Perhaps no food writer in Western Pennsylvania has worked as hard as Geoffrey Tomb did in the 1970s to prevent Pittsburgh Post-Gazette readers from consuming dull salads and unpalatable dressings. Tomb disliked plain iceberg lettuce salads. He criticized a “watery” Italian dressing, a “mediocre” creamy Roquefort dressing, and a French dressing that “tasted suspiciously bottled.” Perhaps the worst dressing that Tomb ingested was a “deep, sour pool on the bottom” of a bowl. While Tomb was frequently unimpressed with salads and dressings, he was capable of praise. A salad of leaf lettuce and curly endive lacking “one piece of iceberg,” with its toppings, led Tomb to declare, “What grand style.”

Tomb’s experiences partly resulted from the region’s ties to national markets. During the 1920s and 1930s, iceberg lettuce began filling salad bowls during winter months as growers developed methods to preserve the vegetable’s freshness on the journey from California to the East. In addition, bottled salad dressings had become household names. For example, Wish-Bone dressing originated in 1948 when the owner of a Kansas City fried chicken restaurant began distributing his dressing to customers who brought him bottles to fill. Lipton acquired the brand in 1958, and 40 years later, Wish-Bone’s annual sales totaled more than $210 million.

This culinary context could frustrate salad lovers but also inspire entrepreneurs. On the one hand, people like Tomb found little pleasure in an iceberg lettuce salad “sopped in a dull bottled Italian dressing.” On the other hand, restaurateurs developed tasty house dressings and sold them to supermarkets. Two such dressings were distributed by the Red Bull Inn and the Primadonna.

Louis Fleck began his Red Bull Inn steak house chain by opening a restaurant in Carnegie in 1964 and converting a nearby mustard factory into a central commissary to make sauces and dressings. The tri-state region became dotted with about 20 Red Bull Inns, including locations in Altoona, Ambridge, Beaver Falls, Charleroi, Johnstown, McKeesport, and Washington. Fleck was an early adopter of the salad bar; by around 1980, his Dormont customers could have iceberg lettuce, spinach, scallions, radishes, peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, celery, sesame seeds, carrots, and olives; sweet items like banana chips and pineapples; and many dressings. Red Bull Inn Italian dressing—flavored with apple cider vinegar, ground pepper, garlic, and other spices—was on grocery store shelves by 1994. Although the last remaining Red Bull Inn closed in 2007, the dressing is still produced for grocery stores. In addition, 16-ounce, 32-ounce, and one-gallon bottles are sold online.

Joseph Costanzo opened the Primadonna Restaurant in 1986 in Stowe Township near its border with McKees Rocks. Around 1990, the restaurant began bottling its Italian salad dressing, and Costanzo sometimes gave away bottles of dressing to his favorite and regular customers. Costanzo’s attempt to franchise his restaurant never took off and although he sold the Primadonna in 2002, the dressing—which mingles red wine vinegar, garlic, oregano, and basil—can be found at hundreds of locations in the region. The restaurant’s web site features a photograph of several dishes and dozens of bottles of salad dressing.

Western Pennsylvanians probably had to look carefully for these restaurants’ dressings in supermarkets in the late 1990s when shelves
were saturated with dressings produced by Kraft, Wish-Bone, and Hidden Valley Ranch. Brands like Newman’s Own and Ken’s Steak House have since proliferated on shelves, and private label dressings became more common. While ever-more-exotic, sophisticated, healthy, and bargain dressings arrive on shelves, the dressings made by the Red Bull Inn and Primadonna remain to perpetuate two favorite local flavors.