

Made in SAN FRANCISCO

NATIONAL BRANDS THAT GOT THEIR START —
AND THEIR HEART — IN THE CITY BY THE BAY
BY LAUREN HAUPTMAN

You may be surprised—or, in some cases, not so surprised—at how many of the country’s most ubiquitous brands originated in San Francisco. Whether it was the pioneering spirit, the locals’ tastes, or something else entirely, the city gave life to some of the biggest household names in this nation’s history. Just a few:

LEVI STRAUSS & CO.

It was all about the rivets. Levi Strauss emigrated from Germany, learned about business in his brother’s New York dry-goods business, and went west in 1853 at age 23 to open a West Coast branch. He built a successful business for nearly 20 years wholesaling goods to general stores throughout the west.

In 1872, Strauss received a letter from Jacob Davis, a Nevada tailor, about the process he’d invented to rivet the pocket corners on pants to make them stronger. One of his customers had been ripping through the pants Davis had made, so he began putting metal rivets at points of strain. The riveted pants were instantly popular, and Davis feared someone might steal his idea. He wanted a patent and a partner, so he turned to his fabric supplier: Levi Strauss.

On May 20, 1873, Strauss and Davis were granted a patent on the process of riveting pants. While denim had been used for workwear for years, placing rivets in the work pants created what are now called jeans. The “waist overalls,” as they were called then, had one back pocket, two front pockets, a watch pocket, a cinch, suspender buttons, and a rivet in the crotch (in 1901, another back pocket was added, and they were called “overalls.” It was not until the 1960s that baby boomers started calling them jeans.)

Strauss died in 1902, four years before the headquarters and factories of Levi Strauss & Co. were destroyed by the 1906 earthquake and fires. Strauss’ nephews, who took over the business when their uncle died,



wasted no time in rebuilding: A new factory opened in November 1906.

Levi Strauss & Co. is still owned by the descendents of Strauss’ sister, Fanny, and it is still a San Francisco company through and through.

“San Francisco offers an environment that benefits from and thrives on cultural diversity, attitudinal flexibility, and innovation” says Robert D. Haas, chair emeritus and great-great grandnephew of Levi Strauss. “San Franciscans have a history of pushing the boundaries of convention and are comfortable with change. For a company like ours, the city serves as an incubator for fresh approaches to business and product development.”

If you would like to learn more, the company’s world headquarters, Levi’s Plaza, has a visitors’ center (1155 Battery St.), complete with a museum and vault. You’ll be riveted.

RICE-A-RONI

It may be little surprise that the San Francisco Treat has its roots in Italy. But did you know it also traces its existence to Armenia?

Nineteen-year-old Domenico DeDomenico emigrated from Italy to New York, then Boston, then San Francisco, where he’d heard the streets were paved with gold. He built a thriving produce business and brought a wife, Maria Ferrigno, over from Salerno, Italy. Maria’s family sold its pasta factory in Italy to join the new family in San Francisco, and in 1912, Maria convinced Charlie (an Ellis Island immigration officer had renamed

NOTE: This is the longer, original version of the article that appeared in the 2008 *WHERE Guest-Book*. Opening-page design by Gene Faught.



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Domenico Charlie) to open a pasta factory in the Mission District. Four of their sons—Paskey, Vince, Tom, and Anthony—worked with Charlie to build the business, which was first called “Gragnano Products Inc.,” then later “Golden Grain Macaroni Co.”

When a neighbor served an Armenian-style rice pilaf dish to the DeDomenicos, the mixture of rice and macaroni soon to be known as RICE-A-RONI was born. In 1958, Vince mixed a dry chicken-soup mix with rice and vermicelli, and *voila*: the San Francisco Treat.

With its television ads singing, “RICE-A-RONI, the San Francisco Treat,” RICE-A-RONI brought the hills and iconic cable car to every household in America in the 1960s. While The Quaker Oats Co. purchased the Golden Grain Co. from the DeDomenico family in 1986, you can still hear tourists and locals, alike, singing the RICE-A-RONI song as they ride the cable car over the hills of San Francisco.

Even San Francisco’s mayor is not immune: “It’s a brand that’s been great for the city and is a vestige of my childhood,” Mayor Gavin Newsom told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. “Just the sight and sound of the cable car bell evokes the old jingle.”

GAP INC.

The Summer of Love was over, and a new decade was lurking just around the corner. It was 1969, and disenfranchised youth were asking the pressing question of the times: Where, oh where, can I find a great pair of jeans?

San Francisco locals Doris and Don Fisher had the answer, and they called it “The Gap” (named for the ever-popular Generation Gap). They opened the first Gap store on Ocean Avenue near San Francisco State University, where they sold Levi’s jeans in a wide selection of fits and styles.

“I created Gap with a simple idea: to make it easier to find a pair of jeans,” Don Fisher said. It wasn’t long before that simple idea took off. Within a year, sales reached \$2 million, and a second store was opened in San Jose. By 1974, The Gap had more than 25 stores in the United States and began selling its own private-label merchandise (by 1991, under the leadership of company President Mickey Drexler, Gap would carry only its

private-label brand); that year, it also introduced the first of many memorable advertising campaigns: “Fall into the Gap.” Banana Republic was purchased in 1983; Old Navy was launched in 1994.

Having dropped its *The* in the mid-1980s, Gap is one of the world’s largest specialty retailers, with more than 3,100 stores, 2006 revenues of nearly \$16 billion, and more than 150,000 employees worldwide. Gap Inc. now includes Gap, GapKids, babyGap, gapbody, Banana Republic, Old Navy, and Piperlime (an online shoe store).

As ubiquitous as Gap Inc. is around the world, the company is still a mainstay of the San Francisco community, both through its stores and its commitment to local philanthropy. And you can always find a pair of jeans.

BENEFIT COSMETICS

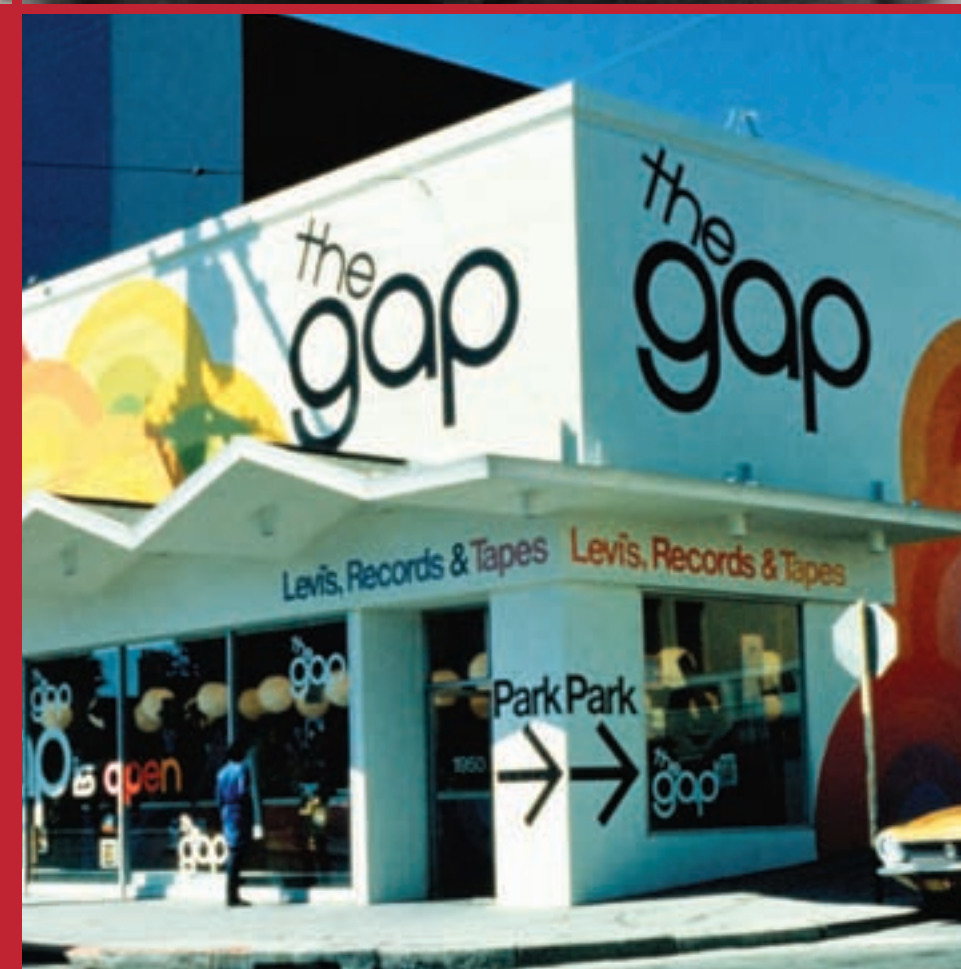
It could have been Benefit Tuna Casseroles. Millions of adoring users are so very glad it isn’t.

When identical-twin sisters Jane and Jean Ford decided to take the money they made from modeling in New York (their big break was a national campaign for Calgon Bath Beads) and start their own business, it all came down to a choice between their core strengths: cosmetics or casseroles.

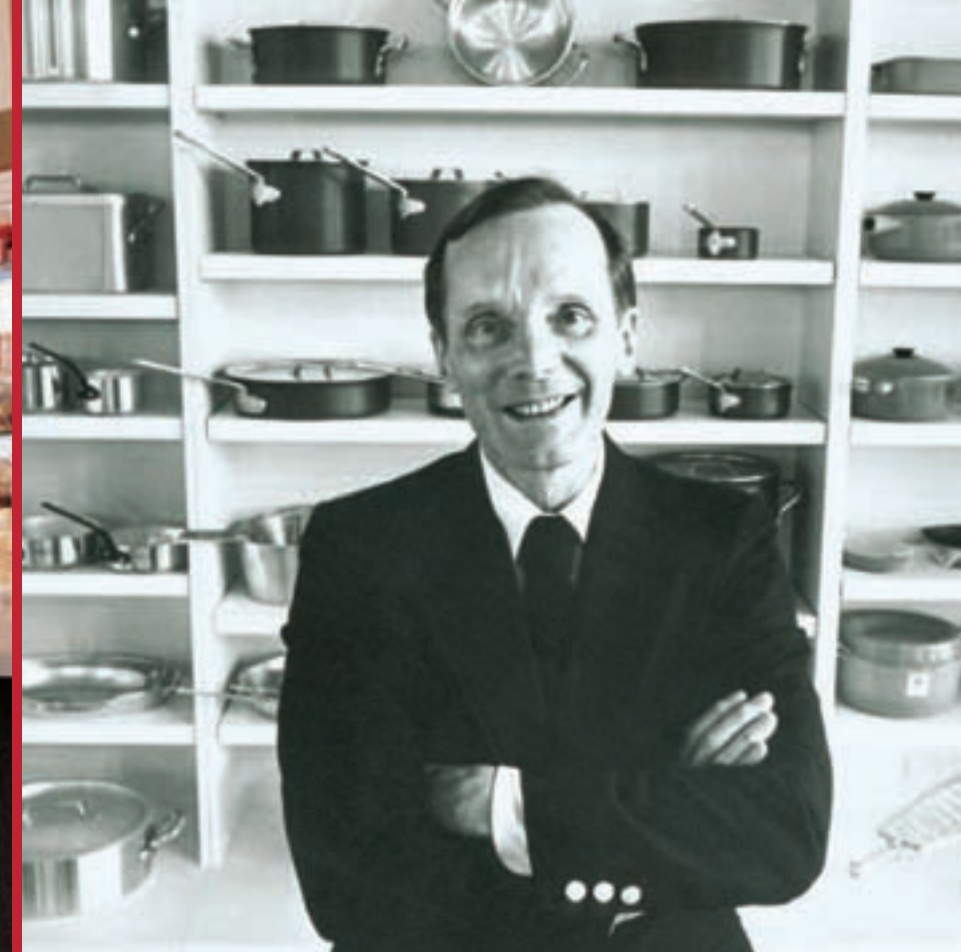
Having always loved San Francisco, the twins moved west and opened a tiny makeup store in the Mission District in 1976 called The Face Place. Wildly successful, the site is where they originated their first products: Benetint (originally designed for an exotic dancer who requested a way to make certain body parts “pretty and pink,” the rose-colored cheek and lip tint is still one of Benefit’s top sellers worldwide, 30 years later), Lip Plump, and Ooh La Lift. Within five years, they opened three more Face Place stores in San Francisco.

To be an entrepreneur, you have to find your client and find your demand,” Jean says. “We found ours in the Mission District. San Francisco is a refreshing city: The women are who they are and know what they want.”

The brand name was changed to Benefit in 1990, following a trip Jane took to Italy, which left her exclaiming, “Bene! Bene!” (Italian for “good.”)



clockwise from top left:
Tourists (and some unabashed locals) still sing the RICE-A-RONI jingle while riding the cable car over some of San Francisco’s highest hills; Levi Strauss, co-creator of the wardrobe staple; The Gap’s (which lost its “the” in the 1980s) first store on Ocean Avenue



clockwise from top left:
The popular Benefit brand began life as The Face Place in the Mission District (twin founders Jean and Jane Ford are behind the counter); William Sonoma peddled fine French cooking tools in his first San Francisco store; Levi's headquarters along San Francisco's waterfront includes a visitors' center, vault, and museum

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Using wonderfully French-girly-yet-naughty and strong product and packaging design and oh-so-fun names, Benefit has become one of the best-selling cosmetics companies in the world, sold at more than 500 counters and 10 stand-alone boutiques in the United States (including the Fillmore Street flagship), and in 23 other countries.

“Being in San Francisco has made Benefit what it is today,” Jane says. “Everywhere you look there is inspiration and beautiful people!”

CRAIGSLIST

Yes, Virginia, there is a Craig. A transplant to San Francisco from Morristown, NJ, software engineer Craig Newmark wanted to make friends. He liked the way he saw people helping each other in several online communities in which he participated, so in 1995, he started telling people online about events around San Francisco—primarily those of interest to local software and Internet developers. His list spread by word of mouth and, soon, he needed a list server—and a name.

Newmark wanted to call it “sf-events,” but friends convinced him to name it Craigslist “to reinforce its personal and down-to-earth nature.” The site continued to grow and evolve, as people started posting items on the list about jobs, things for sale, and apartments for rent. Newmark wrote software to allow e-mail postings to be automatically added to www.craigslist.org (now also craigslist.com).

Refusing advertising, Newmark decided to make Craigslist non-commercial. (The business’ sole source of revenue is paid job and apartment-broker ads in certain cities, ranging from \$10–\$75.) He is a vocal advocate of keeping the Internet free, and giving users “a voice” and a sense of community.

Newmark devoted himself full time to the site in early 1999, and he and his employees worked out of his living room. He named a CEO in 2000, so he could work in customer service, which is where you’ll find him today.

Craigslist world headquarters is in a Victorian house in San Francisco’s Sunset District. As of September 2007, the site has been established in 450 cities in 50 countries, with more than nine billion page views per month—making it the No. 8 Internet company in the world in terms of English-

language page views—and more than 30 million unique visitors. We’re just glad Craig made some friends.

WILLIAMS-SONOMA INC.

Williams-Sonoma Inc., parent company of Williams-Sonoma, Pottery Barn, and West Elm, began when a carpenter took a trip to Paris in 1953.

Chuck Williams had moved to Sonoma, Calif., in 1947 after serving in World War II, and made his living as a self-taught carpenter. The passionate cook, part of a circle of friends who loved to cook and eat together, discovered classic French cooking equipment on the 1953 trip that was unmatched by anything he’d seen in the United States.

Inspired, Williams opened a hardware store in downtown Sonoma in 1954, with plans to convert it to a shop specializing in French cookware. As planned, two years later, Williams-Sonoma was born. Realizing many of his customers were coming to the shop from San Francisco, Williams decided to move to the city, and in 1958, he opened his store on Sutter Street, just a few blocks from Union Square.

The 1960s welcomed Williams-Sonoma with open arms. “The timing was perfect,” Chuck Williams said. “Julia Child’s cooking show was finding an audience. She would show how to make a soufflé one night, and the next day people would come in asking about soufflé dishes.”

The first Williams-Sonoma mail-order catalog was produced in 1971, followed two years later by stores in Beverly Hills, Palo Alto, and Costa Mesa, Calif. During the past 50 years, there have been other brands that were part of the Williams-Sonoma Inc. family, such as Gardener’s Eden, Hold Everything, and Chambers. None have been as successful as Pottery Barn—which has since birthed more spin-offs than *Law & Order*—which was purchased in 1986.

And, while Chuck Williams sold Williams-Sonoma Inc. in 1978, he remains involved in the company to this day, and has since achieved great acclaim as both a cook and a retailer. From its origins as a North Bay hardware store, Williams-Sonoma Inc. has grown into a multibillion dollar retailing giant with stores around the world. But, its headquarters, and its heart, remain in San Francisco.