



Celebrity brands

Are star-studded products worth their A-list prices?

A MERICA'S FASCINATION with celebrities goes beyond their exploits on the stage, screen, or field, leading more and more stars to cash in with products that bear their names. But are those offerings buzz-worthy? Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

A shiraz with golfer Greg Norman's name is excellent, for example, with rich fruit flavors, but a shiraz from a vineyard owned by Dave Matthews is just OK, with a slightly pungent off-note. Even the same name may have products that vary in quality. Martha Stewart's sheets rated Very Good; her laundry detergent was so bad in our tests last year that plain water cleaned about as well.

In our most recent tests of celebrity merchandise, we bypassed Justin Bieber nail polish and Jessica Simpson underwear to test products more likely to be on our readers' shopping lists: pasta sauces,

salad dressings, and soups.

The products are from chefs who cook on TV (Lidia Bastianich, Mario Batali, and Giada De Laurentiis, for example), from restaurants that achieved notice beyond their hometowns (Original Bookbinder's in Philadelphia, and Delmonico's and Rao's in New York City), and from Hollywood heavyweights (Francis Ford Coppola, Paul Newman, and Paul Sorvino). We also included brands linked to other notables; Muir Glen, named for John Muir, the naturalist and writer; and Pritikin, whose founder was an early promoter of diet and exercise. And we included The Sil-

ver Palate, a New York specialty-food store that inspired a series of cookbooks.

Although three of the 26 products were excellent and 10 were very good, half were only average, with some no better than cheaper mainstream brands such as Campbell's, Kraft, and Progresso. (See "Whose Star Shines Brightest?" beginning on page 18.)

Seeing stars

If you think you're spotting more famous-name products on shelves these days, you're right. In 2002 when we published the results of our taste-off of celebrity pasta sauces, many were sold through gourmet



'Our food was never invented in a lab. It always comes out of our kitchen.'

—WOLFGANG PUCK We rate his Tomato Basil Bisque Organic soup Excellent.

shops and restaurants and online. Today you will find more celebrity products in supermarkets, says Lynn Dornblaser, an expert on new products and trends at Mintel, a market-research company. Dornblaser credits the boom in TV cooking shows.

Pam Danziger, president of Unity Marketing in Pennsylvania and an expert on shopping behavior, attributes a rise in celebrity influence to the “luxé” effect. “People buy these branded products because it makes them feel special, rewarded, luxurious to have the reflected luxury of the celebrity brand,” she says. “Even if these goods are twice, three times, or six times as expensive as other products competitive in their class, they still are affordable.” So, she says, consumers “get the luxury kick without paying all that much.”

Well-known people give a product visibility in three months instead of three years, says Marshal Cohen, chief retail

industry analyst in New York at the NPD Group, a market-research company. Celebrity chefs lend particular credibility when they attach their name to anything edible, he says. “If Vera Wang designs a mattress, people say, ‘What does she know, she makes wedding gowns.’ But if Paula Deen or Rachael Ray make coffee or a cake mix, it’s a very believable combination.”

Believable, indeed. In the most recent version of an ongoing NPD national consumer poll, five of the 10 “most-trusted” celebrities were chefs (Paula Deen and Emeril Lagasse topped the list).

Still, you don’t need to be a master chef to front a food label. Case in point: Paul Sorvino. You may remember the scene from Martin Scorsese’s “Goodfellas,” in which the actor portrays incarcerated mob boss Paulie Cicero, who’s slicing paper-thin pieces of garlic with a razor blade for a jailhouse feast. That image may have

helped Sorvino’s career as a marketer of imported Italian foods. According to his company’s website, the actor’s marinara comes from his father’s birthplace in Italy. The sauce incorporates plum tomatoes “grown in rich volcanic soil around Naples,” along with other ingredients, including ... sliced garlic. Our testers found Sorvino’s mild sauce to be very good, though not as good as six others.

Top tomatoes and more

The products we tested typically cost two to three times as much as garden-variety brands. For example, The Original Soupman Tomato Basil (created by the Soup Nazi of “Seinfeld”), costs 36 cents per ounce vs. 11 cents per ounce for Progresso. The price gap was notable among pasta sauces and salad dressings, too. For a half-cup of tomato sauce, Ragu is 42 cents; Rao’s, \$1.41. For 2 tablespoons of balsamic

How other celebrity products fare

We recently tested celebrity goods in a host of categories. Here’s how they ranked vis-à-vis the top- and bottom-rated brands.

Wine (syrah/shiraz)

BEST Mollydooker The Boxer 2009 (84/Excellent)

CELEBRITY Greg Norman Shiraz 2007 (82/Excellent)

CELEBRITY Francis Coppola Syrah-Shiraz 2008 (61/Very Good)

CELEBRITY Andretti Napa Valley Syrah 2008 (55/Good)

CELEBRITY Emilio Estevez Casa Dumetz Syrah Noir 2009 (52/Good)

CELEBRITY Dave Matthews Blenheim Vineyards Syrah 2009 (50/Good)

WORST JC Cellars Syrah 2008 (50/Good)

Wine (red blend)

BEST Pillar Box Red 2008 (76/Very Good)

CELEBRITY Coppola Rosso 2009 (66/Very Good)

CELEBRITY Greg Norman Shiraz-Cabernet 2007 (60/Good)

WORST M. Chapoutier Bila-Haut 2009 (53/Good)

Colombian coffee (ground)

BEST Gloria Jean’s Colombian Supremo Medium Roast (63/Very Good)

CELEBRITY Newman’s Own Organics Colombian Especial

Medium Roast (61/Very Good)

CELEBRITY Paula Deen Captain’s Choice (51/Good)

WORST Maxwell House 100% Colombian Medium Dark (38/Fair)

Laundry detergent

BEST Tide HE Plus Bleach Alternative (68/Very Good)

WORST/CELEBRITY Martha Stewart Clean Laundry Detergent (in HE machine) (27/Fair)

Nonstick cookware

BEST EarthPan With Sand Flow (77/Very Good)

CELEBRITY Emerilware (73/Very Good)

WORST Mercola Healthy Chef (31/Fair)

Uncoated cookware

BEST/CELEBRITY Emerilware Stainless (67/Very Good)

WORST Culinary Institute of America Master Collection (43/Low Good)

Fine-edge kitchen knives

BEST Henckels Twin Professional “S” (87/Excellent)

CELEBRITY Rachael Ray Furi Gusto-Grip (73/Very Good)



CELEBRITY Paula Deen 51484 (52/Good)

WORST Sabatier #5055725 (36/Fair)

Blenders

BEST VitaMix 5200 (76/Very Good)

WORST/CELEBRITY Wolfgang Puck WPBLFP50 (Sold via HSN) (16/Poor)

Food processors

BEST Cuisinart DLC-2011CHB (73/Very Good)

CELEBRITY Wolfgang Puck BBLFP050 (54/Good)

CELEBRITY Emerilware 3-in-1 FP4121002A (34/Fair)

WORST Black & Decker MiniPro Plus MFP200T (29/Fair)

Brownie mix

BEST Trader Joe’s Brownie Truffle (84/Excellent)

CELEBRITY Barefoot Contessa Outrageous (83/Excellent)

WORST Trader Joe’s Gluten Free (44/Good)

Barbecue sauce

BEST Stubb’s Original (76/Very Good)

CELEBRITY Emeril’s Original BAM! B-Q (71/Very Good)

WORST Jack Daniel’s Original No. 7 Recipe (44/Good)

Dijon mustard

BEST Trader Joe’s (79/Very Good)

WORST/CELEBRITY Emeril’s (56/Good)

100% cotton percale sheets

BEST L.L. Bean Pima (71/Very Good)

CELEBRITY Martha Stewart Collection (69/Very Good)

CELEBRITY Calvin Klein Home Collection: Double Row Cord Percale (60/Good)

WORST/CELEBRITY Tommy Hilfinger T-200 (33/Fair)

Whose star shines brightest?

▶ Pasta sauce

A top sauce tastes as if prepared from scratch. Too little time on the stove, the flavors may not develop enough. Too much time, it tastes overcooked. If we had included Ragu, it would have ranked toward the top of the Good category. Testers called it smooth, simple, and mild.

EXCELLENT

Giada De Laurentiis Tomato Basil (Target)

The granddaughter of film producer Dino De Laurentiis was born in Rome, trained at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, worked for Wolfgang Puck at his Spago restaurant in Los Angeles, and has had a series of shows on the Food Network.

Price \$3 (23.5 oz.) CR Best Buy

The scoop Balanced and fresh-tasting, with a buttery richness.

Mario Batali Marinara

Food Network "Iron Chef" host Batali has a culinary empire that stretches as far as Singapore. His flagship restaurant is the award-winning Babbo, and his latest project is Eataly, a wine and specialty-food market. Both are in New York City.

Price \$8 (24 oz.)

The scoop A balanced, fresh-tasting, and garlicky tomato-basil sauce.

VERY GOOD

Vincent's Marinara

Based on an Old World recipe that has been a staple at Original Vincent's Clam Bar on the corner of Mott and Hester streets in New York City's Little Italy since 1904.

Price \$6.20 (25 oz.)

The scoop A fresh-tasting, fairly well balanced, and unusually bright red sauce with herbs and spices.

Rao's Homemade Marinara

From the family-owned restaurant in New York City's East Harlem that opened in 1896 and is now so exclusive that the average Joe, or Giuseppe, can't get a table.

Price \$8.45 (24 oz.)

The scoop A good choice if you like a bit of heat. Fresh-tasting, fairly well balanced, and slightly spicy.

The Silver Palate Marinara

From the former fancy food shop in New York City that spawned a series of popular cookbooks.

Price \$5.50 (25 oz.)

The scoop Fresh-tasting, garlicky, and notably smooth, though a bit salty.

Lidia's Marinara

From Lidia Bastianich, chef, author, restaurateur, and owner of a food, wine, and kitchenware products empire. She also heads Tavola Productions, the company behind her "Lidia's Italy" series on public television.

Price \$5.17 (25 oz.)

The scoop A good choice for garlic lovers. Fresh-tasting, very garlicky, and slightly spicy with a chili pepper aromatic.

Paul Sorvino Foods Marinara

Based on recipes from actor Paul Sorvino, whose family hails from Naples, Italy.

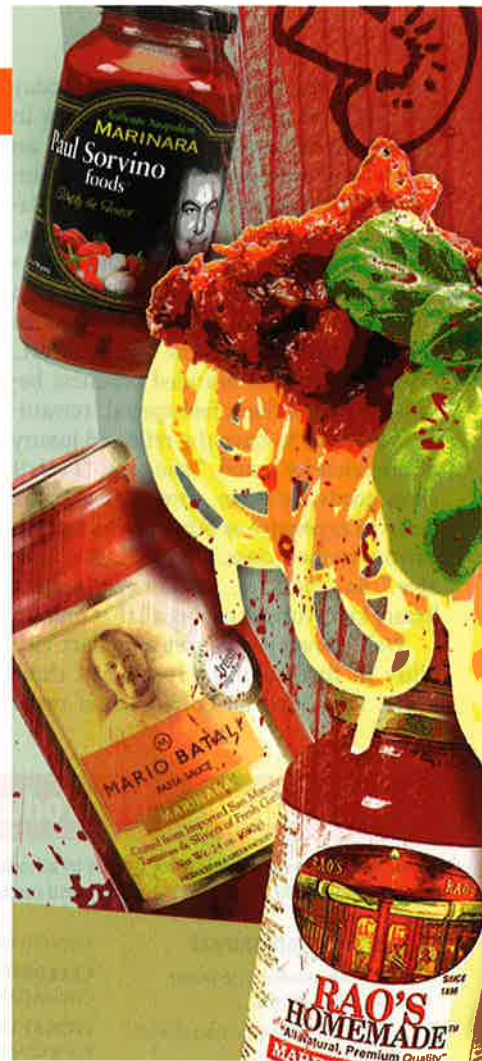
Price \$6.75 (25 oz.)

The scoop A good choice if you like mostly tomatoes. Fresh-tasting, mild sauce that's notably thin but has large tomato chunks. Herbs and spice flavors are minimal.

GOOD

Francis Coppola Pomodoro-Basilico

An Oscar-winning writer, director, producer, and California winemaker, Coppola also sells a line of organic pastas and sauces named after his mother, who wanted her



grandchildren to call her Mammarella (Little Mama) instead of Grandma.

Price \$5.95 (25 oz.)

The scoop A good choice if you like it hot. A spicy, chunky sauce with large herb leaves. Saltier than most others and a bit tangy. Chili pepper flavor.

Patsy's Marinara

From the 67-year-old, family-owned New York City restaurant that claims to have been Frank

vinaigrette dressing, Kraft is 18 cents; Delmonico's, 39 cents. What's more, Delmonico's ranked lowest among the dressings we tried.

Because celebrity products are pricier, they can afford to include better ingredients, such as balsamic vinegar, extra virgin olive oil, fresh herbs and vegetables, and San Marzano plum tomatoes from Italy.

Many celebrity products include such ingredients, but others don't. In Mario Batali's \$8 bottle of marinara (\$1.33 per

half-cup), he uses San Marzano tomatoes; fresh, not dehydrated, carrots, garlic, Italian parsley, onions, and thyme; extra-virgin olive oil, and sea salt. By contrast, Emeril's (about \$4) and Newman's Own (less than \$3) list tomato purée (water and tomato paste) as the first ingredient, as does Ragu. Emeril's doesn't specify whether its onions are fresh, but the label notes the garlic is powdered. The garlic and onions in Newman's Own are dried.

It's tougher to judge the quality of

soups and salad dressings by their ingredients. But we noticed that Kraft Balsamic Vinaigrette lists water as the first ingredient. The two top-rated dressings, Rao's and The Silver Palate, cite soybean oil and aged balsamic vinegar, respectively. The knock against most of the balsamic vinaigrette dressings, celebrity or otherwise, was nondescript oil and vinegar flavors.

Nutrition is another difference among the products, so be sure to check our Ratings. Vincent's Marinara, for example,



Sinatra's favorite and which still boasts a broad celebrity clientele, including Rush Limbaugh and Sean "Diddy" Combs.

Price \$6.75 (24 oz.)

The scoop Big garlicky and herb flavors. But an off-note to the garlic detracted from the overall quality.

Emeril's Home Style Marinara

Chef, restaurateur (he owns 13), TV personality, and author Emeril Lagasse was so big that

has about half the sodium of some others, and Cardini's and Emeril's dressings have very little fat. The Original Soupman soup is loaded with sodium.

Are the stars involved?

We contacted the celebrity chefs to ask what role they play in product development. Representatives for Mario Batali, Francis Ford Coppola, Paula Deen, Ina Garten, and Rachael Ray initially expressed interest, but their famous clients

NBC gave him his own sitcom in 2001. Today his food empire is owned by the Martha Stewart family of brands.

Price \$3.88 (25 oz.)

The scoop For those who like it a tad sweet. Smooth, sweet sauce with a tomato-paste-like flavor, along with a flavor of dehydrated seasonings. Highly processed impression.

Newman's Own Marinara

Founded by the late actor and philanthropist Paul Newman, Newman's Own sells more than 100 varieties of food and beverage products, and all the profits (more than \$300 million since 1982) are donated to charities, according to the company.

Price \$2.85 (24 oz.)

The scoop Smooth and thick, with a tomato-paste-like flavor, a big dehydrated oregano taste, and a touch of heat. Highly processed impression.

Muir Glen Organic Tomato Basil

The company, founded in 1991, is named after John Muir, the naturalist, writer, and father of the National Park Service.

Price \$4.55 (25.5 oz.)

The scoop Chunky, thick, sweet, dark-red sauce, with tomato-paste-like character and the intense flavor of dehydrated herbs, especially oregano. Highly processed impression.

Ratings Pasta sauce

In order of overall quality. CR Best Buy Recommended

Rec.	Rank	Product	Cost		Specs		
			Per container	Per serving	Calories	Fat (g)	Sodium (mg)
EXCELLENT							
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Giada De Laurentiis Tomato Basil (Target)	\$3.00	\$0.60	100	7	440
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Mario Batali Marinara	8.00	1.33	70	4	490
VERY GOOD							
	3	Vincent's Marinara	6.20	1.24	100	6	220
	4	Rao's Homemade Marinara	8.45	1.41	70	5	350
	5	The Silver Palate Marinara	5.50	0.92	50	3.5	530
	6	Lidia's Marinara	5.17	0.86	70	2.5	460
	7	Paul Sorvino Foods Marinara	6.75	1.13	60	3.5	250
GOOD							
	8	Francis Coppola Pomodoro-Basilico	5.95	0.99	50	3	360
	9	Patsy's Marinara	6.75	1.13	100	6	423
	10	Emeril's Home Style Marinara	3.88	0.65	90	3	430
	11	Newman's Own Marinara	2.85	0.57	70	2	460
	12	Muir Glen Organic Tomato Basil	4.55	0.76	60	1	370

Guide to the Ratings

The Ratings are based on how close each product came to our criteria for excellence, as judged in blind testing by our trained tasters. Price is the approximate retail per container. For pasta sauces, jars ranged from 23.5 to 25.5 ounces; for salad dressing, 8 to 16 ounces; soups, 10 to 15 ounces. Cost per serving and calories, fat, and sodium content are based on one-half cup (4 oz.) for pasta sauce, 2 tablespoons for salad dressing, and one cup for all soups except The Original Soupman, whose cost is for the entire frozen 10 oz. package (it's smaller than most and needs no dilution). Most of the products are available at supermarkets. Giada De Laurentiis Tomato Basil pasta sauce is sold only at Target. These other products have more limited distribution but can be bought online: Lidia's Marinara (www.lidiasitally.com), Francis Coppola Pomodoro-Basilico (store.franciscoppolawinery.com), Bookbinder's soup (www.bookbindersfoods.com), and The Original Soupman soup (www.originalsoupman.com).

'I personally test them several times to make sure they are delicious.'

—GIADA DE LAURENTIIS Her Tomato Basil pasta sauce is a CR Best Buy.



didn't get back to us. Lidia Bastianich, Giada De Laurentiis, Emeril Lagasse, and Wolfgang Puck did.

"People have really trusted me, and I take that trust seriously," says Bastianich,

a restaurateur whose public-television show, "Lidia's Italy," is taped in part at her Long Island, N.Y., home, not far from where her sauce is made. "I oversee production. I'm there when they make the