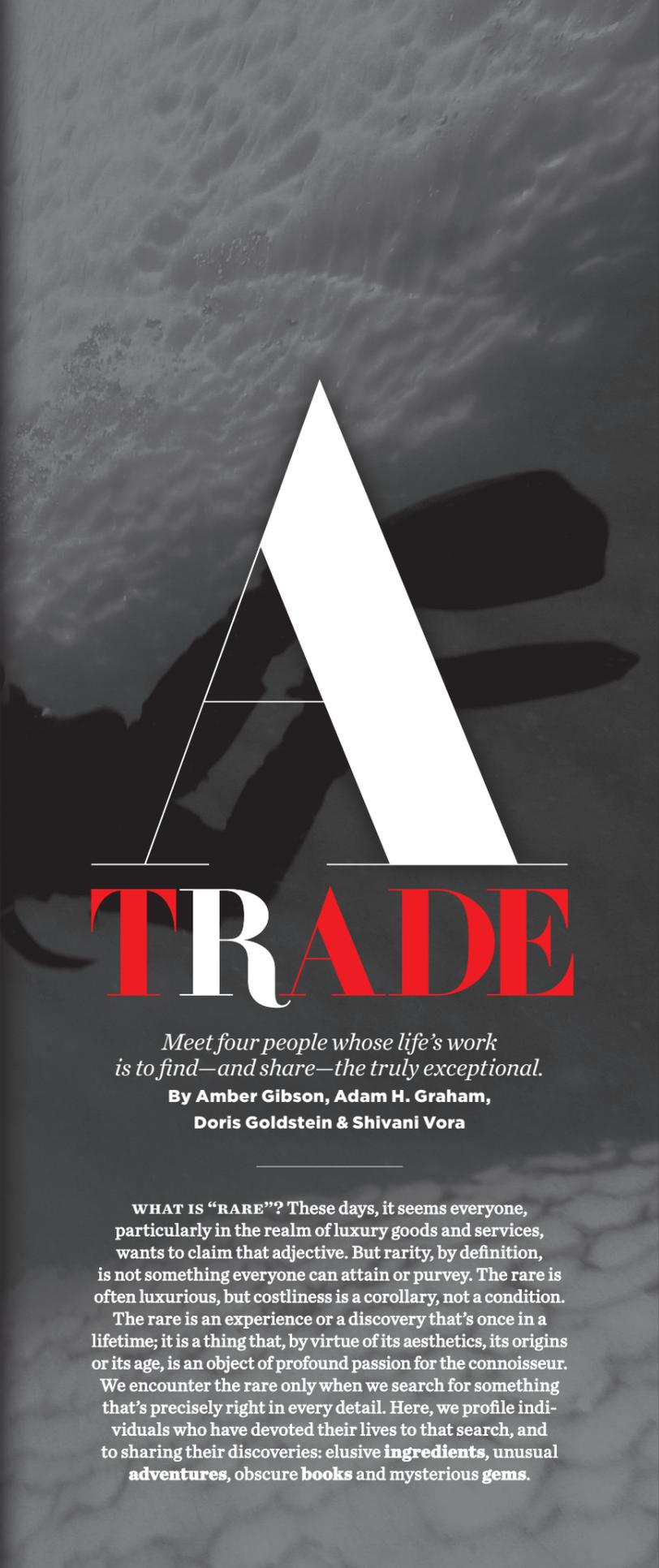




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TRADE

Meet four people whose life's work is to find—and share—the truly exceptional.

**By Amber Gibson, Adam H. Graham,
Doris Goldstein & Shivani Vora**

WHAT IS “RARE”? These days, it seems everyone, particularly in the realm of luxury goods and services, wants to claim that adjective. But rarity, by definition, is not something everyone can attain or purvey. The rare is often luxurious, but costliness is a corollary, not a condition.

The rare is an experience or a discovery that's once in a lifetime; it is a thing that, by virtue of its aesthetics, its origins or its age, is an object of profound passion for the connoisseur. We encounter the rare only when we search for something that's precisely right in every detail. Here, we profile individuals who have devoted their lives to that search, and to sharing their discoveries: elusive **ingredients**, unusual **adventures**, obscure **books** and mysterious **gems**.



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RARE TRADE | Exotic Ingredients



RODRICK MARKUS

"I just got the first five beans through customs a week ago," says Rodrick Markus as I bite into a raw

white Amazonian cacao bean, his latest obsession. It tastes remarkably smooth and nutty, reminiscent of a roasted fava bean. The albino offshoot of a cacao variety only recently rediscovered in Peru, this white version is a rare natural mutation of an already rare plant.

Markus' unassuming Chicago warehouse is a culinary wonderland. The more than 4,000 different ingredients here make up a specialty grocery of a most unusual kind, supplying 1,200 restaurants with hard-to-find goods. Think purple honey and wild hickory nuts. The honey appears infrequently in a small area of the southeastern U.S., often in particularly dry weather and for otherwise mysterious reasons. And the nuts are rarely found for sale because the shells are extremely difficult to crack while preserving the kernels. Markus even stocks lemon peel from a varietal that grows only alongside the Egyptian pyramids.

His obsession with the extraordinary started at age 24, when he cast aside his degree in psychology to start his Rare Tea Cellar business, with a focus on sourcing exotic teas. His

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breakthrough came when chefs like Thomas Keller and Grant Achatz started asking him for individual botanical ingredients from his tea blends. Suddenly it wasn't just about tea—it was about obscure delicacies like Hungarian honey truffles, found beneath black locust trees along the Danube. Now, to extend his collection, he employs biodynamic farmers in India and foragers from Fogo Island to Kyoto. Top chefs have him on speed dial; he even appears on a billboard in Singapore.

Markus' latest endeavour is making his own black truffle bitters—the world's most expensive cocktail bitters, at US\$75 for 55 ml. With his exacting sense for finding the precise ingredients to create the flavour he wants, the bitters are sure to be in hot demand. The 3,000 bottles he made of Balsam American Amaro, which he calls a “game changer in the vermouth movement” because it can turn any wine into bespoke vermouth, sold out in two hours last March. Along with the specific flavours that uncommon ingredients can add to a dish, they can also create a next-level element of surprise. Even in a culinary world that increasingly relies on local and seasonal sourcing, “I think there’s always an angle to bring in a rare ingredient,” Markus says. “It’s a way to wake up the palate.”

above:

(left to right) Okinawan “seaweed caviar,” or *umibudo*, grows only in the deep waters off Okinawa, Japan; violet sugar has the taste and scent of violets; white Amazonian cacao beans were rediscovered in Peru.

Amber Gibson is a Chicago food and travel writer whose work has appeared in *Private Air* and *Yahoo Travel*.

Photography (page 152, on left, and this page) Lara Kastner

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right:

One risk for divers like Rick Stanley (shown) lies in the iceberg itself. When it's blue below the surface, the berg may be top-heavy and likely to roll.



RARE TRADE | Iceberg Diving

**RICK STANLEY**

"They melt and change by the millisecond," says Rick Stanley of the ephemeral settings for his

work. "They can roll and explode at any minute, so it's important to stay down deep. This reduces the risk, but never eliminates it." Based in Conception Bay, Newfoundland, Stanley is one of the world's only iceberg dive instructors.

Every spring from April to June, this part of Iceberg Alley—the long, cold stretch of the Labrador Current that runs from Greenland and Baffin Bay to Newfoundland—teems with calved cubes, bergy bits and ship-threatening growlers (the type of submerged iceberg believed to have sunk the *Titanic*). Eastern Newfoundland, where massive hunks of ancient ice may ground themselves on or near the coast, is the best place on Earth to see icebergs from shore—and the best place to see them up close. "Dives like this are not offered anywhere else in the world," Stanley says, "so I saw an opportunity and grabbed it."

Stanley started diving in 1992 as a way to forage for mussels and scallops, but developed a deeper passion for the marine world. Today, as a certified rebreather diver and full cave diver, his mission is to show others icebergs' primordial beauty. Along the way, he has

“Icebergs are forces of nature, and they're dangerous. Even the small ones can be massive underwater. But the beauty of them is that they're sculpted by the sea—a rare masterpiece that's continually changing.”

spotted unicorn-like narwhals and majestic humpbacks, but it's the icebergs that continue to captivate him. And his underwater vantage point is not one achieved by many other souls: Stanley estimates that he's guided about 300 iceberg divers in nearly 20 years, and probably a few more have had similar experiences elsewhere in the Arctic and Antarctic.

Since the risk of such an endeavour is high, Stanley's Ocean Quest Adventures company takes on only super-experienced divers, with a certification level of Rescue Diver and 200 dives logged. Helmets, drysuits and extreme caution are required. Those lucky enough to meet the criteria get a chance to swim close to the rare, millennia-old floating sculptures and observe their intense spectrum of colours, from crystalline sapphire to deep indigo.

Educating divers about icebergs is paramount to Stanley, who helped found Ocean Net, a group dedicated to sustainable marine tourism. "What's most important to understand about icebergs is that they are forces of nature, and they're dangerous," he says. "Even the small ones can be massive underwater, making you feel tiny in comparison. But the beauty of them is that they are sculpted by the sea—a rare masterpiece that's continually changing... until it's gone."

Adam H. Graham is an American journalist and travel writer based in Zürich.

Photography (page 152, on right, and this page) courtesy Rick Stanley

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RARE TRADE | Indian Books

SUBBIAH
YADALAM

Subbiah Yadalam hasn't always been impressed by rare books. Before age

42, he was merely an avid reader, from a prominent family in Bangalore. Then a new obsession took hold: Browsing through the Bangalore Club library, Yadalam came across a 1909 encyclopedia, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, the likes of which he had never seen. The feeling it gave him launched a treasure hunt that would change his life.

"The thing about a rare, antiquarian book," he says, "is that it does not look valuable on its face. It is, after all, just a book. But when you learn about its age and its rarity, you see it in a completely different way."

He asked to purchase the seven-volume encyclopedia, but the club refused to sell it. Determined to find a first edition, he scoured bookstores, auctions and websites around the world that specialised in limited titles. Eventually, he tracked down a copy in his own backyard at K.K.S. Murthy's Select Book Shop, one of the few rare-book dealers in Bangalore. For 15,000 rupees (US\$230), he had accomplished his goal—and sown the seeds of a much bigger one.

"The idea of 'the rare' has always been there," Yadalam says. "Any object of antiquity has always been treasured and valued." But India, despite being an ancient literary civilisation—in possession of a wealth of rare items, handwritten and printed—did not have a society for rare-book collectors. "The rare has greater relevance today than at any other time in history," Yadalam says. "Along with education and prosperity comes the ability to appreciate the finer things of life, and also the desire to learn about and preserve one's heritage."

Yadalam set out in 2009 to merge those two objectives by founding the Rare Book Society of India online. His idea was to increase interest in books that are scarce by broadening access for his countrymen and for anyone interested in learning about India through its ancient tomes. The society sources precious volumes of Indian history and culture from digital libraries and museum

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collections and posts them—preserving the original look of each page—for free online reading or download.

Yadalam is not troubled by the paradox of celebrating the rare by putting its contents within easier reach of a wider audience. History, he says, is complicated, so any real understanding of the past must begin with as many people as possible reviewing the works created as that history was lived. He hopes young people in particular will view the society's digital versions of books and “want to learn more and collect them.”

With a personal library of about 175 rare hard-copy literary works, Yadalam wholeheartedly believes that nothing can replace the feeling of an in-person encounter with such a title, the feeling he had when he first turned the pages of *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. With only 25 to 250 copies of many such books available in the world, he says, their singularity will only increase with time: “Their rarity is frozen forever.”

below:

Opaque watercolour and ink on paper, these three folios are from a 15th-century book of iconography.

Doris Goldstein has written about jewellery, design and antiques for *Art & Auction*, *Town & Country* and other publications.



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