

# arne osterby: *at your service*

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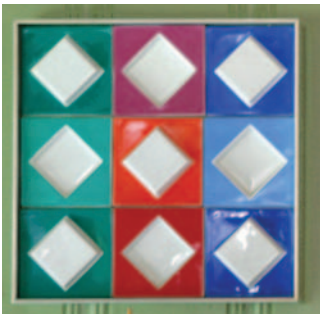
HERE IS A CARTOON by Stu Heinecke showing two men in the middle of the desert selling salted peanuts, popcorn and potato chips to a dying man crawling in the sand without anything to drink. The caption reads "I got the idea when I read somewhere that Arne E. Osterby could sell an igloo to an Eskimo..."

The truth is that Arne E. Osterby, an 83-year-old Swede and fine-living guru, could



text by abby luby

photos by  
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sell you just about anything as long as it's high-end tableware, fine art or home furnishings worthy of the credo that quality wares are must-haves for elegant living.

When Osterby came to this country in 1948, he was riding the wave of Scandinavian design. His style of wooing a post-war populace to a refined life style set a standard now mimicked by media hounds Martha Stewart and Rachel Ray. Osterby deftly used his aesthetic sense to promote, display and sell fine china and interior furnishings. Along the way he befriended celebrities, famed artists, politicians—all drawn to his outgoing, jovial nature.

Tall and limber with steady, dark blue eyes, grey-white hair and closely trimmed beard, Osterby lives in a lofty house in Cornwall that he designed in 1962 for himself and his wife Marie, whom he married in 1952. (Marie died on their fiftieth wedding anniversary in 2002.) Osterby's sense of stylish home living dictated the house's design. "I wanted the living room on the top floor," he says about his innovative concept. "The architect thought I was crazy—but why should I put the bedrooms on the top floor where I'm sleeping and don't see the view?"

Today the house is filled with a wide range of art and furnishings—gifts from friends such as Isamu Noguchi, Victor Vasarely, Salvador Dali, Bjorn Wiinblad, Carol Summers and Bruno Mathsson, among others, enjoyed by Osterby and his second wife, Eileen.

Osterby's career began when he worked at Bonnier's, the exclusive Madison Avenue Swedish furniture and art store. It was the beginning of an 18-year stint highlighted by Osterby's original and creative window and floor displays, which set a trend that earned the enterprising young man several awards and citations.

Store displays became Osterby's three-dimensional canvas where he recreated everyday environments dotted with merchandise and his signature gift bags—a selling tool still used today. "One time, I created a beach scene using





sand and a pool of water," Osterby recalls. "Another time I staged a subway car, borrowing subway benches and strap hangers, spreading gift bags on the seats. Or I would use old barn wood to show off crystal."

The displays were not only real-time advertisements for home furnishings but a place where Osterby could show off his sense of humor. As an experiment and a play on voyeurism, Osterby once painted an entire display window black, leaving two peek holes, one for kids and one for adults. Looking in, they saw an empty space with a singular light on a small, fake mouse sitting all alone. Osterby says people loved it because it was fun and unexpected.

The ever-evolving, unique displays got the attention of the folks up the block at Tiffany and Bloomingdales. "They came almost every day to see the displays and what was new in Bonnier's," Osterby quips.

Kicking off a new line of glassware with champagne and strawberry parties at the store was a typical public relations move for Osterby, who invited steady Bonnier's customers like Frank Lloyd Wright, Ingrid Berman, Greta Garbo, Charles Laughton, New York City Mayor John Lindsay and Dag Hammarskjöld. "It was a new idea," he says matter-of-factly. "Everyone wanted to be there."

Cultivating contemporary artists and craft persons was natural for Osterby, who saw new art as the perfect complement to fine housewares. When sculptor Isamu Noguchi came to the U.S. to sell his Akari Lamps, he showed up at Nord's Furniture store, where Maria Osterby was the manager. She told Noguchi, "Go see my husband at Bonnier's." It was the beginning of a life-long friendship; Noguchi and Osterby teamed up to produce the paper lanterns, which Bonnier's sold at \$4.95 (today an original sells for \$125). "I worked with Noguchi on the inner structure and holders for the light," remembers Osterby. "We worked very closely together and I learned a lot from him and from the way he worked."



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In 1975, Bonnier's closed its Madison Avenue shop and Osterby went to work for Rosenthal, the famous purveyor of hotel and commercial china. He started as vice president in sales, managing some 64 people from Canada to the Caribbean. "We sold whole lines of high-end porcelain dishes, flatware and glassware to exclusive restaurants and clubs, cruise ships, golf courses."

Rosenthal, a company that's been around for over 250 years, sells such luxury lines as Villeroy & Boch (a Luxemburg-based company making tableware, china and glassware) and Italian flatware and cookware by Sambonet, among others.

Osterby always knew the value of saying "thank you" in a way that counted. When an exclusive club placed an order with Rosenthal, Osterby would send a piece of art work by Salvador Dali, Victor Vasarely, or a colorful plate by Bjorn Wiinblad, knowing the work would readily be mounted on a wall.

Once, Osterby met a hardworking caterer that he liked and admired at a trade show. When the show was over, Osterby sent the caterer a Wiinblad plate as a thank you gift. A few months later, when he was pitching the Ritz Carlton in Atlanta, he learned that the caterer who had been at the Hyatt was now running the Ritz Carlton.

"When he heard my voice on the phone he said 'Arne, come right over and let me give you lunch.' That was the beginning of a great business deal. The gift paid off." (Paid off, indeed, in spades: The Ritz Carlton purchased all its china from Rosenthal from that point on. "That one hotel became 32 hotels and because of that little Wiinblad plate, we did over \$6 million of business with them," Osterby smiles.)

"Rosenthal is unbelievable. They must be doing something right," says Osterby about his time working for the international company. Selling Rosenthal china extended Osterby's friendship with Bjorn Wiinblad, who designed china for Rosenthal—and a \$2,500 place setting





for the Shah of Iran. When Osterby married Eileen in 2004, Wiinblad designed their wedding invitation as a gift.

Osterby has come to know a plethora of world-class chefs on a first-name basis, including Mario Batali, Joe Bastianich, Peter Kelly, Norbert Goldner. In 1981, Osterby founded Rosenthal's Hotel and Restaurant Division, turning the company into a multimillion-dollar business.

A reputation for honesty and integrity catapulted Osterby to icon status in the hotel and restaurant industry, where today he is still known for his motto "Good Taste Costs No More." In 1994, he was voted into the Distinguished Restaurants of North America (DiRoNa) Hall of Fame, and is listed in the Eastern portion of *Who's Who*.

**I**N 1995, OSTERBY JOINED The Williamson Group, Inc., with the former managing director of Rosenthal, Gene Williamson. He still works with the company, selling Villeroy & Boch tableware, Sambonet, Jack the Ripper, Judel Products and Heat It Manufacturing to hotels and restaurants in Manhattan, most of New England, parts of Connecticut and Pennsylvania.

But Osterby still manages to find time to kick back and relax at home, with a separate sauna housed just steps away from his front door, down a garden path lined with mountain laurel. The expansive view from his living room is enjoyed from chairs by famed Scandinavian designer Carl Malmsten. Downstairs, his kitchen walls are a personal showplace for one-of-a-kind plates and paintings.

Opening a kitchen cabinet, Osterby pulls out a tall, thin-stemmed red-wine glass made by Rosenthal, explaining how the inherent quality of good china and glassware always has a positive affect on food and wine. "This is a hand-blown glass," he says. "It's so exquisite it can make even lousy wine taste good." ❖

