

THE HOME FRONT

The Better Butter Battle

After Trans Fat Concerns,
Gourmet Butter Spreads;
Hints of Hazelnuts and Brie

BY CHARLES PASSY

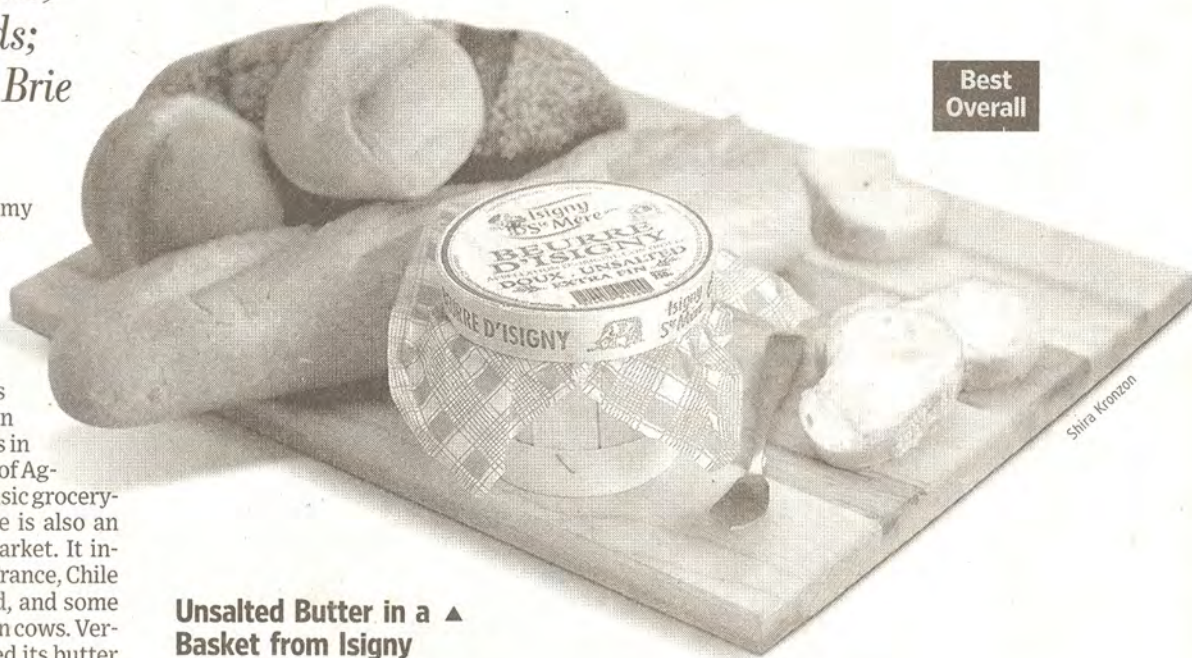
SATURATED FAT isn't the only enemy in the supermarket now. As nutritionists have targeted trans fats—the processed fats that have been linked to heart disease and are in some kinds of margarine—butter is making a comeback.

Butter consumption per capita has risen to an estimated 4.5 pounds in 2005 from an all-time low of 4.1 pounds in 1997, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The vast majority of that is basic grocery-store butter, but there is also an emerging boutique market. It includes versions from France, Chile and even New Zealand, and some made from the milk of goats, rather than cows. Vermont Butter & Cheese Co. has expanded its butter offerings to three from one over the last decade; the latest is made with sea salt. Spokeswoman Adeline Folley says that sales have grown by at least 10% annually over the last few years.

There's a smaller niche still: mail-order boutique butter. Online retailer gourmet says its butter sales rose 135% last year. But talk about a double indulgence. Specialty versions can easily go for as much as \$15 a pound—about three times the cost of an average supermarket brand. And mandatory overnight shipping can set you back another \$20 to (ouch) \$45.

Israel Monteagudo, a jeweler from Miami Gardens, Fla., orders six pounds of French butter online every three months. He can't find it locally, so he doesn't mind paying about \$200 per order. He's been advised to cut back on his saturated fats due to his heart—all the more reason to splurge on what he likes, he says. "If it's not good butter, I won't have it."

To get an overall view of the market, we bought five varieties online in a range of styles. Then we asked husband-and-wife chefs Alex and Sara Martinez, who run Yopo restaurant in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., to give them a taste test. This was serious work: The chefs first tried the butters straight from a spoon, and then on a country-style bread. They quickly tasted the benefits of the high fat content—in some cases, as much as

Best
OverallUnsalted Butter in a ▲
Basket from Isigny

(Best Overall)

Gourmet Food Store

gourmetfoodstore.com; 877-591-8008

\$7.98 for 8.8 ounces; overnight shipping adds \$27

The good: It had a rich, complex flavor, "like a good French wine," Mr. Martinez said, and a pleasing hint of brie cheese. (It would be great on a croissant, he said.) The small basket, with a fabric accent, was gift-worthy.

The bad: The shipping. We wouldn't bake with it given the price—and the chefs said the full taste wouldn't come through unless the recipe was very buttery.

The shopping: Easy. Well-organized site says butter (sold in bar form, too) keeps for 18 days in the fridge.

▼ Vermont Butter & Cheese Co.
Butter Roll

(Best Value)

1-800-Gourmet

1800gourmet.com; 800-468-7638

\$6.05 for one pound; overnight shipping is \$44.40

The good: An intensely creamy butter—no surprise given its 86% fat content. "You can feel the milk in your mouth," Mr. Martinez said. The chefs thought the cultures in the butter lent it a rustic taste. Bring on the crusty bread.

The bad: While the butter was a relative value, shipping was not. You can search for local retailers at vtbutterandcheeseco.com.

The shopping: Pricey. It's available at other retailers including zingermans.com, where one pound costs \$37, including overnight shipping. (Item was out of stock there when we ordered.)

1-800-Gourmet is offering 20% off if you register for your first order.

Best
Value

86% versus the 80% found in most supermarket varieties. At times, our test sounded like a wine tasting, as they detected hints of hazelnut or brie.

Butter, which is essentially churned milk or cream drained of excess liquid, can be surprisingly complex. Its taste and texture come in part from fat content, as well as the grass the cattle feed upon. Butters from France's Normandy region are said to have a naturally salty taste thanks to the land's proximity to the sea. Some makers add cultures—the same friendly bacteria used in cheese—and let the mixture ferment slightly before churning. Versions that use goat's milk often appeal to people who can't tolerate cow's milk; the milk can also lend a nutty or tangy taste. Production methods make a difference: Boutique butters, made in smaller batches than commercial, may be churned more slowly.

In the end, we found some varieties worth the expense. One way to lessen the blow: Buy several and freeze any butter you won't eat within a couple of weeks. Though some companies allow two-day shipping (for under \$25), it can be risky. We tried that with one butter, and it arrived to our Florida home in a liquid state.

Popcorn, anyone?

How we shopped: First, by looking for recommendations at sites like chowhound.com. Though we read about some prized foreign butters from Italy and Eastern Europe, they were hard to find. To save on shipping, you can try calling around. In an offline search, we found the Vermont, Devon and Meyenberg versions at gourmet retailers in New York. Some makers' Web sites list local shops, including meyenberg.com.

Contact us at catalogcritic@wsj.com.



Double Devon Cream Butter ▶

igourmet.com

igourmet.com; 877-446-8763

\$5.94 for eight ounces; overnight shipping adds \$26.49

The good: Another creamy sensation, with a small hint of salt and a nicely "nutty" aftertaste," Ms. Martinez said. It would make a fine breakfast butter for morning toast.

The bad: Like our other great butters, this seemed too expensive for baking. "This is an eating butter," Ms. Martinez said.

The shopping: Site had the widest selection of the five, including a "Butters of the World" assortment for \$33.99.



◀ Goat Milk Butter

Meyenberg

meyenberg.com; 800-891-4628

\$7 for eight ounces; overnight shipping is \$43.98

The good: A great option for those looking for an alternative to cow's milk. Everyone else might appreciate its very slightly tangy flavor. The experts thought the butter, with about 84% fat, had good depth and character.

The bad: The snow-white color and somewhat waxy texture could be off-putting to cow's milk purists.

The shopping: We originally ordered two-day shipping, for \$22.76, but butter arrived melted. Company was extremely apologetic and sent out an overnight shipment right away, throwing in an extra eight-ounce bar.



▼ Straus Family Creamery European-Style Organic Unsalted Butter

Diamond Organics

diamondorganics.com; 888-674-2642

\$11.95 for one pound; overnight shipping costs \$21

The good: Butter, with 85% fat, seemed intended for daily use, especially baking: The package included four four-ounce bars, with clear markings indicating tablespoons.

The bad: The chefs thought it had little character—and they detected a faint refrigerator odor and taste. (Retailer says it rarely keeps quantities around for long.)

The shopping: Site didn't reveal the shipping total until after the order was processed. The company will email customers with the shipping cost before an order goes out.