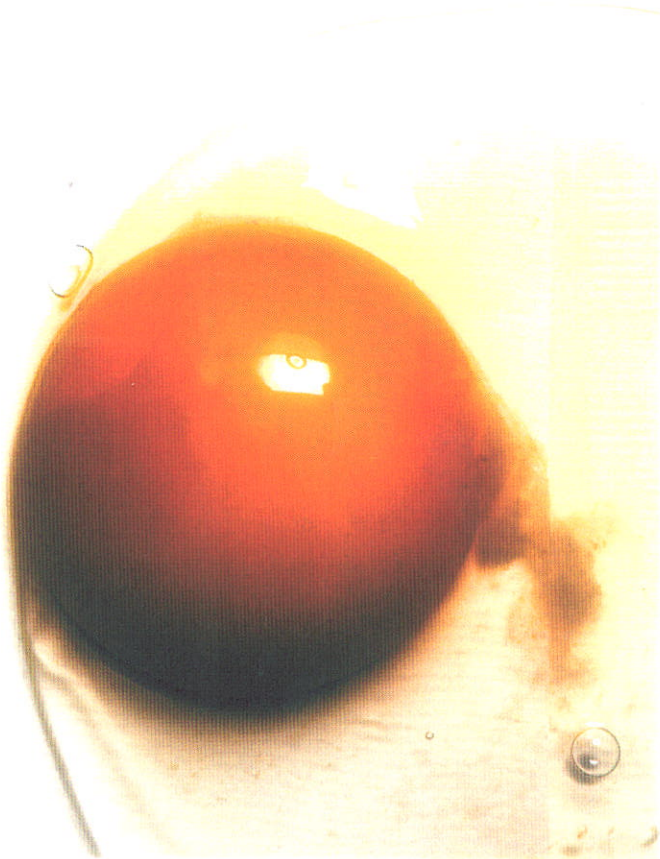


# VOGUE



## unbeatable

*While searching for the perfect gift food, from cured meats to artisanal cheeses, Jeffrey Steingarten learns the best way to ship precious cargo—even eggs. Photographed by Irving Penn.*

Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute please. Mr. Postman, deliver de lettah the sooner de betterah." I crooned softly yet insistently in the timeless song stylings of the Mar-Vettes. Finally, my computer responded, and several sets of clumsy, grainy photographs whooshed their way from Southern California to Manhattan. They were all I needed to complete our present mission. Several pictures showed oldsters in identical cardboard boxes, except that some seemed neatly pristine; others ranged from slightly to hideously battered; and some were wet and leaking a turbid yellow fluid. Several pictures showed the boxes, open and filled with those plastic "peanuts" used for packing, though sometimes the peanuts were wet with a clotted yellow stain. Still other pictures were of Ziploc plastic bags filled with eggs, some whole, some smashed, and some smashed and oozing from the bag.

What was our mission? Most places you can, food is getting better and better. Farmers' markets are popping up every where. Organic fruit and vegetables have become more the rule than the exception. Many more farms raise low and livestock humanely; in the northeastern U.S., at least, pampered pigs are pastured on countless family farms. American character is getting better every year; so do our cheeses and even our chocolates. Chefs are playing with science to create dishes that have never before been dreamed of. Many of them are even good to eat. And at the same time, ancient food traditions are being revived and reinterpreted. The world of can, so dark and depressing in recent years, is finally brightening. Chefs and shops and food magazines intently search the world for new plants, spices, recipes. Every week, it seems, another two or three tiny restaurants are opened (in downtown Manhattan at least) by couples who want only to feed other people very well. It's like sixteenth-century Florence. There's genius on every corner. That's from John Guare's scolding *Six Degrees of Separation*, describing the food scene sixteen years ago. What would he say now?

**OVER EASY**  
The more gourmet food is refined to perfection, the less likely it is to be found locally. But will your mail-order gifts arrive fresh and unbroken?  
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