

proceed would be to purchase the Scallion Sauce Tofu—glistening chunks in a dark, medium-thick brown sauce loaded with Asian flavors, and especially loaded with a true scallion taste.

Then there's only one more option I know of, and it's the best. D&J's greatest product, to me, combines both of their manufactures.....into the most delicious Korean/creative/modern whatever I know, a commingling of large tofu chunks and a reddish paste made from kim chee. Wow! The spicy kim chee tastes vividly of capicum, and not just heat. But the heat part is brilliantly smoothed out by the creamy tofu it caresses. This is one of those great ingredient juxtapositions that only comes along a few times a year (though some Korean restaurants do something similar); if you can, go out and get this one, the best I've ever had, and a miraculous start to any Asian meal.

Compared to what's available in most Korean markets, the D&J products are exactly what you hope they might be: a fresher, brighter, more ingredient-driven take on tradition from an organic producer.

2 MT. VIKOS TAVERNA MEZE (about \$5.99 for a 7.3-7.6 oz tub)

In response to my Greek travel story in the last ROSENGARTEN REPORT, I received the following letter from Ron Cardoos, a partner at the importing company Mt. Vikos in Marshfield, Massachusetts:

Hi David,

I read your notes on eating Greek Meze in Thessaloniki and smiled. My wife Sheree and I have been to Thessaloniki many times and we agree with your thoughts. We were, however, very disappointed when we tasted the Greek meze from there that are being sent back to the states. We actually spit it out. Then we tasted the fancy "gourmet" Greek spreads with attractive labels and spit those out as well. "WE can do better," my Ohio-born wife said. So we went to Thessaloniki where we know a reputable food producer. We demanded top-quality ingredients, and only concerned ourselves with taste and texture. Our goal was to capture the freshness of the meze dishes we tasted in the tavernas.....

Ron Cardoos

And with the letter came samples of their four new products: spreads to serve as meze, or Greek appetizers, perfect for appetizers or at cocktail hour (ouzo hour!)

Now, I have some experience with this company.... particularly in the area of Greek cheeses, which are wonderfully selected by Sheree. I've also written about a meze-like product, *gigandes*, or giant white beans, which Mt. Vikos prepares deliciously. But nothing in the past adequately prepared me for the stand-out nature of the Taverna Meze line they have just launched.

The great thing about these chunky spreads is that they capture the actual textures, the specific textures..... that freshly made products do! They have nothing in common with the reduced-to-common-denominator Greek wannabe-meze products that usually get put in tubs, jars and cans.

They are so good, I'd be happy to serve them at my next Greek dinner party. They are so good, I'd consider lying and telling my guests I made them!

Here they are in ascending order of Dionysian ecstasy:

The Mt. Vikos Kalamata Olive Spread shows everything that's great about Kalamata olives: it is crazy full of cured-olive flavor, but the finish holds only a minor trace of bitterness. This is exactly why I love to cook with Kalamatas. Now it's easier than ever....but you should also use this product as it's intended, as a meze. The tub's amazing to look at: a super-dense purple-black paste, capturing exactly the typical Kalamata color. But more amazing still is the texture—a purée, with its little lumps and bumps suggesting olives themselves, plus a modicum of garlic; as a texture bonus, it is also much lighter, fluffier, runnier than you'd expect it to be. This stuff is killer slathered on grilled pita (or bread), over a bottom layer of something creamy—anything from manouri cheese to feta cheese, two other terrific Mt. Vikos imports. A simple *fromage blanc*, or labné....or Greek yogurt!.....would also work.

The Mt. Vikos Red Pepper and Feta Spread goes to the next level for me. Let me tell you this right off: if you like red peppers, if you like sweetness, and if you like the feel of dairy in your mouth.....you're in. This is a chunky, sexy, wet, almost runny mélange of red peppers, onions and feta—but the great achievement is the way it coats your mouth with the feel of cheese. Could this taste any fresher, or more real?

However.....for me.....it starts to get *really* wild with the Mt. Vikos Artichoke Spread. How many times have you tried a prepared artichoke product that tastes nothing like artichokes? Or tastes at best like a distant echo?

This Mt. Vikos mind-blower is perhaps the first commercial artichoke preparation I've ever had that really seems as if you'd just made it in your kitchen from fresh artichokes! Visual description first: it's a messy clutter of coarsely chopped artichoke pieces, with a strew of herbs, kind of yellow-ish green, held together by an oily paste, looking something like a white clam sauce. Again, the texture blows me out: the artichoke pieces really chew like freshly-cooked artichoke. Then comes the flavor. My oldest daughter hit on something great while we were tasting: "Dad," she said...."this tastes like tea!" And I realized...the taste of a fresh steamed artichoke *is* related to the taste of fresh-brewed black tea. This stuff is so artichoke-y it made us realize what artichokes taste like! I also love the lemon-dill flavors surrounding the artichoke-ness. One caveat, however: eat fast after opening, because true artichoke taste is ephemeral....

Lastly, the top of the line for me is the Mt. Vikos Roasted Eggplant Spread. OK, *je suis auberginist*I LOVES my eggplant! But prejudice removed, I still think this product is the crowning glory in the line. For starters, Mt. Vikos has hit the ideal consistency here: the bulky red-orange mix (red from peppers and sun-dried tomatoes) is chunkier than some baba ganouj, but more puréed than caponata. I love spooning it mainline (right into my mouth), or spreading it on bread, either way discovering the chewy chunks within the velvet paste; it has weight, lushness, oiliness, gravitas. It also has the kind of sublime cooked flavor you get when eggplant hits hot oil, and a terrific, subtle smokiness. And, lurking in the background, is the brio of red wine vinegar, lifting an already lifted creation.

These winners have a great shipping story, too: they don't need refrigeration until after they're opened, making transport ultra-easy! I can't imagine how this much vividness gets into a non-refrigerated vegetable product....but Mt. Vikos has cracked the nut.

3 GARLIC GOLD, SEVEN OAKS RANCH (various prices under \$10 for various products in this line)

Here's another company I wrote about a few years ago that has recently introduced some new products. In this case my purpose is, yes, to tell you about the new ones....but also to insist you get the old ones, which have become absolute staples in my pantry!

Let's start with this truism that I'm sure many of

you find as true as I do: NEVER HAVE YOUR HEAD TURNED BY GARLIC CONVENIENCE PRODUCTS!!! Lord knows, over the years I've tried hundreds of them, always looking for that short cut around the never-neat peel-and-chop process with fresh garlic. Garlic in a glass jar, garlic in oil, minced garlic in oil, etc., etc., until the day came when I accepted the peeling and chopping of fresh garlic as an eternal given in my cooking life.

About five years ago, another day came.....the day that Garlic Gold products showed up at my door. I was skeptical, of course.....but my eye was caught by a product called Garlic Gold Nuggets, Organic (\$4.45, for 2.1oz).....which had exactly the look of the fresh garlic bits I brown up to toss with pasta and other things. I'd never seen convenience garlic in this form before. Could it be.....? Yes it could..... Very definitely yes. It was! These guys were scrumptious, very fresh-tasting, a lot like what I make myself. And all I had to do was screw open a jar! I'm telling you the raw, honest truth.....I use 'em all the time.

I did a little research, and found out that this southern California company, Garlic Gold, started in 2002, when Rinaldo Brotuco helped his 8th-grade son with a school economics project: creating a business plan. They chose to focus on Rinaldo's home-made garlic nuggets. They created a prototype: crunchy, toasted nuggets mixed with a bit of cold-pressed organic extra-virgin olive oil. Then they saw the light! The business launched, they expanded to two more products (a very good Garlic Gold Oil, \$9.95 for 250ml, and an excellent Garlic Gold, \$5.95 for 3.75 oz, the nuggets in a lot of olive oil), and, just this year, expanded the original "nuggets" line by adding three new flavors.

Once again, these guys surprised the hell out of me. All of these new products have the same integrity of the original—and, in the scary world of added flavor, each one has an exciting additional profile, not at all artificial tasting. I can see literally thousands of uses.

The **Garlic Gold Sea Salt Nuggets** (\$5.45 for 2.3 oz) is fantastic: there's a great, bracing saltiness, and, if you toss with oiled pasta, nothing extra is needed!

I'm astounded by the **Garlic Gold Italian Herb Nuggets** (\$5.45 for 1.6 oz): how many dried-herb preps in little jars taste appealing? This one does!—kind of like the great oregano sprinkled over a pizza at a good pizza parlor.

Lastly, there's the one I had least hope for: the **Garlic Gold Parmesan Nuggets** (\$5.45 for 2.2 oz). Now, we all know that "Parmesan" ain't likely to be Parmigiano-Reggiano, and the taste ain't likely to be great. Garlic