

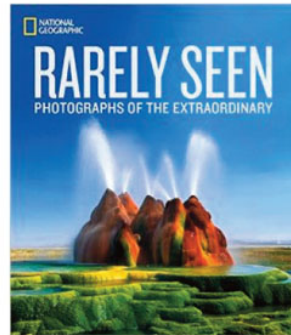
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Holiday Gift Ideas, Both Big and Small

By Lou Fancher



Hammacher handcrafted Hippopotamine sofa
Photos provided



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So now it's down to the wire. If you don't have that spectacular gift for a special someone, you need to think simple. Recognizing the possibilities are infinite, hone the choices to big or small and stay local or go online. Why spend hours in bad traffic when you could be home, lounging on a hippo - which kicks off our last-minute something-for-anyone list.

Yes, count on Hammacher Schlemmer to come up with something "big" and unneeded for people with too much spare change. The 198-pound Handcrafted Hippopotamine Sofa made with "tufted full-grain leather" and covered in "pebbled leather-like polyurethane" is meant to simulate a hippo's hairless skin and comes with a hefty price tag: \$95,000. Does that include shipping? We didn't even ask, so stunned were we with the idea of also ordering a fleet of remote control snapping crocodiles, a bargain at \$39.95 apiece.

Should the hippo hangout ever disappoint you, it comes with the company's lifetime guarantee and can be or returned for credit or exchanged. What, they have an elephantine bed?

OK, now for small - and local.

Moraga-based Hollie's Homegrown company specializes in culinary and medicinal herbs, herbal teas, bath and body products, and herb-infused olive oils, vinegars and honey. Owner Hollie Lucas-Alcalay brings her extensive marketing know-how, three generations of farm family experience, herbs grown in her own backyard and a mother's love to items that help you "take good care of yourself and your family." From tiny lemon-scented candles to tall, slender bottles of Tuscan Rosemary Olive Oil, everything offered takes care of the large (sustainable farming practices protect the planet) and smaller needs: lips, throats, taste buds.

Conceding a strong bias toward books as best-of-all gifts, shopping at Orinda Books is a no-brainer. The independent bookstore stocks local art, photography, music and jewelry, but the main ingredient is books.

Speaking of ingredients, one "big" book of the year is a standout: the 6-pound, 9-ounce cookbook, "The Food Lab: Better Home Cooking Through Science" (W. W. Norton & Company). Serious Eats Culinary Director and Internet cooking guru J. Kenji López-Alt backs up everyday foods like mac'n'cheese, steak, cheeseburgers, risotto and roasted vegetables with rigorous science and over 1,000 full color images. The 960-page behemoth (29 copies equals 1 hippo couch) from the San Mateo-based author is in many ways a bargain at \$49.95 and a great gift for foodies. To discern its value, think about how many times you will peek at its pages as you prepare the best boiled eggs, savory smashed turkey, or fried chicken with skin that's nothing like pebbled polyurethane. With invaluable science-backed advice about knives, freezing foods, grass-fed versus grain-fed beef and how to make the best pancakes ever, get a doorstop to match that living room furniture - make a hippo happy.

The perfect counterpoint to all that heft is Cheryl Strayed's 135-page "Brave Enough" (Knopf). The roughly 5-by-7-inch edition, a collection of quotes from the New York Times best-selling author of "Wild" - the first selection of Oprah's Book Club 2.0 and an Oscar-nominated film starring Reese Witherspoon - feeds the soul after Food Lab has taken care of the stomach. Including advice that Strayed followed on her Pacific Coast Trail journey and words to which we all aspire, the missives

are scrubbed of pretense and introduced with brief essays that are in themselves truly brave enough. Parents note, this is for the plus-16 crowd.

Harmony often comes in threes so strike the perfect chord with National Geographic's "Rarely Seen" (\$40). Pictures of wonders of the world captured by photojournalist Stephen Alvarez during his 20-year career as a National Geographic photographer are thematically organized around phenomena, life, places, objects and moments. Words pale when attempting to define the images, but suffice it to say that stars pinwheeling above granite arches, 650 zigzag steps resembling a corset up the face of the Rock of Guatapé, a worker resting on cauliflower-like bails of cotton in Côte d'Ivoire and red-jacketed ecotourists labeled as "Penguin Paparazzi" as they line up to document a lonely penguin are only a few of the book's rarely seen splendors.

Of course, if you are really jammed for gifts, there is always cash. You can go big, like do a Zuckerberg/Chan and give \$45 billion in stock to a charitable foundation in your kid's name - and watch them scream. Or go small. The younger generation will be wowed by the old-fashioned novelty - anecdotally proven by a teenager who, when handed a \$5 bill said, "Wow, paper money, how retro."

But the one gift you can give that will never be refused, never be too silly, never get old and worn or smeared with potato chip grease (what else are you going to eat while sitting on that hippo lounge?) and will never cost a dime, is love.

Give some love. Get some love. Be grateful. It's that easy.

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