

AUGUST 1 2026

FT Weekend Magazine

THE CONFESSION

Six teenagers told a story that ruined their lives. What if it wasn't the truth?



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FT Weekend Magazine issue number 1,187 • [FT.com/magazine](https://www.ft.com/magazine) • @FTMag
Printed by Roularta Media Group in Belgium and published by The Financial Times Ltd, Bracken House, 1 Friday Street, London EC4M 9BT.
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MARGINALIA by NADINE REDLICH

ON THE COVER
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Letters



EVERYTHING IS TOXIC

by **Kenza Bryan**

Everything is safe until it's discovered not to be: white lead in cosmetics in the 16th century; arsenic in wallpaper in the 19th; most notoriously, thalidomide in the 20th century. Not many companies set out to kill or harm their customers but some will go on denying the truth when it's been amply proved: tobacco, refined sugar – and countless chemicals. I'm no anti-vaxxer, but it's worth asking: "Do I need this?", "Who is profiting from this?" and "Who is funding this person who says this is safe?" The climate crisis and the handful of academics who still say it's not real demonstrate that there are people who can be bought.

JUDITH MARTIN, HAMPSHIRE

Really good to see these questions raised in a widely read newspaper. Let's hope it reflects a growing interest in the topic, beyond the unqualified social media influencers and their followers. I accept that the risks to individuals are slight, nevertheless I do not like the way that chemicals are added to products with little thought, and it is left to society to identify risks and pay for any consequences. A concern that is barely covered in the article is that these persistent chemicals are now pervasive in ecosystems around the world and found in organisms from microbes to fish, birds, seals and whales, including in the Arctic and Antarctic.

MARCUS VIA [FT.COM](https://www.ft.com)

THE NEVER-ENDING LIBRARY

by **Felix Bazalgette**

I get the appeal of the Borgesian library as an image, but the funny thing is that the library in that short story literally contains no information at all. That's because it has every possible permutation of characters that can make up a book, which means the overwhelming majority of books are just noise from beginning to end. There is no filter. To find and identify the book you want, you have to know the exact content of it, letter for letter. There is no shortcut.

QAWSZ VIA [FT.COM](https://www.ft.com)

Good article. It is noticeable that, as stated, while author earnings are

down, publisher earnings are up. So copyright laws are aiding big business and rentier behaviour. Of course, this is the whole point of copyright law and its extension in recent years. Among the key resources now available from pirate sites are obscure, out-of-print books that the publishers don't and can't make money on. Mind you, there remain a huge number of books not scanned and not available anywhere. That's a shame.

TIM GOUGH LONDON VIA [FT.COM](https://www.ft.com)

THE DELIVERY DRIVER WHO BECAME A YOUTUBER

by **Eve Upton-Clark**

Watching these has been a guilty pleasure of mine for the past few months after putting the toddler to bed and finding time to unwind. I'm stuck in hot, humid Florida, and I love escaping into a buzzy London summer evening, where people are enjoying a weeknight. It's obviously not quite the same as being there, but it's the best I can do at the moment, and it at least captures some of the feeling of golden hour in a place where summer is actually enjoyable. Take me out tonight, YouTube man. I want to see people, and I want to see lights.

SLYMONS VIA [FT.COM](https://www.ft.com)

AN END AND A BEGINNING

by **Simon Kuper**

Farewell Simon Kuper and thank you. Ever since I discovered FT Weekend, Simon's column has been the first thing I read. Whatever the subject, he has written about it with flair and ingenuity, making me think about the subject and admire the writer. His words about Donald Trump and Brexit chimed loudest, but as a life-long football fan, I loved his take on the way the sport was growing while also being manipulated and shackled by its governing bodies. Good luck. I look forward to reading feature articles that fill me with wonder and awe, anger and interest.

PETE HALSALL, CUMBRIA

I, like many others, have always looked forward to Simon Kuper's columns. In a world in which the internet and AI are rapidly replacing intelligent, thinking human beings with a seemingly machine-driven Orwellian mass dumbing down, we need



JULY 25
EVERYDAY CHEMICALS

traditional journalism more than ever. We hope he goes on to teach his fast-dying writing skills to younger people who seek a more meaningful future.

BEEZY BAILEY, CAPE TOWN/LONDON

Happy the new beginning involves more FT articles. Sad that the column has come to an end. Thank you.

PAULA BRIDGES, LONDON

PLAYING TO WIN IN THE ALTERNATE WORLD CUP

by **Oliver Roeder**

The possibilities and uses of simulation for scientific research are legion and crucial, as Oliver Roeder's fascinating article suggests. I was, however, immediately put in mind of Borges' short story *The Library of Babel*. The inconceivable vastness of the library makes finding reliable information impossible. If a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, infinite knowledge – and its corollary infinite ignorance – is an existential threat, the realm of gods, not men. Imagine my delight, then, on turning the pages of my magazine to find an article about "the never-ending library", opening with a reference to Borges' great story! Apart from the copyright issues, AI's ability to generate plausible-sounding text without yet having a reliable way to assess its truth undermines its admittedly enormous potential. The proliferation of AI text threatens to generate our very own Library of Babel.

JOHN JARVIS, LONDON

WHERE ARE ALL THE 'ODYSSEY' SPIN-OFFS?

by **Robert Shrimsley**

Robert Shrimsley is quite right to set a humorous tone; people shouldn't take *The Odyssey* too seriously. Homer lampoons Odysseus throughout. He's supposed to be some kind of cunning genius, but he's not exactly a fox at Oxford. Everything he touches ends up as a complete mess for one totally foreseeable reason or another. And the only way he eventually gets home is by getting a lift from the Phaeacians and falling asleep in the back. It was created as a piece of entertainment. Go into it expecting a kind of ancient Greek version of *Dad's Army*, and you'll enjoy it a lot more.

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TECH LIFE

The first meme war

by ELAINE MOORE

ILLUSTRATION by ALBERTO MIRANDA

WHEN DONALD TRUMP WANTS TO UPDATE THE WORLD on the status of the war with Iran, he occasionally reaches for a meme. Like many memes, these are absurd. In one, an AI-generated US Navy ship shoots down an Iranian drone with the words, “Lasers: Bing, Bing, GONE!!!” (Does a laser make a bing sound?) In a recent meme spree, one that included references to a three-year-old Bud Light boycott for no apparent reason, Trump posted AI images of Iranian oil tankers being blown up, one day after the Pentagon paused strikes.

More than a third of Americans now get their news mainly from social media, according to the Reuters Institute, and the country’s oldest-ever president is also its most terminally online. Chaotic, crude internet jokes have become official US political commentary. That in turn has prompted the country’s enemies to engage with a strange new battlefield.

Trump is not the only one posting memes. If Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was the first TikTok war, then the Iran conflict is the first meme war. While Trump is on Truth Social, official Iranian accounts have embarked on their own trolling campaign via X. The Iranian embassy in Zimbabwe

joked that it had lost the keys to the Strait of Hormuz and posted a creepy AI image of a zombified Jeffrey Epstein smiling at the destruction of Iranian hospitals. The Iranian embassy in South Africa posted a strange, AI-generated video of Trump singing about blockades.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue calls this “shitposting as statecraft”. Iran is using provocative, low-quality images and videos to try to present itself as the witty, self-aware underdog. It has been rewarded with a huge engagement boost. This sort of posting, says the ISD, could become a blueprint for non-traditional war propaganda in future conflicts.

Think of memes in relation to the Greek word *mimema* – imitation – and these tactics make some sense. Memes are catchy ideas designed to be repeated and spread online. They can be a word or phrase but are likely to be pictures or videos, with simple, easy-to-read text and over-the-top images. They are shareable and (mostly) authorless. As Art in America magazine once wrote, memes are “open work” – a collective endeavour. Not only are they easy to make, but their format benefits from repetition. It’s not stealing to put your own spin on the distracted boyfriend meme or the “this is fine” dog meme – that’s what they were made for.

Most importantly, memes are often jokes. So when Trump posts ones that compare him to a king, a fighter pilot or Jesus, he may well like the heroic way the pictures look, but he is also baiting his opponents to take them seriously and seem like crybabies who can’t take a joke.

You have to go back to the late 1980s to understand how this came about. Mike Godwin, then a law student in Texas, is credited with being the first to describe internet memes. As someone who spent a lot of time on online message boards, he wanted to find a way to undermine the annoying arguments that erupted between strangers. His solution was to create something he called Godwin’s Law: the maxim that any discussion on the internet will eventually lead to someone being compared to the Nazis or Hitler.

Godwin, who now works as a technology lawyer in Washington, says he used that pseudo-scientific-sounding term to puncture self-serious commentators, and then seeded the idea into online conversations. “I had been reading a lot about information theory and the idea of information as something that is integrated into the physical world,” he says. “I knew I couldn’t say something earnest about [the arguments] – that would lead to ridicule – so I came up with this idea, this joke, and let it propagate.”

In his essay “Meme, Counter-meme”, published in Wired in 1994, Godwin described what he did as “memetic engineering”. He drew on the idea of memes that British

biologist Richard Dawkins introduced in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* – “units of cultural transmission” that could spread and evolve culture by non-genetic means. While Dawkins was talking about fashion or recipes, Godwin’s online meme was a phrase designed to stop bad-faith arguments.

Online memes tended to have a few distinct characteristics, one of which was that the butt of the joke was often the person posting it. The smooth, grey-headed “stonks” guy, for example, was a symbol of financial failure. In “rage comics” and “image macros” (pictures with text on top) creators and reposters poked fun at themselves for being embarrassed or exasperated by life. As time went on, jokes were sometimes piled on top of one another in a way that could make the memes unintelligible to the casual observer.

As memes have been adopted for commercial purposes or political commentary, the target of the joke has shifted outwards. And once a meme is out in the world its creator has no say over how it is used. Pepe the Frog, loved by the alt-right, was originally drawn by San Francisco cartoonist Matt Furie, who is generally described as “gentle”. Furie sued the Infowars website for using Pepe in a poster that featured its far-right

conspiracy theorist founder Alex Jones and was awarded a \$15,000 settlement (he said he would give the money to a frog charity). But he has not managed to stop Pepe being used in racist, antisemitic memes – nor will he.

At the same time, the density of memetic information has eroded. When the co-founder of defence tech

start-up Anduril Industries posts an image of an alligator dunking a basketball, there is not much nuance to grasp. Messages intended for a broad audience sometimes require little interpretation.

The more that memes are employed for war propaganda, the emptier the meaning and the flatter the jokes will fall. Once it might have been worth asking whether the “bing” in Trump’s laser meme was a reference to something else – maybe an old internet joke about *Super Mario* fans being annoying, or the fact that Trump was once recorded using the word “bing” over 50 times. Knowing that could have unlocked another layer of meaning. Now it doesn’t matter. Online memes began with an attempt to puncture self-serious commentators. But what is there to puncture when the subject matter is this serious?

To Godwin, the current wartime insults and boasts are very far from what he imagined memes should be. “My idea for memes was something that would trigger people to think,” he says. “What this is is more like a substitute for thought.” **FT**

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Elaine Moore is the FT tech comment editor.
Tim Harford returns next week



DEPARTMENTS

REPORTS from LESSER-KNOWN
FT BUREAUX

CARTOGRAPHY

Shore leave

“Seacoast shapes are examples of highly involved curves such that each of their portion can – in a statistical sense – be considered a reduced-scale image of the whole. This property will be referred to as ‘statistical self-similarity’. To speak of a length for such figures is usually meaningless.” – Benoit Mandelbrot, “How Long Is the Coast of Britain?”, May 1967

SOURCE: SCIENCE

ALGORITHMS

That’s no moon

The video game *No Man’s Sky* presents its virtual space explorer with a universe that could contain more than 18 quintillion planets. (If you visited each one for a second it would take you 570 million years.) These virtual worlds – their topography, geology, flora, fauna – are generated by mathematical formulas, which depend on a language called an L-system. The system describes the sort of expansive growth shown by a tree. It is named after the Hungarian biologist Aristid Lindenmayer, who used it from the late 1960s to describe the development of simple organisms such as yeast and fungi.

SOURCE: VARIOUS

TOPOLOGY

Under the rug

Many mathematical objects are named after the prolific Polish mathematician Waław Sierpiński. He claims at least an eponymous number, constant, curve, set, triangle, game, cube, space and carpet. He described the carpet, an object with no area but infinite perimeter, as “a curve which contains a one-to-one and continuous image of any given curve”. Given this accommodating and compact self-sameness, its shape has since been used to design WiFi and mobile-phone antennas.

SOURCE: VARIOUS

LAST WEEK’S THEME: YOUNG STARS



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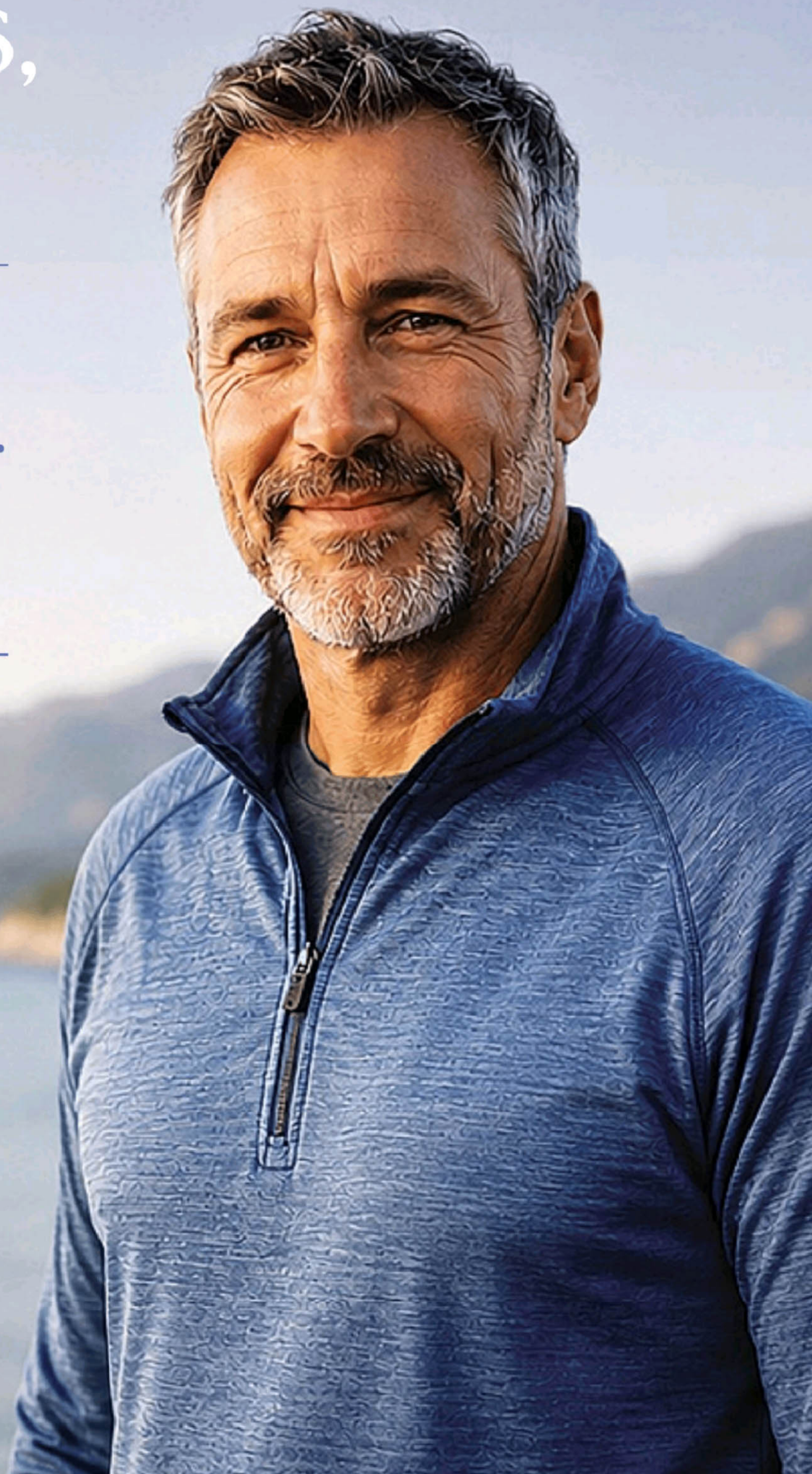
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GALLERY

DIANA MARKOSIAN

by JOSH LUSTIG

It is, in part, an interrogation: of the time spent together, the places visited, the emotions experienced. But it's also an act of creation. A way to reclaim what went before. To be the author, the protagonist, the one in control.

In the latest work by Armenian-American artist Diana Markosian, we are dropped inside a love story. One that no longer exists. "That story is over," Markosian writes in her photobook *Replaced*. "But I can't seem to let go. I want to step back inside those memories, to confront them and to feel what it's like to replace them. So I hire an actor."

Together, Markosian and her actor revisit moments from the relationship. They travel together – "Miami, Paris, Naples, Capri, Nice" – staying in the same hotels, walking the same coastal paths, eating at the same restaurants. "I had believed so deeply in our story," Markosian tells me. "It had all the ingredients of a cinematic romance. We met when I was 19, lost touch, and found each other again more than a decade later. At one point, we wanted to write a book of love. Instead I found myself making one about heartbreak."

Many relationships end. Few are able to maintain all of the fantastical romantic possibilities we allow ourselves to imagine. *Replaced*, however, isn't solely about the end of a relationship, which, for Markosian at least, contained so much. It's also the heartbreak involved in seeing your ex-partner re-enact your love story with someone else. Markosian tells me of how it speaks to a very specific, very painful experience: "The feeling that your place in someone else's life, and the memories you thought were uniquely yours, can suddenly be occupied by someone else. It's less about love itself than about grief."

The camera becomes a tool for understanding. Much of Markosian's previous work has been rooted in her own biography, investigating memory, displacement and the ways we construct personal and collective narratives. In making the photographs for this project, Markosian has found a way to be both inside and outside herself simultaneously.

Many of the images in *Replaced* contain a sense of closeness and intimacy. Bodies intertwined, clasped hands tightly cropped within the frame. But others, like this one, have distance. They feel voyeuristic. Like we're spying on the couple, watching them from afar. A feeling that, for Markosian, mirrors how she sees the relationship itself. "I had become both participant and observer, unable to return to the past, but equally unable to let go of it." **FT**

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"Diana Markosian: Replaced" is at Gallerie d'Italia, Turin, as part of the Exposed Torino Photo Festival, until September 6. The book is published by Allemandi, en.allemandi.com





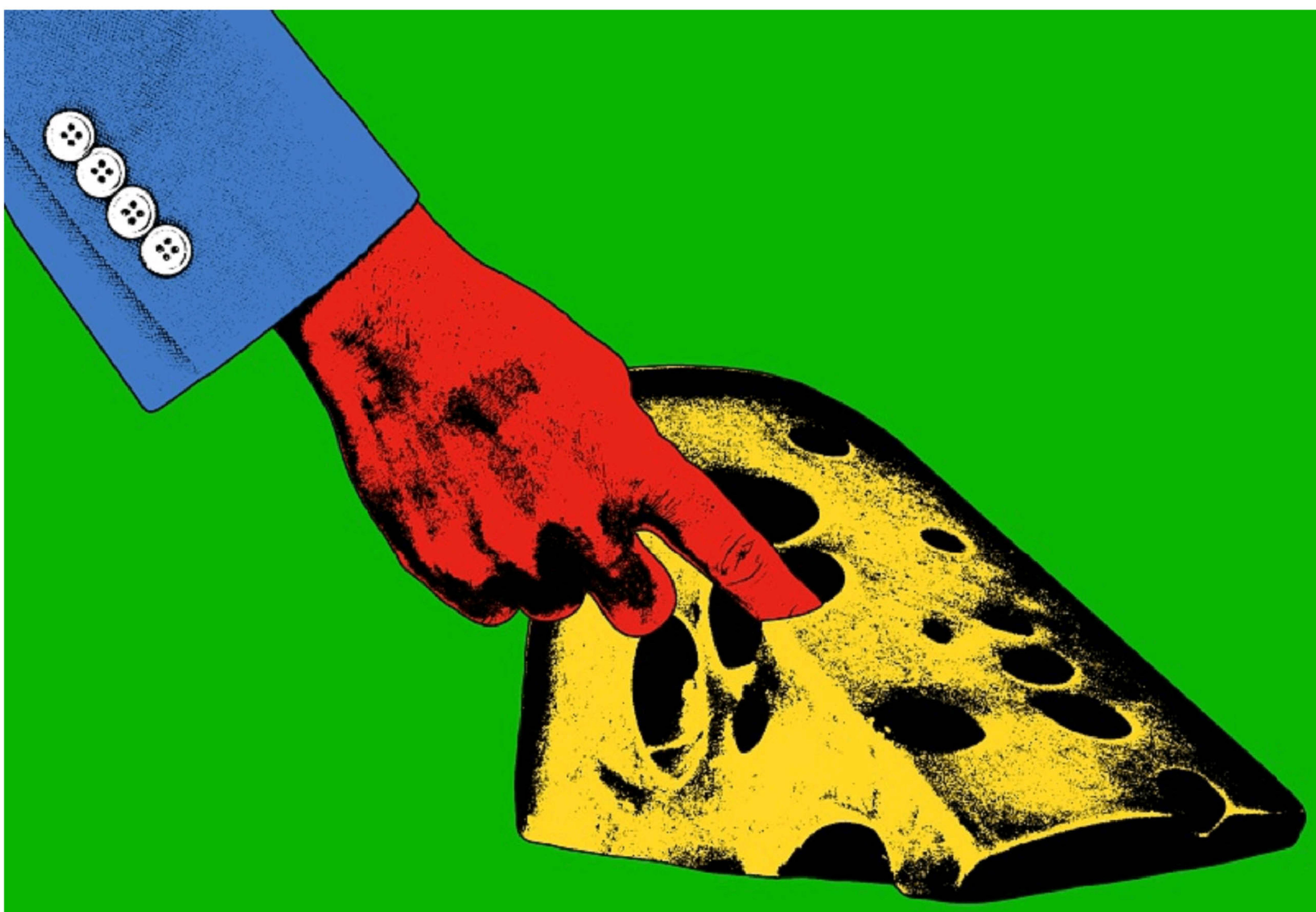
DISPATCH

Ambassadors of cheese

Surging protein demand has US dairies scrambling to boost whey production. Now they just have to sell the curds.

By *Cole Reynolds*

ILLUSTRATIONS by TYLER SPANGLER



It was a few years ago that an unease began to settle into the boardroom at First District Association. It should have been a period of rejoicing, given the Minnesota creamery's \$200mn expansion in the early days of what promised to be dairy's oncoming gold rush. Weight-loss drugs were hitting the market and users were finding that whey protein, long a forsaken by-product of cheesemaking, helped keep muscle as they shed fat. Over the following few years, demand for whey would skyrocket, and First District happened to be installing a new dryer for processing it. The problem, said vice-president Patti Schaefer, was that every competitor seemed to be investing, too.

At its most basic, the job of a cheesemaker is to rid their milk of whey. They add an enzyme that coagulates fats with certain proteins into cheese curds, and squeeze out liquid saturated with whey protein. In the nursery rhyme, there's a reason Little Miss Muffet had to eat both her curds and whey: to get more protein, you've typically got to make more cheese. And Schaefer watched major cheese plants get planned from California to Kansas, New York to Texas - among dairy processing investments at more than double the industry's typical rate. America already had a cheese surplus, and it was about to get more.

Anxious, Schaefer said, First District representatives began to piggyback on trips overseas alongside a small band of marketers, government officials and chefs - cheese diplomats, of sorts - expediting a decades-long quest to convince more people to eat American cheeses. If Little Miss Muffet went on Ozempic, they'd have to find someone to eat all her extra curds.

MIDWAY THROUGH MAY, AT ONE OF AMERICA'S largest trade shows in Chicago, cheese diplomacy was in full swing. In beige basement rooms beneath the glitzy convention, cheesemakers pitched foreign buyers, speed-dating style. And above, Rick Findlay gazed at the orange-vested owner of a renowned Vietnamese steakhouse as she nibbled a cube of cheddar. Findlay, a former Whole Foods vice-president, had flown in for the day from Milan. That evening, he'd be off to Mexico. But for one hour, he shepherded Vietnamese buyers on a tour of 10 Wisconsin cheese companies. Always able to coax a conversation with a deep baritone and gentle hand on the shoulder, Findlay went silent as the owner pressed the cheese against her teeth. He studied her face for the expression every cheese diplomat eventually knows: eyebrows raised, nose scrunched and wholly disgusted.

For five years, Findlay's been doing this, gallivanting around the globe on behalf of Wisconsin dairy farmers. They've held up their end of the bargain by producing more milk than ever. The US shipped a record amount of cheese last year. But prices went the opposite way. Some 1,000 dairy farms shuttered for good in 2025. A nervous joke began making the rounds. What if cheese becomes the by-product?

Sarah Schmidt, a vice-president at the major cheesemaker AMPI, readied her samples at stop No 4 on Findlay's tour. She was dreaming of the Chinese. Exports, on one hand, are a simple maths equation, according to the national US Dairy Export Council (USDEC) and the handful of regional trade

groups who study this kind of thing. And the maths like Asia - a place with enough population, enough affluence, and a low-enough cheese consumption to make even a modest increase feel significant. Right now the average Chinese person eats a half pound of cheese per year, Schmidt told me. "If we could even get that Chinese consumption to double to one pound, given the population..." Her voice trailed off and her eyes glazed over.

Actually selling the cheese, particularly after some limited studies found a high prevalence of lactose intolerance in certain east Asian populations, isn't a simple equation at all. It's advanced calculus for the confident - sometimes cocky - cheese diplomats, keen to sneak cheese into local dishes and waging turf wars with Europeans chasing the same markets. It took a second after she tasted an aged cheddar, but the Vietnamese owner scrunched up her nose. Her eyebrows shot skyward. Finally, once Findlay looked away, she deposited the rest into a nearby garbage can.

VETERAN CHEESE SELLER ROSS CHRISTIESON isn't one for conventions, and he wasn't in Chicago. After all, he has made a career selling cheese in foreign climes. If a buyer is stateside, they're too easy, too invested in the product already, Christieson told me. You have to find them where they are.

"I always describe my job, especially in those early days, as kissing frogs," he said. "You've got to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet a prince."

He requested a report on how Findlay had fared with the Vietnamese.

Christieson has been selling cheese for almost 40 years, first for his native New Zealand before sensing an export boom in America and decamping to California in 2008. The diplomacy was all a bit ragtag back then, he said, just his upstart programme in California and a few people from USDEC marauding abroad in the wake of China's 2008 scandal, where milk was found to be adulterated with toxic chemicals.

Christieson distinctly remembers the Malaysian woman who accused him of poisoning after sampling some blue cheese. And he cannot forget the customs agent in Shanghai who, in 2009, unloaded six wheels of award-winning blue cheese from his suitcase and, one by one, dropped them into a nearby bin.

Expanding in Asia hasn't always worked out for other American industries. Starbucks, often credited with spreading coffee culture across the continent, sold off a controlling stake in its Chinese stores in April. Nike's sales cratered in recent years, too. And when the world's big five chocolate companies tried to expand into Asia in the 1980s, they succeeded mostly in expanding themselves into a big six, after Japan spawned a competing giant.

But those companies weren't slinging cheeseburgers and pizza, the "entry-level drugs", as Glenn Millar calls them - so simple and irresistible that you don't have to understand cheese at all to like them. They are his best ambassadors by far. As burger chains and pizza joints have spread across Asia in recent decades, the cheese diplomats have used them as a foothold. South Korea and

Japan, both major fast-food markets, have seen US imports roughly quadruple since 2010. Millar is an executive at the farmer-funded, state-run California Milk Advisory Board, which sponsors annual pizza-making contests in most countries that receive exports. Willy Wonka-like, he flies the winners to a final competition in Las Vegas or Napa Valley, hoping the promise of a plane ticket to America boosts his organisation's notoriety. Millar's current ambition is to somehow export "snacking" culture or get people going to happy hours. The more Asian countries eat like Americans, the theory goes, the more cheese will sell.

It's all well defined, Millar told me. People get richer, get off subsistence farming and they buy better food. "What is better food defined as?" he asked. "Most of the time, it's defined by what we do in the west, for better or worse." Millar sells cheese, yes, but he's also selling America. He always packs a Dodgers cap on trips to Japan.

YOU'LL SELDOM HEAR A CHEESEMAKER CALL their product "American cheese", for fear of conjuring those cellophane-ensconced, neon slices in the minds of Asian customers, many of whom know it as "plastic cheese". America doesn't enjoy the fame of Italy or France, Christieson lamented. The only time you know you're

eating something American is when you're eating the plastic stuff. "People don't go and buy cream cheese. They buy cheesecakes," he said. "They don't go and buy cheese slices. They buy cheeseburgers."

The population maths is the same for everyone. And it has put the cheese diplomats on a collision course with European cheesemakers, who have a much longer history of exporting to Asia. Their cheeses

largely fetch better prices and have better name recognition too, in part because of the EU's spate of trade agreements that recognise Protected Designations of Origin. Even in some emerging markets, it's impossible to sell anything as Parmigiano Reggiano that's made anywhere but northern Italy. Since October, the Trump administration has countered with its own agreements in south-east Asia, Argentina and Taiwan, all letting American companies sell cheese under generic names like "parmesan".

Back at convention stop No 2 in Chicago, Frank Alfaro was midway through a series of eye rolls when Findlay's tour rolled by the booth for BelGioioso, a prominent creamery that has sent cheese to more than 40 countries. Alfaro, who oversees the brand's exports, sunk into his chair as he worked himself into incredulity over the Europeans and their PDOs. Obviously, he's not able to sell much parmesan to Italy itself. Eye roll. But his Japanese buyers insist on buying it from Italy, too. Eye roll. And his soft-rind gorgonzola, the one that won a gold medal at the World Championship Cheese Contest four years ago? He has to sell it under the name "CreamyGorg". Eye roll.

"The chefs, they get it. The consumers," Alfaro said, shaking his head, "they're inundated with videos saying 'Buy your parmesan from Italy.'" At trade shows like this, Alfaro tries to place his CreamyGorg as close to the European stands as

If Little Miss Muffet went on Ozempic, they'd have to find someone to eat all her extra curds

he can, a dare of sorts towards passers-by to make a comparison. “Let ’em taste it, touch it, eat it.” Alfaro sat up. “You’ve gotta put it in their mouths.”

On the opposite side of the convention, the Italian consortium that protects Grana Padano was making the exact opposite argument. More than five million wheels of Grana Padano are pulled from Italian cheese caves every year. And buying that name, a blue-scarved representative argued, is the only way to know you’re getting the artisanship that comes from almost 1,000 years of making the stuff. She couldn’t resist a bit of chiding: wouldn’t Americans be better off if everyone was a little less “jealous”

the ambition is to
port snacking:
the more Asians
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of tteokbokki now, gushed Alexander. One they swirl in heavy cream. The second, they top with

handfuls of mozzarella. “Thank God for California dairy!” she said.

After 30 years cooking in fine dining kitchens and teaching in culinary schools, Alexander volunteered that she’s no longer the age to be an influencer. But she fancies herself a bit of one anyway. After all, she’s paid to cook up trends, flying around the world and showing chefs which California cheeses could be used in their menus. For this trip – a seminar for some two dozen Korean chefs invited by California Milk – she’d invented a riff on cacio e pepe, using gouda instead of the traditional Pecorino Romano, because that’s what needed to sell, and ssamjang, a traditional Korean bean paste, for umami and familiarity. After a week of testing, her recipes were ready for export. “I’m not trying to sound cocky,” she said, “but I’m pretty sure it’s going to be a hit by the time I get into the country.”

Antonio El Khoury, a French-born chef who promotes cheese in the Middle East for USDEC, admitted that he misses the mark from time to time. But last December, under the dim globe lights of a Riyadh steakhouse, he didn’t. He was putting the final touches on a cheese tasting for a group of influential chefs who’d gathered there. Grilled cheese was on the menu, along with arancini inspired by *kabsa*, a traditional Saudi Arabian dish. He ended with what he considers his signature dish: a chocolate mousse infused with pepper jack cheese. He noticed I was making “the face”. Yes, everyone makes it, nose scrunched and eyebrows up, he told me. But they always come

around. A couple of the chefs from that tasting asked to add recipes to their menus. Riding the momentum, El Khoury scheduled eight more tastings, before war broke out in Iran. Now, they’re all cancelled.

GEOPOLITICAL SPEED BUMPS NOTWITHSTANDING, the cheese diplomats spoke about their work with an air of inevitability. “The one truism is, as people get richer, they eat better food, and dairy is universally considered one of the best food sources,” Christieson said. To catch the white whale that is whey protein, American dairy companies need it to be true.

Alfaro leaned forward in his chair again, just as Findlay moved his tour onward. “GLP-1s are scaring the hell out of us,” he said. It’s especially scary, he added, if users cut back on restaurant meals as some recent reporting and data suggest is happening.

Findlay won over his Vietnamese customer. Over the afternoon, the steakhouse owner returned to sample one cheese so often that she became known among some conventioners as the “orange vest woman”. But because of a language barrier, she left with the impression it wasn’t ready for export.

At the end of the tour, Findlay turned to survey his crew. “All right kids, that’s Wisconsin!” he boomed. They all snapped pictures, posing with little Vietnam flags. Findlay hung around for a few minutes before telling a colleague to grab her luggage. He had a flight to Mexico, and the Uber to the airport was already booked. **FT**

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Cole Reynolds is a journalist based in Washington DC





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IN 2002, SIX TEENAGERS
FROM NORTH CAROLINA TOLD
THE POLICE A STORY THAT
RUINED ALL THEIR LIVES.
EVER SINCE THEN THEY'VE
BEEN TRYING TO RETELL IT

THE RECANTINGS

BY MATTHEW BREMNER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ELEANA KONSTANTELLOS ANDRÉ



THE RECORDER CLICKS ON.

THE TIME IS 21.30. THE DATE: NOVEMBER 19 2002. THE SUBJECT IS JESSICAH Black. She's 16 years old, from Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She's come down on her own. Nobody arrested her. And, "As of right now, you understand you're still... free to leave," the detective states. She replies that she understands.

But the truth is, she hasn't felt free. Not for a moment. She's felt trapped and threatened for hours, afraid she'll go to prison if she doesn't say what these men want her to say.

She didn't come here to tell lies - the total opposite, in fact. At the beginning of the interview, she told the officers what really happened. In her tired, soft Southern drawl, she'd insisted on it. But they just got angry, said she was making things up, that she knew more than she was letting on.

Hundreds of questions followed: some spoken, some shouted, some plain spat out. At times, one of the men leaned in so close that flecks of saliva landed on her auburn hair and round face as she sat on the hard chair in the interview room. The harsh lighting made her feel sick.

And in the midst of it all, there was the fact of a dead man in South Winston-Salem: Nathaniel Jones, beaten and bound with duct tape at his home. And the growing sense that the police had already decided what her place in that story would be - that she could be charged as an accessory to murder.

If she'd just tell the truth, all this could be avoided, the detectives insist. But the truth, that word, it sort of seems meaningless now. Because the truth - that she didn't know Jones, she's never heard of him, and she's convinced the boys, her friends, don't know anything either - isn't the version of events that is going to get her out of here. By the time the detective hits record on the tape machine, she feels crazy - unsure of what she's saying.

"OK. We're gonna start on Friday afternoon, November the 15th, at about four o'clock," he says.

That's when Jessicah Black starts to tell the story that will not only rewrite the past, but her own future, too.

NATHANIEL JONES WAS KNOWN AROUND WINSTON-SALEM AS "CHILLY". HE was a deacon at Dreamland Park Baptist Church, a widower, a grandfather, a man who spent nearly four decades running Jones Chevron, one of the first Black-owned service stations in North Carolina. If you met him and asked how he was, he'd tell you, "I am blessed and highly favoured in the Lord." Among his grandchildren was Christopher Paul, then a teenage basketball star who had just signed for Wake Forest University and was on track for the NBA.

Jones grew up in and around the Black churches and tobacco factories of the old, racially segregated Winston-Salem. By 2002, things were changing, but the city was still deeply divided. Some neighbourhoods had money and opportunity; others had poverty and neglect. Belview, the south side and Moravia Street, where Jones lived, were part of that second world. It was there, on the evening of November 15 2002, amid the beige bungalows, that police found Jones face-down on the floor of his carport, bound with black tape. He had been beaten and his wallet stolen, but money remained in his car and pockets. The groceries he'd bought sat undisturbed on the kitchen counter and in the trunk of his car. His valuables were left untouched. An autopsy showed Jones died of cardiac arrhythmia brought on by the stress of the attack.

In the days after Jones's killing, the Winston-Salem police had a host of leads. A Hispanic male was seen jumping fences near Jones's house at the time of the crime. There was a disgruntled former employee. Then there were the repeated calls from the same number to a local taxi company requesting a cab be sent out to Jones's address around the time of the murder - the dispatcher suspected the caller was a "young Black male". Another neighbour reported seeing a small-framed Black man in Jones's car and noticing a door at a nearby house on Moravia Street closing around the time of the incident.

Local newspapers followed the story closely and public pressure was mounting. In the days after Jones's death, his grandson scored exactly 61 points during a high-school game, one for each year of Jones's life. "I guess I was just trying to send a message to my grandfather, to let him know how much we missed him," Paul later told The Washington Post.

I first heard about the Winston-Salem Five in the summer of 2025. Over the months that followed, I began reading through thousands of pages of court records and police interviews made available to me by defence lawyers, and interviewing many of the people involved in the case. The scenes represented in this story are reconstructed from that material.

One of the first things I noticed was that, according to police files, there was little or no meaningful follow-up on any of the early leads. Officers seemed at a loss. But then another detective working on the case received a chance phone call. The woman on the other end of the line was Arlene Tolliver. She purportedly told him that her 14-year-old son, Jermal, had been acting strangely since the homicide.

The police brought Jermal Tolliver in and from there things moved fast. The boy named the friends he had been with that evening – Nathaniel Cauthen, Rayshawn Banner, Christopher Bryant, Dorrell Brayboy. By 4.30pm that same day, officers had identified another member of their circle: a white girl named Jessicah Black.

THAT'S WHY SHE'S HERE NOW, EXHAUSTED, EXPLAINING TO THE OFFICERS about how she liked to drive around the south side in her black 1986 Mercury Cougar – a gift from her grandparents. That autumn, she'd often drive along Devonshire near Belview Park on a whim, hoping to see the boys, sometimes circling back if they weren't there.

And on that day in November, or so she tells the detectives, that was just how it happened. She drove up Devonshire Street, and there they all were: Bryant, Cauthen, Banner, Tolliver and Brayboy. She picked them up and, at first, she tells the officers, they were "just driving around". But then the mood in the car changed. A conversation started in the back seat, she says. Bryant was "joking around and he was like – 'You know – don't you think it'd be kind of funny – you know – if we went out here and we jacked somebody and just took their money...'"

She says they stopped at a Dollar General, then at the Maxway store, where the boys bought duct tape. After that, they drove to Belview Park. That's where the boys spotted Mr Jones's car. They got out and headed down Moravia Street towards his house, leaving her behind. A few minutes later, she heard the shouting. Then a commotion. Ten minutes after that, the boys came back. "Yeah, we got that shit," she heard them say. "We fucked him up." At least that's what she tells the detectives – that at first she did not fully understand what was happening, but that once she heard the yelling and the banging, "I knew what they had done."

At exactly 10pm, Jessicah Black finishes her confession, 30 minutes after it began. That's it, she thinks, it's over. In fact, it's just the beginning. Elsewhere in the building, the police have been pressing the boys to tell the same story.

Bryant, Cauthen, Banner, Tolliver and Brayboy are neighbourhood boys. Their lives circle a few blocks: Goldfloss, Moravia, Belview Park are the names they know best. Nathaniel Cauthen and Rayshawn Banner are brothers who live on Goldfloss. Teresa Banner, their mother, will later tell me they were from a structured, close-knit family: "They were good people, they had a heart." The boys weren't rich, but nor were they from poverty: "They always had food. They always had clothes. We always had money." They are boys who gather on porches and in yards, who ride around on bikes and mopeds, play ball, skip school and go to the bowling alley, get high and spend long evenings with nowhere in particular to be. That, the boys insist, was all they were doing when Jones was killed. Brayboy says they were just riding around. Cauthen flatly denies any involvement and even asks for a lie-detector test.

The investigators do not accept these firm denials. To them, they seem likely to be the initial stories of a group of boys who know more than they are saying. As officers move in and out of interview rooms, carrying information from one interrogation to the next, the pressure intensifies. They tell the teenagers that their friends are already telling their side of it, that they should too. Under

North Carolina law in 2002, police are permitted to exaggerate, even to suggest they have evidence they do not possess. There is no rule requiring a parent or other adult to be present while 14- and 15-year-olds are questioned. For most of their time in these rooms, the five boys are alone.

When I interviewed him in late 2025, Tolliver told me that a detective asked him to hold out his arm. "That's the vein," he told him. "This is where the lethal injection would go." Bryant said that when an officer said the same to him, he began to cry and thought he should tell them whatever they wanted to hear. Banner told me that officers played him the recording of his brother's confession. The Winston-Salem Police Department did not reply to requests for comments for this article, but several of the detectives confirmed these details in depositions years later. The office of the district attorney said it could not comment on pending litigation.

Slowly, the boys begin to change their stories. The confessions recorded by the police that night vary drastically in the details, and often do not fit the evidence, but the broad outline goes something like this: as Jones arrives home, the boys approach. One or two act as lookouts while others go to the side door or carport. Jones opens the door or is intercepted outside. He is struck, beaten, taped up and robbed. In some statements, a baseball bat is used; in others, fists and kicking are featured prominently. The lights in the carport are said to have been disabled by unscrewing the bulbs. After the attack, the boys run back to Black's car, dump the tape in the park, go home to change clothes, and then head to the bowling alley. Later, they return to Moravia Street to view the scene once police and emergency crews arrive.

ALMOST AS SOON AS JESSICAH BLACK LEAVES THE POLICE STATION, SHE FEELS something is off. She's just not sure what exactly. She's never been in trouble with the police before and her life has been relatively sheltered until now. She grew up between the south side of Winston-Salem and more suburban stretches like Gumtree and Ivy Oakley. At home, the expectations are clear: she's the first grandchild, the one supposed to set the example. She's pushed to get good grades, graduate, stay out of trouble. To do something with her life.

Socially, though, she may have drifted a little outside those parameters. She likes to hang out in the south side of Winston-Salem. Not because she is reckless, but because she doesn't care about class or race divisions. She never really fitted in with the other girls. She just wanted to drive, smoke a little weed and live her life with whomever she wanted. It was her teenage rebellion.

The day after she gets back from the police station, she talks to her mother. "Momma," she says, "I didn't see nothing." She says the police pulled her in, and she doesn't understand why. She was with the boys at the park, but she's sure they didn't do it – they

THEY ARE BOYS WHO GATHER ON PORCHES, WHO RIDE AROUND ON BIKES AND MOPEDS, PLAY BALL, SKIP SCHOOL AND GET HIGH









aren't the type. Now she's worried it's too late. What has she said? What has she done?

Back at the police station, her friends are asking themselves similar questions. They've confessed to a crime they did not commit.

All five boys are charged with first-degree murder and assault with a dangerous weapon, and almost immediately, all five of them recant and move to suppress their statements. But how do you undo admitting to murder?

At the suppression hearings in early 2004, the boys tell a different story. They describe not a planned robbery but an ordinary Friday evening: after school, they gathered at Bryant's house. There was some talk of going to the mall, but when it started to rain the plan fell through. Later, Black picked them up in her car, and they drove around, eventually dropping off a friend on Moravia Street. When Tolliver noticed police lights, he got out and asked a girl he knew from school what had happened. She told him an old man had been murdered. That was it.

The judge is unmoved: "Now, my problem with that would be why would anyone make a false statement implicating themselves after being told that the punishment of what they are accused of doing is death?" he says.

The confessions remain as evidence, and the state splits the case into two parts: the brothers Cauthen and Banner will be tried first; Bryant, Tolliver and Brayboy second. Why, exactly, it is difficult to say in hindsight. Christine Mumma, the attorney who has represented Banner since 2020 and Cauthen since 2022, can only speculate: perhaps prosecutors hoped convictions in the first trial would flush out pleas in the second? Perhaps they wanted to see the state's case tested once before running it again; perhaps five boys, five lawyers and five confessions were simply too unwieldy to handle at once.

JESSICAH BLACK APPEARS AT BOTH TRIALS - THE FIRST IN AUGUST 2004 AND the second in May 2005. At both, she tells the same story she's told the police - the one in which the boys are guilty.

On the stand, she builds the story up piece by piece. First, the car. Then the streets. Then the talk of jacking someone. Then the tape, the park, the shouts and screams in the late evening on Moravia Street: "Get the fuck down", "Give us that shit". When the boys come back, they are grinning, breathless, triumphant.

In the courtroom, the prosecutor keeps walking her forward. She knows, even as she speaks, that the words do not sit right inside her. But by then, the story has been repeated so many times that it has hardened into something vaguely resembling the truth. And she is still terrified that she could be implicated in the murder. The prosecutors are kind. They reassure her. They even let her smoke inside their office. Before the trials, they offer her a thick transcript they've prepared so there aren't any slip-ups. They tell her where to begin, what matters, how not to get lost. So she stays inside the lines, answers their questions. She will get through it.

By the second trial in May 2005, she is heavily pregnant on the stand, and sometimes she can't breathe. She has to ask for a recess to pull herself together. She cannot look at the boys, though she feels them looking at her. Tolliver notices the strain before he understands it. "One time she looked like she was gonna cry," he tells me later. Bryant sits listening, stunned. "I was like, why is she lying? I can't believe it... I was mad."

And somewhere behind sits Jones's family, still trying to understand what had happened to the man who had held them together, who they described as their "rock".

In both trials, the evidence is full of absences. Numerous items - clothing, shoes, the seat cover and cuttings from the car - are tested for blood, but none is found. Police have not recovered the wallet that one confession said had been discarded. Nor can they link the duct tape used in the attack to the defendants: investigators have found no matching roll at Dollar General or Maxway, and Dollar General surveillance footage shows no one resembling the defendants entering the store. Even the alleged robbery appears incomplete: more than \$900 remained in Jones's pocket, and more than \$1,400 was still in a briefcase in the trunk of his car.

The confessions raise equally serious concerns. Firstly, they don't match up. One says there was no plan; another says Bryant directed the robbery. They disagree over how they approached Jones, who carried weapons, who tied him up, whether the carport light was disabled and where he was left. Secondly, the court does not meaningfully confront the possibility that the boys - all of whom had learning difficulties - have been pressured into making false confessions. School reports, predating the interrogations, show that they struggled with "communication, self-direction, work habits, [and] social skills", impairments that would have made it harder for them to process detectives' questions, and especially vulnerable to suggestion and authority.

None of it seems to matter. The boys' confessions, Black's testimony and a Nike trainer print found on the bonnet of Jones's car - said to match shoes owned by Cauthen - bolster the prosecution's narrative. During the closing statements, Banner's then lawyer, Robert Leonard, appears to concede that Banner may have been present and minimally involved, while arguing he did not participate and was not part of any plan. "He - he may have been there, but he wasn't part of what was taking place," he tells the court. Under North Carolina's felony-murder and acting-in-concert rules in 2004, this is a dangerous concession: if the jurors believe Banner helped with the robbery, even without intending a killing, the law can still make him liable for murder.

And it does. Cauthen and his younger brother Banner are convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. The next year, Bryant, Tolliver and Brayboy are convicted of second-degree murder and are each sentenced to a maximum of 198 months (16 and a half years) in prison.

After the verdict, what Jessica Black feels is not simple. There is relief in it, certainly, but shame too. She knows she has lied. But by this point, the lie has been repeated so often that her own truth no longer feels steady. She didn't let her family come to court. She was worried they'd be ashamed. The whole thing has made her question her perception of herself. But she can't let herself get into that. She wants to get on with her life and have her baby. Never be in trouble again.

So she seals it off. For years, she makes sure her name stays clear of the case, carrying the fear that they could still come back and charge her. When she becomes a mother, she feels she has to protect her son from everything, including her past. She struggles with her mental health but cannot bring herself to tell the therapist about the murder or the trials. She is terrified to go back to the south side.

She keeps going, working where she can - landscaping, factory jobs, beauty, carpentry - whatever is there - while raising her son and holding the secret. But in her twenties, her body begins to fail: double hip replacements, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, spinal damage, a blood clot. Work becomes harder, money tighter.

Then her son reaches the age her friends were when they were detained. The case is no longer only a memory. She looks at her boy and, for the first time, in a way that feels almost unbearable, she understands what was done to them.

BRYANT, CAUTHEN, BANNER, TOLLIVER AND BRAYBOY DO NOT GIVE UP ON THEIR claims of innocence. In the years following their convictions, they appeal and lose. The North Carolina courts uphold the convictions in 2006 and 2007. The boys, approaching their twenties, file Motions for Appropriate Relief, trying to reopen the case through the ordinary channels of post-conviction review. Those are denied, too.

By now, the state's story has hardened into doctrine: the confessions were voluntary, the verdicts sound, the case closed. What remains for the boys is the long afterlife of conviction - years measured by birthdays, funerals and missed childhoods. By paperwork, waiting and the repeated humiliation of being told that what they said had happened to them does not count.

Nathaniel Cauthen reaches a point where he can no longer bear it. He feels trapped, "isolated". In prison, there's so much violence. He learns not to lash out, but restraint comes at a cost. In the summer of 2014, he writes a letter to his brother, Rayshawn







ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHY

Eleana Konstantellos André is a Mexico-based photographer. For this story, FT Weekend Magazine invited Konstantellos André to create fictional scenes that reflect aspects of this article. These photographs do not contain the individuals, objects or locations featured in the story.

Banner. He begins: “What’s good little brother, by the time you read this, I should be dead. I can’t stand this anymore...” On July 3, prison officers find him in time to save his life.

“We weren’t supposed to grow up there,” Bryant tells me later. He could endure missing the world outside, he says, but not the thought that someone he loved might die while he was locked away. “That was my worst thought, that I’d lose my mama while I was inside.”

So Bryant keeps writing – to lawyers, innocence organisations, anyone who might listen. One of the places he writes to is the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission, a state-created body that investigates credible claims of innocence. If the commission takes a case, it re-examines the record, interviews witnesses, tests evidence and, if warranted, sends the claim on to an eight-member panel to decide whether it merits judicial review. If it does, the Chief Justice appoints a three-judge panel to hear the evidence.

In March 2015, the commission moves Bryant’s claim into a formal inquiry. The other men follow with their own claims.

By the beginning of 2018, Jessicah Black does not know any of this. She doesn’t know that the boys’ appeals have failed, or that the courts have left the convictions standing. She doesn’t know that Bryant, Brayboy and Tolliver have served their time and come home, while Banner and Cauthen remain in prison. She doesn’t know anything about the Jones family, either – about the daughters he left behind, or the grandson Chris Paul, who will soon write a book about his grandfather in which he’ll say he is sure the boys are guilty, but is conflicted about their long prison sentences. By now, the public weight of the case has changed. Back in the early 2000s, Nathaniel Jones was a respected member of the community, a local role model. Now he is also the grandfather of an NBA superstar.

Then, in the summer of 2019, Black sees a story on the local news. Dorrell Brayboy has been murdered in a car park, in a dispute over money. The news shatters her. It feels so unfair: to be

killed so soon after getting out of jail for a crime she is pretty sure he did not commit.

Around the same time, a journalist from Texas writes to her on Facebook Messenger. He says his name is Hunter Atkins, he works for the Houston Chronicle and that he’s doing a story on the five boys convicted of killing Nathaniel Jones. At first, she tells him to get lost. She wants nothing to do with it. But Atkins is tenacious. “He really is a nice guy, super nice guy,” she later tells investigators. She finally relents.

At an IHOP on Peters Creek Parkway, the conversation, which Atkins tapes, begins with small talk – about work, her mother, her son, her life up to this point. Sometimes she jokes, sometimes Atkins laughs, and sometimes the meet-up feels almost normal, just two people in a booth of a popular chain restaurant, their coffee going cold. Then, Atkins takes her back to that evening in November 2002: the park, what she could really hear, whether the police had fed her the story she later told in court. He is careful, “I don’t want to lead anything... I don’t want to put any adjectives in your [mouth],” he says. And that, more than anything, seems to make a difference. Because once she starts talking about what it was like to be 16 in that interrogation room, the old story begins to loosen its grip. Sitting there in the booth, she begins, at last, to say what really happened.

Soon, she’ll have the chance to do so again. The North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission is also looking into the case of the five boys. And they want to speak to Black.

IN MARCH 2020, THE CASE COMES BEFORE THE EIGHT-MEMBER PANEL OF THE commission. New evidence is presented. DNA testing is carried out on the black duct tape used to bind Jones. All five of the boys are excluded, and so is Jessicah Black. A piece of black string entwined with that tape reveals a major female DNA profile and at least one unknown male profile. Although these unidentified DNA profiles offer new leads, investigators are unable to match them to any known individuals, and there is no public record of any follow-

up that produced a new suspect or changed the direction of the case. The defence also presents an updated footwear analysis comparing the soles of the Nike Air Force 1 to the impression on the bonnet of Jones's car. The expert says the shoes could have made the impression, but, unlike the original testimony, cannot call it an exact match: the shoes were so common at the time, and the impression lacks unique identifying features.

Then there is the testimony of Haley Cleary, a developmental psychologist and an expert in juvenile interrogations and confessions. While she says she cannot prove that the boys' statements are false, she does believe they bear the hallmarks of having been extracted under extreme pressure. She points to the boys' ages and vulnerability, their history of academic failure. She also cites that the detectives threatened four of the boys with the death penalty, repeatedly called them liars, and rejected their denials. "This is an extremely troubling case that involved numerous known risk factors for false confessions," Cleary later tells me by email.

In their depositions with the commission, the detectives defend these tactics as a way of forcing honesty. One says he raised the lethal injection to "elicit a truthful response". None of the boys, however, was legally eligible for the death penalty. Another detective says he told Bryant about the death penalty to impress on him "the importance of being truthful", and that he was mistaken about Bryant's eligibility. He calls it "poor judgement". Detective Chuck Byrom, whom I later speak with on the phone, denies using any such coercive tactics. In his view, they were unnecessary because there was enough evidence to convict the boys even without a confession.

Black testifies too. She tells the panel that the story she gave in 2002 is not true – that she was young, frightened and alone in what felt like a room full of men for what felt like forever. She'd cried the whole time. The true story of that night, she tells the panel, is that she'd picked up some of the boys after school, driven around with them smoking weed, and then they headed to the howling alley and mall. Later, they passed the crime scene and one or two of the boys got out to ask what was happening. But nobody could see the house or a body; nobody confessed or planned anything, and she did not even learn a man had been killed until police came for her car days later. She had no evidence to make her believe the boys had participated in the crime.

The hearing lasts five days, and at the end, the commission votes 5–3 that there is sufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit a judicial review. For Black, the relief is immediate. And then, for the first time in all those years, she gets to speak to the boys. Back in the first trials, they had stared at her in disbelief as she told her story from the witness stand. But now the looks are different. Tolliver even hugs her. "No, it's OK. I ain't mad at you. You're good," he says. Tolliver and Bryant understand that the same thing that happened to them happened to her, too. "We lied on ourselves too, so, I mean, all of us was put in a bad predicament," Bryant later tells me.

The old case still has defenders, none more steadfast than Jones's family. His daughters tell the court they had been there "from the first day that everything started to today", that they had missed no trial, nor any motions they were able to attend, and that they still believed, "We have the right people." The Jones family did not reply to requests for comments for this story made through the Chris Paul Family Foundation.

In June 2022, two years after the commission's hearing, a three-judge panel agrees with the family and the state. They do not overturn the conviction. The defence has not proved, with clear and convincing evidence, that the four men are innocent.

IN NOVEMBER 2025, I VISITED JESSICAH BLACK, NOW IN HER LATE THIRTIES, in a trailer park in South Winston-Salem. She was propped on the sofa, an ashtray balanced on her chest, her legs wrapped in blankets and compression socks, her face swollen from the medication stacked in prescription bottles on the shelf behind her head.

"I thought I'd have to go back into hospital today," she told me. Her voice was hoarse with tobacco, and she seemed exhausted

WHAT REMAINS IS THE LONG AFTERLIFE OF CONVICTION — YEARS MEASURED BY BIRTHDAYS, FUNERALS, MISSED CHILDHOODS

by everything, not least having to go through her story all over again.

Three months earlier, she had testified at yet another hearing. In 2022, the case shifted back into the regular post-conviction system. The next year, the defendants filed Motions for Appropriate Relief, using Black's recantation, fresh DNA results and the science on false confessions to reopen the case. By the time Black took the stand again, she badly needed the whole thing to be over.

Still, as she sat through her fifth trial-like proceeding, she felt this judge was different from the others. He listened. Whispering to the men who were once the boys in court, she remembered saying, "I swear... I think this judge is going to do it, man." She was right: on August 8 2025 the judge vacated the convictions and ordered the remaining two still serving time be released immediately. They had spent almost a quarter of a century in prison.

Then, just as Banner and Cauthen were about to be released, prosecutors moved to stop it. They argued that Judge Robert Broadie's ruling was not an acquittal, that it contained errors requiring appellate review, and that the men should remain in prison in the interest of public safety while higher courts considered the case.

Banner and Cauthen's lawyers argued that the dismissal did function as an acquittal, that double jeopardy barred any further prosecution, and that state law did not permit a dismissal to be stayed merely because prosecutors wanted to appeal. The North Carolina Court of Appeals agreed, but the Supreme Court didn't. Banner and Cauthen will have to stay in prison until the Court of Appeals issues its opinion on the state of the case as a whole, either upholding Judge Broadie's order or finding the proper remedy is a new trial.

Mumma told me that Tolliver and Bryant were willing to be retried if it meant Cauthen and Banner would be released in the meantime. "That's the kind of confidence they have in their innocence," she said.

For Black, the stay of release felt grimly familiar – another limbo, another non-ending. For more than two decades this case has been dividing and destroying lives. Whatever happens in the future, Black will be for ever tormented by the past. She stubbed out her cigarette and swigged from a luminous orange soft drink by the sofa. She seemed in pain.

"Even if I can sit here and say, they've forgiven me and I've forgiven myself, I'm still going to hold that guilt," she said. Every time she thinks about those hours in the interrogation room, she feels the suffocating irony: the "truth" she had to tell in order to go home that day in 2002 did not set her free. It turned out to be the thing that trapped her. **FT**

AT PEACE AT LAST

UKRAINIAN SOLDIERS ARE
BEING REBURIED HUNDREDS OF
MILES FROM WHERE THEY DIED

BY FABRICE DEPREZ
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DZVINKA PINCHUK

The cemetery in the frontline city of Pokrovsk, Donetsk







Oksana Maricheva, now living in Kyiv, commemorates the deaths of her two sons, soldiers from Pokrovsk

The second funeral of Serhiy Kulyk took place on May 6 in Iziaslav, a small, ancient Ukrainian town 800km west of where the soldier was born, died aged 39, and had been buried for the first time.

There weren't a lot of differences from the first ceremony, his brother Andriy said. It had been a bit less sad, maybe. Hotter for sure, under the beating May sun of the Khmelnytskyi region instead of the February frost of industrial Kramatorsk in far-off eastern Ukraine.

That wintry day in 2024 had been beautiful in its own way, his father Mykola remembered; snowless and mild enough that the ground wasn't fully frozen. "The diggers worked well," he said. The same photograph of a blond, smiling Serhiy in a white hoodie adorned the wooden cross of his grave. He'd never had a photo taken in his uniform.

The ceremony in Iziaslav was nearly identical to tens of thousands of burials that have taken place across every area of Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion of the country in 2022. At 11.56 that morning, a message on the town's Telegram channel informed residents: "The cortege is setting off through the town. Please pay your respects to the soldier."

Waiting in Iziaslav's centre, I felt a pang of anxiety as I watched the busy, oblivious life of the town go by: cars looking for a place to park near the supermarket, teenagers rushing to buy an ice

cream between classes. Serhiy Kulyk was the first soldier to be buried in Iziaslav despite having never lived there. Would locals be reluctant to honour an outsider? Perhaps they had simply grown numb to a military ritual that would repeat itself seven more times in the town that month alone.

Then the funeral cortege began to peek out in the distance, a police car flashing its lights to open the way, and people seemed to appear out of nowhere to line the street and kneel. For an instant, life stopped as the cortege passed by. After the police car came a black SUV, converted into an improvised hearse with iron bars welded to its flatbed, followed by an array of cars flying Ukrainian flags. Life quickly resumed when the cortege turned out of sight a few minutes later. A memorial service followed at the nearby house of Serhiy's parents, before the final drive to the cemetery for the funeral.

The family mostly felt relief. Their son was somewhere the Russians could not reach him. His brother Andriy, also a soldier until his discharge last year, had seen in Bakhmut and countless other war-torn towns how missiles, shells and drones could plough and scar the soil. He didn't want that for his older brother. Sitting on a bench after the funeral, he was glad they had been able to get Serhiy out. "I hope it can be done for everyone else," he said.

IN APRIL AND MAY 2026, THE REMAINS OF AT least four Ukrainian soldiers were quietly exhumed from the cemeteries of Kramatorsk and its twin

city Sloviansk in eastern Ukraine. Ten more permits for reburial from the two cities had been issued since the end of 2025 – a small but unprecedented number as Russian forces keep advancing towards the last major standing cities in the Donbas, a region President Vladimir Putin has vowed to conquer in its entirety.

Oleh Alekseenko, a former sociology teacher, fled from Sloviansk to another town in western Ukraine with his wife, Nelya, in the early days of war. At the time they brought just one bag with them, hoping "it would only be a couple of months" before they could go home. Four years later he still lives in a one-bed flat in the area. Nelya died in January and, a few days before Serhiy's ceremony, Oleh saw his only son, Mykhailo, reburied in the nearby town of Drohobych.

Mykhailo was a cheerful political science graduate with a passion for environmental issues. Enlisted in the first weeks of the invasion and killed in combat a few weeks before his 29th birthday, he didn't know Serhiy Kulyk, a welder whose work had taken him all over Ukraine and to Russia. But they did have something in common. Though serving in different units, both men died in a patch of forest north of Sloviansk in 2023.

Mykhailo's body had been laid to rest under the fir trees of a small cemetery on the outskirts of Sloviansk that is now just 15km from the closest Russian positions. His father and Serhiy's parents told me of their fears of seeing their sons' graves damaged in the fighting or desecrated by Russian troops. Over the past year, Serhiy's father had been



The Kulyk family in their new home in Iziaslav, alongside a portrait of their late son Serhiy



making enquiries: exhumation, he discovered, was a peculiar and heavily bureaucratic process even in normal circumstances, and not one that local administrations and funeral companies were keen to deal with. It was also a burden that, until the beginning of this year, fell entirely on the families themselves.

Exhumations of soldiers from frontline cemeteries are rare. In the first world war, both Britain and France were quick to clamp down on private exhumations of soldiers from wealthy families after the front stabilised in late 1914. Sir Fabian Ware, founder of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, was said to have “totally opposed the return of the bodies, believing that the dead should be buried close to the places where they had fallen, officers and soldiers resting side by side in death as in combat”, according to French historian Antoine Prost in a 2011 article.

In Ukraine, remembrance of fallen soldiers has been a dominant aspect of state policy and everyday life since 2022. From the daily 9am minute of silence observed all over the country, to the giant billboard portraits of soldiers killed in battle, honouring the dead has become an inescapable, nation-building ritual. Yet the question of what to do with the remains of soldiers buried in villages and towns in the path of the Russian advance had been unaddressed by Ukraine’s authorities.

Earlier this year in Kyiv, with residents enduring daily power outages during the coldest winter in a decade, I met a burly, serious-looking man



Serhiy Kulyk's reburial ceremony in Iziaslav on May 6

who had recently arrived from the eastern city of Kharkiv. Vakhtang Kipiani, aged 55, has long since dropped the affable, clean-shaven look he wore as an editor-in-chief for the country's leading historical publication. In its place is a thick beard that serves to highlight his transformation into a military man.

Kipiani serves in a special unit of the 13th Khartia brigade, dedicated to bringing back Ukrainian military traditions snuffed out under the Soviet Union. On seeing military burial sites threatened by the Russian advance, Kipiani was startled by a lack of state policy. He has advocated for the creation of a "national pantheon" that would gather the remains of Ukraine's greatest historical figures. In 2024, he moved quickly (and "not fully legally", he admits) to save the remains of Danylo Shumuk, a Ukrainian Soviet-era dissident, from Pokrovsk's cemetery ahead of impending Russian occupation.

Reliving the events of that day, Kipiani recalls Russian reconnaissance drones flying overhead as the van carrying him and two Khartia colleagues barrelled past the Soviet-era stele welcoming them to the Donetsk region. They parked near the cemetery entrance and set to work alongside grave diggers who had been hired by a local officer from Ukraine's security service (SBU). The whole effort was prepared off the books, he says. They put the remains - bones, pieces of clothing, bits of a *mazepynka*, the traditional Ukrainian military cap - in a body bag and drove them to safety in Lviv. In Kipiani's eyes, Shumuk is a

significant historical figure, who "didn't deserve to be destroyed".

Kipiani has more doubts about moving the graves of present-day Ukrainian soldiers buried in frontline cities. In cases such as these, he argues, there's also an important strategic cost to consider. "To have a policy would mean to have a crisis," was how he put it.

Aside from the logistical challenges it presents, Kipiani believes that exhuming coffins in a war zone carries with it a sense of finality. In wartime, evacuation of civilians from frontline cities can always be framed as a precautionary, even temporary, measure. But can the removal of military sepulchres from the same place be seen as anything other than a harbinger of loss? "Some would say, 'Well, if they are evacuating the heroes from... Zaporizhzhia, it means Zaporizhzhia is done for.' And Russian propaganda would exploit this completely," Kipiani told me.

ARTILLERY REIGNED SUPREME IN THE Serebryansky forest where Serhiy Kulyk perished on August 29 2023. Around 4pm, a 120mm heavy mortar round found him in his foxhole. It would take months, and several DNA tests, to identify his mangled body. His burial finally took place the following February, surrounded by his family and brothers-in-arms from the 12th Azov brigade.

But less than a year after his death, the war in Donbas was starting to look very different. Cheap, high-tech drones were flying for longer distances in greater numbers. Pilots on both sides

were looking through cyberpunk-like goggles to hunt down targets. Ukrainian drones had proved particularly effective in slowing Russia's advances. But Russian drones were capable of transforming cities into battlefields when troops were still several kilometres away.

Russian forces had reached the outskirts of Pokrovsk, a couple of hours south of Kramatorsk. Before the war it was a mining town of about 60,000 people. But by September 2024, local authorities had ordered a stringent, 3pm-11am curfew and calls for evacuation rang from creaky speaker-phones mounted on police cars.

Oksana Maricheva, a local shop owner, was among those who would be swept away by the Russian advances. Before she left in September 2024, she went to Pokrovsk cemetery to pray at the graves of two of her sons one last time. Dmytro, 26, was killed in the first days of the invasion but not buried until the following year. Moscow delayed the return of his body and DNA identification took several months longer owing to the huge caseload faced by Ukrainian laboratories. His little brother, Mykhailo, 20, died in May 2024 on his first mission, a doomed operation to establish a foothold on the left bank of the Dnipro in southern Ukraine.

By the time Kipiani and his Khartia comrades launched their rescue in the same cemetery a couple of months later, Russian troops were bypassing the largely empty city from the south in a bid to encircle and ultimately capture it. Their small kamikaze drones targeted vehicles



Mourning the dead at the cemetery in Pokrovsk. The city is currently under Russian control

entering and exiting Pokrovsk. Completing his mission, Kipiani noted the rows of Ukrainian flags and the tombstones of the dead soldiers. Some were elaborate granite monuments, some were simple mounds of brown earth. “Our first thought was that they would probably be destroyed by the Russians,” he said. Anxious to leave, they decided to take pictures and GPS co-ordinates of every grave.

In early 2025, Maricheva started to collect the documents that she thought would be necessary to exhume and rebury her two sons nearer to where she was – death certificates, proof she was their mother, a reburial permit. She didn’t know the Donetsk military administration had warned that the threat of Russian drones made it “currently impossible” to do exhumations in Pokrovsk.

Finally, one official told Maricheva: it was too late.

THE TRUE TOLL OF THE WAR REMAINS unknown but as many as 150,000 Ukrainian soldiers may have been killed since 2022 (with estimates of Russian losses at about 450,000). Though aerial drones have pushed the battlefield beyond the front, Russia’s advance remains agonisingly slow. After four-and-a-half years of fighting, Moscow (or pro-Russian separatists) currently controls 19 per cent of Ukraine, compared with 7 per cent before the full-scale invasion. The sense of stasis on the frontlines means some families of Ukrainian soldiers continue to contemplate the exhumation of their loved ones even as the war goes on.

More than a year after Serhiy’s death, Mykola Kulyk and his wife, Natalia, were persuaded to leave their embattled home city where their son was buried. One of their daughters-in-law had pleaded with them for months to come to her town of Iziaslav and, finally, they relented.

It was a two-day trip by van from Kramatorsk to resettle in a small house facing a neglected park. The house was not far from the city centre, but, more importantly, it was far enough away from the local bread factory. Like everyone from Donbas, Mykola knew that industrial sites tended to attract Russian missiles.

As 2025 went by, Mykola and Natalia worried about the situation back in Kramatorsk. Serhiy’s resting place was a cemetery on a narrow road south of the city that ran towards the besieged city of Kostyantynivka. The Russian drones had begun to pound it; the charred remains of Ukrainian drones and vehicles meant that it would soon be referred to as the “road of death”.

The wheels of the state began to turn at the beginning of 2026, and eventually brought some relief. There was no spectacular change, no solemn presidential announcement of the sort that Kipiani feared would trigger a panic. In February, a commission led by the office of the president recommended the establishment of “a mechanism for the reburial of fallen defenders of Ukraine from territories under threat of occupation”.

That same month, Oleh Alekseenko received a phone call from the local administration in Sloviansk: was he planning to rebury his son?

Less than a month later, Mykola and Natalia Kulyk received a similar call from a no-nonsense servicewoman who went by the name of “Styx”. Styx’s 12th Brigade – the one Serhiy had fought in – was acting on its own initiative, independently of the local authorities. The couple quickly said yes.

As spring turned to summer, Kramatorsk continued its slow mutation from breathing city to steel and concrete battlefield. The evacuation of children from parts of Sloviansk was ordered. Statues and memorials were moved out, as some 10,000 people every month fled and Russian FPV drones began to roam across the city, hitting gas stations, buildings and cars.

In Iziaslav things were suddenly moving fast for the Kulyks, a break from the slow but seemingly ineluctable descent into hell their native city was going through. There were documents to fill, permits to obtain, people to hire – Styx took care of it all. One exception was the permission to bury Serhiy in the Iziaslav cemetery, which they needed to get at a city council session in April. Having missed one session, Natalia had resigned herself to waiting for the next one in two weeks. But, on the phone, Styx’s tone grew more urgent.

“You read the news,” she said. “We have to go faster.”

On April 25, the coffin containing the body of Serhiy Kulyk was pulled out from the earth of Kramatorsk and transported west. **FT**

Fabrice Deprez is a reporter for the FT in Ukraine

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Appetites



FRUIT SPIRITS

Distilling the colour of taste

by DAVE BROOM

ILLUSTRATION by DEBORA SZPILMAN

BARNEY WILCZAK IS CROUCHING TO LOOK INTO THE still, his head between the rafters. How can this tiny lean-to in the garden of his childhood home in the Cotswolds be where all of his Capreolus eaux de vie are made, spirits served in the world's best bars and listed in Michelin-starred restaurants?

I sneak a look down the garden to see where the actual distillery might be, but no, this is where some of the most compelling spirits on the planet are crafted. I've been to similarly small distilleries that operate in beautiful, barely controlled chaos. It's thrilling to experience, but you're left searching for the meaning behind it all. Here, at Capreolus, the intent is clear. For a decade, Wilczak has placed himself at the service not just of the multiple fruits he distils, but also the plants and the landscape. It is gentle, ego-free distilling.

Because there was little modern English tradition of eaux de vie, Wilczak taught himself the craft through tasting, as well as translating Austrian, German and other central European textbooks. Then he designed his own still, put it in this minuscule outbuilding and followed a path taken by distillers for centuries: using what grows around them, be that grain,

DAVE BROOM RECOMMENDS

FRUITY TIPPLES

- **Capreolus Damson 2021, 37.5cl (43%)**
£117 [THEWHISKYEXCHANGE.COM](https://www.thewhiskyexchange.com)
- **Capreolus Perry Pear 2022, 37.5cl (43%)**
£72.50 [THEWHISKYEXCHANGE.COM](https://www.thewhiskyexchange.com)
- **Capreolus Quince 2023, 37.5cl (43%)**
£117 [THEWHISKYEXCHANGE.COM](https://www.thewhiskyexchange.com)
- **Capreolus Raspberry 2024, 37.5cl (43%)**
£134 [THEWHISKYEXCHANGE.COM](https://www.thewhiskyexchange.com)
- **Capovilla Distillato Di Pesche Saturno 2016, 50cl (43%)**
£94.50 [THEWHISKYEXCHANGE.COM](https://www.thewhiskyexchange.com)
- **Somerset Cider Brandy XO, 50cl (42%)**
£52 [SOMERSETCIDERBRANDY.COM](https://www.somersetciderbrandy.com)
- **Somerset Cider Brandy 20 years, 50cl (42%)**
£100 [SOMERSETCIDERBRANDY.COM](https://www.somersetciderbrandy.com)
- **Calvados Christian Drouin XO, 70cl (40%)**
£76.95 [MASTEROFMALT.COM](https://www.masterofmalt.com)
- **Calvados Christian Drouin Hors d'Age 18 years, 70cl (42%)**
£88.95 [SPYWINESANDSPIRITS.CO.UK](https://www.spywinesandspirits.co.uk)
- **Calvados Roger Groult 8 years, 70cl (41%)**
£46.63 [MASTEROFMALT.COM](https://www.masterofmalt.com)
- **Other Calvados Roger Groult**
DETAILS FROM GEORGES BARBIER WINES

grape, agave, cane or fruit, and through fermentation and distillation, trying to capture the produce's essence.

I've been writing about spirits for nearly 40 years, and while I had tried many fruit spirits, the one that first showed me how extraordinary they could be arrived in 2007. It came in the form of a peach distillate made by Gianni Capovilla at his distillery in Rosà, a small town in Italy's Veneto region. It was a transportive experience. One sip and the fruit seemed to hang in the air in front of me, beads of dew on its fuzzy skin, a totality of peachiness. "Capo", as he is known, describes it as experiencing "the colour of taste".

Like Wilczak, Capo was also self-taught, and there are echoes of his approach at Capreolus. There's the astonishing ratio of fruit to distillate; it took 1,000 kilos of blackberries, each berry checked by hand, to make 80 bottles of Wilczak's eau de vie. Both only source their fruits locally and insist on organic cultivation; there are slow, natural fermentations, no sweetening or additions of alcohol, and self-designed stills. You could call it obsessive, but that suggests mania. It's the opposite. It is care, which is why they are rightly regarded as two of the best distillers of any spirit in the world.

If there are commonalities, their spirits are different. The hallucinatory aspect of Capo's distillates – that vision of the fruit you are tasting, his "colour of taste" – is the result of a forensic yet romantic exploration of the fruit itself. Wilczak takes a different approach: "Why do we think of the fruit being here," he holds out his right hand, "and the plant or tree is over here?" he thrusts out his left. "We think they are somehow unconnected. They're not."



Wilczak follows a path taken by distillers for centuries: using what grows around them

His spirits are of fruit in a wider context: the memory of the blossom, the entire plant, its roots, the weather, the soil, its locus. The parallels with wine are clear. As he says, "The perry pear isn't the fruit. It is standing beneath a 300-year-old tree."

"Aromas don't come across in a linear fashion in distillation," he continues. "They come in waves, peaking then falling away, changing, repeating. There are key elements, but there's also this noise in between, and that noise is interesting as it is where the aromas you don't expect appear."

It is why, after four and a half months of fermentation, his Quince smells of rose petals, apple and citrus, why the Damson places you in the woods, tasting the dusty bloom on the fruit, with almond and lilac. It is savoury yet lifted, while that Blackberry speaks of pine, mint, marzipan, red as well as black fruits, sassafras, chocolate and a medicinal touch. Blackberry, yet not "blackberry".

What seems puzzling is why, with such a wealth of fruit, fruit eaux de vie did not become England's national spirit? The answer is, it was. English apple brandy was being made in the 17th century, probably before. Legislation stopped the practice until Julian Temperley of Burrow Hill, Somerset, revived this lost tradition in the 1980s; a "craft distiller" when there were none. After considerable struggle, he was granted a cider

FIRST SIP

EUROPEAN FRUIT SPIRITS

European spirits can be divided into grain-based (mainly barley and wheat) in the north, and fruit-based in central and eastern Europe. While grape spirits dominate the latter, a band stretching from Alsace through Germany, Switzerland, Austria and the Balkans specialises in distillates from other fruits, including pears, plums, quinces and berries. Harvested fruits are either fermented or macerated in alcohol, and then distilled. They are rarely aged in wood.

Calvados is a speciality of Normandy. Similar to wine (or Cognac and Armagnac), its

production falls under Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) rules. These define which varieties of apples and pears can be used, the flavour sub-categories within them, how the trees are pruned, distillation methods and ageing requirements.

AOC Calvados covers the whole appellation and can be made from apples and pears. Column stills are used to give a lighter style, and it must be aged for two years in oak casks.

Pays d'Auge AOC is produced mainly in the east and is predominantly apple-based (around 100 apples and 30 pears)

and must be distilled twice in pot stills. At least two years' ageing is required.

Domfrontais AOC in the south must contain at least 30 per cent perry pears (often much higher). Column stills are used and it must be aged in oak casks for three years.

Somerset Cider Brandy must be produced in the county from fresh apples grown free from nitrogen-based fertilisers. A minimum of 20 varieties must be used to make the cider, and no sugar can be added to boost ferment. It is double distilled and aged in oak casks for at least three years.

distilling licence and Somerset Cider Brandy now enjoys Geographical Indication status and production specifications.

His daughter Matilda now runs the firm. “We have 157 varieties of apples growing within a 10-mile radius,” she explains: Kingston Black, Dabinett, Harry Masters, Brown Snout... the poetry of the names speaks of an older folk memory, of locale, of a bounty of choice.

The names nod towards Normandy and the orchards of Calvados. When you taste great Calvados, it’s not harsh. Rather, it blooms and soars. “A spirit of terroir,” says Guillaume Drouin of Calvados Christian Drouin. The climate and soil dictate which varieties prosper. About 230 types of apple are permitted to be used to make what can be called Calvados. These are further categorised into grades: sweet, sharp, bitter-sweet and bitter-sharp, each with its own qualities. The tannins in bitter-sweet apples, Drouin explains, provide complexity and the structure needed for ageing. Orchards, therefore, are living blends.

“APPLES ARE OUR IDENTITY,” SAYS Estelle Groult of Calvados Roger Groult. “The varieties have been here for longer than we have. They have adapted to the conditions.

“This is not an industrial process,” she adds. Both firms farm organically, and commercial yeasts that would speed up the fermentation process are shunned. Groult leaves the ferment to bubble for a year before distilling; Drouin distils in winter for a fruit-forward Calvados, retaining some for longer maturation. Like Wilczak, Capovilla and Temperley, they are not just distillers, but custodians.

It’s tempting when they speak of orchards, ancestors and cattle grazing beneath the trees to believe that they live in some bucolic reverie, but the reality is different. “We are losing orchards,” says Temperley. “The UK has 16,000 hectares of cider orchard, of which only 5 per cent are planted in a traditional way – low density, a variety of heritage apples – but this way is under threat. Apples haven’t increased in price for the past 30 years. It doesn’t work for the farmer.” A tangible cultural heritage is being lost.

Yet maybe there’s hope. These are spirits that reflect the interests, and fears, of a generation conscious of climate change and fascinated by provenance. Distillation, we’re told, is about concentration, but this implies reduction. In these cases, it is about the opposite: they are expansive spirits, revealing the personality of the ingredient and the place where it grew, a distillation of place and emotion. **FT**

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Dave Broom is a drinks writer, educator and author. Jancis Robinson is away



REVIEW

Oudh 1722, Borough

by JAY RAYNER

ILLUSTRATION by DANIEL EGNEUS

Occasionally, chefs working outside London ask me whether they should open in the capital, and I sigh because the economics of the hospitality business is not my specialist subject. I’m terrific at eating in restaurants. I have never run one. However, on that one question, I can’t help weighing in by taking a sharp intake of breath and shaking my head solemnly. London has an obvious kinetic appeal. It is a dynamic global capital, with one of the world’s most beguiling restaurant sectors. But it’s also an economic bin fire. If you have a financially successful restaurant outside London, why would you risk opening in the capital, where the

costs are so very much higher, good staff are scarce and restaurant-goers have the attention span of a Labrador who has just broken off from chasing a squirrel for the greater joys of rolling in the maggot-strewn carcass of a dead bird?

Still the chefs come. The assumption is that ego plays as much a part in these decisions as a business plan. And yet it doesn’t quite feel that way with Aktar Islam, whose tasting menu-based Indian restaurant, Opheem, in Birmingham, holds two Michelin stars, and who has just opened Oudh 1722 close to Borough Market. The PR campaign was muted. The chosen building, a listed townhouse on a quiet south London cut-through, is almost demure, and little has been done to mark the spot.



FIND IT

LOUDH 1722

66 Union Street
London SE1 1TD
020 3179 1722
oudh1722.com

Small dishes and kebabs £6-£25
Larger dishes £15-£40
Desserts £13-£15

You could walk straight past the dark burgundy frontage, with its white net curtains, and not realise it was a restaurant, as my companion did.

Perhaps it simply represents well-founded self-confidence. Because when you do find your way into its dining room, clad in soothing shades of green, you'll be served some of the best Indian food in a city which, in recent years, has developed an exceedingly strong Indian game. The dishes are lofty with the waft of saffron and assertive with spice. They are a masterclass in ghee-basted largesse. The restaurant is named after the province of Awadh, also known as Oudh, created in 1722 in what is now Uttar Pradesh, and apparently takes its cues from the cooking of the royal court at Lucknow.

Just nod sagely at this information, take the proffered snowy white damp towel, sip a salty-sour lemon sharbat to cool you down on one of the year's hottest days, and admire the architectural joys of the mighty papad selection. Some of them are a fine, crisp latticework, others spice-flecked, a few earth-coloured with a nutty edge. Alongside come chutneys many and various: something fragrant, herbal and green with coriander, a sticky sweet and spiky mango, a little salty yoghurt, a dark intense tomato. A plate of chaat is a tottering construction of still-warm, crisp and soft aloo tikki (or spiced potato patties) on cooling yoghurt, with crunchy deep-fried gram flour noodles and ribbons of chutney under a fall of peppery leaves. Don't be deceived by this apparent delicacy. Eating at Oudh 1722 is a major undertaking that should be planned for. Skip breakfast if having lunch. Skip lunch if going for dinner. Slip down a notch on your belt. The buttery, flaky parathas are too good not to be finished; the garlic naans, blistered and blackened in all the right places, demand your attention.

THERE IS A SECTION ON THE MENU, which is à la carte, dedicated to kebabs from which we have a king prawn the length of a baby's forearm, split open, spice-marinated, garlic-smeared and tandoor-roasted until the tail is lightly blackened in places. It's presented with violet petals, placed just so, as if to signal

that this is actually a gentle thing to do to such pristine seafood. An accurately cooked monkfish tail, roasted on the bone, is released to swim in a rust-coloured butter and tomato-rich gravy of unending depth, and is likewise topped with pink blooms.

Elsewhere on the menu there is a serious emphasis on slow cookery; on giving flavours time to get properly acquainted. We see a plate of herb-threaded, golden and bronzed rice land on the table next to ours, topped by a hunk of roasted oxtail, only just holding on to the bone. Then our own slow-cooked wonder arrives: the kitchen's take on a nihari, a marquee name of a slow-cooked stew, here of slumped beef cheek, in a sauce the colour of newly turned London clay, with added unctuousness from heads of bone marrow. It has the qualities of a Mexican mole, in which dozens of ingredients result in a spiced and savoury flavour all its own. We tear at breads and mop the gravy, which we use as a condiment for a saffron-rich heap of "yakhni" rice, generous with caramelised onions and roasted mushrooms.

Islam knows well how to serve this shiny end of the restaurant market. For all the relaxed service, this is a serious operation, albeit with the odd silliness, including cutlery that is so fine and thin, the knives feel like knitting needles in my hands. There are also buzzwords on the menu to no great point. The meat in a crisped Herdwick lamb kebab patty has been chopped to such a fine and deliciously spiced paste, for spreading on warm handkerchiefs of flatbread, that the breed of animal involved is frankly irrelevant. But none of this detracts from the sense of purpose in a slickly run dining room where, for once, tableside speeches about how to navigate the menu, convincingly delivered, are a genuine help. We finish with a bowl of kulfi soft serve with petals of saffron and mango meringue, and the sweet burst is welcome. Unfinished dishes go into boxes to take home. A kindly waiter, eyeing my gravy-embossed shirt front, quietly lets me know they keep a stain remover pen at reception. Oudh 1722 really does have all the bases covered. Of course they should have opened in London. **FT**

jay.rayner@ft.com





RECIPE CLUB

Let's celebrate the cucumber

by HONEY & CO

PHOTOGRAPHY by PATRICIA NIVEN

It is hard to overstate how much we missed cucumbers when we first moved to the UK. The long, watery ones found in major supermarkets bore such little resemblance to the small, sweet, crunchy cucumbers we had grown up eating in Israel. So we'd make pilgrimages to Green Valley just off Edgware Road, and to the Turkish grocers on Green Lanes, buying bags of little cucumbers to take home and eat standing at the kitchen counter with nothing more than a little salt, or chop into every salad imaginable. They tasted of home.

This experience is shared by pretty much everyone who moved from the Middle East to western Europe. If you ask a Brit about cucumbers, they might think of afternoon tea sandwiches or the obligatory slices in a green salad. Talk to someone from the Levant, north Africa, Turkey or Greece about cucumbers, however, and the conversation becomes far more animated. Cucumbers are eaten for breakfast, lunch and dinner. They are carried to the beach whole, grated into yoghurt, chopped into grain salads, pickled, stuffed, juiced or eaten out of hand. In the heat of the eastern Mediterranean, no vegetable is more prized.

Elsewhere, perhaps because cucumbers seem so ordinary, they are often underestimated. But a really good cucumber has everything going for it: sweetness, crunch, fragrance and an almost magical ability to refresh. It is a veg that asks very little of us – perhaps a sprinkle of salt, a squeeze of lemon, a drizzle of good olive oil – yet it gives back in abundance. Cucumbers repay attention.

It is always best to buy the smallest, firmest cucumbers you can find – Lebanese or Persian if possible – and resist the temptation to peel them unless a recipe calls for it. Their skins bring flavour, colour and a satisfying snap, while their seeds, if not overly mature, add juiciness rather than dilution.

These recipes celebrate the cucumber in all its forms. There is a Greek-inspired salad where ribbons of cucumber meet salty feta and anchovies in a dressing you'll want to keep in the fridge all summer. A freekeh tabbouleh packed with herbs and pistachios turns cucumber into the backbone of the salad rather than an afterthought, with delicate steamed salmon dressed in overlapping cucumber scales. And finally, a cucumber, apple and celery granita proves the vegetable belongs just as happily at the end of a meal as it does at the beginning: icy, fragrant and impossibly refreshing, especially with a little cream poured over the top.

Perhaps no vegetable captures summer quite so perfectly. Cool in temperature and in temperament, when given the spotlight it deserves, a cucumber is the coolest vegetable of them all. **FT**

By Itamar Srulovich. Recipes by Sarit Packer



GREEK-INSPIRED CUCUMBER CAESAR SALAD
TO SERVE FOUR AS A SIDE OR TWO AS A LIGHT LUNCH

This is a great summery, salty alternative to a Caesar salad. You can make both the dressing and the crisps a day or two in advance, and then it just needs a quick assembly before serving. Make sure to layer the salad so every person can grab a good division of every element.

For the feta dressing

- 80g crumbled feta
- 1-2 sprigs fresh oregano, picked
- Pinch of chilli flakes (optional)
- 1 garlic clove, peeled and roughly crushed
- 1 lemon, 4 strips of the peel and all the juice
- A few grinds of black pepper
- 80ml olive oil

For the salad

- 1 baby gem lettuce, broken into leaves and washed
- 2 small Lebanese cucumbers, or half a large one, peeled into strips
- 1 long shallot, peeled and thinly sliced
- 1 small tin of anchovies in oil (about 30g drained)

For the crispy chips (optional)

- 2 tortilla wraps or 1 pitta bread cut in half into 2 rounds
- Drizzle of olive oil

- 1 Start by making the feta dressing. Mix everything together in a little jar or Tupperware and shake to mix and break the feta up even more. This can be made a day in advance and kept in the fridge (it will keep well for a few days if you want to make a double batch).
- 2 If making the crispy chips, heat the oven to 170C with fan assist. Cut the tortilla or the pitta into triangles, lay them on a flat baking tray and drizzle with a little olive oil. Bake for 12 to 14 minutes until golden all over, then remove from the oven to cool on the tray (they will crisp up as they cool). These can also be made a day or two in advance and stored in an airtight container.
- 3 Assemble the salad on a large serving platter, starting with the washed gem leaves. Then scatter the crisp chips all over, followed by the cucumber strips. Top with the shallot slices, breaking them up into rings so they cover the salad.
- 4 Shake the feta dressing again and spoon it all over the salad. Top with the drained anchovy fillets before serving.





CUCUMBER AND PISTACHIO FREEKEH TABBOULEH WITH STEAMED SALMON TO SERVE FOUR

You can now buy packs of baby cucumbers in most supermarkets. Crunchy and sweet, they work perfectly for this recipe. If you can't find them where you are, use a large cucumber, peel it, halve it and scoop out the seeds from the centre before chopping it up for the salad (otherwise it will be too watery). You can just make the salad and serve it with anything you fancy. However, for a light protein accompaniment, we recommend serving it with these steamed salmon (or trout) fillets, allowing one per person.

For the steamed salmon

- 4 salmon fillets (each around 120g)
- 1-2 tsp Dijon mustard
- 2 baby cucumbers, very thinly sliced
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

For the freekeh tabbouleh

- 150g dry cracked freekeh (or you could use bulgar wheat, cooked as per instructions on the pack)
- 150-170g baby cucumbers, diced
- 80g roughly chopped pistachios
- Small bunch of parsley, leaves picked and chopped (about 30g)
- Small bunch of mint, leaves picked and chopped (about 30g)
- 1 large lemon, zest and juice
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 3 tbs olive oil

- 1 Boil the freekeh in plenty of lightly salted water for about 20 minutes, strain into a colander and rinse with cold water to separate and stop the cooking. Then set aside in the colander to fully drain. If using bulgar wheat, cook according to the pack instructions and store in the fridge to cool till mixing with the cucumber.
- 2 Mix the rest of the salad ingredients together. Then add the freekeh and mix well. Season with the salt and pepper.
- 3 If you are steaming the salmon, bring a pot of water to boil on the stove. Lay each piece of salmon skin side down on a little piece of parchment and place in a steaming basket. Brush the fillets with mustard and sprinkle with a little salt. Lay the thin cucumber slices in a little scale pattern. Season with more salt and plenty of freshly ground black pepper, then place the steaming basket on the boiling water and cover. Thin tail fillets will only need four minutes, and thicker middle fillets require about six to eight minutes. Carefully lift the fillets on to plates and serve with the tabbouleh on the side.



CUCUMBER, APPLE AND CELERY GRANITA MAKES FOUR GENEROUS PORTIONS OR SIX PALATE-CLEANSER PORTIONS

This icy treat is so refreshing, with a light note of celery for balance so the whole dessert is less sweet. A little pour of double cream really brings this together as the perfect summer dessert. But you can also serve smaller portions without the cream as a palate cleanser between a main course and pudding.

- 200g cucumber, peeled and diced
- 2-3 celery sticks, sliced (about 100g)
- 1 apple, peeled, cored and diced (about 100g)
- 1 small bunch tarragon, leaves picked (about 10g)
- 2 limes, zest and juice
- 130g caster sugar
- 30g light honey
- 50ml water
- Pouring double cream to serve (optional)

- 1 Mix all the granita ingredients together, apart from the honey and water, in a large bowl. Set aside for 10 minutes to release some of the liquid.
- 2 Using a blender, blitz everything together until it's as fine as possible. Then add the honey and water and blitz again for a very smooth texture.
- 3 Transfer to a deep tray or large Tupperware and place in the freezer overnight, or for a minimum of four hours. Remove from the freezer and, using a spoon, scrape the mixture up to break it up and create little crystals of shaved ice. Once it has all been scraped, you can return it to the freezer and keep in a sealed container for up to two weeks.
- 4 Pop your serving glasses in the freezer to chill. When you are ready to serve, scoop the granita into the chilled glasses and serve cold with cream to pour over on the side.

NEXT WEEK: CREMALATO – SUMMER'S COLDEST,
COOLEST AND EASIEST SWEET

NIKKEI

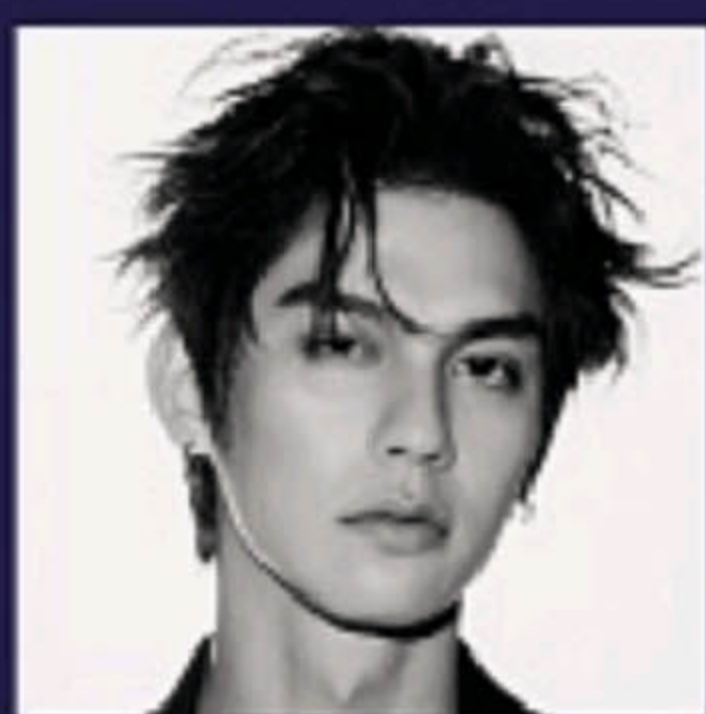


**FINANCIAL
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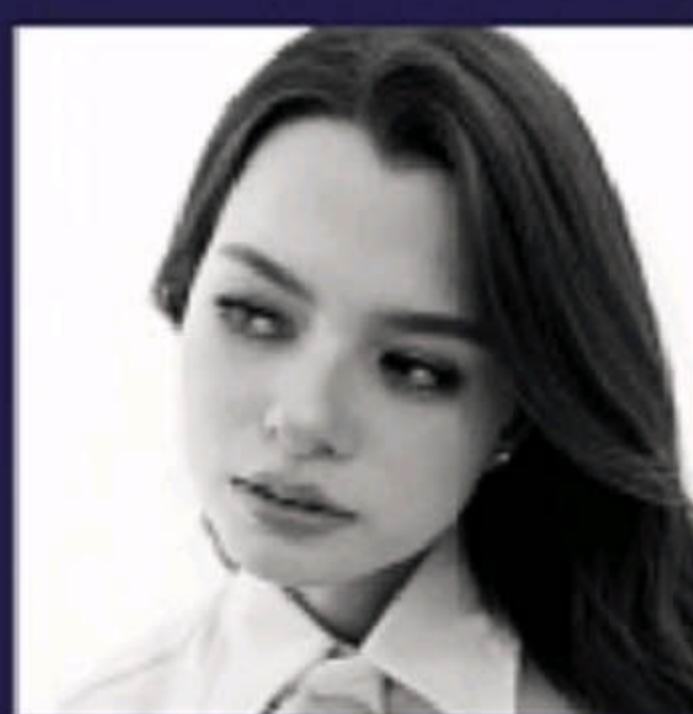
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While I am perfectly aware that, for many people, one of the chief aims of a summer holiday is to escape from the daily pressure of getting food on the table, I am not among their number. It's not that I want to be cooking nonstop, but I shy away from hotels for any break that's longer than a few days: I want space to expand into, unpeopled views to gaze out at, and I absolutely must have a kitchen to play in. Not that I go away in summer any more – I can't take the heat and I no longer have school-age children, which means I am free from the constraints of the classroom calendar – but I have a lifetime of experience in this field to draw on, and someone ought to be a beneficiary. Why shouldn't it be you?

However keen a cook you are, you have to abandon any hope of finding the experience idyllic. It's unlikely that you will find the kitchen of your dreams. Holiday rentals are not known for the excellence of their equipment, and that is putting it mildly. But you know how often in life the qualities that draw you to a person can be the very things that later on drive you mad about them? Well, luckily, I have found that the reverse can hold true with a holiday kitchen.

At first, I am in shock at the inadequate pots and pans, the scant supply of knives, none of which can be relied upon to be sharp, the oven that fires too hot or too cold, its temperature bearing no relation to the gauge of the thermostat. Making that first meal is always a challenge. But then something strange happens: that initial alienation I felt at not being surrounded by all my familiar implements falls away, and I suddenly feel unencumbered and liberated. What's more, I become preposterously attached to that too-large pasta pan that won't sit on the hob without wobbling, or the tin opener I couldn't even make work on day one. It may simply be a kitchen case of Stockholm syndrome, but I do think that one of the ways in which we refresh ourselves on holiday is by breaking with our everyday routine. We can't change who we are – as the title of Jon Kabat-Zinn's huge book on mindfulness meditation has it, *Wherever You Go, There You Are* – but we can experience ourselves in a different way. Perhaps this is the very essence of travel, even if it's not to a foreign country.

However, I'm not such a free spirit: there are some kitchen implements I always take with me. It's not a huge list, but I confess I have to make an effort not to keep adding to it. For me, one of the worst things about going away is the packing. Although I find unpacking even more tedious, the emotional weight of decision-making as one chooses what goes in the suitcase in the first place always puts me in a bit of a flap. For some reason, I find this much harder when it comes to anything not to do with the kitchen: in particular, when I poke about in my wardrobe thinking about what I might wear on holiday, I seem to start believing I'll turn into an entirely different sort of person, and start shoving in clothes I've had for years and never felt tempted to wear at home. And then I don't wear them on holiday, either.

I become absurdly attached to that too-large pasta pan that won't sit on the hob

At least when it comes to cooking, I know myself better. I cannot pack for every eventuality, but I know what I cannot do without. You may well have different requirements, but I know I'll want a good cup of coffee before anything else, so in case coffee-making facilities turn out to be subpar, I take an AeroPress and a starter supply of good coffee (should you be interested, or even if you aren't, it's the Gourmet Noir blend from algeriancoffeestores.com).

If I'm going anywhere abroad, I cannot travel without a packet of Maldon salt, a jar of Colman's English mustard and a large zip-lock bag stuffed with Yorkshire Gold tea bags. I try not to add anything more on the food front, as part of the whole thrill of being away is pottering about local shops. I'm not just talking about quaint little greengrocers and cheesemongers and so forth: I do adore the Aladdin's cave of a big foreign supermarket.

EAT MY WORDS

How to survive a holiday kitchen

by NIGELLA LAWSON

ILLUSTRATION by HATTY STANIFORTH



I would also not consider going away without my mezzaluna safely packed into a padded envelope (and clearly marked, so I don't cut myself when I open it up on arrival), and I also go armed with my small Oxo handheld mandoline, plus one of my Microplane cut-resistant gloves. I really should take only one Microplane grater, but I have got into the habit of using two, both fine, one of which I use for garlic and ginger; the other for zesting lemons. It's not as if they take up a lot of space, after all. But this can be a dangerous way of thinking, as it can permit any amount of just-in-case binging in. So I restrain myself after this, and the only other piece of equipment I carry with me to unfamiliar kitchens is a garlic peeling tube, which I feel hardly counts as equipment in the first place.

Perhaps the most important thing is not what you take with you, but what you leave behind. Never go away with lofty or ambitious ideas of what you'll be cooking once you get there. Loading yourself up with expectations is far more detrimental than the most egregious over-packing. **FT**



GAMES

MINI CROSSWORD

NO 120 SET BY SOLOMON

- 8 clues
- 2 straightforward clues
- 2 general knowledge
- 2 cryptic
- 2 anagrams

1		2		3		4
5						
6						
7						

- ACROSS

 - 1 Speedy vehicle going both ways (7)
 - 5 Ray ___, singer and pianist 1930-2004 (7)
 - 6 Source of fruit or vegetable (7)
 - 7 Strobes (7)
- DOWN

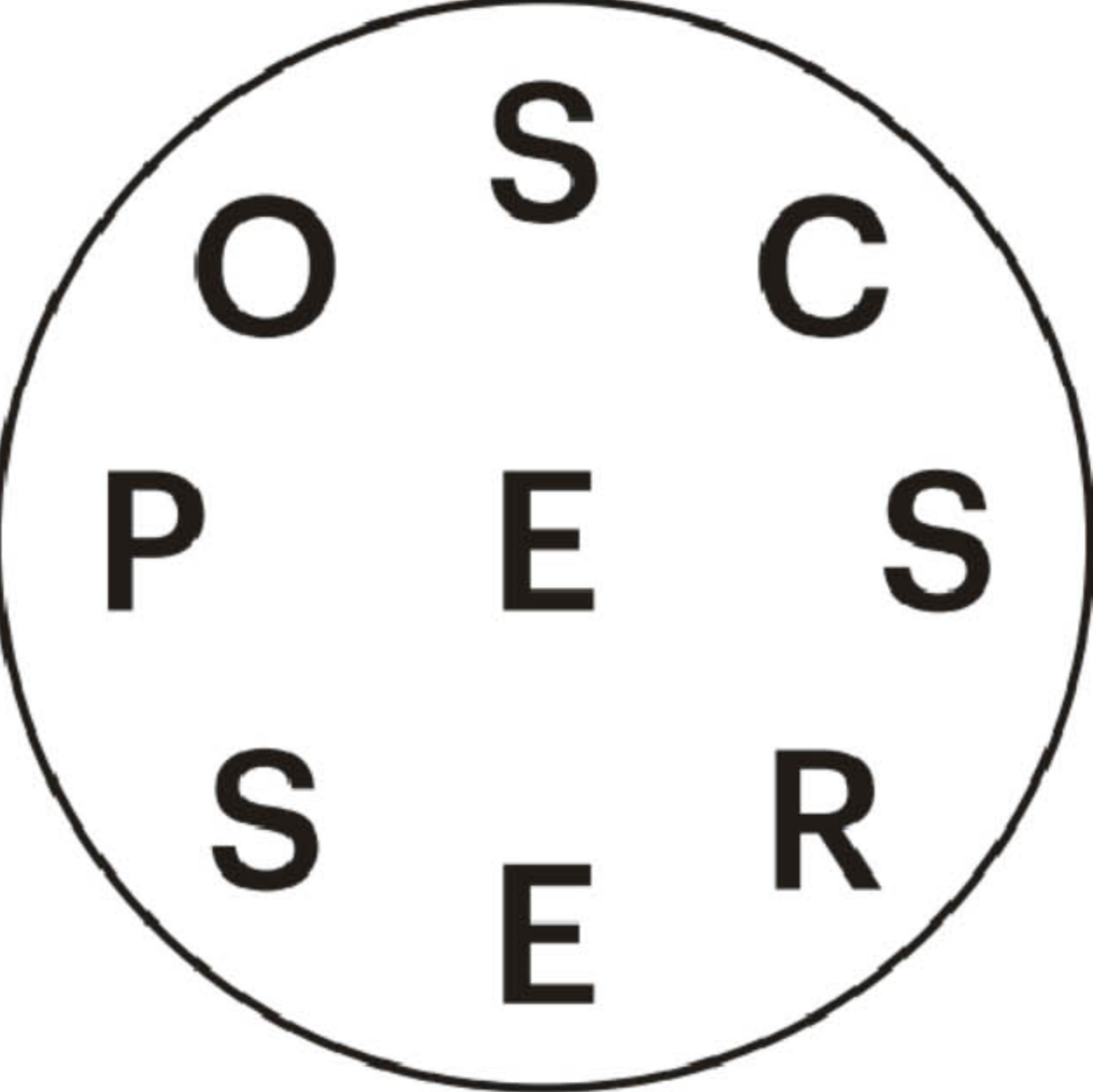
 - 1 Coronas (7)
 - 2 Geoffrey ___, writer of *The Canterbury Tales* (7)
 - 3 Bring together (7)
 - 4 Lives (7)

Access FT crosswords from the past 30 days – Cryptic, Polymath, Weekend and Sunday Puzzles – on ft.com/crosswordapp

WORD CIRCLE

NO 120

How many words can you form that use the centre letter plus two or more of the other letters? No letter may be used more times than it appears within the circle. There is one word that uses all nine letters.



SCORING
GOOD – 30
GREAT – 40
AMAZING – 50

BINARY PUZZLE

NO 120

Place 0 or 1 in every empty square so there is an equal number of each digit in every row and column. In any row or column, there must be no more than two of the same digit in succession.

	0		0		0		
	0				1		
		0	0			1	1
		1	1			1	
	1			0	1		
0	0			1	0		
		1				0	
		0		0		0	

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- THIS WEEK'S QUIZ ANSWERS
- A round on the links
The link was actors who became knights or dames
1. St Mirren
2. Gerard Manley Hopkins
3. *The Caine Mutiny*
4. Walter (Dennis the Menace)
5. *The Guinness Book of World Records*
6. Elba 7. *This Is Going to Hurt*
8. Steve Redgrave 9. Keith
10. Windsor Castle
- The picture round
Joan of Arc + Phil Collins = Joan Collins

SOLUTIONS

FOR ISSUE DATE
JULY 25

Mini Crossword No 119

P	E	R	U	G	I	A
O		A		O		L
I	N	S	T	A	L	L
N		H		H		E
T	H	E	R	E	I	N
E		R		A		D
R	E	S	I	D	U	E

Binary Puzzle No 119

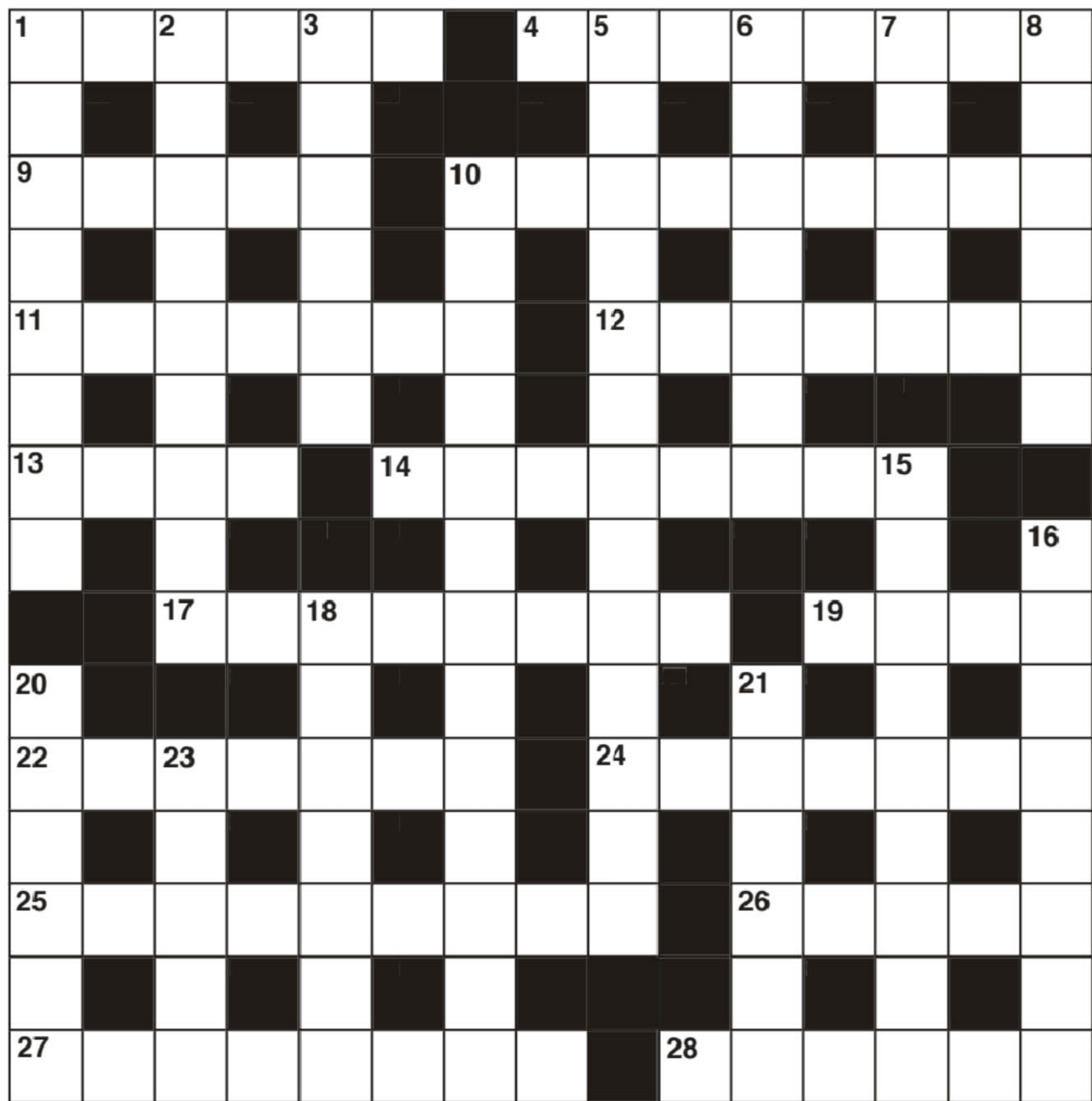
1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0
0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0
1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0

Word circle No 119

ail, ails, aim, aims, aisle, alien, aliens, animus, anise, caesium, calumnies, casein, cinema, cinemas, claim, claims, clime, climes, cumin, email, emails, ice, ices, ins, inseam, isle, ism, lain, lei, leis, lice, lie, lies, lieu, lime, limes, limn, limns, line, lines, lunacies, mail, mails, main, mains, malice, manic, **masculine**, menial, mica, mice, mien, miens, mil, mile, miles, mils, mince, minces, mine, mines, minus, miscue, muesli, music, musical, musicale, musl n, nail, nails, nice, nil, nils, nuclei, sail, saline, semi, sic, sin, since, sine, slain, slice, slim, slime, sluice, smile, snail

THE CROSSWORD

NO 804 SET BY ALDHELM



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

ACROSS

- 1 Copes, survives (4, 2)
- 4 Wavy scribbled line (8)
- 9 Access (5)
- 10 Animals (9)
- 11 Explanatory scientific statement (7)
- 12 Line touching a circle (7)
- 13 Requirement (4)
- 14 Old-fashioned underwear (8)
- 17 File (8)
- 19 Con, swindle (4)
- 22 Cinema snack (7)
- 24 Put in place (7)
- 25 Slide uncontrollably over surface water (9)
- 26 Leader, head (5)
- 27 Unassisted vision (5, 3)
- 28 Unorthodox belief (6)

DOWN

- 1 Put it up in lush, grand welcome (8)
- 2 Computer department stops wrongly deleted ownership record (5, 4)
- 3 Customers' transport takes year without one (6)
- 5 Insane to change an amount of paper outside for survey (13)
- 6 Popular head of television seen around is powerful (7)
- 7 Plant goes wild around end of September (5)
- 8 Substitute final character after rates get adjusted (6)
- 10 Free explanation about odd bits of pulpit (13)
- 15 Fashionable person thus joins US spies having ignited resistance, ultimately (9)
- 16 Youngsters get very hot under second shopping centre (5, 3)
- 18 Harvested top produce, perhaps, that's not out (7)
- 20 Horrible pain with even elements of crush injury (6)
- 21 Spy manipulated 60s revolutionary mind (6)
- 23 Good fortune follows quiet courage (5)

Crossword No 803



GETTY IMAGES

A ROUND ON THE LINKS

BY JAMES WALTON



All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the connection, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

- 1 Which Scottish football club did Alex Ferguson manage from 1974 to 1978 before moving to Aberdeen?
- 2 Whose posthumously published poems include "God's Grandeur", "The Windhover" and the "The Wreck of the Deutschland"?
- 3 Which mutiny features in the title of a 1951 Pulitzer-winning novel by Herman Wouk, adapted into a film starring Humphrey Bogart?
- 4 Brown is the surname of which antagonist of an eponymous Beano character?
- 5 Which annual reference book was launched in 1955 with the aim of settling pub arguments?
- 6 Which island (pictured) that played a significant part in history in the 1810s is the third largest in Italy after Sicily and Sardinia?
- 7 Which BBC TV series of 2022 was based on Adam Kay's memoir of his time as a junior doctor?
- 8 Who is Britain's most successful Olympian not to be a cyclist?
- 9 What's the first name of Lily Allen's father?
- 10 In which royal residence is Queen Elizabeth II buried?

THE PICTURE ROUND

BY JAMES WALTON

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



+



= ?

Answers opposite

WHAT FRESH HELL

How can I TikTok like Andy?

Work, life and family dilemmas solved by *Robert Shrimsley*



ILLUSTRATION by LUCAS VARELA

It's tough, isn't it? You were doing so nicely building your influencer profile and then along comes Andy B and the whole middle-aged, working-stiff genre is being redefined by the TikTok premier. I mean, what is the value in blind ranking your favourite bar snacks if that's something the PM is already doing with his new chancellor?

It was all going so well, all those lovely vids of you in your new swimsuit (I did say you rather than me); your skincare regime; you with the view from your balcony in Dubai (look closely, you can just see the Iranian drones); or maybe you were blind ranking your favourite *Star Wars* movies – the only acceptable answers on that being five, four and six, with all the rest in last place. OK, maybe *Rogue One* in fourth.

Or perhaps you are not doing TikTok and Instagram videos at all because you're, well, an adult. But now you see that even prime ministers are Tiking, or is it Toking, and you realise that lying on LinkedIn is no longer enough of a social media offering.

There are still some gaps in the market. We haven't seen Andy Burnham attempting the airwalk or the slick back dance, though he did raise his arm, bob about a bit and clap to the strains of New Order's "True Faith" on the day he was declared Labour leader. I don't see a TikTok or Insta hit in that, well, not unless there's a new dance craze called dads at their daughter's wedding.

But anyway, Andy is pointing the way towards a good TikTok and Insta game, certainly for a middle-aged politician. Most of the videos so far have been of the "ways I'm a normal bloke like you" variety, though there is the odd political clip of the "simple ways I've helped you today" genre. And he's good at this. He has an easy, relaxed style, and the light-hearted topics – favourite bands and blind ranking of pub snacks – all play to his "just a regular guy who's not from London, honest" image.

Clearly, we can't all be prime minister. Well, I say that. There do seem to be more openings nowadays than there once were. If we follow the trend of the past decade, then up to 70 of us could be prime minister in the next century. But we can learn to TikTok like a PM. Andy has shown us oldies how to build our influencer profile and

Andy B won't be demonstrating his understanding of economic policy (in fact he's disguising it brilliantly)

following. I don't suppose many people will pay us to sell fashion items, but there might be opportunities in garden furniture.

There are some key differences. While we might use social media to stand out, Andy uses it to appear normal. He eschews the stilted or lofty grandeur you might associate with a political leader. Earlier PMs didn't understand the medium. Anyone who saw Gladstone's Instas will know how badly you can get this wrong. All that conversations-with-prostitutes stuff; that "rescue work" might have looked edgy at first, but he was too preachy. And, as for his four-and-three-quarter-hour budget speech in 1853, viewing figures really collapsed after the third hour.

Other influencers want to show off their taste in food or clothes or music, their attractive body or deep knowledge of fantasy football. AB won't be demonstrating his understanding of economic policy (in fact he's disguising it brilliantly). He just wants to seem more likeable.

It is vital to understand this if you plan to imitate him, because no one really cares if you rank Scampi Fries above pork scratchings. Actually, I'm not sure that's true. I've never met anyone, certainly any man, who is not susceptible to a cheeky game of classification. (I originally wrote "quick rank", but on reflection...)

So how can we learn? Maybe we reverse his technique. Instead of playing it normal, we should go for more power videos that play up our special status.

I admit, I've started to dabble. Not having a chancellor of the exchequer, I dragooned my accountant into filming a favourite-bar-snacks video with me. It wasn't a total success. He began debating whether you could write off anything purchased as a work expense. Another one I'm about to post has me showing my home office, once I've moved the laundry basket and the exercise machine that's covered in a layer of dust. There will also be a dance video as soon as the pogo comes back into fashion.

You may wonder why exactly you need to take to TikTok or "boost your following". Unlike Andy, you're not seeking votes, after all. But that is to miss the point. The middle-aged can no longer opt out of this new Britain. The PM has made it clear that this is what real people do. You want to be a real person, don't you? **FT**

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