

JULY 16/17 2022

# FT Weekend Magazine



**THE OBESITY CURE**  
*By Hannah Kuchler*





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# FEATURES

## 20.

### Treading water

The cost of living crisis plays out in one UK household.

By *George Bass*

## 24.

### Miracle drugs

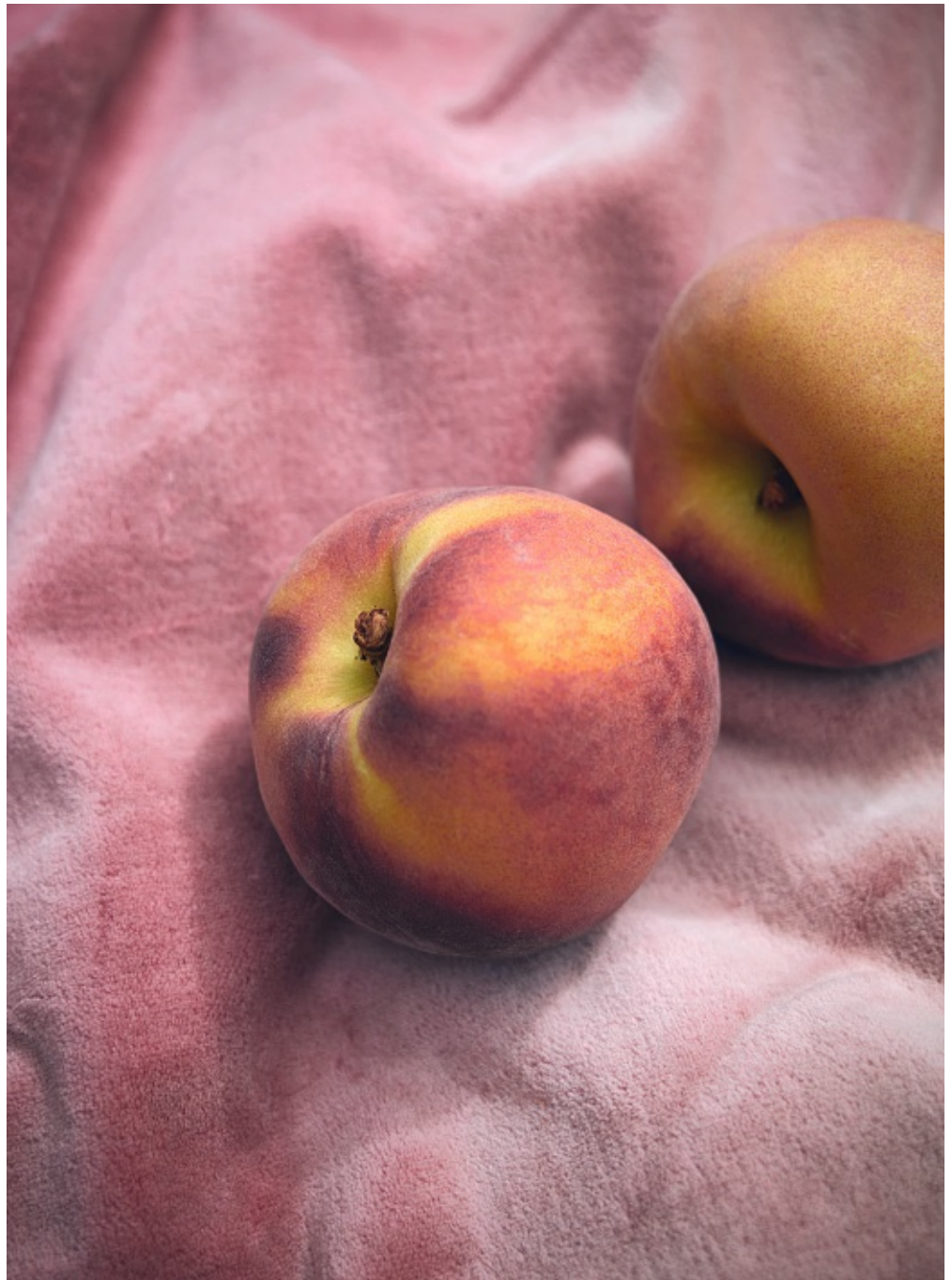
A new generation of highly effective weight-loss medication is raising hopes and questions.

By *Hannah Kuchler*

## 38.

### ► Peaches

A short history of the perfect fruit. By *Bee Wilson*



## INTELLECT

- 9 **Tim Harford**  
Time to embrace risk
- 10 **Elaine Moore**  
The virtue of reality
- 12 **Gallery**  
Mohammed Adel in London

- 14 **Simon Kuper**  
Cracks in the establishment
- 16 **Gillian Tett**  
CEO WFH WTF

## APPETITES

- 35 **Tim Hayward**  
Hot stuff from this Soho bistro
- 37 **Ravinder Bhogal Recipe**  
Cardamom mandazi with Kenyan chai
- 43 **Jancis Robinson**  
Why everyone should drink more South African wine

## WIT & WISDOM

- 45 **Games**
- 46 **The Questionnaire**  
Angélique Kidjo, singer and songwriter

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## ON THE COVER

Illustration by *Studio Hosego*

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# Letters



## It's Justice Thomas's Supreme Court now

by Jill Abramson

One thing the US seems to suffer from is an obsession with the constitution and its literal interpretation. My country Switzerland based its constitution on the US one, but we update it from time to time. I fear as long as the US cannot wean itself away from this medieval mindset, it has lost its ability to adapt. Xeelee1123 via FT.com

I wonder why this is about reinterpreting a constitution from a 50-year-old judgment, Roe vs Wade, rather than looking at the plight of the poorest. Unwanted or unplanned children make poor families poorer, and the children will grow up with inevitably fewer resources. The middle class will travel to obtain abortions but the poorest won't. SPAC Cowboy via FT.com

The belief that the text must be afforded the meaning it would have had when it was written [constitutional originalism] suffers from the assumption that one can see through the eyes of those grounded in another time.

However, as a non-American, the most serious defect in the US system is the politicisation of the judiciary and the failure of the separation of powers. The job of the Supreme Court should be to correct interpretation by lower courts, and justices who publicly promote their individual political stances should not serve. It should be possible for a professional to take a view of the legality of a situation, regardless of whether one finds it personally desirable. Jacqueline Castles, London

## Trivial pursuits

by Rosa Lyster

Having a hobby like knitting is so much more than just making an "unattractive scarf". It's a practical, useful and enjoyable pursuit with enviably satisfying results. Something to wear, a gift to give, a token of love.

A member of our village Knit and Natter group, recently facing terminal cancer, succeeded in knitting jumpers for all her loved ones. A most commendable way of passing on skills in a demonstrable show of affection.

Caroline McAslan, Kidmore End

Rather than being about hobbies, this article is about why one should avoid Twitter and the likes. So much time wasted.

Daneel Olivaw via FT.com

I am stunned to read hobbies have a negative reputation and are associated with people who have no friends and no idea what normal people do for fun. I thought having no hobbies was a shortcoming.

HarrT via FT.com

Rosa Lyster writes some cracking observations and some really funny lines. Do these articles come out every weekend? If so, I might start a new hobby of reading them religiously.

Common Sensai via FT.com

I was hoping for some light entertainment or maybe deep insight into why people enjoy doing something odd or collecting objects and instead got a guilt-inducing lecture on *passee-temps* that makes me feel like a loser. I think I will just go back to my coin collection. There is nothing like holding a 2,000-year-old piece of silver



## ▲ JULY 9/10

Triumph of the right

stamped with some Greek god's face and pondering who made it, spent it, held it, coveted it, dreamt about it. That certainly is a hobby.

Or is it an addiction, a mania, a compulsion? In the money museum in Paris there is a great video about why people collect coins. If you get to visit, it will make you feel normal. Well, sort of. Whatever.

Oh, heck, I loved the article. Organicapples via FT.com

That bloke with the bus DVD... I feel so seen. cardstance via FT.com

## Husband, hero, cop, abuser

by Sarah Haque

Absolutely heartbreaking travesty of justice. Thank you for this seamless integration of the wider issues and the individual case. Scott via FT.com

## Boris Johnson's parting gift to conversation

by Robert Shrimmsley

An entertaining glossary. Sometimes Johnson employs words with a travesty of meaning and sincerity. These come under the headings of apologies, regrets and humility. I noticed two words he used in his resignation. "Privilege" and "herd". He said it was a privilege to be prime minister; to him that meant he was able to use his majority to do what he liked. As for "herd": a derogatory reference to his colleagues. Ego blinds reality. Colin Heath, Cardiff

## A Brit chef's French adventure in Languedoc

by Tim Hayward

Unfair. Completely unfair. Superb. What an experience. The writing does the food justice. Tortolia via FT.com

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Quiz answers: The link was Only Fools and Horses. 1. Trotter 2. Lyndhurst 3. Rodney Marsh 4. Raquel Welch 5. Royal Albert Hall 6. Costa del Sol 7. Jason (Momoa and Alexander) 8. Cassandra 9. "Granded" 10. Millionaires  
Picture quiz: Stephen King + Isadora Duncan = King Duncan (from Macbeth)

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# Intellect

*Undercover Economist*

## TIM HARFORD

A riskier approach to new vaccines will pay off

**At the risk of sounding like a newlywed presenting my spouse** with a list of pointers for improvement, these once-miraculous Covid vaccines could do better. It wasn't long ago that I celebrated the anniversary of being fully vaccinated, but that first flush of immunity started to wane very quickly. I've even been flirting with some exciting new variants.

I shouldn't joke. The vaccines were indeed spectacularly effective, as well as being as safe as one could hope. But the virus has adapted so quickly that it is at risk of leaving us behind. The current vaccines were tuned to induce immunity to early strains of the Sars-Cov-2 virus, but more recent variants have proved adept at evading both the vaccines and the immunity from earlier infections. The vaccines still dramatically reduce the risk of severe symptoms. But they do not eliminate the risk of infection, illness or lasting side-effects. Infection rates in the UK today may well be higher than they have ever been. The result: short-term illness, the risk of long-term illness and, for the unlucky, hospitalisation or death.

We can cope with that, if we have to. But there is clearly a risk of something nastier down the track. The UK has been hit by three consecutive waves of Omicron variants, each one appearing in a matter of weeks. If a future variant proves much more dangerous, we will not have much time to brace for impact. So what can be done? The answer: develop better vaccines. The simplest ►



◀ approach is, as with flu, to try to predict where the virus will be four to six months ahead, and to make booster doses accordingly. That looks feasible. After scaling up to meet demand for vaccines in 2021, the world has “unprecedented production capacity”, says Rasmus Bech Hansen, founder of Airfinity, a health analytics company – enough to produce another 8bn doses this year.

But better, if we can figure out how to do it, is to make a vaccine that targets all Sars-Cov-2 variants, or a wider family of coronaviruses including Sars or, even more ambitiously, all coronaviruses. “It’s a riskier and more aggressive approach,” says Prashant Yadav, a vaccine supply-chain expert at the Center for Global Development, a Washington-based think-tank. There are several such vaccines in development; if one of them works, that’s a huge step forward.

Another approach that has recently been in the spotlight is a nasally administered booster. Akiko Iwasaki, an immunologist at Yale University, leads one of several laboratories working on such an approach, which she calls “prime and spike”. The nasal spray promises to produce antibodies in the nose, thus preventing infection before it starts and breaking the chain of transmission. But this vaccine is still at an early stage.

Other delivery mechanisms include patches and pills. It would be vastly easier to store and distribute a vaccine in tablet form, and many people would prefer to swallow a pill than have a jab. A final consideration, says Yadav, is to develop new ways of manufacturing vaccines – for example, growing them in plant or yeast cultures. Having such alternatives available would avoid bottlenecks the next time a vaccine is urgently needed.

This is all very exciting, and Bech Hansen says there are around 400 different Covid vaccines at various stages of development, along with more than 100 new flu vaccines and over 250 vaccines for other diseases.

There is far more urgency than there was before Covid, but less urgency than we need. Given the risk of a further dangerous variant (not small) and the social benefit of an effective vaccine against it (huge), governments should be investing much more to accelerate the next generation of vaccines.

**I**n 2020, government programmes such as Operation Warp Speed in the US aimed to subsidise research, testing and production of vaccine candidates, as well as dramatically accelerating the process of regulatory approval. The idea was that governments, rather than private companies, would accept the risk of failure. This made sense, because it was society as a whole that would enjoy most of the rewards.

A vaccine manufacturer certainly profits from a successful vaccine but those profits are dwarfed by the wider benefits. By accelerating vaccine development and production, Operation Warp Speed “saved hundreds of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars”, says Alex Tabarrok, an economist at George Mason University.

The stakes are lower now but still unnervingly high. While there is plenty of interesting science happening in the vaccine pipeline, it will not be fast enough if we are unlucky with the next variant. To move next-generation vaccines beyond promising studies into clinical trials then large-scale production will take money, as well as a greater sense of regulatory urgency. It is possible these new vaccines will all fail or that they will succeed but provide only a modest benefit.

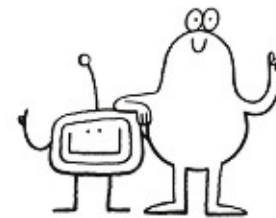
Or they may prove essential. Investing more money in the next Covid vaccine is not only likely to create scientific spillovers for other vaccines but is the best way we have of reducing the risk of disaster. Such insurance is worth paying for. Politicians have been keen to declare that the pandemic is over but the virus pays no attention to such proclamations. We need even better vaccines. We should be willing to pay for them. **FT**

.....  
Tim Harford’s latest book is “How to Make the World Add Up”

Notes from the Cutting Edge

## ELAINE MOORE

### Virtual reality bites



**My family has a new toy. At every gathering, a Meta Quest 2 virtual reality headset is now carefully unpacked and passed around. It is so popular that my nephews start begging to see it as soon as they arrive.**

Their reaction is understandable. The metaverse that Oculus headsets access sounds like an alluring place. Create your own form, flit between worlds and exceed the limitations of reality – what could be better? If the possibilities are endless, who wouldn’t want to disappear into a digital universe? Yet the headsets are still bulky and the apps cartoonish. Even the game my family loves best, an atmospheric puzzle set in Edwardian London called *The Room*, shows that seamless interaction with the real world and realistic graphics are years away. After an hour, not even my nephews want to play any more.

My experiences so far suggest that we’re still a very long way from having to worry about spending too much time in thrall to the metaverse. Yet this observation runs counter to the steady drumbeat of warnings that have emerged about virtual life over the past year. When Meta whistleblower Frances Haugen spoke out against her employer, addiction to the metaverse was one of the things she claimed to be most worried about. Immersive environments would encourage users to unplug from reality altogether, she said.

You can see why product managers like Haugen might worry. Many of us lost the battle against limiting our internet use long ago. Tech addiction may not be recognised by the US Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, but so-called “limbic capitalism” has tricked our brains into habits that ensure excessive consumption of tech products. Checking and rechecking messaging apps, say. Or looking out for email notifications.

**‘Limbic capitalism’ has tricked our brains into the excessive consumption of tech products**

On this point, I agree. I’m guilty of both. I turned my own screen-time alerts off months ago. Knowing how much time I spent on my phone didn’t seem to change the outcome.

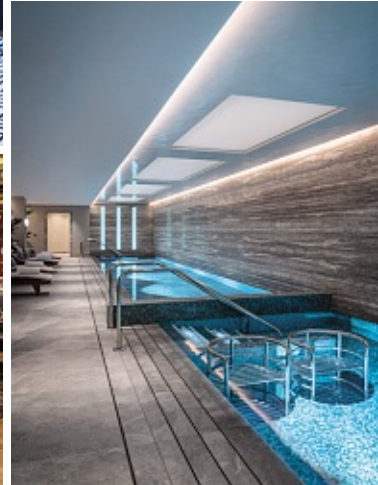
The assumption is that the metaverse will make all this worse. Research seems to show that virtual reality games are more addictive than the traditional variety. A small Chinese academic study promoted by Alvin Wang Graylin, the China president of the electronics company HTC, found that virtual reality games were almost 50 per cent more addictive than PC ones. It’s that sort of engagement that explains why the metaverse is hyped as reaching an \$800bn market valuation in a couple of years.

It helps that the pandemic has primed us to go online more often.

As venture capitalist Matthew Ball wrote in a series of recent essays: “The most obvious behavioural change of the past year has been the increasing amount of time we spent online and in virtual worlds. But more important is [the] destigmatisation of this time.”

In lockdowns, the safest way to pass time with other people was online. Spending hours at a time on the internet became normalised. Yet this does not mean we are all on the verge of spending hours and hours in the metaverse. In the four years I have been testing out virtual and augmented headsets, I have yet to try one that feels comfortable. “Like strapping a brick to your forehead,” as one friend put it. It is possible to buy upgraded head straps that attempt to redistribute the weight, but even so the sets remain heavy. This would be easier to accept if there was more to do in the metaverse, yet after 30 minutes untethered from reality, I’m more than happy to log off. **FT**

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Elaine Moore is the FT’s deputy Lex editor in San Francisco



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## GALLERY

*Painting by***MOHAMMED ADEL**

Untitled, 2021

**Mohammed Adel was born in London to Bangladeshi parents in 1997.** This untitled painting is part of a series he made that draws on family photo albums to examine the hybrid nature of immigrant identity. By bringing together elements from his childhood from his parents' lives before he was born and the lives of unknown relatives, as well as items from where he lives now, Adel creates a form of visual autofiction. "I combine imagery from my home, the rug and picture frames with the image from the photo album," he says. "I impose my own narrative on to the figures, giving them the role of guests in my house."

Adel's painting will be on show at *Bridging Landscapes*, a London exhibition of artists and writers from the south Asian diaspora, staged across two venues. "The idea behind this show is to bring multi-disciplined artists together in one space to show that south Asian artists are not homogenous, and there is no one-size-fits-all," says curator Aisha Zia. "How we are shaped by our past helps us accept connectedness to the present and reimagine a positive future." 

.....  
 Words by Josh Lustig. "Bridging Landscapes" is at French Riviera, London, July 20-August 7, and Rich Mix, London, August 4-6

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World View

# SIMON KUPER

How Johnson finally sabotaged the Eton-Oxford establishment



**T**here are years in the UK when eras change. It happened in 2008, with the simultaneous arrival of the financial crisis and the smartphone. But so vast are the powers of British prime ministers, who inherit them in part from monarchs, that the change of era often coincides with a change in Downing Street. That was true in 1945, when a new Labour government began turning Britain into a social democracy, and again in 1979, when Margaret Thatcher reversed the process. The fall of Boris Johnson, now in his last weeks as prime minister, may prove a turning point too. And the change of era it seems to echo is 1964, the last time Britain tried to jump from rule by Etonians to meritocracy.

By 1964, three different Eton-and-Oxford-educated Conservatives had held the premiership for nine straight years. The latest incumbent, Alec Douglas-Home, was an aristocrat who had renounced his peerage to enter the House of Commons. He was (obviously) a more honourable figure than Johnson, and he possessed the phlegm of his generation. Months before the election, when leftwing students intending to kidnap him rang the bell at the house where he was staying, he answered the door himself, heard them out about their plot, then remarked, "I suppose you realise if you do, the Conservatives will win the election by 200 or 300." He gave them beer, and they went away. (He only told the story years later, inevitably at a shooting party in Scotland.)

What Douglas-Home and Johnson had in common was that neither could have reached the top in a meritocracy. What Johnson lacks in honesty and application, Douglas-Home lacked in

brain. He famously admitted that when reading economic documents, he used matchsticks to grasp the points. Labour's leader at the time, northern grammar-school boy Harold Wilson, charged: "After half a century of democratic advance, of social revolution, the whole process has ground to a halt with a 14th ear!" Douglas-Home retorted by calling Wilson "the 14th Mr Wilson". He lost the election to Labour's promise of modernity. Later, he attributed his defeat to a magazine article by former cabinet minister Iain Macleod, who wrote that a "magic circle" conspiracy of Old Etonians had made Douglas-Home prime minister.

Wilson's new dawn disappointed, as new dawns always do. But the change of era reflected a broad desire to admit new talent into what was then called "the establishment". Douglas-Home's own government had approved the Robbins report, which recommended expanding British universities so that they could admit all those "qualified for them by ability and attainment". And the toffs had to step back. The Tories didn't elect another privately educated leader until David Cameron in 2005.

Now, after nine years of the past 12 under Eton-and-Oxford prime ministers, there's a similar British urge. It takes a lot to sabotage possibly the world's oldest ruling caste, but Johnson did it by embodying to the point of parody the caste's trademark flaws: an unserious gentleman amateur who treated politics as a game, shunned the hard work and winged it on his verbal performances. He has ruined prospects for the next generation of toffs.

**Oxford now uses complex formulas to recruit more bright state school kids and fewer Johnsons**

Keir Starmer chose this week to confirm Labour's pledge to withdraw charitable status from private schools. Already, in the Tory leadership race, a new political elite is emerging: people from immigrant families who got their chance in politics under Cameron. And the ruling elite's chief nursery, Oxford University, is modernising too.

Many at Oxford feel shame in having co-produced Johnson. His portrait doesn't even hang in the dining hall of his old college, Balliol. Instead, the ancient walls are lined mostly with portraits of Balliol women, including at least one "scout" (cleaner), to honour 50 years of women at the college. Oxford admissions tutors now use complex formulas to assess the relative deprivation of candidates, enabling the university to recruit more bright state school kids and fewer Johnsons. In 2020, 68 per cent of new British undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge came from state schools, the highest proportion on record. Women outnumber men. Public school headteachers whine about "reverse discrimination", but in fact Oxbridge is finally starting to resemble a meritocracy.

Private schools are frightened. Many parents will change their minds about "going private" once they realise it might diminish their kids' chances of getting into Oxbridge. After all, Eton without Oxford is worth much less than Eton-and-Oxford. Britain's elite of 2050 could strangely resemble the rising grammar school elite of Wilson's day. Contrary to popular belief, the UK can change. **FT**

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*American Experiment*

# GILLIAN TETT

Why CEOs are angsty over WFH



**E**arlier this summer, I moderated a dinner debate for the New York Stock Exchange with a clutch of esteemed US chief executives. I expected an earnest discussion about inflation, supply chains and the war in Ukraine. But that's not what I got.

After one CEO asked a question about the merits of hybrid work, the conversation suddenly became highly emotive. A show of hands revealed most CEOs disliked the policy of remote working. Another showed most were only getting their staff into the office for two days a week at best.

Their dilemma was painfully clear. Should they force staff to return by threatening to fire them, as Elon Musk recently did at Tesla? Strongly urge them to return, like Wall Street bosses such as David Solomon of Goldman Sachs? Or take the same route as Tim Cook of Apple, who initially demanded curbs on remote work but was forced to compromise after mass protests? As the debate raged, it turned this economics dinner into something more like a communal corporate-therapy session. "It's the biggest single issue," the boss of a Midwest industrial group forlornly admitted.

Last month, it happened again, this time while moderating a discussion with an earnest consultant from EY. We were supposed to debate macroeconomic issues but as soon as someone uttered the phrase "remote work", the conversation was hijacked.

Once again, middle-aged executives said they wanted employees to return to the office. On this occasion there were also younger workers present, and they were equally vehement that they wanted to work mostly from home. The only exception to

this generational divide was one middle-aged software CEO whose staff had always worked remotely.

The arguments were intense and driven by culture as much as logistics and economics. As a family therapist might say, the debates showed the generations often "talk past each other". The same words can mean very different things to people because their assumptions clash.

Take productivity. Workers like me who started their careers towards the end of the 20th century assumed offices were more "productive" than home. "Going to work" was synonymous with "going to the office" and was defined in opposition to home, which was linked to time spent not working. But for anthropologists, this mental split was an anomaly when set against most cultures throughout history. Today's laptop-wielding workforce seems to underline this. To them, being in an office can seem less productive since "you end up socialising and that stops you doing your job", as one young banker told the EY debate.

To this, the older generation would retort that conversation is never a waste of time; it fosters teamwork and leads to the unplanned encounters that spark creativity, not to mention the personal contact needed to manage people. I was told all this by the CEOs I was interviewing. But digital natives grew up managing social relations in cyberspace as much as in the real world. The latter does not always trump the former in their eyes; they think "managers just need to learn to manage remotely", one said.

There is a third key point of tension: apprenticeships. Though the concept is most often associated

with blue-collar work in the west, it also mattered for 20th-century white-collar professionals. Today's established lawyers, bankers, accountants or journalists usually learnt their craft by observing others and through immersion in an office.

This wasn't just because they needed to acquire technical skills. The key issue was the transmission of culture. Offices were where the younger generation learnt to network, comport themselves at work, manage their time and so on. In anthropologist-speak, the office was an environment where deeply ingrained rhythms were seamlessly conveyed and reproduced from one generation to another.

Today's corporate leaders take it for granted that the culture transfer matters, hence the existence of summer internships.

But not everyone shares this view, especially when so much else is in flux and many of the older generation are struggling to make sense of an increasingly digital world.

It might prove to be a temporary clash. Another theme that emerged from these debates was that most older executives blithely assume it will be easier for them to put an end to remote work when the summer is over - and if a recession hits. But this assumption may be misguided too; surveys from groups such as Gallup consistently show most people working from home today expect to continue to do so, most of the time. It is a fascinating moment to be a corporate anthropologist and a nightmare for those CEOs. **FT**

gillian.tett@ft.com [@gilliantett](https://twitter.com/gilliantett)





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# ESSAY

on

## COSTS OF LIVING

Tracking the impact of inflation and anxiety on my household

By George Bass

**W**orking as a security guard and a bouncer, I'm trained in "restrictive intervention". Anyone who gets too rowdy or too close is first asked to tone it down. If they turn violent, the bodycam gets switched on, and the attacker may find themselves folded up like a deckchair. But there's one bloke who makes all my training evaporate. He comes to my house every day. He wears grey shorts, a red top and carries a high-vis handbag. He's the postman. And every time he shows up, I pray the envelopes he's holding aren't marked "Your bill is enclosed".

In my job keeping people and property safe on a university campus, I earn £10.71 per hour. Working 16 12-hour shifts a month bags me an average £1,400, after tax. I've always been comfortable earning a modest wage. Since I began working at the age of 15, I've picked jobs based on two guiding principles: I don't want to have to tell lies all day, and I don't want to get work calls beyond the car park. In my various roles over the past 25 years, working on a gun range, in a lead factory, as a labourer and shifting boxes, those two rules have never been broken. Getting a job in security taught me a third: once the uniform's on, you need to help people.

This year, the drumbeat of news about inflation has made me increasingly anxious. In March I stumbled across the term "working poor" in an FT article about a cleaner and her delivery-driver husband. They were ditching weekend trips away to visit friends and family because they could no longer afford them. I'd never heard the term before. I started to wonder if it included me.

I did some googling. My hourly rate puts me at more than a pound above the Office for National Statistics' 2021 low-pay threshold of £9.40. But I'm below the national median average of £604 a week, or about £31,400 a year. So on my wages alone I'm worse placed than the average Brit, but better off than the low-paid.

This is sort of reassuring. But with inflation hitting a 40-year high of 9.1 per cent, including a reported 6 per cent rise in food

prices and a 33 per cent rise in fuel prices compared with a year ago, I can't help wondering if at some point in the next year my job will become unaffordable.

I decide to start tracking my bills and my spending as closely as possible. If I can work out where the money goes, I'll know how much room I've got to absorb the apocalyptic-sounding deluge of price rises coming our way.

### Shift 733

I clock off at 6pm and race home, pulling the outdoor cabinet key from my security vest. It's March 31, and tomorrow the energy price cap is set to jump by an average of 54 per cent, or £693 a year per household. Like everyone else in England, I'm desperate to submit my gas meter readings beforehand. But the website is jammed, so I make a note to do it when I'm off shift the next morning.

At 5am, my reading is successfully submitted. My phone tells me my monthly wages have come through: £1,434.48. Two years ago, in lockdown, it was £1,411.86. Until the recent price rises, I haven't minded that it's not budgeted much. It's not like I've taken up yachting.

The first set of monthly debits are on my phone too. The gas breakdown cover comes out at £26.57, which is worth paying as it's a lot easier to swallow than the doomsday scenario of the boiler breaking down and having to find thousands of pounds to replace it. Bulb's monthly electricity bill, one of the few that comes in the post, is luckily still set as per my contract at £44.74, and the gas bill at £27.47. I breathe a sigh of relief that the rise in the energy cap isn't yet affecting my bank balance.

I arrange a celebratory trip to visit my parents. Since I sold my van in 2010 - a tough choice but necessary in order to swing the mortgage - my girlfriend, our daughter and I have walked everywhere. If we go beyond work or playground pick-ups, we use public transport. Although transport prices seem to have been steadily creeping up, the 40-mile trip to my parents only sets us back £18.15 with a family railcard.

Dad's a Londoner, born and raised in the East End; Mum's from south-east Germany. He charmed ►



**I breathe a sigh  
of relief that the rise  
in the energy cap  
isn't yet affecting  
my bank balance**

◀ her while she was over on a holiday that she's yet to return from. Over lunch, Dad tells me how the insecurity that low-paid workers face right now isn't the future he worked for. His generation went on strike and missed wages to get the right to sick pay, weekends off, job protection. He went from working in a fur factory to building sites to being a draughtsman for the Greater London Council until the building got turned into the London Aquarium. Zero-hours contracts are a sign my generation has been mugged, he says. I should get the union involved. I tell him my last email to the rep went unanswered - maybe they're on zero hours too.

Mum is even more vocal. Why are politicians who are already on more than 80 grand a year getting a pay rise of £2,200 while everyone else is getting hammered? She was a typist who raised three kids, which makes me think she must've also been a bank robber, because my girlfriend and I can just about feed one. She always makes me smile when she speaks Cockney rhyming slang in a German accent.

#### Shift 734

Before my next shift, I brace myself for the mortgage payment to make its monthly dent in my bank balance. Thank God the amount is fixed for the next two years at £656.97 a month, but I dread to think what the interest rates will be when we have to remortgage in 2024. I check the online food order. I eat porridge twice a day. The way I see it, Brexit shouldn't impact too much on the price of groceries if they come from Scotland. On the days when I'm on duty, from 6am to 6pm, I pre-make my special turbo salad: a mix of spinach (£1.05), peanuts (46p), tomatoes (90p), brown bread (£1) and Colman's mustard (£1.65). It revs me up like Popeye, keeps me going for 12 hours and works out a lot cheaper per fistful than a Starbucks sandwich.

I've always been pretty good at economising. I keep fit by using the kitchen floor as a gym, doing press-ups, lunges and dips on the gap in the worktop. They say muscles are made in the kitchen; mine literally are. And so far, food has been one of the easiest ways I can save money.

My girlfriend realised once we'd moved into our own house that we could get rid of the previous owners' dishwasher and rely on elbow grease. If it's my turn to wash up, I'll only ever use the cold tap or the kettle to spare the boiler. I've also long since given up milk in my porridge. I use the kettle for that too.

I avoid discounts for stuff I wouldn't normally buy when I'm doing the online grocery shopping, as it's just another way to get tempted into spending on what you don't need. Trolley, an app and grocery-price tracking site, has been a great resource to see how much our regular items have changed over time and to find the cheapest deals.

My job also occasionally provides small bonuses in the form of uneaten food. Every so often while locking up, I'll discover a meeting room where board members have left some of the spread they ordered completely untouched. I still remember the delight on my girlfriend's face when I introduced her to the gourmet onion-bhaji sandwich.

She gets to skip buying lunch too. Working in a school for kids with social and emotional problems, she gets a canteen meal as long as she helps keep order. You need to keep your carbs up when distressed pupils are attacking each other and you're the referee.

My girlfriend's job and the stories she brings home are part of the reason I class myself as well-off, namely because I had a warm, loving and safe upbringing. My nan's advice about avoiding the "never never" (buying on finance) has kept me from going too deep into debt. Every time I get tempted by something extravagant, I think of the magpies I sometimes watch on CCTV, the ones in the car park who are trying to headbutt wing mirrors or pick glossy posters off the walls. I guess flapping around trinkets and shiny stuff for too long can drive you a bit crazy, especially once you realise most of it ends up as clutter.

The car park was the site of another lesson. A few years ago, a university academic who is also a psychotherapist asked me to help set up her in-vehicle Bluetooth. As we were chatting, she told me that the blokes who sit in her chair don't

## I eat porridge twice a day. The way I see it, Brexit shouldn't impact too much on the price of groceries from Scotland

cry because they never got a Scalextric or put a Lotus in the garage. They cry because their dad didn't cuddle them.

It's why I'm grateful that, despite the mornings, evenings, weekends and bank holidays I often have to spend at work instead of with my family, those shifts buy me some weekdays off. I can go to the park and throw pine cones with my daughter after school, meet Mum for a milkshake after she leaves work.

#### Shift 736

I'm walking through a graveyard that we have to patrol when I start to smell something weird, almost like marmalade. As I get closer to the odour's source, something clicks in my brain - it's urine. Three junkies are sitting in some bramble bushes. Around their feet, different-coloured syringes are spread out like crayons, along with empty blister packs and burst sharps containers. It's like someone's booted open a biohazard bag from the bins in one of the campus's nursing-simulation suites.

One of the junkies is trying to inject his mate but can't find a vein. He's put so many holes in him I think it qualifies as acupuncture. I'm glad I forked out a month's fun money (£64.85) on a pair of TurtleSkin needle-proof gloves.

In a happier occurrence, HMRC emails me to say I don't owe any tax aside from the Pay As You Earn amount automatically deducted from my salary. I've been doing a bit of freelance writing and have declared everything I earn, but luckily it's not enough to get taxed. I log into my portal at work and find my tax deductions have actually dropped by £48.40 since last month, and my national insurance has fallen by £20.78. Maybe things are looking up. In a few days, my girlfriend will transfer over £630 to cover her half of the mortgage, the bills, insurance and after-school club fees.

The next day, I'm guarding the library, working with my shift mate Joe. He's got three other jobs - supermarket-order picker plus Deliveroo and sometime decorator - and a kid on the way. I tell him even his work ethic can't prepare him for being a parent. When I get home,

I find my daughter has tested positive for Covid.

In a stroke of luck, this has coincided with four days off duty for me, meaning we don't have any childcare issues until Friday, when my girlfriend's bosses thankfully let her have a day off. Two negative tests later, my daughter is allowed back to class. To cushion it, I treat her to lunch in Pret A Manger, where the filter coffee has gone up from 99p to £1.10. I always carry a loose pound for rough sleepers so they can buy themselves a hot drink. Now I'll have to move up a denomination.

Come the morning, my girlfriend's tested positive, plus another bloke on my shift. Everyone's had Covid twice now apart from me, and I really don't want a rematch after the first round left me feeling like I'd upset a load of Luton fans.

A message from the student-accommodation manager puts my worries in perspective: the university is letting one of its houses to a family of Ukrainian refugees via the council. Security need to get the keys ready, so I head to the safe room and tag them up on yellow and blue fobs, then write "Vitajemo" on the labels. Hopefully, Google has translated "Welcome" correctly.

My next day on duty is a Saturday, and I'm buzzing: the £150 council tax rebate from then-chancellor of the exchequer Rishi Sunak to provide some "fair, targeted and proportionate" help is there on my phone. Part of me's tempted to draw it out as cash just in case it disappears. Not that I don't trust a bloke who needs help tapping his card at the petrol station.

April edges towards May. I'm on duty over the bank holiday. The monthly insurances are going out: home, critical illness, mortgage protection. When we moved in just ahead of the first lockdown, these came to £139.14 a month. They're pretty much the same - maybe the system has forgotten us.

Then the gas bill comes in. It's gone from £28.47 to £95.97.

#### Shift 740

For the first time since school, I've been working out percentages. Out of my £1,434.48 post-tax pay each month, about 23 per cent goes on

## One of the junkies is trying to inject his mate but can't find a vein. He's put so many holes in him I think it qualifies as acupuncture

paying for my half of the mortgage, or £328. I can't economise there.

Food for the household wipes out 31 per cent, which leaves 46 per cent for bills, life, everything else. But with the bills this month totalling £748.70, that's 52 per cent of my take-home pay. This would be some very scary arithmetic if it wasn't for my girlfriend transferring her half across. It's a godsend I'm not a single parent trying to keep the house going on my wages alone. I wouldn't last a month. It would be me in the graveyard trying to find a vein.

This, I realise, is why the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the UK economic research institute, recommends looking at your net household income - not your individual wages - to work out how you compare with the rest of the population. When I fill out its online calculator, the results say that with my girlfriend's salary added to mine, and because we only have one dependent, our household after-tax income of £3,452.16 puts us in the "seventh decile". I'm not sure what a decile is, but it goes on to say that although my hourly wage is below the median, our joint household income is actually higher than around 61 per cent of the UK population. That explains why we still have enough breathing space right now to save a little (I put £10 a month into a current account for my daughter and £50 a month into an ISA), go on some day trips and have two takeaways a month.

I use up one takeaway when I'm on duty one Sunday. The burgers and chips to share cost £28.37, but my shift mates and I take turns buying, and I'm happy that this month is on me. Mostly because I'm working with my shift mate Sam, who's kind enough to give me a lift home most nights, and he needs a treat after having to take action against a female intruder. She'd refused to leave the site Sam was guarding, so he called the police, at which point she climbed on the bonnet of the squad car and did a number two on the windscreen.

Every time "energy" starts trending on Twitter, I read how the price cap is forecast to rise again. The latest estimates say it could go as high as £3,244 a year in October due to surging gas prices. It's "genuinely a

once-in-a-generation event", according to the boss of Ofgem, the energy regulator. Food prices are also going up. I can't face looking at the calculator again. I don't need to, to know that my family could be in trouble.

Did I take a wrong turn somewhere? Since secondary school, I only hoped to earn enough money to put a roof over my head, enough grass to practise penalties and maybe have one hot holiday a year for me and my family.

People will say that if I want more money to live on, I should've bettered myself and found a higher-paying job. I agree, but then who's going to do my job? Don't they deserve a roof and a bit of garden as well? And would they enjoy being a security guard as much as I do?

I do a litter-pick with my daughter for her cubs group. If I ever get to retire, I plan to spend my free time doing the same thing but solo: get up, clean the streets, go to bed. The work takes me back to one of my most rewarding jobs, cleaning a multistorey car park. I'd grab my headphones, my tongs and a black sack and slowly make a neglected place look better. Maybe in my twilight years I can do the same. I only hope GTA will still be releasing soundtracks by that point.

#### Shift 743

It's 6am on a Saturday. I clock on to find a student has suffered some kind of episode in the night and smashed a door down with a fire extinguisher. Everyone is understandably shaken. There are longer-term questions about the person's care and the best way they can access help, but in the meantime we have to deal with the immediate aftermath. We calm the flatmates down, begin clearing the mess, then prepare to drive the impromptu renovator to a new residence that my bosses have arranged.

As much as I love it, there are times when this job feels a little dangerous. Not for the first time, I wonder about buying a stab-proof plate for my protective security vest. I google the cost of one. It's £73. I decide I'll just be unfailingly polite instead. **FT**

George Bass is a security guard at a UK university

# WONDER DRUG

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*A new hormone-based treatment for obesity appears to be startlingly effective. Is it a miracle or merely the latest in a long line of misguided medical interventions?*

BY HANNAH KUCHLER

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n the summer of 2018, Lisa Robillard left her doctor's office and walked down the long corridor of a medical complex in suburban Virginia. She'd just had an appointment with yet another physician who could only recommend "diet and exercise" when she brought up her life-long struggle with her weight. Robillard was 11 when she attended her first Weight Watchers meeting with her family, who celebrated hitting their dieting goals by going out for ice cream. Later, when her first fiancé proposed, the ring was conditional on dropping several dress sizes. She lost the weight but, when they split, it piled back on. Now, after 40 years of yo-yoing, she was dispirited.

Then Robillard glimpsed a sign hanging on one of the doors along the corridor: "Struggling to lose weight? You don't have to do it alone." Inside, she found a somewhat grim clinic of aged vinyl chairs and wall-to-wall beige that didn't much look like the birthplace of a wonder drug. But she also learnt that more and more scientists believe obesity is a disease rather than simply resulting from unhealthy habits and that, for the seriously overweight, lifestyle changes will never be entirely effective. Eventually, she joined a trial the clinic was running for a new drug called Wegovy. "I wish I had known sooner that it wasn't just a lack of willpower," says Robillard, who is now 55. "The many dollars spent on going to weight-loss [meetings], the years of beating myself up, the years of self-hate. I wish I had known that it wasn't my fault."

Wegovy, made by Danish drugmaker Novo Nordisk, is the first in what is shaping up to be a new generation of obesity treatments, which use a hormone to regulate appetite. (The name is the result of a nebulous bureaucratic process involving pharmaceutical regulators and the company's marketers.) The average patient in the study in which Robillard participated lost 15 per cent of their body weight, about three times more than on previous drugs. Nearly a third of them lost almost as much as they would after weight-loss surgery. Robillard lost 57 pounds. The US Food and Drug Administration approved Wegovy for general use in June 2021.

Wegovy arrived on the market amid a global obesity crisis. Almost half of Americans are expected to be obese by 2030, a Harvard study found, and that could account for up to 18 per cent of healthcare spending on related conditions, ranging from heart disease and stroke to osteo-

arthritis. Worldwide obesity rates have tripled since 1975, with 650 million adults obese in 2016, according to the World Health Organization. In 2019, the OECD declared that developed countries' plans to tackle the problem were largely failing. And the Covid-19 pandemic only underscored that obesity puts people at greater risk for infectious disease.

Despite the vast need, many major pharmaceutical companies have held back from developing weight-loss drugs, in part because the category is marred by a long history of quackery and safety scares. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the industry poured money into diet pills based on amphetamines. These eventually fell out of favour because they were highly addictive and had harmful side effects. In the 1990s, fen-phen - a combination of fenfluramine and phentermine - became so popular that weight-loss clinics sprung up across the US just to prescribe it, even though some patients on the drug experienced manic episodes. It was later taken off the market after a study showed up to a third of patients could suffer from heart valve defects. As recently as 2020, US regulators forced the withdrawal of weight-loss drug Belviq because of concerns it increased the risk of cancer. For the most desperate, surgery has become popular, though it is expensive and comes with its own risks and restrictions.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Wegovy - a weekly injection patients self-administer using a small device that looks a bit like an EpiPen - has plenty of fans. Patients like Robillard, for one. While her day job is still working for a union, she now works part-time as a Novo Nordisk spokesperson, giving motivational speeches to staff. Unpaid celebrity endorsements include venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, who says the drug completely changed his relationship with food, and Elon Musk, who has cited it on Twitter. Novo Nordisk recently more than doubled its sales targets for obesity drugs to \$3.7bn by 2025. Its share price has risen 26 per cent in the past year. But before the company can make Wegovy mainstream, it has to convince doctors to prescribe it and insurers and governments to pay for it. It has to persuade patients to sign up for some heinous side effects. And then there's the small matter of overturning centuries of, as it turns out inaccurate, assumptions embedded in the Latin root of the word obesity: "having eaten until fat". ►





*ALMOST HALF OF AMERICANS ARE EXPECTED TO BE OBESE  
BY 2030, AND THAT COULD ACCOUNT FOR UP TO 18 PER CENT  
OF HEALTHCARE SPENDING ON RELATED CONDITIONS*

**S**ince the second half of the 20th century, the wealthy have tended to stay thin, a benefit of having access to medical care, healthy food and free time to exercise. But for most of human history, scarcity reigned, and the rich flaunted their fat. Corporal excess was proof of a bountiful table and perhaps even genes that would protect offspring in times of famine. But the story of obesity has always been complicated. The toll it takes was clear to the ancient Greeks, Hippocrates noting that “corpulence is not only a disease itself, but the harbinger of others”. Then Christianity came along and yoked appetite to deadly sins such as gluttony and sloth. In Dante’s inferno, the souls of food addicts are punished by icy rain, representing the damage their overindulgence does to themselves and others.

Novo Nordisk scientists have viewed obesity as a disease for 25 years. It is an unusual pharmaceutical company. Based just outside Copenhagen and almost a century old, it is controlled and part-owned by a charitable foundation that invests in scientific research, start-ups and humanitarian projects. The world’s 17th largest pharmaceutical company by revenue, it generated sales of about \$20bn last year. The company’s staff likes to say Novo Nordisk was born from a love story, because its founder sought out insulin for his diabetic wife, bringing it back to Denmark for her from Canada before building his business. So its scientists paid attention in 1987 when three separate teams of academic researchers – in Copenhagen, Boston and London – simultaneously discovered the effect of a hormone known as GLP-1 on insulin. When we eat, cells in the small intestine secrete GLP-1, causing the release of insulin, which in turn tempers fluctuations in blood sugar levels.

Back then, scientists thought the hormone held promise helping diabetics restore normal insulin production. While experimenting with how to create a new GLP-1-based drug in the 1990s, Novo Nordisk lab scientists noticed their mice and rats began to lose weight. The hormone’s effect on the brain, they discovered, is to reduce appetite and create a feeling of fullness. This is exactly how it worked for Robillard in 2018; she felt her mind freed from its obsession with eating.

Peter Kurtzhals is talking to me over Zoom from a conference room at the company’s Danish headquarters. A senior scientist at Novo Nordisk, he cuts

the figure of a no-nonsense researcher but lights up describing why the academics who discovered the hormone should be considered for a Nobel Prize. He says GLP-1 may be the pharmaceutical equivalent of a Swiss army knife because Novo Nordisk is also testing drugs based on the hormone to treat kidney disease, an increasingly prevalent liver condition known as NASH, even Alzheimer’s. “It’s kind of amazing, philosophically, that we have a natural hormone that can be pharmacologically used in such a variety of conditions,” he says.

This natural hormone has a flaw: it is so unstable that it lasts mere minutes in the body. In 2005, one San Diego biotech company marketed a drug based on a similar hormone produced in the venom of Gila monster lizards because it lasted for several hours, rather than minutes. Novo Nordisk’s scientists laboured for years to create a stable version of GLP-1 that could be used as medication. Testing their potential drugs in animals proved troublesome: a dose that kept a pig satiated might not work in a human, and it proved especially difficult to track important side effects. “It’s hard to ask the dog or the pig whether they feel nauseated,” Kurtzhals says.

In 2009, Novo Nordisk won approval for its first GLP-1-based treatment, a daily drug called Saxenda. But the 5 per cent weight loss it offered patients wasn’t enough to make it a blockbuster. The company’s scientists searched through hundreds of potential drugs until they hit upon semaglutide, christened with the brand name Wegovy when it was approved in the US last year. Wegovy is very similar to Saxenda. Both are 90 per cent the same as naturally occurring GLP-1, but because of its different chemical side chain, Wegovy can be taken weekly. (The company does not know exactly why it proved so much more effective, but animal studies suggest it is distributed differently in the brain.) When an early Wegovy trial showed the drug’s power, Kurtzhals says it felt “too good to be true”. Then a late-stage trial confirmed the stunning weight loss, and the team celebrated. “They felt like they had won an Olympic medal,” he says.

Meanwhile there is one cardinal mystery about obesity for scientists to solve. Until they do, patients will be on the drug for life. Experts increasingly agree that the tug of war over her weight that Robillard described to her doctor in Virginia is a literal thing for many people. Once it becomes obese, the human body tends to push itself to rebound to

its previous highest weight. Scientists don’t fully understand why, or how to stop it. Many speculate that our brains have not adjusted to living in a time of plenty. “There’s been a selection bias towards those people who could better protect body weight during times of famine,” Kurtzhals says. “But now we don’t have a shortage of food.”

When a patient stops taking Wegovy, their appetite returns within weeks and they pack on weight. In the study run by Robillard’s doctor, Domenica Rubino, the patients who came off the drug regained 7 per cent of their body weight. “We used to think that behaviour causes the weight state, but now we think the weight state actually causes the behaviour,” Rubino says. There may be even worse side effects of coming off the drug. Less than a week after Robillard stopped taking it at the end of the trial in November 2019, she started having panic attacks. “Every circuit started thinking about the cravings,” she says. She regained 20 pounds.

Novo Nordisk’s long-term ambition is to cure obesity by discovering how to stop the body bouncing back. Until then, Kurtzhals believes people should think of treating obesity as they do other chronic diseases. “For some reason, many people have an easier time understanding that your blood pressure medication is for life than understanding that your treatment of obesity is also for life,” he says. Part of that reason may be the price tag. Unlike generic blood pressure drugs that now cost \$10 a month, Wegovy’s monthly list price in the US is about \$1,350.

**M**any patients know, intuitively, that obesity is a disease, and some were primed for Wegovy’s US approval. Within a week, Kimberley Shoaf, a public health professor at the University of Utah, visited her doctor and discovered she wasn’t the clinic’s first patient to request Wegovy. Scared of the surgery that she saw as the only alternative, she pushed to get a prescription. In the past 11 months, she has lost 70 pounds, more than 20 per cent of her weight, and is still shedding half a pound a week. She can walk for longer, her blood pressure has dropped, and she hopes to soon have the words “pre-diabetic” erased from her medical records. “In spite of turning 60, I feel younger,” she says. ▶

*'WE'RE TRANSITIONING FROM THE LACKING SELF-CONTROL NARRATIVE TO ONE THAT SAYS "OBESITY IS A DISEASE, YOU NEED A PRESCRIBED CURE"... SO WE CAN SELL WEIGHT-LOSS MEDICATION'*

Marquisele Mercedes, Brown University

◀ These results are the reason she's willing to put up with Wegovy's significant side effects. At first, she threw up every week after taking the injection. Now she suffers constipation. Similar side effects were reported in the trial and on drugs.com, where patients universally praise the resulting weight loss but frequently complain of a constant "morning sickness". The drug also comes with a warning it could increase the risk of thyroid cancer, though so far that has only been found to be the case in lab animals.

While it is starting with well-informed patients like Shoaf and Andreessen, Novo Nordisk's next challenge is to convert obese people who never seek treatment. Which is where Queen Latifah comes in. The drugmaker is paying the actor to lead an unbranded campaign called "It's Bigger Than Me". In online videos, Latifah plays an emergency room doctor lecturing as an overweight patient is wheeled in suffering from "stigma", for example. She never explicitly says the drug's name. At live events with experts in New York, Los Angeles and Houston, Novo Nordisk hopes Latifah succeeded in stirring up demand. A famous black woman, the company hopes, will appeal to the four out of five African American females who are obese.

When we speak over video call, Latifah, who wears a dark blue wrap dress, is poised. "It's not just about image," she says. "It's about science. It's about genetics. It's about hormones." She says she didn't even understand that she had a weight problem until she asked a personal trainer to help her drop 25 pounds for her role in the 2003 comedy *Bringing Down the House*. Latifah describes having her measurements taken: "She literally walked me through my butt. She was like, 'You are obese.' I had never heard that term apply to me," the actor says. "So then we started a plan, and it worked."

When I ask what the plan was, she says diet and exercise, adding "I've never really been one for the medical... the medicine side of this." She stops herself, perhaps realising this might not go down well with the PR reps sitting silently on the call. "Well, let me just put it this way... I saw people go crazy on a fen-phen bender like I've never seen in my life." Latifah may have inadvertently hit on Wegovy's biggest obstacle: the deeply entrenched stigma around treating weight problems medically.

This challenge falls, in part, to Vince Lamanna, Novo Nordisk's newly appointed US sales leader and a walking advertisement for Wegovy. His

sleek grey and blue check suit looks like it would not have fit him before he lost 30 pounds, 15 per cent of his body weight, on the drug. Playing with the empty injection pen that he carries to show how easy Wegovy is to self-administer, he says it is "really tough" to sell. "We are still the only company doing it, doing it alone," he continues. Doug Langa, an executive vice-president at Novo, has spent 30 years selling drugs for almost every disease. Yet he has never encountered a task like this: a disease for which only one in 10 Americans seek treatment. And when they do, they struggle to find a doctor who will listen. "This is far and away the most challenging, without question," he says.

Novo Nordisk put "feet on the street" within 72 hours of Wegovy's approval, sending what it calls "educators" into doctors' offices around the US. Lamanna anticipates it could take two to three years to change the minds of primary care physicians. Endocrinologists and weight management specialists tend to understand that dieting can't always compete with the body's drive to bounce back to a heavier weight. Almost 10 years have passed since the American Medical Association first declared obesity a disease, yet the average doctor barely spent any time learning about it at medical school. "The biggest misconception is that it's calories in and calories out. So, how much you exercise and how much you eat," Lamanna explains. Rubino, the doctor who ran the Wegovy trial in Virginia, adds that primary care doctors rarely understand the roles played by nutrition and hormonal regulation, and that that vacuum is filled with society's stigma against obese people.

While sending sales representatives to doctors is normal practice in American medicine, undertaking a complete re-education is reminiscent of how opioid makers tried to reclass pain as a "fifth vital sign" so that clinicians felt they had to treat it with a drug. Rubino, who was paid by Novo Nordisk to run the trial, accepts people might think the company's education programme is self-serving. "But, so far, I think people are trying to be very careful about their role," she says.

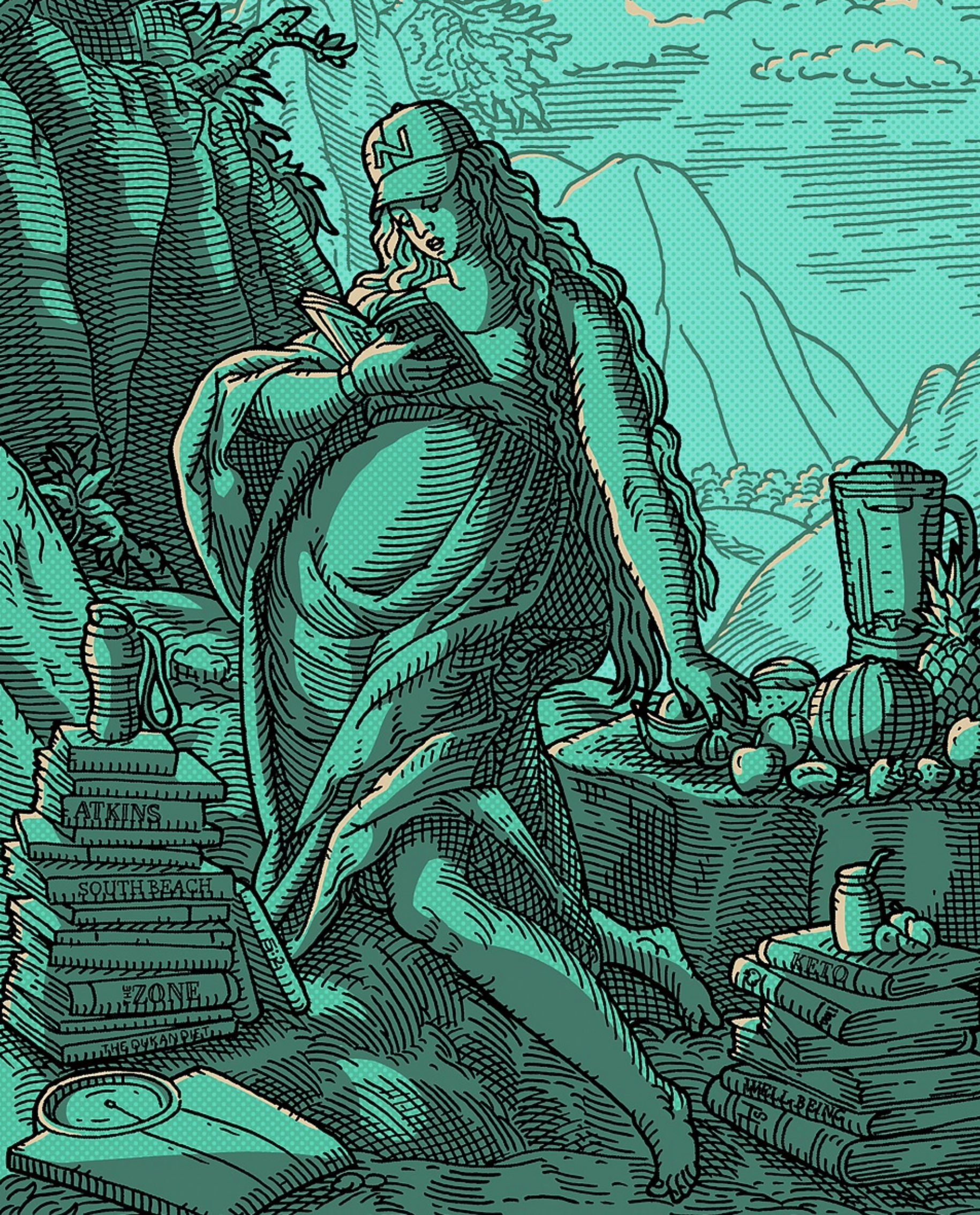
Lamanna's team is unlikely to stay alone in its mission to spread the word. Novo Nordisk's longtime rival in diabetes treatment, Eli Lilly, recently published what look like even better topline results for its obesity drug, Tirzepatide. Nearly two-thirds of participants trialling its GLP-1-based treatment lost 20 per cent of their body

weight. Pfizer, too, is working on a treatment based on the hormone. AstraZeneca and its partner Regeneron, as well as start-ups Versanis and Gelesis are taking different scientific approaches to the same problem. All of them are hoping to break into - and expand - the market for obesity medicines, such as Wegovy. If they succeed, there will be far more pharmaceutical preachers to convert the millions to medical treatment.

**E**ven if Novo Nordisk can win doctors over, it faces a greater challenge to convince reluctant payers. Some 80 million obese Americans do not have insurers who will pay for Wegovy. While it is on most insurers' lists of officially covered drugs, it is often in a lifestyle category, alongside treatments for issues such as erectile dysfunction. Payers also put up hurdles so patients must obtain permission before filling a prescription. One Maryland pharmacist told me she had seen many prescriptions for Wegovy, none of which had ever come back after being sent for authorisation.

Rubino says she becomes exasperated ploughing through appeal forms for patients who she believes should be exceptions, such as one whose bipolar medication caused weight gain. She says she once spent two hours on the phone trying to get the correct case ID and fax number to send along one appeal. Frequently, appeals are ignored or rejected without reason, she adds. "It's a system that's been put in place to basically prevent you from being persistent. And I'll do it for my patients. But it takes a tremendous amount of time," she says. Rubino believes insurance companies also stigmatise obesity. "For the longest time, the explanation of why it wasn't covered was there wasn't sufficient weight loss," she says. "Now, I don't know what the excuse is."

Major US insurers Aetna, UnitedHealthcare and Cigna did not respond to requests for comment on coverage decisions. James Gelfand, who leads public affairs at the Erisa Industry Committee, which represents US employers that sponsor health plans, says previous obesity drugs were so ineffective it was a "no brainer" to refuse coverage. Currently about half of all US employers have opted to put Wegovy on their list of covered drugs. But they may still restrict it to certain groups of ▶



ATKINS

SOUTH BEACH

THE ZONE

THE OYKAN DIET

KETO

WELL-BEING

TO





*'DRUG COMPANIES DO A DELICATE DANCE  
ATTEMPTING TO EXTRACT AS MUCH MONEY AS THEY  
POSSIBLY CAN FROM THIRD-PARTY PAYERS'*

James Gelfand, Erisa Industry Committee

◀ patients or make those who qualify jump over other hurdles. Wegovy might be different, but he suspects employers will wait to collect more data and then, perhaps, begin with those most in need. If drugmakers really want it covered, Gelfand suggests they could cut prices. "Drug companies do a delicate dance attempting to extract as much money as they possibly can from third-party payers, knowing an individual patient will never have means to be able to afford the drug," he says.

Novo Nordisk also has to win over Congress to get Medicare, the US's publicly funded health insurance for seniors, to cover obesity drugs. For 10 years, legislators have proposed removing the ban that stops Medicare from paying for obesity treatments, but it is not clear if the political will to do so exists. The Danish drugmaker might particularly struggle to win politicians' votes after insulin, one of its biggest products, became the "poster child" for rising drug prices, according to Novo Nordisk's Langa. A congressional committee accused the company this year of jacking up the price of insulin 28 times since 2001, resulting in a 628 per cent price increase. Novo Nordisk argues that its net price has actually fallen and that the increases are going to middlemen and insurers. Langa half-jokes that if you want to see him really stressed, watch a video of him testifying in Congress.

The prospect of losing coverage after the age of 65 worries patients who know the weight could pile right back on. Gwendolyn, a 66-year-old musician, lost 80 pounds in Eli Lilly's drug trial. She says she used to be a "walking heart attack", whose problems were exacerbated when she developed long Covid. Now she feels like she could work for many more years. But if Medicare won't pay, she'll have to find the money or would even consider cycling on and off the drug to save costs.

Eli Lilly has not yet announced the price of its obesity drug, though it will probably be in the same ballpark as Wegovy. Gwendolyn describes it as "very scary" that the medicine could cost so much, though she has some sympathy that drugmakers want their money back from trials that cost a "fortune". "But when you realise the sheer numbers of people that would take this, I would think that they could make money by scale," she says. "I feel like what this is going to be is more like a designer drug that wealthy people will take to help reduce their weight... that's kind of sad."

In the UK, the NHS has a vested interest in tackling obesity, saving on future associated medical costs. About 28 per cent of adults in England were obese in 2019, almost double the rate in 1993 and one of the worst in Europe. In February, the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence issued preliminary guidance advising that Wegovy can be given to the most overweight patients, with at least one obesity-related condition, alongside a diet and exercise plan, but only for two years. Production-related supply problems mean it is not yet available. When it is, UK patients will get it for the prescription cost of £9.35 per item. When there are more doses available, Novo Nordisk will expand promotion across Europe, where some health authorities including those in Ireland, the Netherlands and Switzerland already cover the cost of Saxenda.

**E**ven if Novo Nordisk and its competitors succeed in getting their drug accepted by the people who hold the purse strings, they will still face opponents who reject the whole premise that obesity should be treated with medicine.

Advocates of "body positivity" and some weight management experts believe health metrics such as blood pressure or blood sugar are far more useful than body mass index. The company is hoping to sway doubters with a trial, which reports later this year, that will show whether Wegovy reduces the risk of cardiac problems.


Marquise Mercedes, a doctoral student in public health at Brown University, is fed up hearing that Wegovy is a "miracle". She warns the drug could actually encourage "weight cycling", which is "incredibly dangerous". Studies show that losing and regaining weight could increase the risk of conditions such as diabetes. "All of the things we attribute to fatness, like cardiovascular risk, diabetes, depression, anxiety... have actually been found to be related to weight cycling," she explains.

Some critics fear that Novo Nordisk will be too successful in converting doctors. Clinicians often find drugs - such as overprescribed antidepressants - are a convenient crutch when they lack the time or skill to dig into the complex roots of a problem. Krista Varady, a professor of nutrition at the University of Illinois, recounts her "eye-opening" experience at a conference of diabetes special-

ists who have used GLP-1 for years. Some said they immediately put 95 per cent of patients on the drug, without waiting to see if diet or exercise would work. "I was shocked," she says. "But our system is designed to treat the sick, not to do prevention."

Varady worries that it will be easier to medicate a world that she describes as "obesogenic" - tending to cause obesity. Wegovy could become a societal sticking plaster, allowing food companies to continue selling junk and pharma companies to profit from slimming people down. She believes it would be more "humane" if governments found ways "to teach people or tax them", such as the UK levy on sugary drinks. Mercedes believes Novo Nordisk's efforts to counter stigma - the Queen Latifah campaign - could actually end up embedding existing bias. "They're selling you a solution to the discrimination and stigma you face by giving you a way to be smaller," she says. It is "literally just advertising. We're transitioning from the personal failure, lacking willpower, lacking self-control narrative, to this narrative that says 'Obesity is a disease, you need a prescribed cure'... so we can sell weight-loss medication," she says. "They are going to make a killing."

Novo Nordisk does not believe there is a binary choice between offering drugs and changing society. Propelled by the potential for huge profits, it may be more successful than the patchy and poorly funded efforts to address the underlying conditions that exacerbate obesity, including mental health, poverty and lack of access to fresh food. The company's scientists are working on improved versions of Wegovy - including a pill - and combinations they hope could help people lose even more weight.

Lisa Robillard feels she is one of the lucky ones. Her insurance covers Wegovy, so it only costs her \$40 a month. When the drug was approved, she had to go to four or five pharmacies to find it, but now has a reliable supply. Her knees and ankles don't hurt, she's stopped snoring, and she has more energy. She says she has no problem taking the drug forever. Yet she resents people who think it is a quick fix. She says she has to continue watching what she eats and exercising. "It's not like you take the drug, and then you can eat pie and cookies all day." 

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*Hannah Kuchler is the FT's global pharmaceuticals correspondent*



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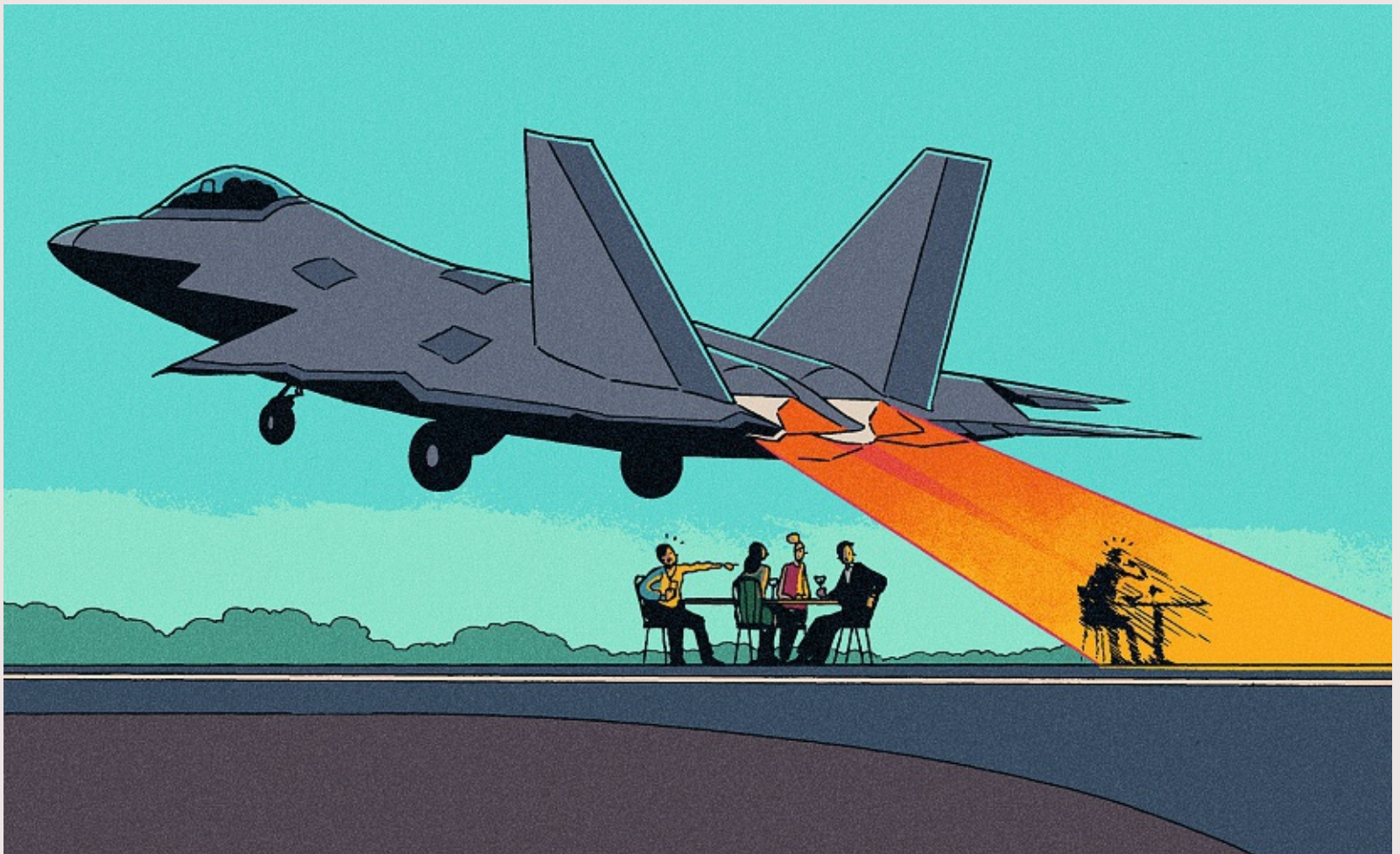
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# Appetites



*The Gastronome*

## Tim Hayward

Heavenly flavours  
tempered with hellfire

**Paradise is a small bistro full of dark promise** in one of the remaining scummy strips of Soho. It's on Rupert Street and it is possible to sit on a high stool, look along the metal bar, through the black-framed windows and straight down the pedestrian passage of Tisbury Court, the last tenacious outpost of Soho's sex industry. The room is entirely clad in smooth cement and the austere appurtenances permit perching rather than encouraging languor. Here you sit up straight or lean in to the food.

Kokis is a Sri-Lankan pastry, made by dipping a hot metal die into a batter of coconut milk and rice flour. These decorative little crisps are usually sweet, but here they're made savoury and filled with a tall mound of hand-chopped, raw, aged beef, mixed to a loose tartare with green chilli and chives

and topped with cured egg yolk - a polarising ingredient bringing, it is true, great crashing waves of umami, but also a lingering guff of hydrogen sulphide which, like a fart in a lift, will hang around a little longer than you might enjoy.

Two grilled Ceylonese-spiced prawns with seaweed butter are served in a puddle of freshly made mango chutney and present something of a problem. The flavourings are delicious, but the tight, firm meat of the very fresh prawns has taken up little of the marinade. I handle the first delicately, removing the head and shell and mopping around with the fleshy nugget of the tail, but this was a mistake. I recommend ripping off the head, sucking out the brains so noisily that the two Australian lawyers sitting to your left stop boring their dates with tales of past rugby triumphs and instead ►

◀ stare in something between disgust and admiration. Remove the legs so you don't actually go into a full choke that requires them to interrupt their droning to administer the Heimlich, and then eat everything else in two bites. The shell too. It requires some work, but you'll get every last morsel of flesh out and not miss a microgramme of the superb seasoning.

Wild sea bream crudo with coconut, calamansi, lime leaf, orange, red chilli has much in common with a lightly pickled ceviche. Light flavours and citrus brightness. A neat little oil of curry leaves creates a fragrant backnote and a generous strewing of trout roe (has anyone "strewed" yet this century? It feels strangely retro) adds popping excitement for those of jaded palate.

Slow-braised Middlewhite pig's head cutlet is a sort of rissole, with all the unguent greasiness that implies. It has a crisp outer coat of breadcrumbs, a heavy spicing of cardamom and a cloak of tamarind and apple sauce, all of which combines to be not unpleasant for about 12 seconds. Then feels like you're sucking on the afterburner of a Lockheed Martin F-22. I am not unused to hot food; in fact I really enjoy it. I've also been pepper sprayed a couple of times. This tended towards the latter.

The Australians were, frankly, unsupportive: "A bit hot for ya, mate?"

"Fuh...!" I breathed like Drogon dispersing the Lannister army.

To be fair, this was probably an unforced error by the kitchen. The authentic tiny green chillis pack an enormous amount of capsaicin into each thin slice. One or two extras in my portion of the mix would have been enough to take things over the edge. In the absence of a class B firefighting foam, Oniric Blanc Xarello, 2021, a crisp, low intervention number from Catalunya, was an unexpectedly effective and extremely palatable suppressant.

I've always felt that mince on toast was underrated. When you concentrate enough on the flavours of the liquids, the essential minciness is subsumed in the totality. It's like textured gravy. Deep-fried red-style minced chicken is very much in that vein but with a massive and complex palette of spices, roasted to add depth, and then fresh green peppercorns for a surprise high note. The coconut "veil" was an intriguing and vaguely off-putting disc of set coconut milk, about 2mm thick and draped over the mince like rubber sheeting. It did not, to be truthful, add much. The mince was stunning, but like Sister Ruth in *Black Narcissus*, it would have been better for everyone if it had never taken the veil.

It would have been a tragedy of colossal proportion, though, not to have the roti. It is never, ever the wrong time to order hand-fettled, laminated bread. But offering a choice between lamb fat and "grass-fed ghee" (really? No cow involvement?) was little short of genius. I'm totally there for this sort of thing. Yay! I say. More curated fats. Hey ho for badger lard and yak butter.

Pulling gently into the last station, I order some seared Scottish king scallops to clear the palate. There are three of them in a muscular scrum and a pool of kiri-hodi coconut gravy, topped with a fruity pickle of rambutan. All is sweetness and light and perfectly set off by another certifiable strange-o from the wine list, Tenuta Terraviva Trebbiano d'Abruzzo (2020). In case you hadn't noticed, I'm taking advantage of a complete lack of cultural synergy between the food and traditional wines to try something off-piste, and it was indeed lovely. Though I'd have to say that the mango Negroni was an equally appropriate "pairing".

Outside of the napalm rissole, the meal was challenging only in the very best respects. Novel flavours and new combinations, locally sourced where possible and delivered with charm and wit. The days are long gone when I felt the need to test myself in the spice fire, but I don't think that's what Paradise is trying to do. I'm going back for the flavours, not the heat, but I'll pack a small fire extinguisher, just in case. **FT**

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Recipe

# Ravinder Bhogal

Cardamom mandazi with Kenyan chai

**Mandazi is a Kenyan bread, a subtly sweet triangular puff of cardamom-laced dough, deep-fried like a doughnut. It was also the nickname my late uncle gave me. Uncle lived through a blur of beer and whisky-soda chasers. At home with us, he built a smart mahogany bar. Bottles popped, crystal glasses tinkled and spilt and the glossy wood got sticky and stained.**

In those days, our house was often packed with strangers, wounded phantoms who drank like him. While the men got blitzed and the women got depressed, children went unseen, but saw everything. Drunks stumbling acrobatically down stairs, brawls between brothers, adults emerging from locked rooms with dishevelled clothes, jealous tiffs, a slap across the mouth, a woman cowering. Home was often scary.

The upside to being invisible was that us kids had a lot of freedom. We stayed up well past bedtime, watched horror movies, gulped icy sodas straight out of glass bottles and ate erratically. Mostly, we'd just skip dinner and walk to the nearest kiosk looking for treats. There was a woman who made *mandazi*. She rolled the dough into rounds, cut it into neat triangles and dropped them one by one into bubbling oil that popped and hissed before each one floated up to the surface like inflated cushions. They were delicious and left us satisfied and greasy-fingered.

Some years later, my uncle died suddenly on Christmas Eve. The world felt fraught and unpredictable. That evening, miles from home in England, I tried my hand at making *mandazi*. It was a success. The warm fluffy tufts offered a safety blanket; the ghostly scent of cardamom lingered and conjured his memory, a remembrance in every bite. **FT**

Ravinder Bhogal is chef-patron of Jikoni. @/🐦@cookinboots

## MAKES 16 MANDAZIS

- 400g plain flour, plus extra for dusting
- 100g caster sugar
- 1½ tsp baking powder
- 1½ tsp ground cardamom
- a fat pinch of sea salt
- 1 egg, beaten
- 300ml coconut milk
- Rapeseed oil for deep frying

### To finish:

- 100g caster sugar
- 1 tsp cardamom powder

### For the Kenyan chai:

- 1l hot water
- 2 tsp of fennel seeds
- 3 cardamom pods
- A stick of cinnamon
- 5 cloves
- 4 tea bags (I love Clipper organic tea) or two heaped tsp of loose tea
- Milk to taste

**1.** Sift together the flour and baking powder in a large mixing bowl and then add the sugar and cardamom. Whisk together the egg and coconut milk, and then fold into the dry mix, bringing it together into a sticky dough.

**2.** Turn on to a well-floured surface and then knead until smooth. Cover with a tea towel and leave to rest for half an hour.

**3.** Divide the dough into four even portions and then roll each one into a ball. Using a rolling pin, shape each ball into a 5mm thick disc. Using a sharp knife cut each disc into four triangles.

**4.** Heat the oil in a deep, heavy-based saucepan (no more than half-full) to 180C. (If you don't have a digital probe thermometer, a cube of bread added to the pan will turn golden in 30 seconds at this temperature.)

**5.** Line a plate with kitchen paper. Working in batches, fry the *mandazi* for two to three minutes on each side until golden brown and puffy.

**6.** Mix together the sugar and cardamom, and then roll the *mandazi* in the cardamom sugar.

**7.** To make the chai, boil the water in a kettle. While it's heating, lightly bruise all the spices and pop into a teapot, along with the tea bags or loose tea. Pour over the boiling water and let it brew for a few minutes. Pour out into cups and add milk and sugar to taste. Serve with the warm *mandazi*.

*The Ingredient*

# Peaches

Why perfect ones really are worthy  
of the poetry they have inspired

By Bee Wilson

**When it comes to peaches I'm with Samuel Johnson** who was said by his close friend Mrs Thrale to eat seven or eight large peaches "of a morning before breakfast began", then more after dinner. Even then Dr Johnson complained that "he never had quite as much as he wished of wall fruit" (the old English name for stone fruit such as peaches and apricots, because it was grown against walls to give the plant support and warmth). There is a reason "peachy" is a synonym for excellent or fine. The experience of eating a ripe peach is unlike that with any other fruit, the gentle fuzz in your hand, perfumed juices dribbling. Whether yellow or white, round or flat, peaches can be so fragrant and melty that they are almost like gelato grown on a tree. There never seem to be enough of them before the summer is over.

Peaches and cream are underrated as a summer treat compared with strawberries. When you add a strawberry to cream, the acid in the berry seems to fight with the blandness of the cream, whereas soft peaches - sliced and sugared - seem to merge with cream, in both texture and perfume. I felt vindicated in my love of peaches and cream when I read *Nose Dive* by Harold McGee, a brilliant scientific examination of smell which describes how both flavours are largely made up of molecules called lactones (also present in coconuts, apricots and some nuts). As McGee writes, "serve peaches with cream and you double down on lactonic richness".

The trickier part is laying your hands on peaches worthy of the name, at least in the UK, where they come in two categories, sublime and disappointing. It isn't always easy to tell them apart. Sometimes, a punnet of unpromising supermarket peaches (or nectarines, which are really just a smooth-skinned variety of peach) will turn luscious after a couple of days on a sunny windowsill, but some peaches go mushy without ever sweetening. Your best bet is to look closely at the skin and shun any peaches with even a hint of green. In *The Cook's Encyclopaedia* Tom Stobart notes that "if they are greenish when bought, they will never ripen at home".

In TS Eliot's 1915 poem "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" the narrator wonders, "Do I dare to eat a peach?", the suggestion being that its flesh might be too juicily sensuous to eat in public. Etiquette books of Victorian and Edwardian times advised polite eaters always to consume a peach with a fork, to avoid making a mess. Today, westerners may hesitate for the opposite reason, fearing the ones in the shops may be too hard, mealy or sour. Perhaps you hedge your bets by buying a "ripe and ready" pack from the supermarket chiller only to find that the coldness has killed the flavour.

There are still delicious peaches to be had in Britain in the summer months, mostly from Spain and Italy, although 2022 has been a difficult year for Spanish farmers after crops were hit by ►







◀ hard frosts in April. Ixta Belfrage is a chef who has collaborated with Yotam Ottolenghi and has just published her own superb first book, *Mezcla: Recipes to Excite*. One of her recipes is for the easiest and most refreshing peach sorbet I've ever made. You freeze the peaches in chunks (no need to peel) before whizzing them in a food processor with an aromatic syrup made from rooibos tea, sugar, water and lemon peel. The slushy pink sorbet that results tastes like the peach iced tea of dreams.

The recipe was inspired by Belfrage's childhood, which was spent in Italy with her Brazilian-British family. She recalls Italian summer peaches as "incredibly fragrant and intoxicating" with red skins and a "deep yellow egg colour" inside. They went into fruit salads, in crostatas and tarts. Now that she lives in London, Belfrage tells me she can still find sweet, fragrant peaches as long as she chooses them in person, mostly from greengrocers (she likes the selection at Newington Green Fruit & Vegetables) rather than online.

I suspect we are more disappointed by bad peaches than we are by bad bananas, because even the greatest Cavendish banana is only mediocre, whereas a perfect peach is, well, perfect, with a fleshly quality William Morris described as "pinch-ripe". In *The Duchess of Malfi's Apricots, and Other Literary Fruits* (2001), Robert Palter shows how many writers have been inspired by the peach's furry and luscious form. As with the current use of the peach emoji, many poems featuring peaches over the centuries have been obscene, using the cheeks and cleft of the fruit as a not-very-subtle metaphor for the curves of the human body. Even descriptions of peaches in fruit catalogues can get quite hot under the collar. In 1851, an American horticulture expert called Ebenezer Emmons wrote evocative lines about the Early Crawford peach that my editor strongly prefers you google.

It is in Asia that the glory of the peach is now most appreciated and where peach consumption, falling in the UK and US, remains buoyant. Peaches have been cultivated in Japan for 8,000 years and in China for more than 7,000 years. From there, they travelled to Greece, then Rome, where they acquired the name *Prunus persica*, based on a false belief that the fruit was Persian rather than Chinese. They also found favour in France and Spain and would eventually travel with the Spanish to America. But no matter where in the world the peach has travelled, Chinese food culture remains the one that prizes the fruit the most (mostly white peaches rather than yellow). China is now by far the biggest peach producer in the world, accounting for more than 60 per cent of the global peach and nectarine crop.

In China, peaches are symbols not of sex but of long life (and fortune and good luck). "The roundness symbolises infinity," Taiwanese-American food writer Clarissa Wei tells me. The reverence is such that, instead of a birthday cake, a Chinese person might be given longevity peach steamed buns (*shoutao bao*): fluffy dumplings, shaped like peaches and tinted a gentle pink colour with little green leaves attached to each. Wei, whose cookbook *Made in Taiwan* will be published next year, has previously reported on a female master baker who creates intricate versions of celebratory peach buns featuring a giant central peach bun surrounded by a crowd of smaller peach buns; these are decorated with coloured dough to look like the branches of a peach tree. Longevity peach buns do not contain any actual peaches because cooking with them is not really a thing in Chinese cuisine.

A single honey peach - a particularly sweet variety of the fruit - can sell for as much as 50 yuan, about £6. Last year, a peach farmer in Yangshan township, known as the "hometown of honey peaches", told a reporter from People's Daily Online that with the advent of online shopping, business was better than ever. "We used to sell peaches by shouldering them to docks and train stations," he recalled, but now he couriers his fruit to customers all over the country. Wei has observed a similar affection for peaches in Taiwanese food culture, though the heat of Taiwan is not suited to growing them (peaches need a certain number of hours at cool temperatures as they grow). During her childhood in Los Angeles, Wei had a peach tree in her backyard and says she has never eaten peaches as juicy as those from that tree. "They were the size of a fist. It was such a wonderful thing," she says. "My friends and I would climb on each other's backs and pick them." I ask her if her mother ever cooked with them, but she says she did not - they ate all the peaches just as they came, straight off the tree. "Culturally, I was never taught to do anything with peaches. When it's fresh, you just want to enjoy it," Wei adds.

Asia and the west have radically different ways of paying homage to the peach's loveliness. As Wei remarks, "in China, there is a pursuit of finding the perfect raw peach", whereas "in western culture you bake it into pies". In her writings on growing up in Virginia, the food writer Edna Lewis observes that peach cobbler was "the great hot fruit dessert of the summer season that everyone looked forward to". Lewis's cobbler, which I highly recommend, is essentially a lattice-topped pie, as opposed to the type of "cobblers" that are topped with a scone-like dough. (I scale down the sugar a touch and use butter instead of lard in the pastry.)

In her version, the peaches turn pink and syrupy in the oven and drench the bottom layer of pastry with their delicious fragrance. Lewis includes the cobbler as part of a menu to eat on a cool summer evening after a thunderstorm. Another of her peach ideas is to crush them with a potato masher and add them to vanilla ice cream.

Both the eastern and western approaches have their merits. The Chinese attitude of leaving well alone reflects the truth that a perfect peach cannot be improved upon. But there is also value in the western belief that peaches are so great that it's worth spreading the peachiness around. "I don't agree that there's no point in cooking a peach," says Belfrage. She loves to add them to an Italian crostata with cherries and frangipane and an orange-polenta crust. She also finds yellow peaches to be delicious in savoury dishes, such as with cheese and olive oil or sliced with raw fish plus lemon juice and zest, chillis and fennel tops. Her only proviso is that whatever

you do with a peach, you must start with a good one. "You can't cook them into deliciousness. It's impossible to poach or roast a peach into that perfect soft sweetness that you want," she says. Sad to say, this is true. There have been many times when I attempted to redeem sub-par peaches by poaching them with expensive vanilla pods, only to find that I had basically recreated a

canned peach, only less nice.

In a way, the best and easiest of all summer dessert recipes is a peach dropped into a glass of wine. It is near impossible to consume this with friends on a summer's evening without feeling you are seizing the day. Time stands still when you are eating a perfect peach, all the more so when you are drinking one too. As Margaret Costa wrote in her *Four Seasons Cookery Book* (1970): "Prick a small, rosy, white-fleshed peach all over with a silver fork. Put it in a large wine glass. Fill it up with chilled champagne. Look at it. Drink it. Eat the peach." The food writer Diana Henry based a whole cookbook around this pairing, *How to Eat a Peach* (2018). Henry first encountered it on a trip to Italy in her twenties, when she watched in wonder as people at a neighbouring table in a restaurant halved and pitted peaches and sliced them into glasses, adding cold moscato. "Then they ate the slices, now flavoured with the wine, and drank the wine, now imbued with the peaches," she says. Like anything involving peaches, this works best with perfect ones. But if your peach should be less than sublime, at least you have a glass of peachy wine to console you. **TT**

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Bee Wilson is the author of "The Way We Eat Now"  
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# Jancis Robinson

## South Africa's plan to crack the world's biggest markets

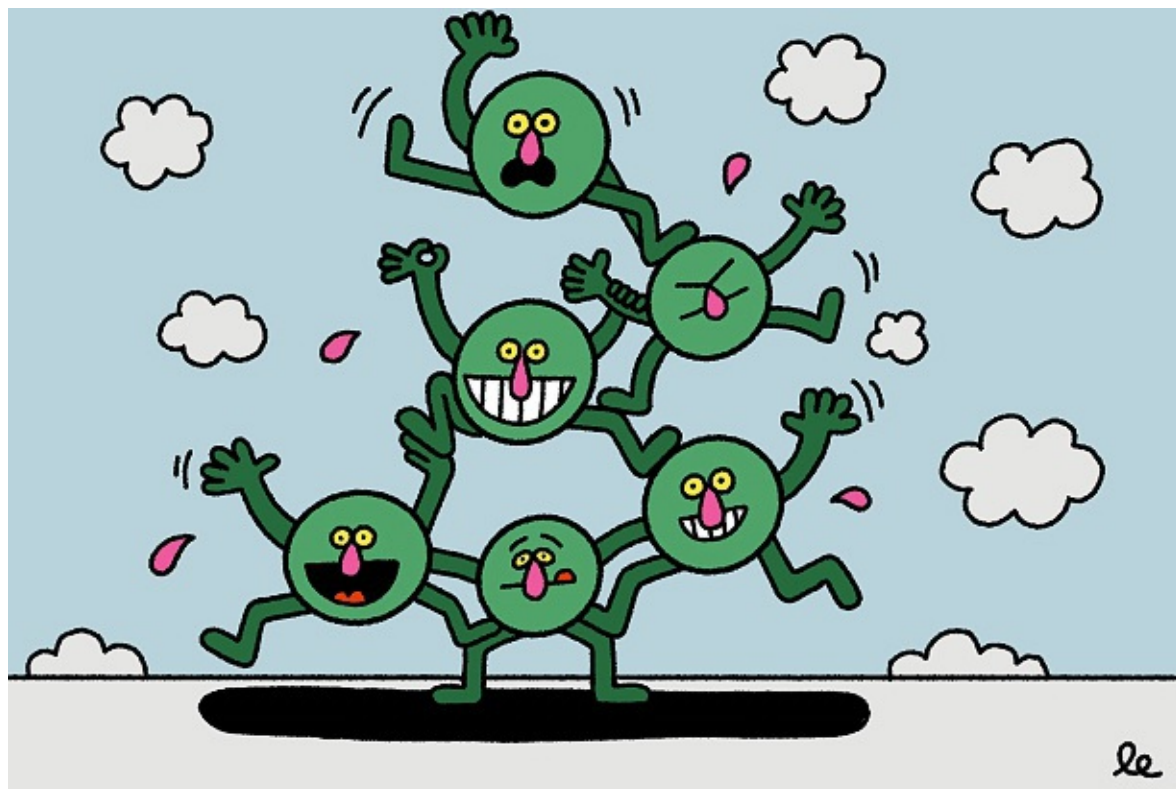
**W**hy don't Americans drink more South African wine? It's a question that I have been asking myself, and any American wine drinker who will listen, for some time. The world's biggest wine market was only the sixth biggest importer of bottled South African wine last year, taking fewer than a third as many bottles as the UK, and under two-thirds the number of the relatively tiny Netherlands.

I'm such a fan of South African wine that I'd like everyone to appreciate it. And producers and growers there really do need every bit of financial encouragement to keep vines, many of them venerable, in the ground.

Peter-Allan Finlayson who, along with his brother Andrew, makes the stunning Crystallum wines, was in London recently. He warned that, although grape prices have at last been going up, farmers have found it more financially appealing to grow citrus on the west-coast land that has been increasingly prospected by quality-conscious wine producers and that "even rooibos is more profitable than wine".

Operating in a decidedly shaky economy, South African wine producers desperately need to export. One bright light for them recently has been China, which seems to have filled some of the gap left after Australian wine was kept out by discriminatory tariffs with imports from the Cape.

It seems, however, as though some canny investors are seeing the potential of South Africa's undervalued vineyard land. Eben Sadie, an early exponent of the now-fashionable Swartland region, also visited London recently, for the first time in five years. He told me that "lots of money is coming into South African



**It seems some canny investors are seeing the potential of South Africa's undervalued vineyard land**

wine now, including from eastern Europe. Buyers can choose between one hectare of insignificant Pomerol or a huge estate in South Africa."

He is taking a thoroughly proactive approach to these incomers who, one assumes, have very much more cash than any native wine producer. "They're appointing good consultants, so they get the planting right. But is the winemaking philosophy right?" Sadie adds that if he thinks something is going wrong, he'll pick up the phone and intercede because "it's in the interests of us all that they succeed".

By "us all" he means a tight-knit community of wine producers, all trying to advance exports. Finlayson, for instance, was travelling round the UK in a group of four who,

between them, make a total of six brands of wine. I had the pleasure of seeing them with a selection of their offerings in our flat. What was most fascinating was that three of the producers - Finlayson, who makes Crystallum and Gabriëlskloof wines, John Secombe of Thorne & Daughters and Marelise Niemann of Memento - are very much part of the new wave responsible for reigniting interest in South African wine in the UK. The fourth member of the group, Charles Back, is much more experienced.

Back is a third-generation, 66-year-old wine producer based at Fairview estate in Paarl, which was first planted with vines in 1699. He was an early adopter of Fairtrade, worker-participation, ►

◀ oenotourism, vinification in clay jars. He's the sort of guy to have been given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the International Wine Challenge at the age of 58.

Yet Back seemed most eager to hear what the younger producers had to say and, when presenting his own wines, confessed that "after 44 years I've just realised that owning all your own vineyards is not the best idea. It limits your flexibility and cash flow. I have 550 hectares of vineyard now and I've tried to find unusual sites, but it hasn't been easy."

He admitted to all sorts of other mistakes, such as initially making the Viognier he pioneered in Cape vineyards in the 1990s just like Chardonnay, which resulted in "flabby" wines. He also rued what he did when he bought the Swartland farm that would become Spice Route. "I made a big mistake. I pulled out all the bushvines, including old Chenin! I just left the oldest block, planted in 1965, of Sauvignon Blanc. I replanted with Grenache based on my travels in the southern Rhône, and with the prediction of climate change in mind. Grenache is more drought-resistant because the bigger berries absorb more water."

As we tasted his Fairview Sauvignon Blanc 2021 from Darling, Back explained a special technology he employs to predict exactly which night the grapes should be picked. "Imagine that luxury," sighed

*Jancis recommends...*

### SOUTH AFRICAN FAVOURITES

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ataraxia Wines Sauvignon Blanc 2021 Hemel-en-Aarde</b> £13.99 Bancroft</li> <li>• <b>Baleia Sauvignon Blanc 2021 Western Cape</b> £18.49 Bancroft</li> <li>• <b>Cederberg, Five Generations Chenin Blanc 2021 Cederberg 13.5%</b> £31.49 Bancroft</li> <li>• <b>Crystallum, The Agnes Chardonnay 2021 Western Cape 13%</b> £25.50 The Good Wine Shop, £25.95 Wine Republic and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cambridge Wine Merchants, £26.99 Handford Wine</li> <li>• <b>David &amp; Nadia, any Chenin Blanc 12%-13%</b> From £26.68 Justerini &amp; Brooks and Lay &amp; Wheeler, £27.50 Huntsworth Wine</li> <li>• <b>Gabriëlskloof, Landscape Series Cabernet Franc 2019 Walker Bay 14.5%</b> £33.99 Wines of Cambridge</li> <li>• <b>Hartenberg Chardonnay 2018 Stellenbosch</b> £15.49 Bancroft</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Lismore, Barrel Fermented Sauvignon Blanc 2018 Cape South Coast 13%</b> £24.28 Lay &amp; Wheeler</li> <li>• <b>Momento Grenache Noir 2019 Western Cape 13.5%</b> £27.88 Lay &amp; Wheeler, £29.95 Frontier Fine Wines</li> <li>• <b>Thorne &amp; Daughters 2021s – any white except perhaps Semillon</b> 2021s expected any minute. 2020s are quite widely stocked</li> </ul>
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Tasting notes on Purple Pages of [JancisRobinson.com](http://JancisRobinson.com). International stockists on [Wine-searcher.com](http://Wine-searcher.com)



Marelise Niemann who buys grapes from nine growers and 15 vineyards for her Momento label.

She is another huge fan of Grenache, not just red but white too. In fact her best 2021 white is her Grenache Blanc that's so much zettier than a typical southern French example (but won't be in the UK until September). "The grapes are so well suited to the South African climate," she enthused, adding, "especially for the future." She also

produces a fine Grenache Gris, a variety that's rare in South Africa.

**All three of the younger producers** in the group make their wines in the same winery, Gabriëlskloof, which is owned by Finlayson's father-in-law. Doesn't that impose a certain uniformity, I wondered, only to be told that Niemann and Seccombe once made wines from exactly the same lot of juice from the press and they turned out completely differently.

Seccombe's Thorne & Daughters wines have a particularly distinctive character. He is not especially interested in powerful aromas but goes for understated elegance and drive on the palate. He also has a grey (*gris*) speciality, Semillon Gris, a variety that's even rarer than Grenache Gris, though it is not recognised by the South African wine authorities so the wine has to be labelled simply Semillon.

It was interesting to hear about their concerns; above all, sustainability in an era of climate change. They pointed out that, in the winery alone, it takes between six and eight litres of water to produce a litre of wine, without taking any irrigation into account (though Swartland vines tend to be dry-farmed). But the move away from obviously oaked wines has apparently resulted in a national shortage of used barrels.

Seccombe studied at Plumpton College in England with winemakers at the celebrated English wine estates Gusbourne and Hattingley, so is very familiar with South African wine's number one market. Both he and Finlayson had recently been to try to sell their wine in the US. According to one of them, "the US sommeliers are now aware of South African wine". Though the other added ruefully, "even if there are only about 800,000 cases of it in the whole country". **FT**

More columns at [ft.com/jancis-robinson](http://ft.com/jancis-robinson)

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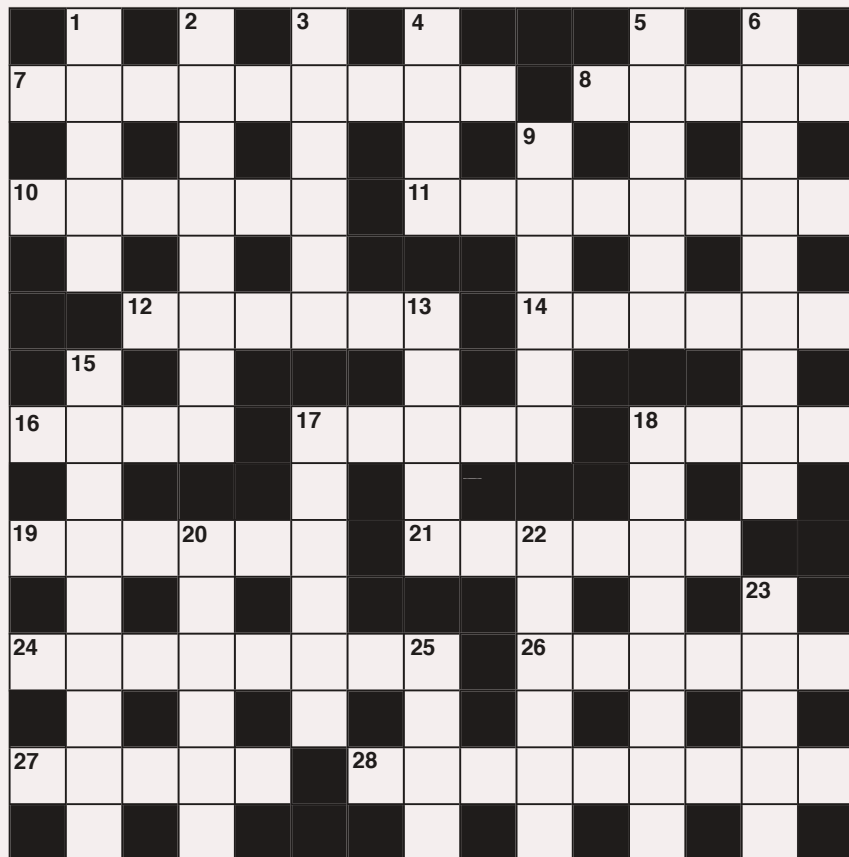
**FT Weekend**



Games

**THE CROSSWORD**

No 598. Set by Aldhelm



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

**ACROSS**

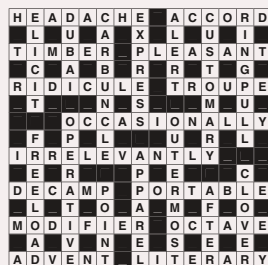
- 7 Temporary, improvised (9)
- 8 Lure (5)
- 10 Saltwater lake (6)
- 11 Rusted (8)
- 12 Summary (6)
- 14 Open, frank (6)
- 16 Very small (4)
- 17 Breathing organs (5)
- 18 Head cook (4)
- 19 Money holder (6)
- 21 Chicory (6)
- 24 Become pals with (8)
- 26 Spud (6)
- 27 Knight's horse (5)
- 28 Meticulously, cautiously (9)

**DOWN**

- 1 Bird's mouth has a bit of corn inside (5)
- 2 Get head of ethics in for reforming financial centre's savagery (8)
- 3 Transfer coppers, perhaps (6)
- 4 Start asking for different hairstyle (4)
- 5 Average number following TV, radio and so on (6)
- 6 Pastries cooked with pie – is missing starter (9)
- 9 Endlessly talk about field event (6)
- 13 Anxious and sent mad by drug (5)
- 15 Mention about great swirling smoke (9)
- 17 Offspring don't start to sparkle and shine (6)

- 18 Greedy company to ban American (8)
- 20 One adding fat to food store? (6)
- 22 Bird piped around end of summer (6)
- 23 Least badly off (5)
- 25 One establishment, ultimately, underwriting doctor's oath (4)

Solution to Crossword No 597



**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. In Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*, what is James's surname?
- 2. Which Hampshire village is known as "the capital of the New Forest"?
- 3. Which former QPR and Manchester City footballer was sacked by Sky in 2005 after making a joke about the recent Asian tsunami?
- 4. The cousin of which Hollywood actress – and 1960s pin-up – was Bolivia's first female president?
- 5. Which London venue was opened by Queen Victoria

in 1871 – although she was too overcome to perform the ceremony itself?

- 6. What term for the Almeria coast in Andalusia, Spain (above) was coined in the 1920s to promote tourism?
- 7. Which first name is shared by the actors who played Khal Drogo in *Game of Thrones* and George in *Seinfeld*?
- 8. Which Trojan priestess was fated to speak true prophecies but never be believed?
- 9. Which song made Clive Dunn from *Dad's Army* a one-hit wonder?
- 10. According to Credit Suisse: in 2020, of what did America have 21,951,202, China 5,279,467 and Britain 2,490,952?

**THE PICTURE ROUND**

by James Walton

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



ANSWERS ON PAGE 6

*The Questionnaire*  
**Angélique Kidjo**

Singer and songwriter

*Interview by Hester Lacey*



**1. What is your earliest memory?**

My mum telling me to slow down. Of 10 kids, I was the one with the most energy. I was always asking questions. My nickname was WhenWhyHow. My mum started a theatre troupe. The world of theatre was like Alice in Wonderland. I would always be saying: "I wanna sing! I wanna sing!" My mum shoved me on stage when I was six, saying: "You wanna sing? Right, now it's your turn." I froze! But I did it.

**2. Who was or still is your mentor?**

So many. My mother, my grandmothers, my father. Miriam Makeba. She's a singer from South Africa. Island Records founder Chris Blackwell. I grew up in a household where music was constant. My father always said: "I want you to be educated not just by books but by culture." When Miriam Makeba's album came out, it was: "Wow! An African woman

having an international career." Until she arrived, the first black woman I'd seen on an album cover was Aretha Franklin.

**3. How fit are you?**

I've always been an active person. When I'm on stage, I'm constantly moving. Working out keeps my brain sharp.

**4. Tell me about an animal you have loved.**

I grew up with four German shepherds. They're like humans, the way they feel things. I used to go running on the beach, and they would surround me if somebody was coming. I've never felt more protected and safe.

**5. Risk or caution, which has defined your life more?**

I have taken risks in my career. I'm never where people expect me to be, because I refuse to let anyone put a label on me. I have many styles, and I love it like that. But I'm always mindful of not hurting

people. The pain that words inflict lasts longer than any other. It puts a stain on your soul, it hurts. There is a proverb in my country: "Words are like eggs, once they fall you can't piece them back."

**6. What trait do you find most irritating in others?**

Cynicism. When you are cynical you become selfish.

**7. What trait do you find most irritating in yourself?**

I always try to help people. Some people don't need your help. You have to understand that you don't have the answer to everything. But if I am in a position where I think I can do something, if I don't do it, I can't sleep.

**8. What drives you on?**

My mum used to say: "Every day you wake up, greet your body, be thankful that your body's here to take you to the next step." You can only make plans, you don't know if they'll come to fruition, but you've

got to continue. I am always mindful to be grateful for what I have.

**9. Do you believe in an afterlife?**

Yes, I do. You keep the memory alive, you keep the person alive. The body is just an envelope.

**10. Which is more puzzling, the existence of suffering or its frequent absence?**

There is no life without suffering. If you don't know pain, you don't know love. If you don't know failure, you won't know success.

**11. Name your favourite river.**

The Nile. The long river at the centre of our humanity.

**12. What would you have done differently?**

I wouldn't change anything. I come from a culture where looking back with regret means nothing. You have to continue. **FT**

.....  
*Angélique Kidjo stars at Womad, July 28-31, which celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. womad.co.uk*

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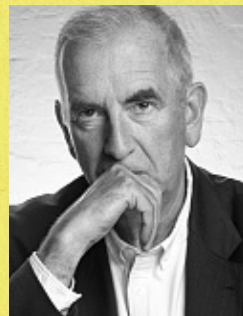
**On families:**  
the magic and the  
misery **Monica Ali**,  
author of *Love  
Marriage* and  
novelist **Susie Boyt**,  
in conversation



**On tasting Ukraine:**  
from the kitchen  
table to power  
and politics **Olia  
Hercules**, chef  
and author, with  
Caroline Eden,  
travel and food  
author



Share a glass  
with **Jancis  
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