales, is the brewery's delicious, fruity **Red Ale** with double the hops—a great pint to swill with a big, greasy meal when you want something to cut through the fat on your palate. (It added a lot to our ribs—in all senses.) On the hop-spice border sits Rogue's second seasonal, **Yellow Snow Ale**, which is not like any yellow snow I've seen (whatever stained it was seriously dehydrated)—but it's a lovely saffron all the same, its juniper berry aroma conjuring up evergreens on a winter's day. The ale fakes sweet, then the bitter Northwest hops flood in: I love it, but non-hopheads might find it lopsided.

The daddy of modern American wassails is San Francisco's **Anchor Our Special Ale**, which in its current incarnation (the top-secret recipe varies from year to year) is just sensational. It's a deep, reddish brown with an aroma I found gingery but Leff insisted was cumin. (We opened a bottle of ground cumin and passed it around. We also sniffed bottles of ginger, coriander, allspice, clove, nutmeg, and mace. Hard to say. Maybe cumin plus ginger. Plus nutmeg. Plus anise.) The spices are right there in the foretaste, but the ale goes out on a flying carpet of dark chocolate and licorice.

That's a hard act to follow, but other spiced beers had their charms. From Bellingham, Wash., **Orchard Street Jingle Ale** had the sparest, most elegant, all-type label and the slogan "sprinkled with seasonal cheer." More than sprinkled, actually: My fellow tasters reacted grimly to its velvety suffusion of cinnamon and cloves. But I thought the spicing, while bold, made the ale taste like fruitcake is supposed to. I liked it. The others preferred **Harpoon Winter Warmer** (from Boston), which reminds me of cinnamon toast but might go well with pumpkin pie. (It's a Thanksgiving beer.) From Norwalk, Conn., **New England Holiday Ale** is fizzy and cola-colored, with a jolt of nutmeg and ... cardamom?—Break out the spice bottles, guys—and a rudely abrupt bitterness. **Hale's Wee Heavy Winter Ale** (from Seattle) is a wee heavy on the allspice. "Or is it Old Spice?" asked Leff. "Maybe English Leather," said Goodman. "No—Hai Karate."

The label of Deschute's **Jubelale** (from Bend, Ore.) depicts a young woman with

largish breasts spinning on skates around a frozen lake, a snow-capped peak in the distance. One hand is thrown in triumph above her head, the other holds a bottle of Jubelale. She has reason to be exultant. This reddish brown "festive" ale is uniquely great. What's that aroma? Nutmeg? Pine cone? Maple? Campari? Whatever: This is the most convivial spiced brown ale imaginable, with just enough resinous hop to keep it from finishing syrupy. Portland (Oregon) Brewery's **BobbyDazzler** is a dazzler, all right—a fat, red, malty monster of an ale in which the hops seem to bloom out of the spices.

Moving into malt: It's not from England, but the classic **Geary's Hampshire Special Ale** from Portland, Maine, is the best big-malt holiday ale I've ever tasted—a synthesis of great American and English brewing. The aroma hints at butterscotch and caramel; the body is rich and smooth, with lightly toasted malt (but no burnt edges—this toast is buttered); the finish is luxuriously long, malty but never sweet, rounded off with virile but respectful hops—a big bear rug of a beer.

This time of year, you can drown in brownish ale. From Seattle, Pacific Maritime's *Jolly Roger Christmas Ale* ("Yo-Ho-Ho!" reads the label, which bears a skull-and-crossbones with a Santa cap) is a Northwest version of a toasted-malt brew, which means a bit more chocolate and a ton more hops: It's good, but a real buccaneer would take a more dramatic stand. Widmer Brothers' *Winternacht* (Portland, Ore.) is a sweeter, roastier version of the brewery's fine *alt* beer. Roastier yet is *Snow Cap Ale* from Widmers' just-over-the-Washington-border neighbor, Pyramid. Brown with auburn highlights, it has a sweetish nose and deep—but not terribly profound—hopping. Red Hook's *Winterhook* (Seattle) always tastes to me like the brewery's ESB with the volume turned up: some grain, some fruity esters, but a body that's too undeveloped for its bitterness. This baby needs to fill out.

The browns get weirder in the east. *Clipper City Reserve Winter* from Baltimore has its roastiness swamped by an agreeably sweetish, strawberryish bouquet. Otter Creek's **A Winter's Ale**, from Middlebury, Vt., is broadly in the Scottish style but without the sweetness: It's deep, caressive, with hints of toasted caramel, burnt chocolate, and smoke. *Snow Goose*, from Maryland's Wild Goose Brewery, is just as roasty but has a butterscotchlike sweetness and a conclusive (rather brusque) flurry of grapefruit-rind hops. Weirdest of all—but wonderful—is **Weyerbacher's Winter Ale** from Easton, Pa., with its hint of malt syrup and its toasted-poppy-seed-bagel breadiness. "Tastes Jewish," said Leff. "Like my grandfather's breath."

Jim's grandfather would probably have liked **Ramstein Winter Wheat**, a lovely, lightish quaff from a great wheat-beer brewer in northeast New Jersey. The beer has notes of roasty carob and chocolate, but the wheat lightens the body and adds a fragrant note of clove and banana. This is the only holiday beer that's actually *quenching*. *Samuel Adams Winter Lager* is also made with wheat and a

touch of spice, but its body is a little fuller and its flavor monochromatic: It's nothing to turn cartwheels over, but it's a fine "starter" winter beer for the faint of palate—and it's widely available. Another lager, Seattle's *Thomas Kemper Winterbräu*, is darker and toastier, with a hint of the brewery's famous blueberry ester—odd but rather pleasant.

The Mighty Stouts were a study in contrasts. We were thrilled by Magic Hat's ***Heart of Darkness***, a seasonal beer from a playful brewery in Burlington, Vt. The body is deceptively light, but the ashy-chocolate finish stays and stays—not like an unwelcome guest but a girl (or guy) who you thought at first was sort of nice-looking but gradually realized was deeply, meltingly beautiful. From Victory, a young, already-legendary brewery in Downingtown, Pa., comes Heart of Darkness' antithesis, ***Storm King Stout***. This is a fat, mouth-coatingly roasty, feel-the-burn, big-alcohol imperial whopper, with a go-for-broke flamboyance that is dazzling to behold. It gambles and wins, whereas the more original Brooklyn (N.Y.) *Black Chocolate Stout* craps out. The airplane-glue nose warns you not to light a match in its vicinity, and all that alcohol combined with layers of creamy chocolate malt (and maybe real chocolate) is the clumsiest kind of overkill. This stout is like one of those overmuscled lifeguards who can't even gesture without being distracted by his own biceps.

By the time we got to the foreign beers, we were pretty well blotto, but not enough to miss the fact that our bottle of *Aas Yuleøl* (from Norway) was skunked so badly that its subtle charms (and it has some) were overwhelmed. From England came the "Winter Warmers": Samuel Smith's *Winter Welcome* was the lightest, with a bit of sticky, wet-cardboard caramel (this beer doesn't travel too well in those clear bottles) and a good, pearlike hoppiness. Young's tasty *Winter Warmer* was a darker brown with deep red highlights and a nose of bark and candy cane: pinecone soda. Darker yet is ***Harvey's Christmas Ale*** (from Sussex), with burnt molasses and cooked pear in the nose and on the palate. This baby is formidable—smooth, little fizz, sweet and slightly sticky but well on the right side of cloying thanks to roasted malt and a powerful hop undercurrent. It's a masterpiece of its type, for sipping in lieu of sherry. One American ale dares to call itself a "Winter Warmer": Portland, Oregon's *Bridgeport Ebenezer Ale*, which the label assures us will "stand up to figgy pudding." We didn't have any figgy pudding handy, but its sweet-and-sour, passion-fruit flavor did stand up to our corn chips.

We shouldn't have saved the Belgians for last. An American Belgian-style ale, ***Allagash Grand Cru***, from Maine, was a wonderful reminder of a slightly candied, sweet-aromatic type of ale that the Belgians don't make during the holidays. What they do make put us under the table: ***Scaldis Noel***, like a superb cognac plus candy sugar; ***Corsendonk Christmas***, with a peppermint nose; a soft, sweet body; and a nutmeggy finish. The *Speciale Noel Ale* from the great Abbaye des Rocs was a disappointment—a little flat, composed but not orchestrated. We finished, appropriately enough, with ***Delirium Noel***, 10 percent

alcohol in a white porcelain bottle featuring a (drunken?) Santa being pulled in his sleigh by pink elephants. Where could one possibly go from here?

To bed.

Xmas Fir Trapping

How to bag the balsam, Fraser, or noble that's just right for your living room.

By Laurie Snyder

Posted Wednesday, November 29, 2000, at 8:30 PM PT

You've survived another Thanksgiving dinner, the dishes are done and the relatives sent packing, but there's no rest for the weary. Now is the time to shift your focus from feast to foliage and join millions of other folks in that perennial search for the perfect Christmas tree. But is there such a thing as the perfect Christmas tree? Should you choose fir, spruce, or pine? And what about all the subspecies? After talking with tree aficionados and conducting my own census of the woods, one thing's clear—there are bum seeds in every Christmas tree lot.

But before you plunk down \$30, \$60—even \$150—you should know a tree's reputation. How long before its needles drop? Before its color pales and its scent dies? How will it look decorated? How do you spot a stale, must-avoid tree? Should you buy from a lot, cut your own, or order over the Web? And last, should you buy the same old Scotch pine that you grew up with, or is the tree of your dreams something a little more exotic?

The top-selling Christmas trees are balsam fir, Douglas fir, Fraser fir, noble fir, Scotch pine, Virginia pine, and white pine, according to the National Christmas Tree Association. Blue spruce and Norway spruce also garner loyal followers. (See pictures of all these trees [here](#).) About 98 percent of the \$1.2 billion annual crop is cultivated like corn on some 15,000 Christmas tree farms. Although Christmas trees grow in all 50 states, Oregon, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Washington, and Wisconsin harvest the most.

Tree types vary from region to region. But with improvements in cultivation and genetic engineering, in some cases, the ranges of these trees have expanded somewhat to give consumers greater choices of locally grown trees. That is, unless you live south of Disney World, as Russ Whited, a tree seller in Fort Myers who trucks in trees from the far-away Pacific Northwest, says, "You can't grow any decent trees in Florida. Down here we grow bushes."

It's impossible to discuss prices with much accuracy since they fluctuate by region too. Generally, choose-and-cut farms sell trees for a flat rate, ranging from \$20-\$60. Expect to pay \$20 to \$50 more for trees sold by the foot on retail lots, with prices topping out at \$200 for premium trees in big urban areas. If you're

lucky enough to live near an evergreen-rich National Forest, you can cut down a tree for a nominal fee. (In this article, the prices are for 6- to 7-foot trees.)

So, what's it to going to be?

Spiked Popularity

Growing up in Iowa, I opened my presents under a **Scotch pine**. It ranks as perhaps the most popular Christmas tree nationally because it can be cultivated cheaply over a broad region. At Pleasant Valley Farms in Wisconsin, you can pick up a precut tree for just \$16.

Though a bargain, the tree's popularity is starting to wane. For one thing, the Scotch isn't a beaut. For another, its bright green needles are 1- to 3-inches long and stingingly sharp. After weeks in the house, the dried needles turn even more aggressive. Please, don gloves before de-decorating, or this porcupine will leave you bloodied. (On the plus side, Scotch pine needles cling to the branches for several weeks, unlike some other evergreens.) Because pines tend to turn yellowish in the fall, farmers often spray them with a kelly green colorant to make them look more Christmassy. Inspect the needles on interior branches for telltale flecks of colorant.

The bushy density of pine trees also makes them hard to decorate: If tree farmers didn't prune and shear pines into a conical shape once or twice a year, they'd look as wild and woolly as Don King's hair!

The Cadillacs of the Lot

Tree farmers may laugh at us behind our backs for our Christmas tree choices, but nobody laughs at purchasers of noble and Fraser firs. Folks love the way their open-branch structures show off all those ornaments from Mom. These trees smell great and retain their needles for weeks. You can't go wrong with either tree. One caveat: When these trees aren't pruned during cultivation, they can look sparse, especially toward the top.

The rarer of the two, **noble firs**, grow in the Pacific Northwest. They have soft, 1-inch needles, green with a hint of blue, and a sort of a peppery fragrance. When city folks visit Rusty Elliott's choose-and-cut farm north of Seattle, they ask for nobles by name. Outside their growing region, nobles bring top dollar. The noble that costs \$60 retail in Oregon will command \$150 in California, says tree-broker Sherry Lantz of E-Trees Inc. Because farmers underestimated the demand 10 years ago, there's now a shortage. If you want a noble in your living room, prepare to pay even more and consider buying the first one you see. That includes you, Northwesterners!

The elegant **Fraser firs** are native to the chilly, high elevations of the

Appalachians, but today farmers in cool climates grow them too. North Carolinian Fred Wagoner says his Frasers bring \$35-\$45 retail in the Greensboro area. Fraser needles are soft, deep-green with silver undersides, a bit shorter than the nobles', and gently taper shorter toward the branch tips. Frasers also ship well, and with the high demand for them outside of conifer country, they rank as one of the Web's top-sellers.

Don't worry about buying a tree unseen. Rocks Christmas Tree Farm in New Hampshire selects the prettiest 300 Fraser and balsam firs for its mail-order and Web customers, who tend to be fussier than lot buyers. But the convenience will cost you. For instance, a Fraser fir from Rocks shipped to Seattle costs \$80; a similar tree from the farm's choose-and-cut lot sells for half that. Shipping size restrictions mean you'll have to settle for a 6- to 7-footer. Last year, out of the 33 million trees sold, 330,000 were bought over the Web.

Besides needle length and sharpness, another way to tell pine from fir is to examine how the needles are attached to the branches. Pine needles grow in bundles of two to five held together at their base, like little needle bouquets, along the branch. Fir needles grow in single file rows up the twigs. (Spruce needles are similar to fir needles.)

Closer to Camrys

The other top-selling firs—the balsam, grand, and Douglas—share the characteristic soft needles with good staying power, deep green color of varying shades, and nice scent of their classier cousins. All three tend also to have slightly longer needles than the luxury firs.

The stalwart of the New England farms, the **balsam fir** looks like a slightly shaggy Fraser, but this tree's big selling point is its sinus-clearing fragrance. So strong, the boughs of trees are often used to scent aromatic, decorative pillows. The L.L. Bean catalog sells balsams for \$75, plus shipping. If you trek to New Hampshire, you can cut one down for around \$35.

Folks in Idaho and Montana like their native **grand fir**, with shiny, dark-green needles that jet out in two rows on each side of the branch and give off a citrusy scent when crushed. When pruned and sheared, as most of these less expensive firs are, it's a thick-foliaged tree.

The old reliable **Douglas firs** sparked the Christmas tree industry on the West Coast in the 1920s. They grow with weedlike tenacity in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California, as well as in the cool Midwestern states and the Northeast. While not a true fir, the Doug fir has good needle retention, piney scent, and branches that sweep out in all directions. Californians buy these trees by the truckload, and this year a Pennsylvania Doug fir beat out the competition to grace the White House's Blue Room for the Clintons' last Christmas at 1600

Pennsylvania Ave.

The Clintons' tree will be cut, shipped, put up, and decorated in a matter of days, which brings us to the first law of Christmas tree buying: Avoid geriatric trees. The needles drop faster on old trees, the scent's weaker, and the color fades. When buying from a lot, ask when the trees were cut, since retail trees can be harvested as early as September and kept on ice. Since these early harvest trees won't hold their needles as long, you're better off buying one cut later in the season, say, early November. Test for freshness by giving the tree a good bump on the ground. If a pile of green needles drops, move on. Or grab a branch near the trunk and pull your hand toward you. A handful of needles indicates an old tree.

Spruced Up

The bluish-green needles and long, splayed out arms give the **blue spruce** a formal, majestic look. Also called the Colorado blue spruce, this tree takes 10 years to reach a sellable height, compared with some pines and firs that can hit that mark in seven or eight. This means the blues can be pricey in many parts of the country. At Captain Jack's farm, a big operation in central Iowa, blues sell for \$10 per foot, while the Fraser firs he brings in from Wisconsin sell for \$7 per foot. This tree is *heavy*; you'll need a village to wrestle it into its stand.

The lovely **Norway spruce**, the tree of choice in Europe, cuts the most delicate profile of all the evergreens discussed in this article; tall and thin, with 1/2-inch, dark-green needles and pretty cinnamon-red branches. Tree-grower Rusty Elliott says its fragrance fills a warm room like "something cooking," and its razor-sharp needles keep her cats away from the ornaments. Big downside to spruces: They're even more prickly than the pines. So glove up! Make sure to have plenty of vacuum bags on hand, especially if you choose Norway, for all the needles that will surely drop.

Which Brings Us Back to Pines

If you live in the hot, flat areas of the South and want a locally grown tree, you'll probably buy a **Virginia pine** and pay in the neighborhood of \$23. Like the Scotch, it has long (2 to 3 inches), bright-green, sharp-as-tacks needles that stay on the branches through Christmas. Bill Dixon of Big Bill's Christmas Trees in Texas says parents are to blame for narrowing a consumer's mind when it comes to holiday tree options, since most folks are going to buy "what Mama and Daddy bought."

The **white pine** is the friendly cousin of Virginia and Scotch. It has long needles, a broad growing range, and a low price tag (choose-and-cut farms often sell them for around \$25), with a crucial difference: Its needles are feathery soft. Since it puts off almost no scent, it's a good choice for people with allergies. It's a

light tree, perfect for the bachelor with weak upper body strength. The downside: Its branches are strong enough to hold up lights and bows here and there but too weak for heavy ornaments.

Remember ...

A fir or pine cut in mid- to late November can stay needle-thick and fragrant through the end of the first week in January. Spruces are an OK choice if a couple of weeks with a holiday tree is time enough. Remember the shape of a tightly sheared tree may look nice leaning against the snow fence, but its densely packed branches won't show off your investment in antique glass balls (which is exactly why I'm going with the Fraser this year).

When you bring your tree home, saw an inch off from the trunk, plop it butt-end into a bucket of water, and store it in an unheated room until you're ready to bring it in the house. Watch the water level closely, especially in the first six to eight hours because your thirsty tree can easily swallow a gallon in that time. After it's inside, be nice by keeping the stand's water reservoir full and the tree away from radiators, fireplaces, or sun-filled windows. When Christmastime's over your tree's not junk: Throw it out in the yard with suet and bread stuck in its branches. The birds will love the treat and the extra shelter from the winter winds. If yardless, then poor Tannenbaum, it's off to the chipper.

Attack of the Mega-Ornaments

Christopher Radko, the man who super-sized Christmas.

By Alison Cook

Posted Wednesday, December 19, 2001, at 9:54 AM PT

Deck the halls with boughs of folly! The American Christmas tree 2001 has morphed into a swollen, status-laden monstrosity, and it's all Christopher Radko's fault.

Or mostly. Radko, a dapper Manhattan Polish boy who built a lordly empire out of mouth-blown glass ornaments, has in the last few years grown inescapable. He and his ferociously expensive "Christmas home furnishings" (that's decorations to you) are the darlings of the nation's lifestyle pages, the staples of tony department stores, the talk of the network morning shows, the toast of the monied classes. And I do mean monied: Your average Radko baubles fetch 40, 50, 60 bucks; the biggest and most elaborate go for a daunting \$70 to \$90 each. Celebrities like Elton John and Barbra Streisand can afford to collect Radko. So, apparently, can a growing cult of fanatics whose "Radko trees" are monuments to conspicuous consumption. A modest Radko tree might sport 250 ornaments, and it is not unknown for a blow-out-the-lights version to be encrusted with 1,000 of these highly perishable adornments. Go ahead, do the math. We're talking an

investment level that demands a Lloyd's of London policy.

So it's hard not to snicker when Radko tells *USA Today* that this post-9/11 Christmas is "not about traveling to faraway places or buying that fur coat anymore. It's about gathering around the Christmas tree with family and friends." Yeah, right. What could be cozier than Christmas on the home front of a Houston socialite of my acquaintance who rarely appears in public without the interlocking Chanel C's displayed on her person, and who proudly brags that her young sons will only allow the Radko brand on the family tree?

The weird thing is the utter charmlessness of Radko's creations. Oh, the workmanship's there: the intricate detail, the careful interior silvering that imparts such a lush gleam. But those hand-painted faces often smirk or wink or leer alarmingly, gazing out of cartoonishly popped eyes. Radko's foppish, red-faced, slightly *louche* Santas—a multitudinous tribe—do not look like the kind of fellows you'd want to leave the kiddies with. Indeed, it must take a Radko Santa so long to get dressed that it's a wonder the fourscore-and-seven gifts he's invariably toting ever get distributed. And what's with those scary snowmen? They look demonic enough (in the unsettling manner of clowns) to give Stephen King the willies. The blecherous names bestowed on each ornament only compound the horror: "Frozy Cozy," "Warm 'n' Woolly Mitten," "Chirpy & Chilly," "Merry Meows," "Rootin' Tootin Nick."

Worse still, these suckers are big. In fact, with every new collection, they seem to get bigger, more self-important, more purely expressive of Radko's too-much-is-never-enough aesthetic. What engages at the traditional, Old-World glass-ornament size of 3 inches, engages considerably less at the in-yer-face Radko scale of 6, 7, or even 8 inches, which is uncomfortably close to a foot long. Mammon has something to do with the phenomenon I have come to think of as "Radko Bloat." Quite simply, Radko can charge a *lot* for an ermine-robed St. Nicholas as bulky as a quart of malt liquor.

But Freud may have even more to do with the thrusting verticals of the ever-expanding Radko repertoire. Radko stacks up his ornaments in tiers; bolsters them with pedestals and assorted conveyances (sleighs, motorcycles, spaceships); lifts them skyward with towers, steeples, lampposts, pointy finials; endows them with explosions and wild cornucopias of brightly wrapped Christmas packages. So you get an onerously topical "Made in Manhattan" Empire State Building, or a superfluous "Stack o' Raccoons", or a redundant confection like this year's rococo "Snowtem Pole," which doesn't stop at one snowman when three will do. "Snowtem" is everything Radko. It's scary and tall and over-the-top. It's also sold out at my local "Starlight Store," which is Mr. Radko's cutesy-poo designation for the favored retail outlets that stock hundreds of his designs.

The practical problem with the grandiosity of Radko ornaments is one of scale.

Buy just one, and it throws your tree seriously out of whack. It's the insidious wedge that demands more and more big Radkos to balance out. Ultimately, you'll require at least a 12-foot tree (and ceiling to match) to support the enormity.

Which syndrome would be tolerable if it stopped at the doorstep of Radko cultists. But it doesn't. This December, it's crashingly obvious that the pernicious Radko influence has trickled down even unto Kmart level. Radko Bloat is now a national curse. The savvy Chinese have smelled the coffee, which means your local Pier 1 and Cost Plus and mega-craft-emporium is now chockablock with humongous, Radko-scale ornaments. Some are blatant Radko imitations at reduced cost, like the three-for-\$10 gift-laden drugstore Santas, or the hippie VW van the size of a particularly unwieldy cell phone. You can hardly find a nice little 3-inch glass ornament anymore.

Everywhere, the Radko homages are as blatant as the worrisome foot-long blown-glass pine cones I saw in Lake Placid last month, or the 7-inch leaping trout. Demo trees in your local retail outlets tend to be clad (am I right about this?) in bolt-wide swaths of netting and gargantuan beaded fruits and towering sprongs of dried weeds, all at regulation Radko scale. Even garden-variety Christmas balls and drops no longer get precious shelf space unless they are the size of bowling balls, or at least grapefruits. Last week, at a Houston Kmart, I watched a man and his young daughter pawing a selection of enormous, shatterproof glass balls. The man passed an 8-inch specimen to his wonderstruck kid and joked, "Afterward, you can use it as a basketball." Later, I drove past Houston's city hall, where, to my dismay, the civic Christmas tree overlooking the reflecting pool has been super-sized with humongous, shiny globes that must be a foot in diameter.

I imagined Mr. Radko perched on my shoulder, whispering, "Say Uncle."

Bots Till You Drop

Comparison-shopping search engines are good for consumers, bad for monopolists.

By Bruce Gottlieb

Posted Thursday, August 17, 2000, at 12:00 AM PT

One of the most promising developments in e-commerce is the proliferation of so-called "shopping bots." *The Jetsons* it's not, but these "bots" are very good at what they do: find the lowest price on the Web for a particular item. In fact, there's really no good reason to buy something online without using a bot to see if it's being offered somewhere else for less. Here's how they work.

Suppose you want to buy a Palm V. A leading shopping-bot Web site such as mySimon.com (Yahoo!, AOL, and most portals offer similar services) can troll the

Web to provide, almost instantly, an up-to-date list of price and availability of that item at dozens of e-tailers. For instance, you'd find that the Palm V is available for \$275 at Amazon.com, \$300 at Egghead.com, and \$375 at BestBuy.com. Aren't you glad you asked?

Of course, as the people who bring you the Yellow Pages have pointed out—Let Your Fingers Do the Walking!—the idea of finding a good price was not unknown in the pre-Web era. But shopping bots are better because they take only two or three minutes to deliver a low price vs. the time-intensive exercise of phoning a bunch of merchants.

But shopping bots have another, greater potential in that they may force conventional retailers to offer lower prices. That is, even if consumers had all the time in the world to find the lowest price at a local retailer, they'd still be likely to find an even better price using a service such as mySimon. Here's why.

An ordinary retailer sells just to the people who live within driving distance of his store. If he thinks up a clever idea to reduce overhead (meaning that he can offer lower prices), his reward is that people will drive a little farther to his store, and he may slightly increase his business volume. But if the manager of a Web store cooks up a clever way to reduce overhead and lower his prices, he captures the entire national market—assuming that everyone is using mySimon or something like it. In other words, services such as mySimon give businessmen a much bigger incentive to be more efficient.

Even more important, the Web's shopping-bot services free people from the trap of patronizing the relatively small number of stores that happen to be located in their immediate neighborhood. You can think of every physical store as possessing a type of quasi-monopoly that benefits retailers and hurts consumers. That is, suppose it's possible for a local store to sell a VCR at \$150 and still turn a respectable profit. Suppose I own a similar store in the next town and price the VCR at \$155. I'll get away with the higher price, because residents of my town will probably conclude that driving a long way to save \$5 isn't worth it.

The owners of the lower-priced store will probably reach the same conclusion and price the VCR at \$155 as well. That's because if they sell at the higher price, residents of that town have no option but to pay the premium. In fact, every local store will go through the same reasoning and will charge the premium, meaning that the prevailing price at bricks-and-mortar stores will be \$155. Of course, this monopoly power isn't unlimited. Suppose I got greedy and priced the VCR at \$160. In that case, a savvy businessman might decide to open a slightly cheaper electronics store in my town to steal my customers. But so long as local retailers don't get too greedy, they can get away with charging just a few dollars more than the minimum price needed to cover overhead and get a small profit. No competitors will appear because it's quite expensive to set up a new shop in a location where a similar shop exists—even if the existing shop is charging slightly

inflated prices. (This is a slight simplification, since discount stores will spring up in the far suburbs, where land prices are lower, but the basic idea is sound: The hassle of driving means that local merchants have a limited monopoly over residents.)

The Web and shopping bots, which allow people to pick the lowest price from a national market, change the equation. On the Web, it's not very expensive to set up a new business—at least compared with setting up enough bricks-and-mortar stores to credibly challenge a big chain such as Circuit City or Best Buy. And the payoff for setting up a Web store with rock-bottom prices, if everyone is using mySimon, is now huge. A retailer who manages to offer a lower price, even if this means a lower per-item profit, can make it up on volume. Instead of winning the business of a single town, this businessman can win the business, in theory, of the entire country. In short, a "winner-takes-all" market translates into lower prices for customers.

In fact, the comparison-shopping engines are especially good news for smaller operations lacking the deep pockets required to mount a large-scale, old-media advertising campaign. If a service such as mySimon.com will cough up side-by-side prices for barnesandnoble.com—which buys all sorts of expensive advertising space—and Nobody.com, it makes sense that Nobody.com, with lower expenses, will win the price war. (This leads to the delightful possibility that all the mom-and-pop booksellers bankrupted by Barnes & Noble superstores can go online and bankrupt barnesandnoble.com.)

It's not surprising, therefore, that deep-pocketed online booksellers such as barnesandnoble.com and Amazon.com have reason to fear bots. This points to a troublesome question. What's to stop a big company from paying mySimon or Yahoo! to block out smaller firms? Nothing, actually. Both AOL and the Go network's shopping bots list only merchants who pay to be included. mySimon does not require payment, but they do admit to giving preferential treatment to paid advertisers. If these shopping bots list only companies with large marketing budgets, of course, then a lot of cost savings associated with the technology won't materialize.

Of course, it remains to be seen whether the most successful comparison-shopping search engines will continue to give preferential treatment to firms that are willing to pay. It seems possible that a Web site that relies only on ordinary advertising could make enough to pay the bills, and it would certainly have more credibility among consumers. After all, the shopping-bot sites are just specialized search engines—once you've developed the technology, it's relatively cheap to operate. And it's now received wisdom that a search engine can be successfully supported by advertising, or at least that's what Wall Street seems to be saying when it values Yahoo! at around \$73 billion.

Toy With Me

Want to get a jump on holiday shopping? Here's where to start.

By Sian Gibby

Updated Thursday, November 1, 2001, at 11:21 AM PT

How on-the-ball are you about holiday gifts? Are you one of those hyperorganized people who goes right out and buys next-year's Christmas cards on Dec. 26? Well, then you might want to get started holiday toy shopping for your children early. Like *now*.

Why so soon? Well, to get it over with. And besides, pouring money into our shell-shocked economy could potentially produce the same result we get when we feed our kids ice cream before bedtime—an upsurge in activity with no sign of a slowdown.

Some toy stores have not yet opened their secret coffers to reveal this winter's toy crazes. But hip and entertaining toys there are aplenty out there already, so why not get your shopping done early and then sit around drinking eggnog lattes later while all your friends are pulling their hair out and wondering if razor scooters are hopelessly passé and which is the right Barbie?

To make shopping easier for you, we broke the ginormous category of "toys" down into five Duplo-simple blocks: infant and toddler toys; dolls and action figures; stuffed toys; electronic games; and miscellany.

Infant and toddler toys: Babies are wonderfully predictable. The same things we played with and loved when we were drooling and pooping in our pants are just as popular with our crawling and waddling progeny today. Babies like colors and buttons and lights, so get anything that has these features and you will pretty much be in like Flynt. Fisher-Price stuff always charms, and they offer an endless variety of playthings; from the stackable doughnuts (if you don't have these, by some freakish accident, get them) to this Sparkling Symphony selection. Playing-grown-up toys like toy phones and lawn mowers enjoy a limitless popularity.

Also big this holiday season will be electronic music toys like Music Blocks, which uses plastic removable sound cards that allow youngsters to rearrange melodies by Bach, Mozart, and others (\$75). This is a sure bet (a hipster dad I know swears by the one they got for their daughter). If you have a nostalgic turn, equip your mobile tyke with the timeless Radio Flyer tricycle (\$49.99) or their *de rigueur* red wagon (\$89.99). And you'll be pleased to know that See 'n Say's Barnyard Bring-Along is still educating little folks in how to moo and baa for a mere \$10.99.

Dolls and action figures: You can buy Barbie dolls in a staggering array of incarnations. Barbie can do anything. She is a dentist, safari photographer, gymnast, fashion designer, and star ballerina in *The Nutcracker*. There even

exists a Barbie who pops out of a giant cake. (“Bachelor-party Barbie”? Not even going there.)

African-American, Latina, and So-Cal blond ‘n’ bronzed, Barbie comes from every country on earth—she has mutated so many times, she is all but unrecognizable. Recently Barbie, already flawlessly lovely, has become ... younger. A line of dolls called Generation Girls features Barbie-sized teens living hip “realistic” lives. We have Mari, a goofy techno-geek; the Diana-Ross-as-*Mahogany*-esque Nichelle; and even a rocker dude, Blaine, who has his own badass guitar and DJ turntable. For those seeking something more pedestrian, you can buy the McDonald’s employee Barbie. Cheering fact: The Mickey-D uniform looks as bad on her as it does on everyone else.

Barbie prices are all over the map: Wal-Mart features selected Barbies for about \$14; but some of the deluxe models can cost \$100 plus no matter where you buy them (one 5-year-old friend of mine was intensely distressed when Mom said that the ravishing, \$300 Bob Mackie-designed mermaid Barbie was simply out of the question). My choice would be the Fashion Model Barbie (around \$40 for the pared-down, underwear-clad-only version) with her retro 1950s sidelong glance; she is the most stylish and the most versatile.

Virtually every kids-themed or fantasy movie now boasts its own line of action figures—last year we saw *X-Men* and *Austin Powers* dolls—and this year will be no different. It’s a safe bet that the Harry Potter figures will be hot this season. You can get doll versions of most of the books’ characters, and Mattel has had the good sense to make them small and reasonably inexpensive. (Gund makes more costly, larger, slightly softer figures with more detail for \$28.) Also in evidence are Sully and Mike figures from *Monsters, Inc.*; these cuddly guys talk in John Goodman and Billy Crystal’s voices, but are they worth \$89.99? The movie isn’t even out yet!

Stuffed toys: Most kids possess tons of stuffed toys, but do they ever really *play* with them? Howsoever it be, there is no shortage of plush animals out there.

Elmo was the sine qua non for the holidays a few years back, and he’s still going strong: Tickle Me Elmo Surprise is ticklish in more places now, and he spouts a number of cheerful remarks (when you squeeze his paw—or whatever it is—he bursts forth with a stream of jolly but shrill phrases: “Elmo not very ticklish there!”). His “most ticklish place” is designed to change, keeping little kids guessing. When they get it right, Elmo erupts into spasms of delight.

There is also the more pricey Sing ‘n Strum Barney (\$39.99). My thoughts? Save your money and buy your kid some sneakers instead. She may not thank you for it now, but your household will be much happier. It is the most annoying thing on God’s green earth.

For the slightly older child, there's a selection of Pokémon stuffed toys so menacing as to make one wonder what kind of kid would request, let alone cuddle, them (\$5.99 apiece). Ditto the more deluxe Furbys (\$29.99).

FAO Schwarz has a line of exclusive stuffed toys, many of them charming. These Gund bears are my faves. They are soft and comforting, plus they appear to be smirking.

Electric and video games: It's hard for someone my age to get a handle on which of these games is hip. I had to get help from canny experts: my 12-year-old nephew, Noah, and his tres-cool buddies Logan and Conor. They told me (in laconic preteen tones) that StarCraft by Blizzard was happening. Bike and skateboard games, like Dave Mirra Freestyle (\$49.99), were accorded elaborately blasé kudos, as were John Madden Football games by Electronic Arts, GameBoy Advance (around \$150), Nintendo's GameCube (\$399), and Xbox (\$299).

Miscellany: Probably the most enduring toy fun can be had with LEGOs. I have watched 16-year-olds make fantastically sophisticated contraptions using the little plastic brainchildren of Danish toy designer Ole Kirk Christiansen. A basic set of 1,200 pieces costs \$26. For younger kids, Duplo starter sets run only \$20. LEGOs now has Harry Potter ensembles costing as little as \$6.99. You cannot lose if you buy LEGOs.

Back to Basics Toys features a mouthwatering choice of games and toys that are such classics, chances are both you *and* your parents enjoyed them as small people. A prime example: wooden block sets with pillars, arches, and columns (a complete 102-piece set going for around \$300. Yikes! Did Mom and Dad shell out that kind of dough for us?).

The same company offers the old spring rocking horse (\$96.99), BRIO's marble labyrinth game (\$64.99—remember trying to get the marble through the tipping maze?); Magic 8 Balls (\$7.99); Slinky (also \$7.99); as well as an impressive group of scooters, wind-surf scooters, and gas-powered scooters (much pricier; the gas one costs \$799, the TerraSailor windsurf scooter is a jaw-dropping \$1,199.99). I have it on good authority (Noah, Logan, and Conor) that Rupp minibikes are all the rage—cute-as-hell little scooters, they are also favored by portly Shriners on parade. (These are hard to find online; check out eBay or minibike clubs like this one for more info.)

Other good bets include remote-control cars (like the super-sized R/C Volkswagen Beetle for \$149.99), Foosball (\$229.99), pogo sticks (\$27.99), adjustable stilts (\$56.99), and dollhouses (most of the Back to Basics sets cost around \$200 apiece). Bright-yellow Tonka dump trucks cost \$45. If you love bumpin' little rides, don't forget Hot Wheels; you can stocking-stuff a HW gift pack with five bitchin' cars for just \$8.99. I say, go for these: Everyone loves Hot

Wheels.

If you're thinking that those Aibo robotic dogs from last year *have* to be cheaper this season, you're right, but they still cost a paralyzing \$1,500. If your tots simply must have a robot animal in 2001, try the less expensive Otto Bot or Dino-Chi (\$34.99 or \$29.99 at FAO).

So, grab your checkbooks and go get toyed up. You'll be glad you avoided the crowds and *still* scored some awesome treasures for your beloved spawn. Then relax and let the holidays roll on.

Packin' It In

Picking the best packing for your holiday shipping.

By Maureen Cosgrove

Posted Friday, December 14, 2001, at 12:42 PM PT

On the day I shipped all my belongings across the country to go back to school, I had an eerie feeling things were going a little too smoothly. Of the 30-odd boxes I was shipping via UPS Ground, the woman taking my packages needed only to glance at the first few before the other shoe dropped. When she asked me what was in the first few boxes (lots of glass and picture frames) and how I wrapped them (in newspaper), I learned that shipping isn't as easy as flirting with the UPS guy in the cute brown shorts. I spent the next four hours camped out at a table in the UPS station, with rolls and rolls of bubble wrap purchased at an extreme markup, repacking at least half of my life's possessions so that they were up to snuff for the exacting shipping requirements of UPS.

With hazy memories of this, and with lines growing ever longer at the post office as the holidays approach (do you really want to stand in those lines twice?), I thought the question merited revisiting: What exactly is the best way to ship breakables so they'll arrive intact?

To find out, I sought some of the more shipping-challenged items you might send to a pal for the holidays or to a friend who's about to gallop down the aisle. (Engagements are on the rise after Sept. 11.) I went to Crate & Barrel and purchased the cheapest hand-blown wine glasses I could find. (Hand-blown, it was explained to me, are much more fragile than those made by machine.) I picked up some tiny fragile glass Christmas tree ornaments, too. Then, to round out the breakable ensemble, I went home and hard-boiled a dozen eggs.

I chose the most common and accessible packing accoutrements: peanuts, aka loose fill, those annoying little Styrofoam puffs that inevitably end up all over your floor; bubble wrap, everyone's favorite popping pastime; newspaper (I wanted to prove UPS wrong); and, at the recommendation of the U.S. Postal Service,

popped popcorn ("it's inexpensive and environmentally friendly").

I decided to ship two boxes for each packing material. Each box got an egg, a wine glass, and an ornament. In one box I put the items free-floating in the packing itself. The other box, while filled with the same packing, had the extra protection of individually wrapped items (some in newspaper, some in bubble wrap) per the FedEx [Web site](#), which recommends wrapping items separately if you're shipping several in one box.

Because most of us are used to doing these sorts of things at the last minute, I shipped them all overnight to see how they'd fare with a little extra knocking around via airmail. No one at any of the shipping counters—Mail Boxes Etc. for the UPS packages and FedEx—seemed to notice that I was overnighting things to myself, and at exorbitant rates. (But then, maybe lots of people ship themselves hard-boiled eggs for Christmas.) The prices were indeed painful (approximately \$22 per box for UPS Next Day Air Saver service, and \$15 per box for FedEx's Standard Overnight delivery, both guaranteed for the next business afternoon), but I got what I paid for: I had all my packages the next day before noon. (To compare prices for shipping methods, check out the chart at the bottom of the page.)

Findings

The results were fairly straightforward: If you want breakable things to arrive whole, wrap them individually before putting them in any packing materials. Not one of my items that were wrapped up *and* protected with packing broke. As for the glasses and ornaments thrown naked into the packing material, all of those survived, too. The eggs were a different story.

As industry experts will attest, the items in bubble wrap had the least amount of damage—the egg floating free in bubble wrap had just a hairline crack. Though not dirt-cheap (\$4.25 for a roll of large-bubbled wrap that filled two boxes, 12 by 10 by 8 inches each), the bubble wrap was worth the investment. Plus it provided hours of bubble-popping entertainment.

Styrofoam peanuts, surprisingly, were not infallible either. The egg that had traveled rakishly in loose fill was pretty well cracked. At \$6 for a bag (enough to fill two boxes with a little left over), and considering how tedious they are to clean up, peanuts didn't seem to pull their weight in protecting valuables.

The worst protection, though, came from the newspaper. The fantasy of this being the perfect packing material because it happens to be conveniently lying around your house is just that: a fantasy. The egg packaged with newspaper was completely smashed in on one side and not in great shape around the others. So, while newsprint is extremely cheap to use, shipping is not the best way to recycle your daily paper.

The surprise winner in this horse race was the packing material least used (or least thought of for packing)—popped popcorn. At an economical \$1.15 per bag (we're talking the raw kernels here, not microwavable), which filled two boxes, popcorn was the only medium that provided such good insulation that the egg it carried didn't even have a crack. Moreover, it provided me with a tasty treat while I made out all those address slips.

Dum Dum Da Dum

But could I really rely on just eggs? That felt a little too easy, so I decided to ask some package-receiving experts: recent newlyweds.

The brides I talked to confirmed my findings, generally: Tissue paper and newspaper were not so good, and if they had anything that arrived broken, it had been packed in one or the other. As one of these ladies put it, "newspaper-wrapped items could well have been sent via wood chipper."

Peanuts, while they work, seemed to be universally loathed because of the mess they make. One bride suggested registering first for a vacuum cleaner to clean up after all the gifts you've received packed with peanuts since they fly everywhere and splinter and split when you try to catch them.

The two favorite wrappings among brides were foam wrap (just regular sheets of white foam, usually stuck between plates or dishes) and the air pillow, which was described by the newlyweds I polled as "the best filler out there." You've probably seen this inflatable air cushion—which looks something like a plastic sandwich bag inflated with air—if you've ordered books recently from Amazon.com. While not in as high a circulation as peanuts or bubble wrap yet (a spokeswoman at UPS told me they'd just received their first massive shipment of them), their popularity lies in their easy cleanup—just pop the air bags and throw them away.

So if you're worried about how much time you have left to ship for the holidays—and UPS says its deadline to ship something cross-country via ground service, which is much cheaper than air, and get it there before Christmas is Monday, Dec. 17—or if you're running up against that one-year-after deadline by which you need to send a wedding gift, just remember this: If you want your packages to arrive alive, keep the newspaper for reading or lighting your fire, and pack with something that goes snap (bubble wrap), crackle (peanuts), or pop (corn).

Paper Swoon

In the age of e-mail, fine stationery has become the ultimate signifier.

By Cynthia Kling

Posted Thursday, March 11, 1999, at 12:30 AM PT

As a striving free-lancer, I believe in the three note theory of success: i.e., send

three flattering missives to the right people each day, and you'll be at the top in no time. It doesn't really matter what you write--but what you write *on* does matter. Stationery has always been important, but paper's cachet as a cultural signifier has increased dramatically in the age of e-mail. While friends don't care if you send them letters on recycled grocery bags, those who don't know you will scrutinize the note--the paper, the letterhead--and judge you.

Cognizant of the perils of purchasing stationery, I start at the top, Cartier--arguably the snootiest stationer around. At the desk of the 52nd Street store in Manhattan, I find a stern saleswoman at the desk taking an order from "Mr. Ambassador" on the phone. She hangs up, looks at her watch, and says she can give me about 10 minutes--until the next ambassador, I guess. The first stationery she shows me is 32 pound (meaning that 500 stacked sheets of it will weigh that much). The sheet is thick enough to choke a Hewlett-Packard, which is the point, of course. It's the preferred weight for writing paper, the maximum recommended for laser printers is 28 pound.

Before we discuss paper price, she informs me that the name and address die to engrave the stationery will cost \$130. A little steep, I suggest. A die that includes a family crest is closer to \$1,000, she says crisply, "and people enjoy leaving their address dies to others in their wills."

We whip through some options--envelopes lined with tissue, beveling or indenting the sheet around the edge to create a border, stamping the family crest in gold--before we return to paper prices: Fifty ecru, note-sized sheets and matching envelopes go for \$254, engraving included. (That's about \$5 a note.) The price for 50 business-sized sheets and envelopes is \$259.50, and 50 6 inch by 4 inch note cards and envelopes cost \$256.

My fingers glide across the soft paper like skates on a pond. And then the saleswoman lets it slip: Cartier's paper is actually Crane's 32 pound paper.

Stephen Crane made the paper for the first colonial bank notes back in 1776; Paul Revere did the engraving. Those new 20s in your wallet with the Andrew Jackson watermark are Crane & Co.'s handiwork. In addition to the U.S. Mint and the treasuries of 40 other countries, Crane supplies paper for about 3,000 retail stationers in the United States. The locations of Crane & Co.'s 13 outlets can be found on [the firm's Web site](#), and another page lets you [search by ZIP code or international region](#) for other retailers. (A Greenwich, Conn., calligrapher tells me that Tiffany & Co. also repackages Crane's paper.)

"Most of our social stationery is 32 pound, 100 percent cotton rag," says Leslie Reed, Crane's manager of personal products. Cotton's long fibers are what make paper soft. In the old days, all paper was made of cotton rags, hence the name. Today, most writing paper is made of 25 percent cotton and 75 percent wood pulp. The problem with wood pulp is that paper makers have to use acid to break

it down--and the chemical never quits working. This explains why recently printed, cheaply made books are self-immolating in the Library of Congress, while 500-year-old Gutenberg Bibles are OK.

Some paperphiles buy foreign stationery made by Smythson of Bond Street, London, or by Pineider of Florence, Italy. Smythsons outlets can be traced via a toll-free number, (800) 345-6839. The saleswoman at Blacker and Kooby, on 87th and Madison, shows me some Smythson sheets and envelopes, offering that it is the paper of choice of the British royal family. Beautiful and very "U," as Nancy Mitford would say, but almost U in that hounds and blood sausage way. A little rumpy--the cards don't quite match the envelopes.

Then she opens a green leather case, revealing Pineider samples. It made me believe, as some scientists contend, that the beauty response is hard-wired. The paper is both languid and luminous, and it feels denser than Crane's. But the 225-year-old Italian stationers don't bother with weight standards, used for currency and book paper, because this stuff is strictly for letter writing. It is, they say, the smoothest possible writing surface you can find. It would be a crime to use anything other than a good fountain pen on it. But which pen? That's a research project unto itself.

The sheets are creamy white and the tissue lining in the envelope a bluer white. The saleswoman didn't have to drop names (the pope and Stevie Wonder) to justify the price of 75 note-sized sheets and envelopes. At \$144 (\$1.92 per note), this stationery is a steal. But the engraving cost is a steep \$175 and \$42 for the die plate. You can find Pineider outlets by calling (800) 616-9111.

I stop by Kanter's Printers on 23rd Street, an address generated by the Crane Web site. Kanter's price for 100 note-sized sheets and envelopes on Crane's paper is \$166 (\$1.66 a note!), about \$100 if I use Strathmore, a competing paper, which is only 25 percent cotton rag.

To get the stationery engraved, the die plate will cost \$56, about average. It is a onetime charge, and Kanter's--and most other stores--let you keep the plates. But if I forego the luxury of engraving, the clerk will sell me 500 24 pound Strathmore sheets and envelopes, flat printed, for \$167. (That's 33 cents a note. Now we're really talking.) Turnaround time for printing is 10 days, about a month faster than either Smythson or Pineider.

If you're not going Europaper, the mom and pop operations are definitely the best value. Is engraved paper really worth it? I ask the printer. "Some people want a Caddy and others want a Chevy," he shrugs. "Does anyone use colored paper?" "Hairdressers and discos."

After choosing paper, you must pick a size. Business-sized sheets are a mistake for two reasons: 1) it's difficult to write enough to fill that much space; and 2) that

much flattery might be misinterpreted as stalking. The note-sized sheets look insubstantial and girly. The 6 by 4 cards are best because they make a few scribbles look weighty and dignified.

Luckily, there are only three sizes of fine stationery, because there are hundreds of typefaces from which to compose your letterhead. At stationery shops you see people agonizing over whether they're really more Helvetica than Old Roman. The sample books don't help much because you want to see how it looks in your name on the size sheet you've chosen. Some Crane & Co. outlets let you test drive a sample of typefaces on a computer. The Levenger Web site, which sells Crane's, limits you to four sensible choices, so you can't go too far wrong. Most professional printers will do a proof of your letterhead for \$12-\$25.

Let me offer one piece of advice: Avoid monograms. Those three initials may look aristocratic, but that's because they were first used by drunken, illiterate royals who couldn't write their whole names. I wonder if Tom Wolfe knows that? His writing paper has a large blue, diamond shaped monogram at the top. But then, he doesn't need to observe the three note theory anymore.