

The Observer Magazine

9 JUNE 2024



Silent revolution
A headphone fanatic
frees her ears to the
sound of real life

Rio Ferdinand
'I had an amazing time
studying ballet, but in the
end chose football'

Ask Philippa
'Why do I keep falling
in love with
unavailable men?'

Ready for

blast off

As astronaut Tim Peake prepares for his next mission, he talks about his extraordinary life up there – and down here

A woman with dark, curly hair is the central figure, wearing a white dress with a vibrant floral pattern in shades of blue, red, yellow, and green. She is positioned against a background of large, overlapping, hand-painted shapes in bright blue, yellow, and orange. The overall aesthetic is artistic and colorful.

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The Observer Magazine



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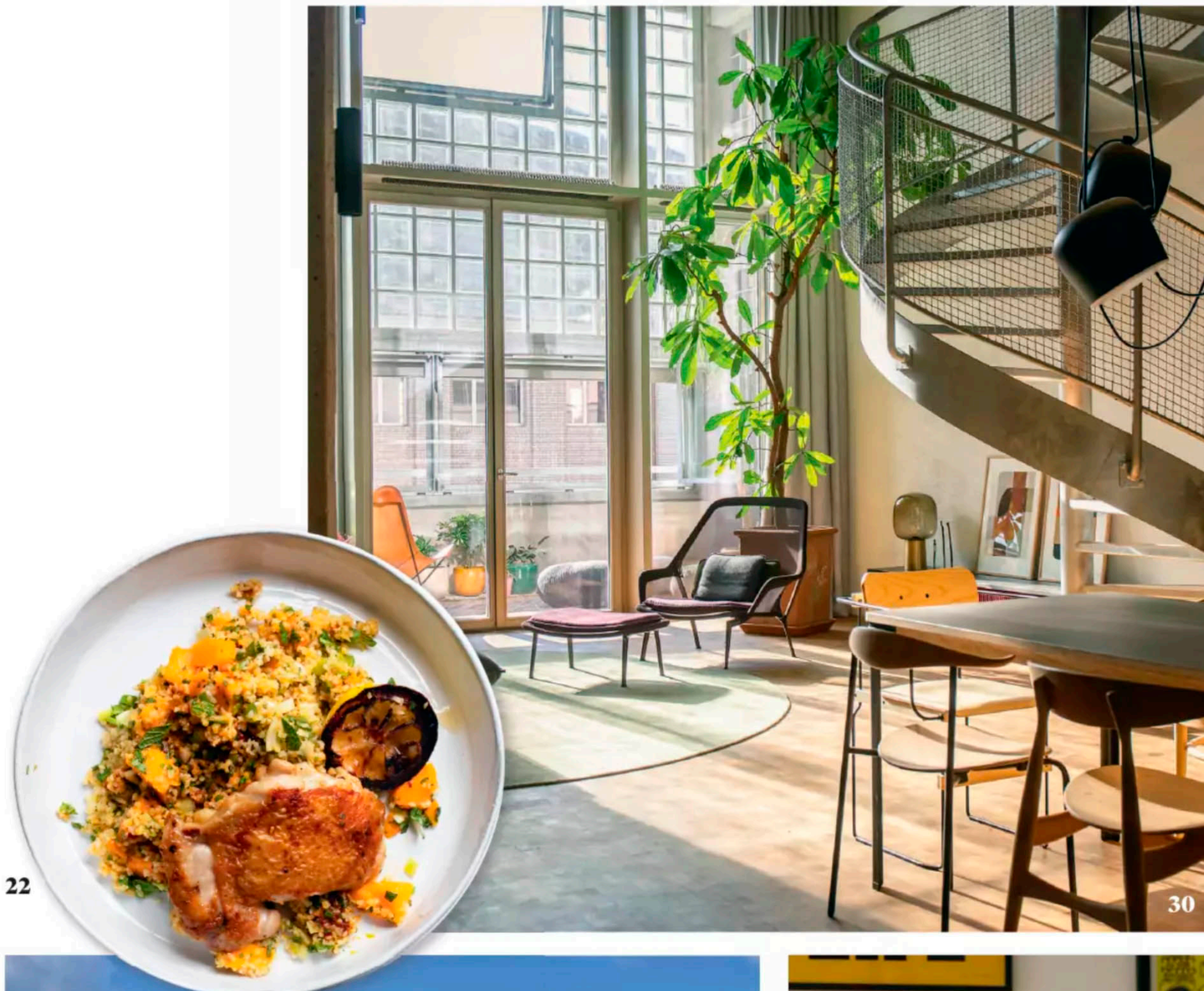
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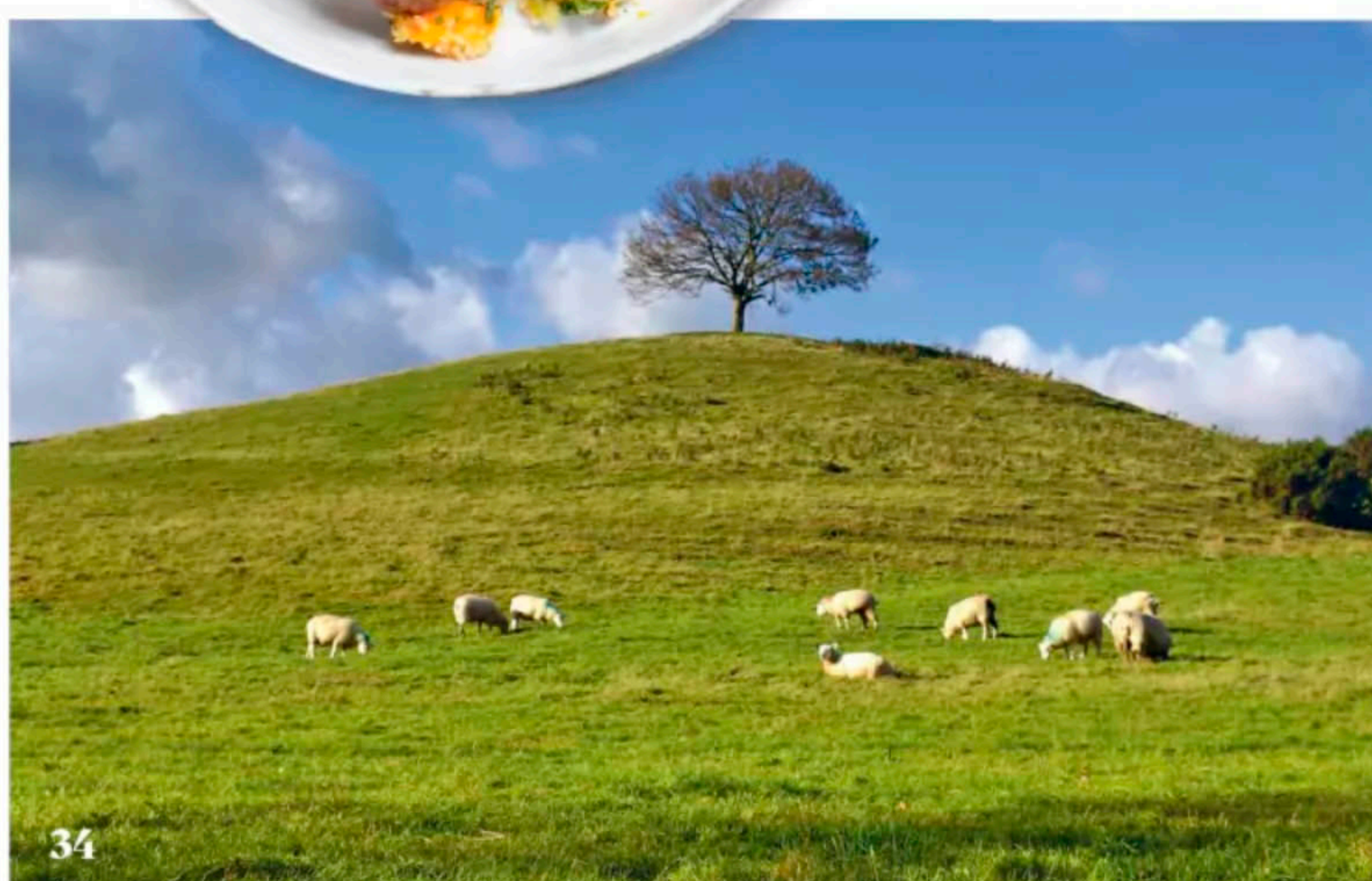
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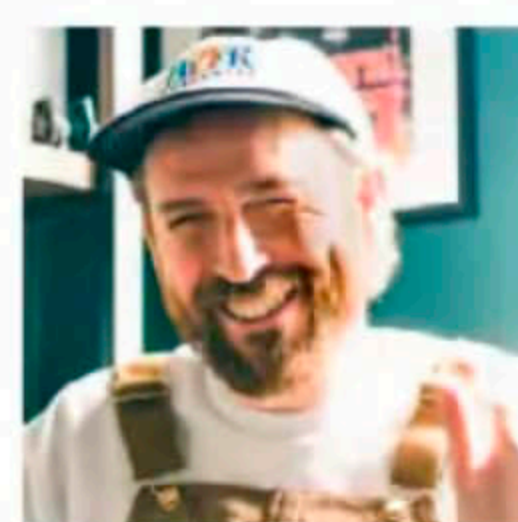
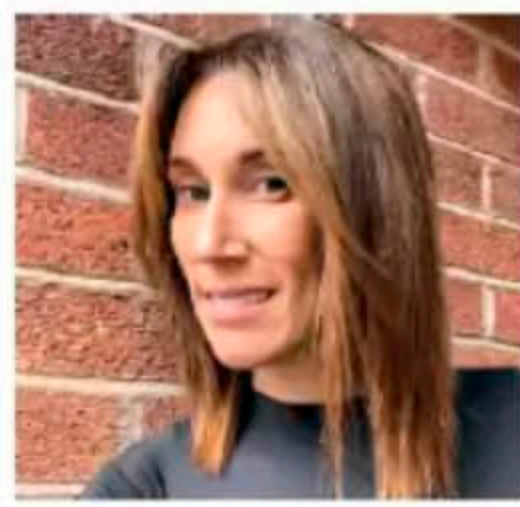
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Contributors

Writer and journalist **Deborah Linton** has been telling the stories of people we know – and many we don't – for more than a decade, getting to the essence of their voice. Her interviews span the world and, in this case, outer space as she meets astronaut Tim Peake (p8).



Liverpool-based illustrator **Luke McConkey's** style focuses on bright colour, bold lines and fun characters. He draws inspiration from music, games, cartoons, food and just about anything around him. He has a truly collaborative approach and can't wait to hear new ideas. Turn to our feature about headphones to see his work (p14).



Ella Glover is a freelance reporter and features writer covering drugs, workers' rights, housing and lifestyle. She has written for *Tribune Magazine*, *Huck Magazine*, *VICE* and *Dazed*. Ella gave up her headphones for a month to better understand why they've become so ubiquitous – and addictive. Find out what happened on p14.



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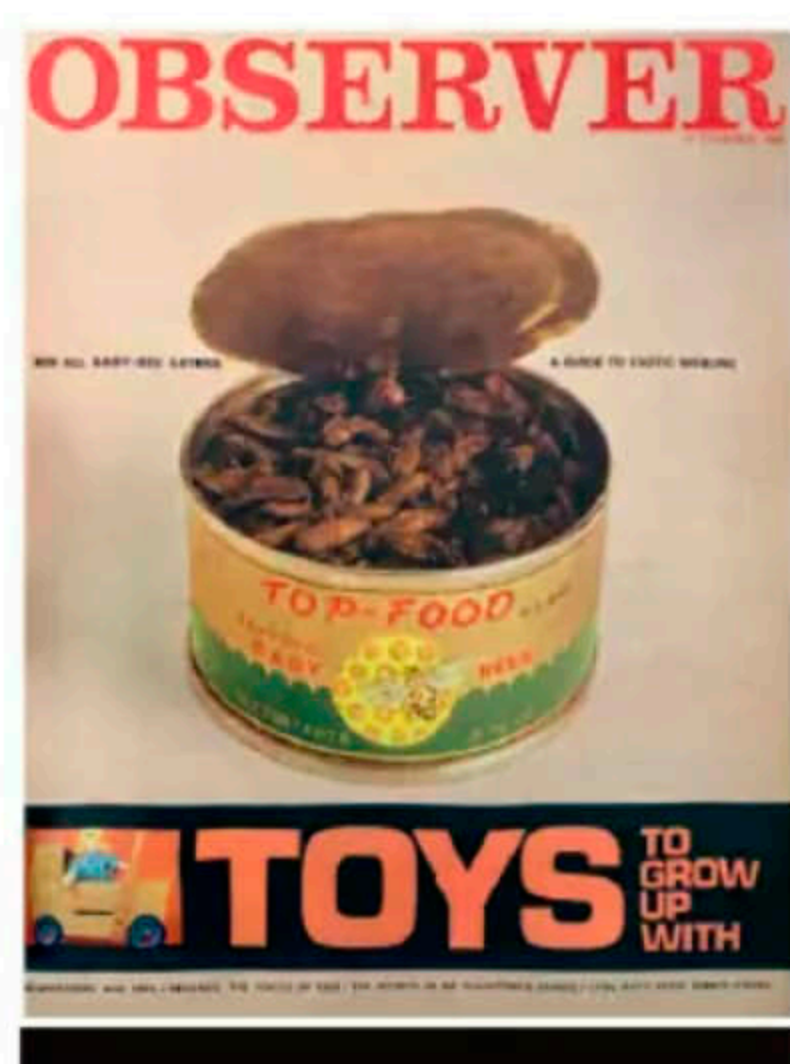
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Eva Wiseman

Booking a holiday is stressful, unless it's a magical mystery tour



@evawiseman



From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine's past

'Do you fancy yourself an epicure?' the *Observer* tantalised in 1968. 'Does your eye stray and your mouth water when you come across the small ads for smoked eel and tinned quail and brandied apricots?' If so, you were about to be consumed with envy, as Jane Grigson and wine correspondent Cyril Ray tackled some of the year's strangest, most decadent and priciest foodstuffs in a gargantuan tasting session.

Exotic food in 1968, when olive oil was only just escaping from chemists' shops, appears fairly tame through a 2024 lens. It was assumed 'most readers know what smoked salmon and Greek honey and olives tasted like', but the tasting table was piled with tinned soups and potted pâtés, plus 'munches of cocktail nuts and Japanese rice crackers, forkfuls of tropical vegetables, swigs of fruit juice, spoonfuls of fruit in liqueurs... washed down with some suitable wines.'

What treats met with

expert approval, and what 'caused Cyril Ray to shake his head in great alarm and cry "bogus" and Jane Grigson to wrinkle her nose and pronounce "ordinary"?' Both enjoyed smoked stuff: duck, eel and mackerel.

Truffled luxury hit the mark: Grigson pronounced Fortnum & Mason's truffled terrine de foie gras 'very smooth, subtle and delicious' and approved of a single tinned black truffle at 13 shillings and sixpence, declaring, 'I would be jolly pleased if someone gave me that.' The California kumquats in brandy – an eye-watering 27 shillings – were so successful with both, that Ray pleaded, 'Let's not mess about, let's just eat kumquats.'

Messing about was the name of the game, though. Tinned soups made him near-apoplectic and cocktail nuts were 'a confidence trick'. Grigson's greatest ire was reserved for salted cherry blossom. 'The nastiest thing I have ever tasted in my life,' she pronounced. *Emma Beddington*

Once again summer is here and I have forgotten to book a holiday. I don't know how you lot do it, with your diaries and your dates, and your savings, and your organising the cat, and your knowing what you want, before you want it. It's not that I don't want it enough. I want it more than enough. My internal holiday clock begins ticking in the barren dead of winter, a fantasy of beaches and freshly caught fish, but as the clock continues, the rest of me remains static, frozen in indecision and lack of imagination.

This, I realise now, must be when the rest of you are booking your time off work, scrolling your houses to rent near the sea, negotiating which group of your friends you can live with for a week without upturning the table of ancient relationships, negotiating which of your friends' children you can live with for a week without... best not say. Good for you. Good for you.

As I scabble around now for somewhere to take my family during the school holidays, I find myself drawn time and again to something online called the Ultimate Mystery Holiday. Perhaps you have seen it, have similarly heard its quiet knock on your pre-sleep dreams, have opened the door just a crack, only to find its mysteries haunting your waking dreams, too. The Ultimate Mystery Holiday is an option on a popular voucher site where, alongside the compost bins and cream teas, you can buy "an Ultimate Mystery Getaway from £99pp."

It goes on, "Holidays include Bali, Mexico, New York, the Dominican Republic, Iceland, Italy, Egypt & More!" The first time I saw this online I assumed, with my typical worldweary cynicism borne of a lifetime of errors, that if I were to buy a voucher, I would, knowing me, end up holidaying for a fortnight at the little-known resort "& More". But I kept finding myself back on the website, just, I told myself, for a little look. City breaks were there, in Rome and Porto, beach holidays, too, in Cyprus, Malta, the photos are of indistinct turquoise oceans, scattered with mocked-up Polaroids of pyramids and sand. What's the worst that could happen, I started to ask myself, my finger hovering above the buy now button.

That cynical part of myself would speak up then, in its low exhausted drone, and list all the worsts, from the self-catering units overlooking sewage-treatment plants, to the romantic city breaks in active conflict zones, to the buffet breakfasts made up exclusively of ham, and a turbulent plane that is standing room only, arriving at 4am at a holiday resort built hurriedly by enslaved youths. I chose to fade the voice out at some point and think about not just the potentially blissy beaches or affordable wine, but the true gift of the Ultimate Mystery Holiday (a gift that you receive even if you do happen to end up kidnapped by say, the local boys whose families have been decimated by hoteliers' unlawful practices) which is, that the decision-making is taken out of your hands. Surely that alone is worth £99.

The world is large and holidays are short – yes, you could go back to the sweet bed and breakfast in North Wales where you had that lovely week in 2003, you could

do that again and again, and it would be fine, but you will never, let's be honest, recapture that first shock at the beauty of its landscape, that first feeling of quiet lust you discovered in its yellow bedroom, youth.

Yes you could fly to that Italian island you keep seeing friends go on about on Instagram, but again, sorry, the honesty – you are not built of the same pure jubilation as these friends, nor do you have the same sized wallets, nor, *nor* are you able to run in a bikini without noisily apologising. And if you want to holiday with friends, you first need to ensure you have made at least one friend who has the patience and particular nous for organising said holiday. You do not simply arrive at middle age with the efficiency or desire to first calculate the similar-but-different dates when six people can take time off work, then sift through holiday rentals, bearing in mind friends' budgets, toilet requirements and secret third expectations (associated with nostalgia, fear, exes and alcoholisms), which remain unsaid but have the power to either make or destroy the entire summer.

No, this is a skill years in the making, and one that few, understandably, are willing to take responsibility for. Solo holidays can be preferable, in theory times of grand self-discovery and extensive journalling and "travel", but more often times of breakfast cocktails and bed at eight. It's hard to holiday, is what I'm saying. It's not easy.

So, I'm talking myself into it now, the Ultimate Mystery Holiday, because: what is a holiday for if not a chance to escape what we already know, a chance to take a week-long risk, throw our little lives in the air like dice? What is a holiday, if not a fine balance: the knowledge it might be awful alongside the slim possibility of gorgeousness? What's a holiday for, if not the chance for brief, exquisite freedom from yourself? At £99, it's a bargain. ■

One more thing...

Fascinated by the seemingly cursed **Co-op Live** arena. The new venue postponed a series of concerts, then last week 23,500 fans were pictured waiting inside for Nicki Minaj, not knowing she'd been detained at Schiphol airport... Presumably the Co-op's survey would have flagged up an ancient Mancunian burial ground.

In a zero-star review, Rebecca Nicholson described **Buying London** as 'probably the most hateable TV show ever made', making me (sorry) literally run to Netflix. But it wasn't bad in a good way, it was bad in a 'how dare they make this when 25% of London live in poverty after paying rent?' way.

The latest season of **True Detective** asked, 'What if moms made the best detectives?' Now romcoms are asking, 'What if moms were hot?' Loved reading Katy Waldman in the *New Yorker* on Anne Hathaway's new film *The Idea of You*, and the wild concept of... the hot mother.

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This much I know

Rio Ferdinand, pundit, 45

Interview **RICH PELLEY**
Photograph **LINDA NYLIND**

I was given a scholarship to the Central School of Ballet, which was a big thing for a boy from a council estate in south London. I had an amazing time, but it was my decision to come away from it and choose football.

I had a great childhood. When I look back now with my friends, it's full of laughs and jokes. There was a real mix of backgrounds and cultures. I wish kids now could have a childhood like that, without the judgment of social media. A lot of parents are protective of their kids and rightly so. We were allowed to go out and navigate the world with freedom.

I go to soft play with my kids. I take my daughter horse riding. When you're a young man, you can go out clubbing

every week with no responsibilities. You don't think about what will happen when you have kids and what you might do with them. But do I miss those days? No.

My kids can't beat me at football. In fact, I don't let them beat me at anything. That's the way you've got to be: tough love.

Racism is a societal problem. Any discrimination in society creeps over into other industries. Football is no different. We want to see improvements, but it's not football's duty or job. Education is at the core. It needs to be put in place in schools and homes for young people to be influenced in a positive way.

I probably had a kebab about three weeks ago. A mixed shish. When did I last have a hangover? Two days ago, after a friend's wedding.

I put things in place before I retired so that I had three or four different lanes I could go down. Boxing was one of them. Finding the right time to start implementing them is the key.

I took up boxing for my mental health. I needed to find something to take my mind off a personal situation that was happening at the time. [Ferdinand's first wife, Rebecca Ellison, died in 2015.]

I had an amazing time at the Central School of Ballet, but decided to come away and choose football

People said I was mad. I was training five or six times a week, sparring with Olympic fighters. But when I applied for my licence somebody had just passed away after a fight and the governing body rejected me. It was a blessing in disguise.

What I worry about the most is my kids. And I see my family as my biggest achievement. Having five children and being happily married puts me in the fortunate column.

You can really smell the history at Windsor Castle. I went with my wife, Kate, and my dad. I was definitely proud to receive an OBE. ■

Rio Ferdinand teamed up with McDonald's and BBC Children in Need to promote the smile disappearing from Happy Meal boxes in aid of this year's Mental Health Awareness Week



Nine years after his first trip to outer space, Tim Peake is ready to leave Earth once again. He talks to Deborah Linton about preparing for the first all-British space mission – and setting his sights on Mars

‘The only limit

Photographs PAL HANSEN

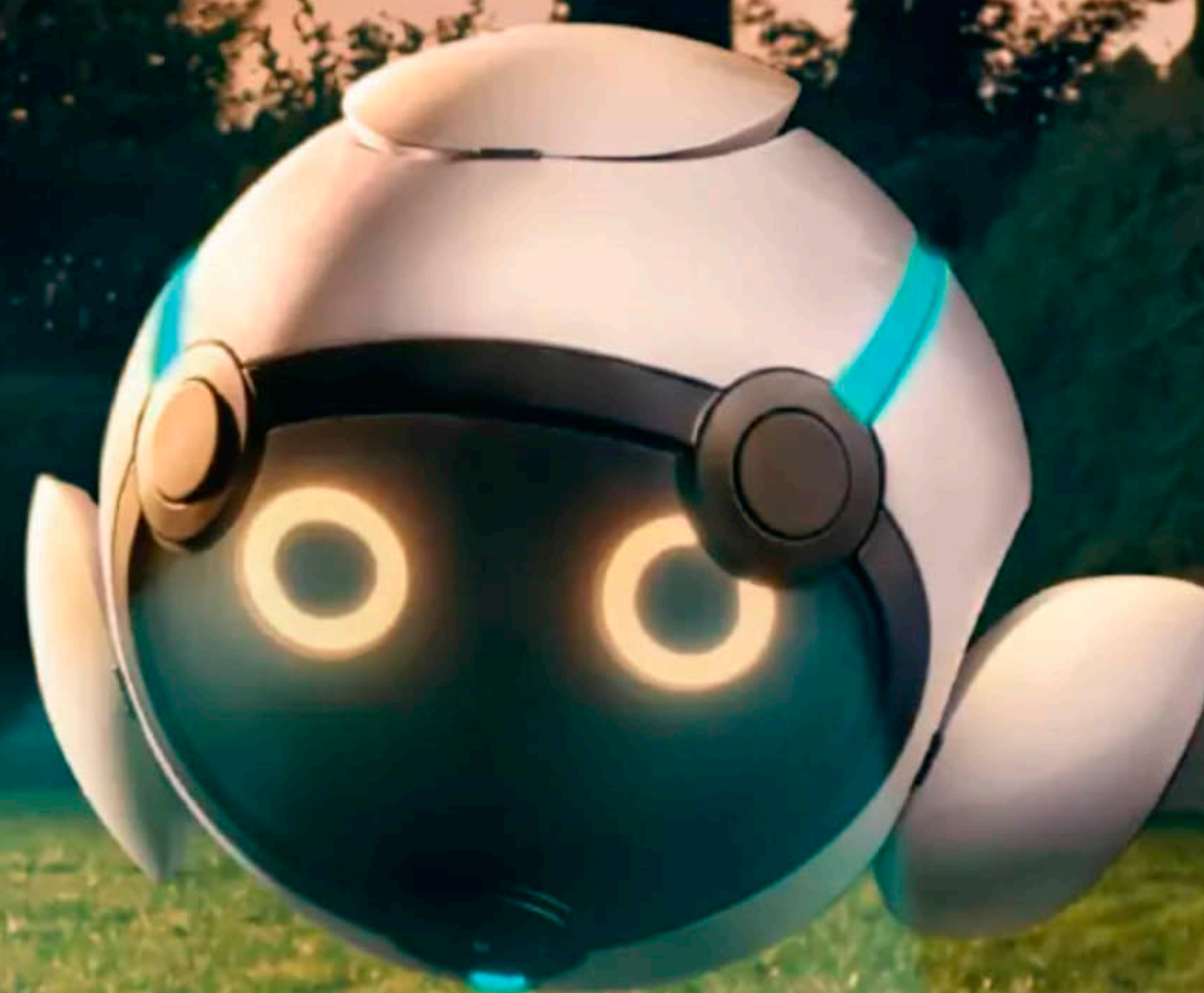


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ENGINEERING FOR *Life*

The astronaut Tim Peake is tracking his cab driver on his phone. The car that will deliver him from our meeting to his next appointment (on a day packed with radio commitments) is late and Peake is calculating the most time-efficient route for us to meander through Soho's traffic, on foot, to reach it. Peake is the seventh UK-born astronaut in space and the first Briton to spacewalk – an unfathomable feat for us, but not for him. Space, he agrees, casting a glance at a printout of the schedule he keeps in his pocket, might be easier to navigate than rush hour on Earth.

We have already been chatting for an hour, in a snug above his agent's office. He announced his retirement as a European Space Agency (ESA) astronaut in January 2023, but we're meeting in the wake of news that he is preparing for a return to orbit on the first ever all-British space mission. That mission is due to launch next year and Peake is expected to be announced as the flight's commander within the coming weeks. The radio interviews he's conducting today coincide with a deadline for British businesses to make a case for their science to be included onboard, to be tested in microgravity: a strident bid to showcase Britain's capabilities on an outer-world stage.

"Is going into space a bit like being a boxer," I ask. "You'll always be tempted back into the ring one final time?"

Peake smiles and laughs. "I think it is," he says.

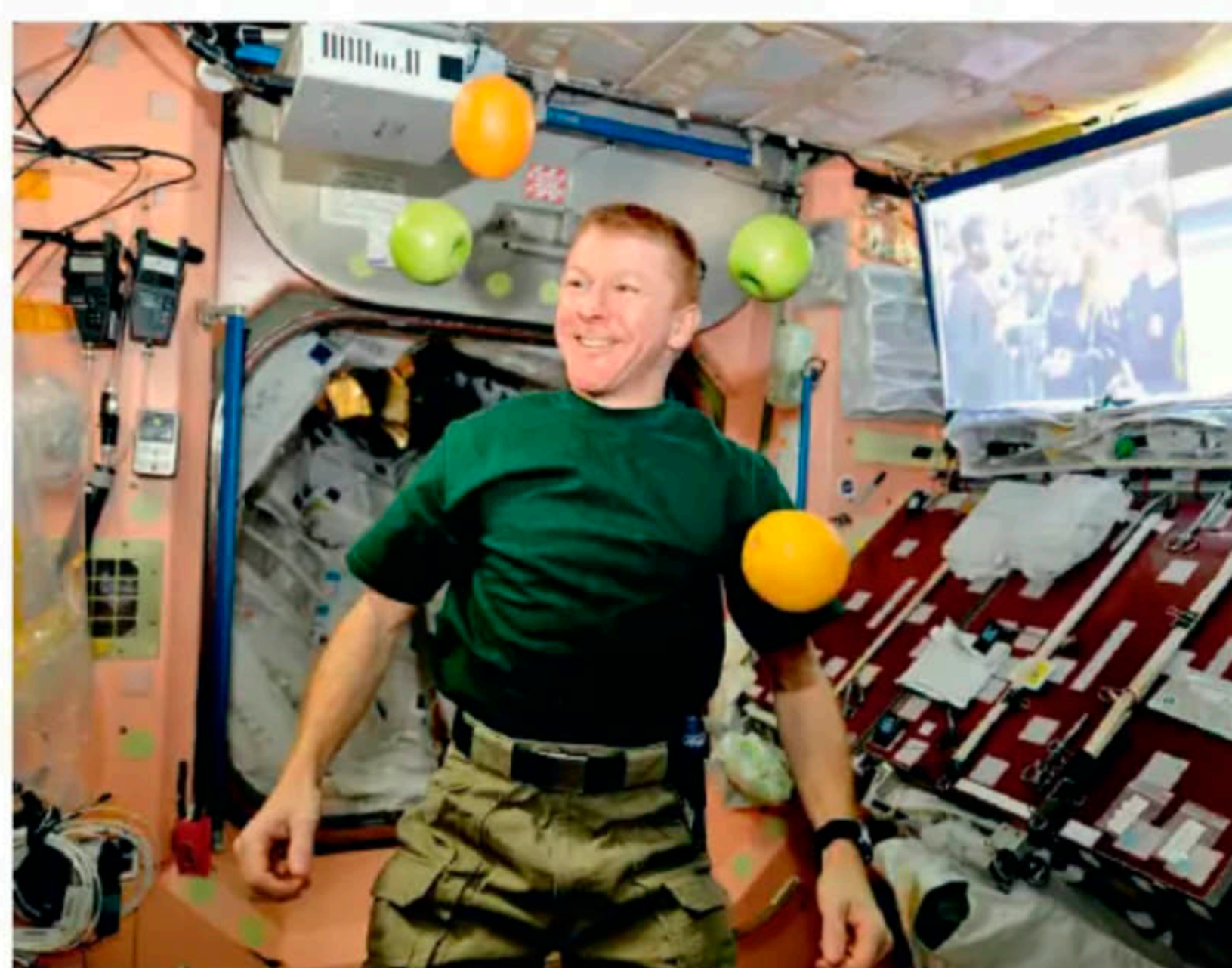
Since blasting off into space in December 2015, for the ESA's six-month Principia mission, Peake has become a polished and very public brand. Through Principia, he raised the bar for international space engagement: news of his mission, which involved countless experiments conducted onboard the International Space Station (ISS), reached 33 million people, many of them children. Retirement had been a difficult decision. "The logic was both personal and professional," he says. Peake met his wife, Rebecca, while both were serving in the army, and the couple have two sons, Oliver (15) and Thomas (12).

"We'd been bouncing between Germany and Houston," Peake says. Retirement "gave the kids some stability, got them settled. Also, working for the ESA as a government official, your hands are tied. Following the Principia mission there was so much opportunity: to work in the UK space sector, to join the advisory board of startup companies, to expand my knowledge of how business works as well as to be able to say, 'OK, I can write a book now and go on tour.' And I knew what was coming up in terms of commercial space flight. I knew opportunities were only going to grow exponentially over the next five to 10 years. Just because I was leaving the ESA, I wasn't hanging up the boots." He adds, "The moment you *really* retire is the moment they stop asking you to come."

Before his ESA retirement, Peake, now 52, had taken on an ambassadorial role that focused on educational outreach. His upcoming mission will include four UK Space Agency astronauts, one of whom, Peake says, is likely to be the former Paralympian John McFall, who would become the first para-astronaut in space. The mission will last two or three weeks, and will be paid for by privately funded US firm Axiom Space. "The opportunity to command a mission is hugely exciting," he says. "Just getting into space again, the whole package... As somebody who learned to fly and then *taught* people to fly, to take three Britons up who haven't flown before would be fantastic."

Peake describes the next decade of space exploration as "the most adventurous and exciting" yet. He believes the universe is "teeming with life". And he has ambitions to fly to Mars, 4m kilometres away. I ask if he'd really attempt that trip. "I'd give it some serious consideration," he says. "Right now, it would be a selfish thing to do, when the boys are about to go through their exam years, their teenage years, and might want their dad around. I think I could do it when they're a bit older."

There are "no technological hurdles to overcome", he says, of reaching the red planet. "And setting up a habitat on Mars would be incredible. I was thinking about it the other day. I can't see us being ready in 10 years, 15 at the



earliest. And I thought that would be beyond my career timeframe. Then I found out Don Pettit, a Nasa astronaut who's going up to the space station on a six-month mission, is 69!"

Principia and the preceding training necessitated him missing half of his sons' lives, which has preyed on his mind. "You do get homesick. Not to an extent where it's problematic, but there's a chunk of life down there that you're missing out on: birthdays, anniversaries, Christmases. You're very remote and detached and your family has to get on and enjoy these things. We look back at photo albums now and I think, 'Where was I?'"

His family has become accustomed to the risk that comes with space missions, but it's something he grapples with. "It would be devastating to lose a parent in your teenage years," he says. "There is risk involved. But there's risk in life, and you've got to grasp the opportunities."

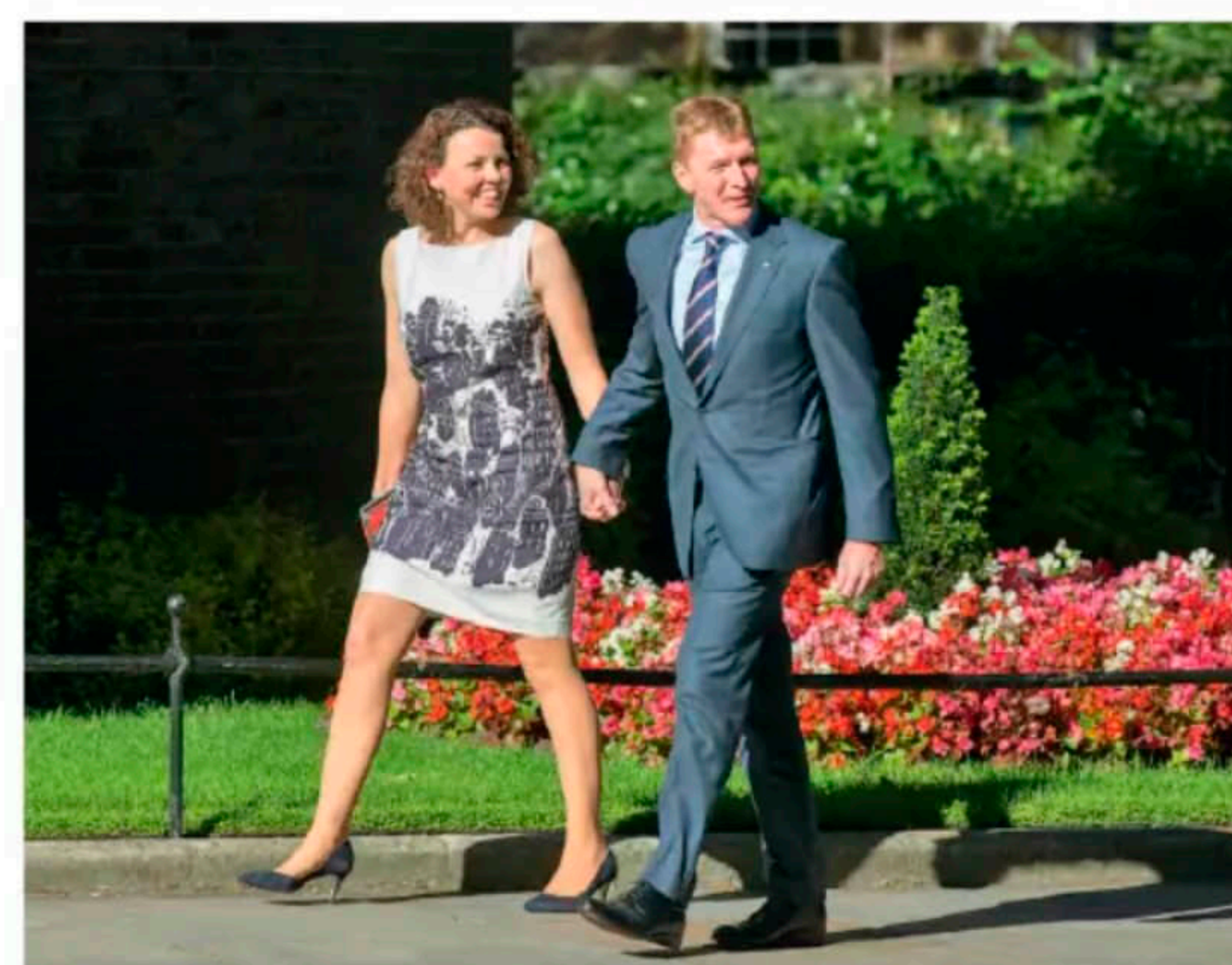
Peake's life began with an "ordinary" childhood in Chichester. He has described himself as an "incorrigible pusher of buttons and switcher of switches", but there were no early fantasies of reaching space beyond him owning a Lego rocket. When he watched a *Blue Peter* segment on air stunts, aged nine, he developed a fascination with helicopters. A gliding trip he took when he was a teen Army cadet cemented his love of flight.

He was an "unexceptional" student. "I should have done better," he says. "I probably took my eye off the ball because I'd already been given a place at Sandhurst. But I've worked extremely hard ever since. I've never stopped studying and I've always had a textbook by my bed." He graduated from Sandhurst into a career as a military pilot. Peake was 36 with 3,000 Apache hours and postings in Northern Ireland and Afghanistan under his belt when Rebecca spotted an ad for an astronaut job at the ESA. He answered it – and saw off 8,000 candidates during a year-long recruitment process. Peake was unveiled to the media in Paris in 2009. In 2012, the British government announced it would, for the first time, involve itself in human spaceflight, having

Can you hear me, Major Tim?: (clockwise from top) taking part in his five-hour spacewalk; water survival training; with his wife, Rebecca; and on the ISS



'In space we could build factories and print human organs using bio ink'



outlined a 20-year programme to accelerate its position as a leader in the global space economy. A year later, at another press conference, this time at London's Science Museum, Peake was announced as a crew member for a long-duration mission to the ISS – the Principia mission. He returned to Earth in June 2016 having accomplished all sorts of newsworthy space endeavours, including running the equivalent of the London marathon, presenting a Brit award and completing a five-hour spacewalk.

When I ask for the defining image of the mission, he recalls peering out of the ISS hatch and watching a colleague in space. "That's just amazing, to see another human outside. It's one thing to look down at Earth and you kind of get used to that, but when somebody does a spacewalk, seeing a human with the Earth in the background... That's not Photoshopped, it's real!" He also remembers the aurora's glow, which he describes as "probably one of the nicest memories to go back to. It's magical. It's a beautiful, beautiful sight." Space has a smell, too: "A bit like static electricity or burnt metal when you take your jumper off, that Ozone-y smell. I've never smelt it anywhere else."

"Has he missed all this," I ask him – the sights and the smells and exercising his space reflexes, during retirement?

"Yes, absolutely. Part of me really looks forward >

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› to going back because my life at the moment is just spinning a number of different plates.”

Peake's retirement, according to his Instagram account, has included everything from visiting Wimbledon's royal box to dry stone walling, part of a two-year DIY project at the West Sussex home he and Rebecca bought after lockdown. He starts a live UK tour in September. Six months of intensive astronaut training, in the USA, Europe and Japan, likely beckons after that.

For Principia, Peake amassed six years of training that included stints surviving underwater and in caves. “A lot of astronaut training is there for life, but there will be an element of refresher training. What's the latest emergency equipment? What's the science we're doing? The biggest thing for me to learn about would be the brand new space craft. It's a bit like drinking through a hose pipe, in terms of taking in all the information.”

It is space travel's capacity for scientific advancement that Peake is most excited about. He compares his astronaut role to that of a lab technician. “Maybe you do 10 experiments in a day,” he says. That's the real value of space's commercial era, to his mind: experimenting in space to help people on Earth.

Microgravity is a sought-after testing ground for science and tech, removing factors that disrupt chemical processes. As such, science is a mainstay of the 21st-century space race. Peake was involved in more than 250 experiments during his last time in space, including experiments he conducted on himself: monitoring his body's reaction to weightlessness, for example, by taking his own blood samples. X-rays and bone-density scans are also par for the course, expanding our understanding of the body's reaction to forces other than gravity; so, too, learning how plants – and therefore food and other life forms – grow in space.

This scientific work, Peake says, offers the mission's “real satisfaction.” And the diminishing cost of transporting space cargo creates the potential for shipping clean, limitless solar energy back down to Earth. “I don't even think the space industry itself has fully woken up to what that means for what you can do in space. If you can get so much material into orbit so cheaply, you can build factories up there, we can print human organs using bio ink. We are maybe 10 years off. It's gamechanging in terms of the economics. The only limit is our imagination.”

Technology, specifically AI, will be a research priority for the British mission. “If you really want to have AI farms, then have them in space. You've got access to 24 hours a day solar energy and the best heat rejection you could want.”

Peake has described the space game as geo-political “horse trading”. But he's clearly bought into the potential of space being a new and profitable business arena. What then of tech billionaires and celebrities: do they have the same business being in space as professional astronauts?

“Generally, I detach myself from the private space-flight activities,” he says. “I'd prefer space to be used for scientific research, inspiration and exploration. Take this UK mission: if it was just a case of national chest-beating, not interested. It's got to be a worthwhile endeavour. It's got to have a beneficial impact for the future.”

Boosting Britain's science profile is part of that. “I think the UK has been through the wringer in the last few years. Brexit hasn't helped our scientific community. I think this mission could be amazing in terms of showcasing some of the great stuff we do.” Education is also a huge driver. “We reached 2m school kids with the last mission. With four Britons we can have a massive impact. It's hard to overestimate the knock-on effect.”

Has he considered the line that exploration treads between selfishness and altruism? “I think it's a mix. Most of my colleagues feel as if we're contributing something to the greater good. That's certainly why I joined the Space Agency. But

‘The aurora's glow is one of the nicest memories of space. It's magical’

I'd say every astronaut has a selfish reason, too. You'd never put yourself through the training, or put your family through it, unless you were passionate.”

He believes all world leaders would benefit from experiencing the combined vulnerability, hostility and beauty of space, if only to look down and see what's at stake. “I appreciate the complexities of geopolitics down here, but I think when you spend six months on the spacecraft with five other people from nations around the world and you're all looking down at planet Earth and seeing it as a common home, it makes clear that you're all working together; everybody's life depends upon each other's and on the thousands of people who are working together down on Earth to keep you up there.

“When you see dust storms coming off the Sahara spreading over southern Europe, wildfires in Canada spreading over North America, when you see how little room there is in our atmosphere, how what happens in China or India or the Amazon rainforest is affecting northern Europe and how what we do is going to affect the rest of the planet, it gives you an appreciation that you might feel we have borders on Earth, but there aren't really any...”

During Principia, he orbited Earth 2,720 times; night came and went 16 times every 24 hours. He recalls seeing smog encase the Kathmandu Valley, a place he'd visited at 19, and crystal clear Tibetan plains to the north: “You see the juxtaposition and you think: ‘That's us. We did that!’” When he was last in space,

‘Taking in all the information is a bit like drinking through a hose pipe’: Tim Peake

it was nature on Earth that he missed most, other than family. “It's all sterile and clinical on the ISS. There's

one sorry poster in the Russian dining room of a green field with a tree in it. We all end up, on a Friday night, having dinner, staring at it. Humans need to be around nature.”

Peake is juggling his many commitments from the back of the cab we're in, messaging Rebecca about childcare while on his way to his final interview. There is a concern that visiting space a second time could “take the shine off” having already spent six months in orbit. “I had a huge amount of time up there appreciating that,” he says. But for Peake, a return in the commander's seat seems only right – a British mission might never have happened if his last mission hadn't had the impact it did. “I'm quite a modest person; I don't like to come across as arrogant. On a practical level it set the benchmark of what you can do with a mission. France had flown several astronauts before, so had Italy, so had Germany, suddenly here come the Brits.”

He'd like to imagine this outreach and his enthusiasm for science to be his legacy. But there are bigger issues, too. “As exciting as the next 10 years will be, with that comes risk: that we manage it, we're sustainable, we're responsible, that tourism doesn't get out of control, space doesn't become a domain that is militarised, that we operate peacefully. At the moment, space is still relatively pristine. Nobody owns it. We can all use it, we tend to look after it and we tend to get on well together. We're in this era where we need to make sure that continues. If we don't look after it, we won't have it.” ■

Tim Peake's Astronauts: The Quest To Explore Space is touring the UK from 1 September to 4 October. Tickets from [fane.co.uk/tim-peake](https://www.fane.co.uk/tim-peake)



Until about a month ago, the thought of leaving my flat without my headphones connected to my smartphone filled me with anxiety. Any length of time, whether a two-minute walk to the shop or a two-hour commute, with nothing but my own thoughts and the racket of the city to listen to, was enough to send me into a mild frenzy.

This borderline compulsive relationship with my headphones wasn't something I was even aware of until earlier this year, when my friend, the environmental sound artist Lance Laoyan, noted how headphones not only disconnect us from the reality of noise pollution, but also keep us distracted under the guise of helping us to focus. This conversation sent me down a bit of a thought spiral, of which I am prone, and I became acutely aware of the ubiquity of headphones in our culture and how little attention we pay to it.

In Manchester, where I live, you'll be hard pressed to spot anybody in the city centre *not* wearing a pair. Cyclists, commuters, runners, everyone. In 2022, according to research by Statista, 30 million of us used headphones, the majority in-ear Bluetooth headphones, such as Apple AirPods.

By 2027, it's predicted half of us will own headphones, the majority aged 25 and 45. Whether it's music, a podcast or an audiobook, many of us choose to tune into anything but the outside world when we're out and about but increasingly I've begun to question exactly why.

So, in April, I gave up my headphones for a month, in the pursuit of greater awareness of my surroundings and my relationship to my headphones – which is dependent, to say the least. They were intricately linked to my daily routine. Taking the bins out, exercising, washing dishes, writing, eating lunch, trying to sleep. The only time I lived without them was when their battery died. It was never – and I mean never – by choice. The anxiety that followed, until I was able to charge them, should have been enough to tell me that I was, at the very least, habituated.

Obviously, it hasn't always been like this. Sony released the revolutionary Walkman in 1979, the world's first personal listening device. It came with lightweight headphones and it seemed miraculous that music was suddenly portable; that you could walk around wrapped up in your own curated soundscape. Headphones, in this sense, are acutely generational, each one more seductive and addictive than the last: Generation X had their Walkman; Millennials their beloved MP3 players and iPods, which digitised the

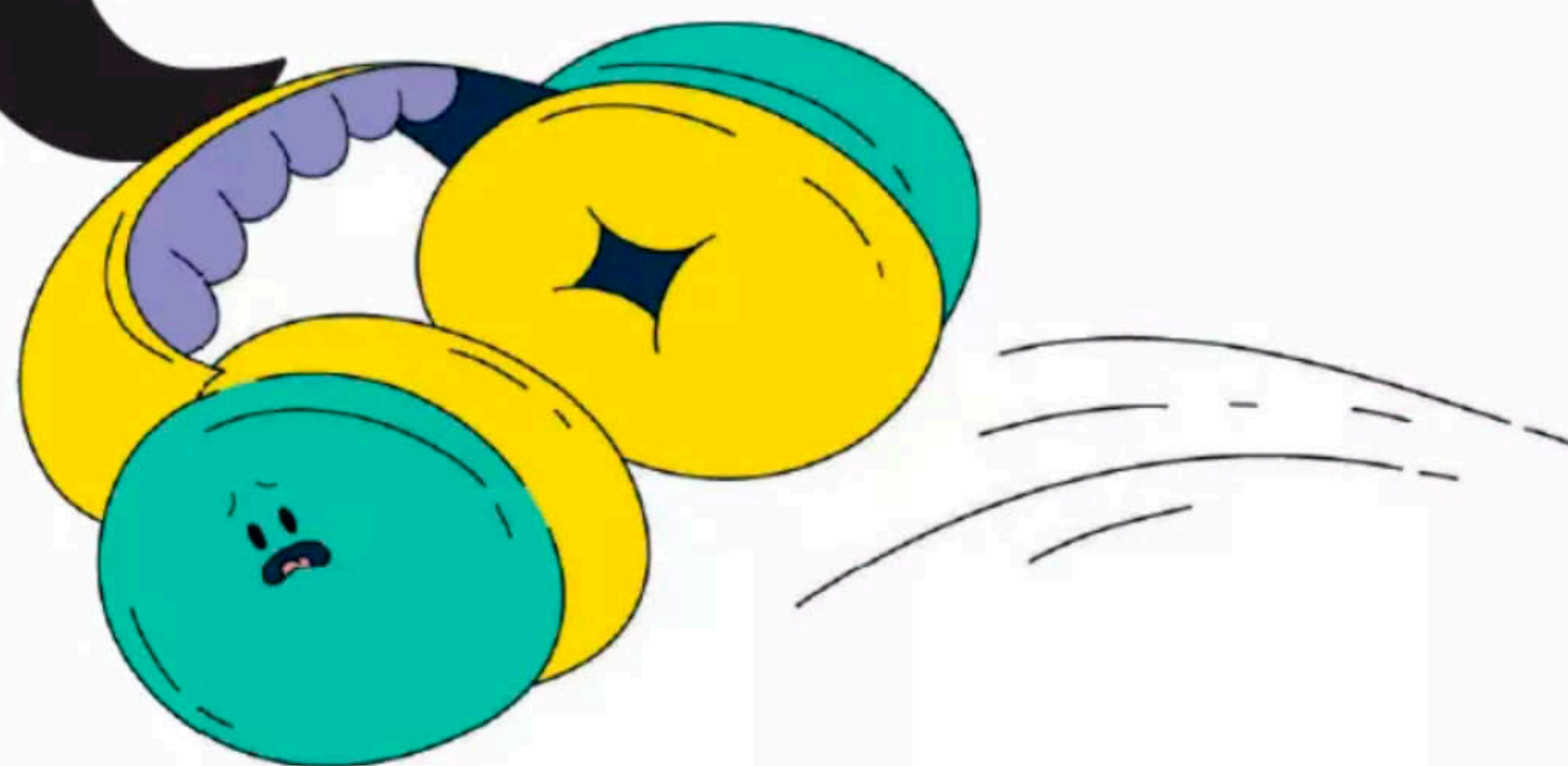
personal listening experience, making it easier still to listen to anything, anywhere, any time. Generation Z – my generation – have been weaned on the smartphone and streaming services. The draw to listen to anything other than the outside world has never been more powerful.

The invention of the Walkman didn't just alter how human beings listen to music; it changed how we interacted with our environment, other people and ourselves. It was a monumental shift and, despite the studies which have shown that headphone use is accelerating hearing loss and even causing more road collisions due to people being distracted, nobody seems to be questioning it.

One person who is closely studying our collective use of headphones is Michael Bull, professor of sound studies at the University of Sussex. Bull conducted some of the first sociological research into their prevalence. He believes our reliance on them can be explained by one very human motivation: a need for control. This can be broken down into four aspects. The first, cognitive, relates to the ability to control our mood, while the second, the environmental aspect, is concerned with the power to block out displeasurable noises. Then there's the bodily aspect – which could mean anything from feeling more empowered while walking through a crowd of strangers to being able to focus ›

Come on, feel the noise

Many of us are permanently hooked to our headphones. Worried that she was missing out, Ella Glover decided to unplug for a month. Here, she reveals how she reconnected with the rich soundscape of humanity, made space to listen to her friends – and tuned into her own thoughts







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› without the threat of distraction from unpredictable noises. And, finally, social control: headphones allow us to block everybody out, unless we choose to let them in.

But, Bull notes, this control is a double-edged sword. While headphone users often describe themselves as being freer, he says, “They are dependent on the machine for that to be true; they’re locked into the economic dynamic of the world and the medium they’re using. That’s a big contradiction: you’re being manipulated, but the manipulation creates a sense of freedom.” This resonated. I try to be aware of my relationship with what appears to be pervasive, but not actually necessary in our culture. For example, we find that we “need” our smartphones or social media accounts simply because they are so omnipresent, but research consistently suggests that these things aren’t good for us long term. Are headphones any different?

I see this paradox most clearly in my desire for both cognitive and environmental control, the two of which are heavily interlinked. I often find it disorienting to live in a city. I witness so much horror and I have no choice but to avert my gaze. I walk around Manchester listening to Northern Soul, passing homeless people with a spring in my step, fully engulfed by my own audiotopia. In some ways it feels necessary. It is difficult to see so much sadness on a daily basis while unable to immediately help. I understand, then, the need to feel in control of my own experience; the sense of freedom that comes with tuning it all out. The same goes for blocking out the noise of industrialisation. I can understand the argument that headphones can be used as a tool for personal liberation, something Bull found in his research. But surely, true liberation would be for the outside world to be better suited to our needs (and, of course, the needs of the natural world).

However, we cannot change the things we are not aware of. This is something Laoyan said to me. I’d never thought before about how our incessant use of headphones, or reluctance to hear the outside world, shields us from reality. He comes at this issue from an environmental perspective. An artist and researcher concerned with the effects of noise pollution on our natural environments, he says: “For me, understanding noise pollution is a way of processing the sorts of environments we have created, are creating, and what impacts they have on an ecological basis. These unwanted sounds can cause spikes in stress hormones in us and in animals and, if exposed for long periods of time, can prove to be destructive.” Wherever there are high levels of noise pollution, he explains, there is a higher risk of mental and physical degradation. To tune it out is simply to accept it, but change requires us to critique it, and to critique requires listening.

Refusing to wear headphones is not just about acknowledging the ugliness of the world, it’s about experiencing its beauty. When we block out the noises of the city which we deem negative, we also block out the noise of the natural world. When I walk through the tree-lined main roads on the way to my gym, I hear the birds singing. They are not drowned out by the traffic, not if you listen out for them, and there is something quite lovely about hearing the city in its totality. Using headphones, particularly to listen to music, explains Bull, is a way to “aestheticise our experience”, to make things seem more beautiful; pleasurable. But there is pleasure in the real world, too. It’s ripe for the taking. Beauty is all around us, we just have to notice it.

It’s no secret that gratitude practices fulfil numerous benefits for our mental health. To be grateful for what exists outside our personal possessions; to be grateful for what we have even when we feel that we have nothing, is boundlessly positive. Perhaps what is truly liberating, then, is to accept things as they are, and to know that while a lot of those things are bad, there are plenty that

‘There is something lovely about hearing the city in its totality’



are wonderful. This is what Laoyan calls “taking back control of our ears”, something he encourages. “There is an empowering feeling in being able to experience the places we live in through the tactility and senses that we naturally have,” he says. “As much as new technologies can enhance or augment our human bodies, we cannot hide from the fact that we are intricately entangled with this world.”

And while all of this can feel a little philosophical, and likely requires a shift in perspective beyond simply leaving your headphones at home, I did notice some concrete benefits in my daily life, too. In one of our email chains about the experiment, Laoyan asked me if I’d noticed I had more “natural energy”. I hadn’t thought about it in this way, but he was right. Things I previously found tedious to the point of paralysis, daily chores like doing the dishes or hanging the laundry, became, if not fun, then relaxing.

As neuropsychologist Dr Amber Johnston explains, music stimulates dopamine and the reward centres in our brain. We live in a dopamine-fuelled society, and much of our favourite technology contributes to this. When we use

music to get a dopamine hit during otherwise “boring” tasks, we find it more difficult to tolerate boredom. “If people can’t tolerate feeling bored then they are still seeking dopamine to help them soothe their discomfort, and music and headphones might be a way to do that,” she says. “So, actually, practising spending time in a state of not seeking dopamine, but instead feeling comfortable with boredom will, over time, reduce the amount of additional stimulus that’s needed to get that same dopamine hit.”

If I wasn’t already aware of the grip headphones have on society, I only had to look at my friends and

‘The snippets of humanity I heard made me feel more connected’: Ella Glover

acquaintances’ confused faces when I told them my plan to abstain. Most of them lamented the horrors

of being forced to listen to other people. And look, I get it. There is something empowering about being able to easily ignore people, especially when it comes to unwanted behaviour like catcalling. But it also closes us off to genuine interaction. A 2021 study by audio firm Jabra found that UK headphone users wore them for on average 58 minutes a day, with 38% keeping them on to actively avoid talking to others. Some researchers worry this could be contributing to a culture of disconnection, and growing loneliness.

I didn’t start speaking to strangers in the street the moment I stopped wearing headphones, but I did hear snippets of humanity in a way that made me feel more connected. Importantly though, I was able to give my loved ones more attention when speaking to them on the phone. I often used headphones as a means to multitask while speaking with people on the phone. I’ll cook my dinner, or navigate on Google Maps. When I no longer did this, I noticed that when I spoke to friends and family members, they had my undivided attention.

Despite this, I am not actively against headphones. They can be a means for focus and productivity, and for those with sensory processing issues, they can prove invaluable. But something magical happened when I chose not to wear them. I began to feel calmer. My thoughts didn’t vanish, but they no longer held as much weight. They would pass by me like cars on the motorway. I learned to exist exactly as I was, and appreciate the world for exactly what it is.

A month after my experiment concluded, I still wear them now and then but they no longer exert the same control over me. Music is just music, not a necessity to get me through boring tasks. Podcasts and audiobooks are forms of entertainment and information, not a means of distraction from my own thoughts. And the sounds of the city are just sounds, not something I need to escape. ■

‘I made the right choice. But I want to talk about my grief, too’

When Grace Campbell had an abortion, she felt relief she was able to exercise a right so many women had fought for. But nothing prepared her for the depression that came after. Here, the comedian reflects on the emotional and physical pain of terminating her pregnancy

Photographs **JULIA KENNEDY**
Stylist **HOPE LAWRIE**

There it is,” the doctor said, without warning. I turned, the cold jelly sliding off my stomach, to face the screen he had swivelled towards me. There it is, he said, nonchalantly, like he was pointing at the Eiffel Tower as we walked along the Seine. There it is, like he’d found his car in a festival car park. There it is, as he showed me, apropos of nothing, the foetus I was about to abort.

In December last year, I was at home, stuck in a sour state of depression that no amount of brightly coloured vapes and episodes of *Schitt’s Creek* could remedy. After an intense seven weeks, post-abortion, the bleeding had finally stopped. But the persistent crying, self-hatred and grief followed me everywhere I went.

Ever since I was a teenager, I’d been under the impression that an abortion was like a really bad period. It hurt

for a few days and then, after it was done, back to the pub for a night of gossip. But here I was, 29 years old, floored by a grief so intense it scared me. How could I be grieving something I didn’t know I wanted?

Unable to comprehend why I hadn’t just bounced back, I went on Reddit, desperately seeking reassurance. I found a thread where a young man said his partner was still depressed months after her abortion. Below were comments of sympathy, telling him that sometimes abortions take a long time to get over. I instantly panicked. How long is a long time? I don’t have a long time. I felt furious that instead of warning me what might happen, the only medical professional I’d met in this process had showed me what I was losing and simply said, “There it is.”

I am obviously pro-choice. I say obviously, not because I assume you know who I am but rather, I assume you know what’s right. But if you do know who I am, you’ll know my comedy has always been described as “sex-positive” and >



'I did the only thing I thought might make it better. I talked about it on stage': Grace Campbell wears top by meandem.com; jeans by Citizens of Humanity (selfridges.com); shoes by kurtgeiger.com

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> pro “women being able to do what the fuck we want with our bodies”. I am lucky I live in a place where abortions are accessible and I won’t get arrested for having one. Especially, as we’re so acutely aware of the fact that in the US, a growing number of states are making abortions illegal, while in the UK, there has been an increase in the number of women being prosecuted for having abortions after 24 weeks, as well as a rise in far-right MPs unashamedly vocalising their anti-choice opinions.

Because I feel so grateful to have safe abortion access, it is daunting to even express the complex feelings that came after mine. But... I want to try.

So, I really didn’t plan to get pregnant at this point in my life. A couple of months earlier I’d decided to come off the pill because I wanted to see if my anxiety levels improved on a natural cycle.

Newsflash: men don’t like wearing condoms. One night, because of my desire to please a stranger in the moment, I had agreed to forego it. A momentary decision that was followed by consequences that I had to deal with alone.

The day I found out I was pregnant there was a mild hysteria among my best friends. They took the day off work and flocked to my house. As they drank wine, I kept making inappropriate jokes at my own expense while intermittently bursting into tears.

“What do you think you’re going to do?” asked Anna. I didn’t know. Confusion overwhelmed me. I’d always imagined I wouldn’t think twice about getting an abortion. I’m Grace Campbell, I like staying out until 5am, not paying my parking tickets on time and sneaking vapes into cinemas. I’ve never thought about having a child. I’ve been too busy behaving like one. But now, at 29, in what felt like my last gasp of young adulthood, the words, “I’ll have an abortion,” didn’t slip off my tongue.

The prospect of making such a finite decision freaked me out. I wished I had the grace of time. As ever, my friends became my committee. The mum of one of my best friends called me up to reassure me it would be fine if I had an abortion. She’d had an abortion at my age. “I don’t regret it. It wasn’t the right time for me,” she said. She sounded so sure. But I wasn’t sure and I wondered if perhaps this confusion was in part down to the stage I was at in my life. Everyone around me was having babies, whereas I had just a cruel reminder that I wasn’t anywhere near ready.

During my decision-making period, I had to go on a trapeze. I was making an ad for a car company and the idea of the ad was that I would say yes to everything offered to me. Including trapezing and, unbeknown to the producers, perhaps a baby. Right before I mounted the high diving board from which I was supposed to jump, the trainer took me to one side.

“Do you have a heart condition?” No. “Asthma?” only around cats. “Any chance you might be pregnant?” she asked. I panicked. I thought about the eight positive pregnancy tests I’d done, all lined up on my chest of drawers. I became paranoid. What would happen to me if I decided to say yes to having this baby and then went on this trapeze and sneezed? Would it fall out of me, mid-air?

I considered my options. Option one: have a baby with a man I barely know; see how big my boobs got in a full-term of pregnancy; not be able to go to Mexico with the girls next year; take a baby on tour with me.

Option two: have an abortion; take a couple of days off work and then it will be over.

The trapeze woman asked me again. “No,” I said, “I’m not pregnant.”

“Why do you want to terminate this pregnancy?” the doctor asked. My friend, Holly, who had come with me to the hospital, had warned me I would have to provide reasons. This is part of the UK’s abortion law, that two doctors need to agree that a woman’s reasons for an abortion are valid. So, on the way there, I had prepared an answer I was hoping would make the doctor laugh, because I thought, if I can make the doctor laugh, then my abortion will be OK.

“Well,” I said to him, “I am a comedian. And the man who

‘I’ve been so afraid that if I spoke out, I’d come across as anti-choice’



got me pregnant is a musician and I just think that I should spare the world another nepo-baby.” He didn’t laugh.

Instead he gave me a pill. I insisted he let me do a toast, to a nepo-baby that could have one day been both the host and musical guest on *Saturday Night Live*. Holly apologised for my behaviour; an ongoing theme of our lives.

The doctor gave me instructions to take another pill the next day. He said I would have some cramps and that I would bleed for a few days and then everything would be over. What he didn’t warn me was that I might bleed for a lot longer than that. In fact, for weeks and weeks to come every time I would go to the toilet I’d see chunks of bloody tissue.

He also didn’t warn me I might feel depression like I’ve never experienced before. That I would have a hormonal crash that puts my historical comedown from Bestival 2014 to shame.

The doctor showed me the foetus on the screen, gave me a pill, told me some basic facts, but he did not prepare me for what was about to come. That I wouldn’t be able to look in the mirror, or at pictures of myself, for months, because I would totally dissociate from my body in the hope that I would feel further away from my reality. That I would feel a pervasive sense of guilt, for letting go of something that was mine. And that then I would feel shame, shame that feeling guilty was in some way a dishonour to the women who fought for my right to be able to have this choice.

What that doctor might never know, but I hope he will now, was that showing me that blob on a screen would provide a photographic memory for a grief I didn’t know

I could feel. A grief for something I never knew, but something I know I would have loved very much. And that every time that image would flash into my head for months to come, I’d burst into tears like a child who’d tripped and wanted their mum.

I’ve thought a lot about why that doctor showed me the screen that day. Was it because it wasn’t really a baby yet? Was it because he wanted me to be sure? Maybe he’d had people regret their decisions and he wanted to make sure I knew what I was doing. Or was it just because he is a man who has never tried to empathise with what it feels like to be a woman in that situation?

I know that this is not everybody’s experience with abortion. I have good friends who really did bounce back quite fast. And I’ve got other friends who’ve had a few and found one much harder than the others. Abortions are not one-size-fits-all. They are a physical and emotional process. And your reaction to them will be impacted by what is going on in your life; past present and future. And that is the nuance that we desperately need when talking about abortions.

I was nervous writing this. I’ve worried that in doing so I am letting women down. You only have to look at the upcoming American elections to see we are being confronted with loud, powerful men who are trying to occupy our basic right to choose. Women are being controlled and their every move watched, because of the male obsession with taking our autonomy away.

And so I wonder if we don’t want to tell other people how hard our abortions were, because thank fucking God we are still being allowed them. But then I think, that is why we are being denied the nuance.

In February, four months and a lot of iron supplements after my abortion, I did the only thing that I thought might make it better: talk about it on stage.

Abortions aren’t a natural source of comedy. They can be divisive, and in talking about them I knew I’d bring up feelings that other people in the audience have about them. My instinct was that most people would have some connection to it. So I just told the story, as it happened, and it was amazing how many people, of all generations, connected to it. There was a universal truth in what I was saying: abortions can be harder than we are told and too often women are left picking up the pieces of a man’s decision.

Last week, I was having a smear test and the nurse could tell I was on edge. I explained that since my abortion last year I’ve felt anxious in medical situations.

She stopped, gently put her hand on mine and said, “Are you OK?” a look of genuine compassion in her eyes. “Sometimes it’s harder than you expect,” she continued. For the first time in weeks, I started to cry. Not because I was sad again, but because I wished that she had been there that day when that doctor showed me the screen. To tell me that what was about to come wasn’t going to be straightforward but, crucially, it was normal and I wasn’t alone in that complex type of pain. And to also, maybe, slap him.

I am glad that I was able to have an abortion and now I know that I made the right decision. But the simplification of it before, during, and after, meant that I experienced a lot of my grief entirely alone.

Up until this moment, I have been nervous to talk about how it affected me on a physiological and psychological level, because I’ve been so afraid my words would be misunderstood or worse, I would come across as anti-choice. But, my abortion had a huge impact on me and I want to be able to say that without worrying that I have let women down. I wish that the world allowed women the nuance of wanting these rights, while also being allowed to talk about the pain that sometimes comes with it. ■

Grace Campbell Is on Heat is at the Edinburgh Fringe this summer, followed by a European tour. For more details, go to disgracecampbell.com.

If you have been affected by any of these issues, please contact the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (bpas.org)

Food & drink

Nigel Slater

@NigelSlater



Fresh and easy recipes you can get ready well in advance

Photographs JONATHAN LOVEKIN

There are plump, crumb-coated croquettes of peas and tarragon waiting to pop into sizzling oil and slices of potato, partly cooked and ready to toast under the grill. The pea croquettes will sit on a tangle of pea shoots and herbs. The potatoes will get a sauce of sweet, golden onion, curry paste and yoghurt. Both are the sort of recipes you can prepare in advance, leaving only the cooking to the last minute.

The croquettes, big fat fritters of peas and tarragon, have a back note of wasabi. The mild heat flatters the peas and unexpectedly brings the tarragon to the fore. Ideally, its presence is gently felt, but you can add more or

less as the fancy takes you.

Equally, the curry paste in the yoghurt sauce can whisper or sing as loudly as you wish. I chose a mild paste with a hint of tomato and paprika whose slightly sour notes make the recipe dance. The important detail is not to let it boil once you have stirred in the yoghurt.

Much of my eating is in this style at the moment. The dishes I find myself drawn to can be partly made earlier in the day, leaving only a little last-minute cooking. They are substantial enough to be a light main course or useful as an accompaniment. Relaxed cooking for pretty much any occasion.

Grilled potatoes with curry yoghurt sauce

Use your favoured curry paste here. (I used a bhuna paste, which lent a slight tart and smoky quality to the sauce.)
Serves 4. Ready in 45 minutes

potatoes 400g, medium-sized
curry leaves 30
onion 1, large
ground nut or vegetable oil 3 tbsp, plus a little extra
mild curry paste 1–2 tbsp
yoghurt 250ml

Bring a deep pan of water to the boil, then salt it generously. Peel the potatoes, then add them, whole, to the water. Let them cook for about 15 minutes or until they are tender enough to pierce easily with a metal skewer. Remove the potatoes from the water and set aside to cool a little.

Warm the oil in a shallow pan, scatter in half the curry leaves, fry for a minute or two until almost crisp, then remove from the pan with a draining spoon and set aside.

Peel the onion, slice it thinly, then stir it into the remaining oil in the shallow pan. Let it cook over a low to moderate heat for 15 minutes or so, stirring from time to time, until soft and pale gold.

Line a baking sheet with kitchen foil and preheat an overhead (oven) grill. Cut the potatoes into slices, each roughly the thickness of a couple of £1 coins. Place them flat on the baking sheet. Brush each slice with a little groundnut or vegetable oil, then season lightly with salt and cook under the preheated grill until they start to colour.

Scatter the remaining curry leaves into the onion and let them cook for a minute or two. When they darken, stir in the curry paste. Continue cooking for a couple of minutes until the onion is coated with the paste and very fragrant, then stir in the yoghurt and remove from the heat.

When the potatoes are golden and sizzling, serve with the curry sauce and scatter with the reserved curry leaves.

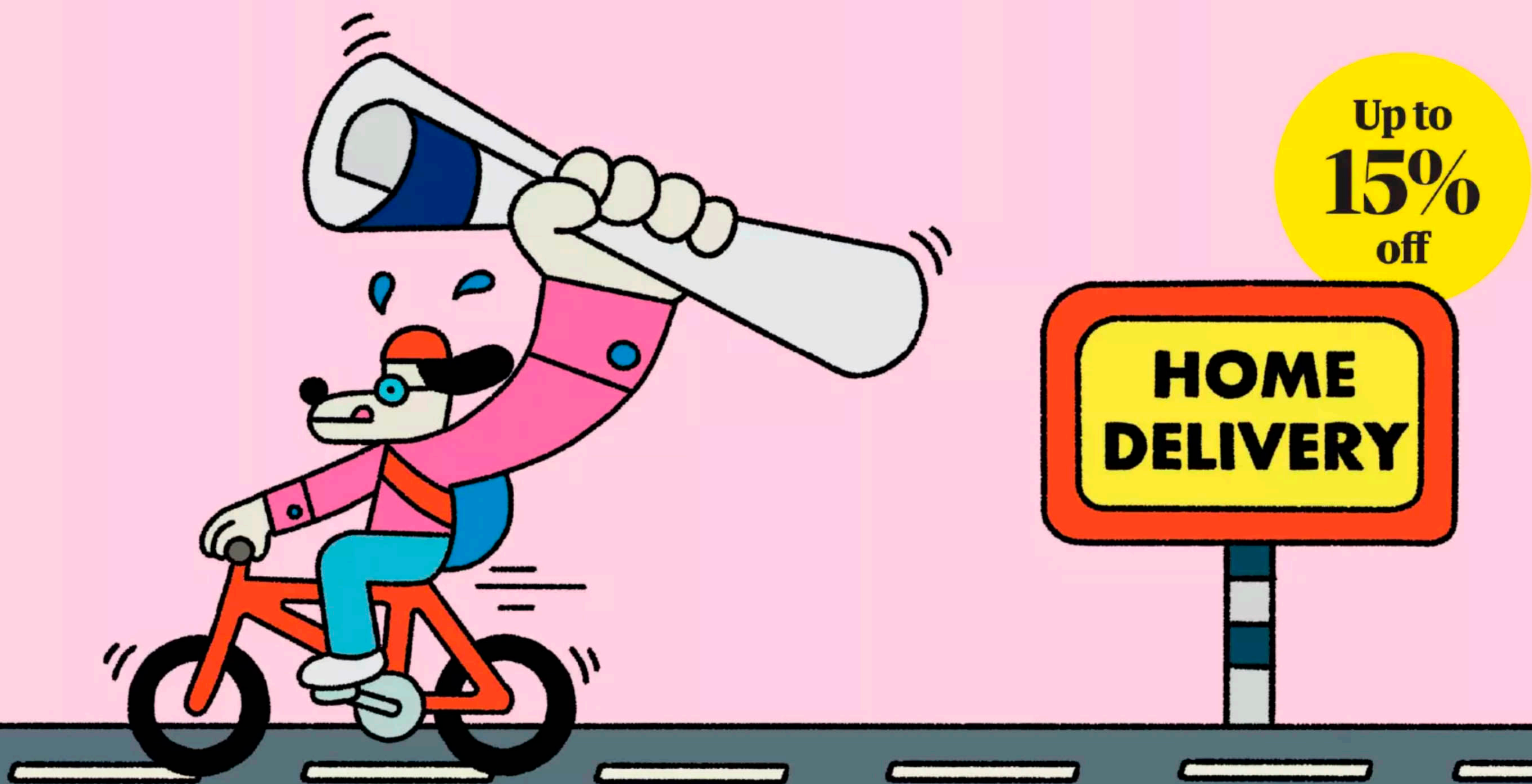
Pea and wasabi croquettes with pea shoots

Tarragon and peas with the warm, gentle back note of wasabi. Make sure to chill the mixture thoroughly before shaping the croquettes and turn them gently in



Shoots and scores: pea
and wasabi croquettes
with pea shoots. Facing
page: grilled potatoes with
curry yoghurt sauce

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Food & drink

Nigel Slater

The croquettes sit on a tangle of shoots and herbs. The potatoes get a sauce of sweet, golden onion

› the pan using a palette knife.
Makes 8. Serves 2. Ready in 30 minutes, plus chilling time

shelled peas 500g, fresh or frozen
tarragon 15g
wasabi paste 2–3 tsp
butter 40g
egg yolks 2
breadcrumbs 40g, dry, white such as panko

To coat and fry:
eggs 2
breadcrumbs 4 large handfuls
vegetable or groundnut oil to shallow fry

To serve:
pea shoots, mint and coriander a handful
olive oil a little
lemon juice a little

Put a deep pan of water on to boil and salt it lightly. When it is boiling, tip in the peas and let them cook for about 4 minutes, a little longer for fresh peas, then drain them. Strip the tarragon leaves from their stems. You will end up with about 10g.

Tip the cooked peas into the bowl of a food processor and reduce to a thick purée, then add the tarragon leaves and the butter. Beat the egg yolks, then stir them into the puréed peas together with the wasabi, breadcrumbs and a generous seasoning of salt. Transfer to a mixing bowl, cover and leave to chill.

Gently shape the pea mixture into 8 barrel-shaped croquettes. (A little flour on your hands will make this easier.)

Break the eggs into a shallow dish and beat with a fork. Put the breadcrumbs into a second dish. Lower the croquettes, one by one, into the beaten egg, then into the breadcrumbs. Pat firmly to help the crumbs stick to the croquettes, then lift them out on to a baking sheet.

Warm a 1cm deep layer of vegetable or groundnut oil in a shallow pan. Keeping at a moderate heat, lower the croquettes into the oil and fry for a few minutes until the underside is golden and crisp. Gently turn them and cook the other sides, then remove and drain on kitchen paper.

Toss together the pea shoots, mint and coriander leaves, dress with a little olive oil and lemon, then nestle the croquettes among them. ■



Nigel's midweek dinner

Grilled chicken, mango bulgur

Photograph
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

The recipe

Put the kettle on. (Always a good start.) Place 100g of **bulgur wheat** in a heatproof bowl, then, when the kettle has boiled, pour over enough water to cover the bulgur by 1cm. Cover the bowl with a plate or lid and set aside.

Heat a griddle pan (or preheat an overhead grill if you prefer). Remove the bones from 4 **chicken thighs**. Lay the thighs out flat, rub them all over with a little **olive oil** and season with **sea salt** and **black pepper**. Place the chicken skin side down on the griddle. Cut 1 **lemon** in half and place it on the griddle (or under the grill).

Peel 1 large or 2 small perfectly ripe **mangoes**. Slice the cheek from the mangoes, following the flat side of the stone with your knife, then slice away the rest of the flesh as thickly as you can. Cut it into small dice and put it in a medium-sized mixing bowl. Finely chop 4 **spring onions** and add them to the mango.

Remove the leaves from 10g of **mint**, finely chop them, then do the same with 10g of **flat-leaf parsley**. Stir the chopped herbs into the mango with the juice of half a **lemon**.

Check the bulgur wheat has absorbed all of the water. The grains should be moist rather than wet. Run a fork through them to break them up, then mix in 2 tsp of **harissa sauce** and introduce the mango and herbs. Taste the bulgur and increase the harissa if you wish.

Divide the bulgur between a couple of plates, put the chicken on top, then sprinkle over any grilling juices left behind. They are too good to waste.
Serves 2. Ready in 45 minutes

◆ To remove the chicken bones, lay the thighs skin side down on a chopping board. Using the point of a very sharp knife, follow the bones with the blade, but avoid cutting right through to the board, carefully free them from the flesh. ■

Food & drink

Jay Rayner



@jayrayner1

It describes itself as a 'refined taverna', but this Greek restaurant deserves more colourful language

Gaia

50 Dover Street,
London W1S 4NY
(gaia-restaurants.com).
Starters £10–£55
Mains £32–£230
Desserts £14–£36
Wines from £45

Oliver Putnam, the washed-up Broadway director played by Martin Short in *Only Murders in the Building*, would adore Gaia, named after the goddess earth mother. Famously, Putnam lives on dips and Gaia is a veritable dip heaven. It starts with a dollop of soft, whipped, herb-flecked feta. That is followed by

an indecently luscious taramasalata, like a savoury Chantilly, just begging to be scooped away with the accompanying hoop of still-warm sesame-crusted koulouri bread. There's a fava bean dip, and a smoked aubergine dip and a tzatziki. Dip, my darlings. Dip like the wind. Mind you, the notoriously skint Putnam wouldn't be able to access that which he so desires. For this is also dip heaven in that it can only be afforded by the gods; by those who can carelessly spend £12 on a thumb-high whorl of whipped cod's roe.

Gaia, which hilariously describes itself as a "refined taverna", much I suppose as the Ritz across the road is a refined Travelodge, represents London right now, or at least that version of London north of Piccadilly. It is owned by a Russian who is based in Dubai and has a kitchen overseen by a Nigerian-born chef who has written a menu of Greek dishes to be served to a fully Botoxed clientele from Asia, the Middle East and Europe who need never look at the menu's right-hand column. So why did I go? Partly, because it's intriguing to see whether there is a significantly elevated version of traditional dishes (spoiler: there isn't) and partly because to point and laugh at stupid things, you must first pay for the stupid things.

So sit down alongside me on the pale blue banquette and take in the warm, glowing clusters of globe ceiling lights which, depending on your level of bitter cynicism, dangle like bunches of grapes or like haemorrhoids begging for treatment. Enjoy the tasteful objets d'art and the artisanal linens, the Zaro's mineral water imported from Greece and the trophy cabinet of big wines downstairs by the loos, packed with La Tâche, Château Latour and 1994 Petrus for those punters who are only prepared to go so far with the whole humble, peasantry Greek thing.

The menu is divided into starters and larger dishes all of which are meant to be eaten "family style" by people who may well have several of them. I'd describe the food as nosebleeding expensive, but that might make a mess of all the creamy linen. A 350g goat dish is £75. A rib-eye is £95. The whole grilled chicken with fried bread and winter truffle is £130, and the T-bone steak is £230,



The tarta me fistikia turns out to be a truly magnificent fridge cake with a base of peanut shortbread, stacked with salted caramel

Hey big spender: (clockwise from left) tarta me fistikia; the dining room; the 'exceedingly good' tarama; baby squid; broccoli with chilli and garlic; and half a roasted chicken

though that does include chips. Interestingly, the day I went some of the prices online were between £5 and £8 lower. I'd warn you to be aware of that, but we all know you're not going. Equally, while they're all doubtless lovely, this newspaper's expenses won't cover them.

Instead, we have three dolmades for £16 and they are fine: loosely rolled, a good sharp lemony edge to the rice filling, a dainty scattering of fresh herbs and pine nuts across the top. They are not, however, twice as good as those that cost half the price. They're just a little prettier. The small, flat splodge of ground beef moussaka for £24 is so spoonable, so very soft, you could eat it without recourse to teeth. Then again, dental implants are expensive. You wouldn't want to risk them. I would like to have tried the courgette tempura and the cheese pies, but they're all out of courgettes and cheese today. Instead, we have baby squid, which is very much on the chewy, adolescent side of baby. It's nowhere near as good, for example, as the version at Mandarin Kitchen, which is twice the size for less than two-thirds the cost. Much

better is the half corn-fed chicken, with dark marinated skin and a herb-stuffed breast. It's a lovely dish for £24. Except it's £42. For that money I want the whole thing. This one is missing its wing. Where's my bloody chicken wing? A £12 portion of broccoli with a fine dice of chilli and garlic is just a bunch of accountants laughing uproariously at us. The omnipresent service is solicitous, verging on the infantilising. They are constantly attempting to portion up our dishes for us. I assure them we can cut up our lunch ourselves.

At the heart of the offering is the "fish market", an ice-stacked counter full of red mullet, Dover sole and the like, priced by the kilo. There's a solitary black Canadian lobster, still alive, its limbs twitching as if it's trying to make a run for it. I know how it feels. You choose your fish and they'll fry, grill or salt bake it as you wish. The prices force me to call Rex Goldsmith of the renowned Chelsea Fishmonger. He tells me his kilo price for mackerel is £12.50. I tell him at Gaia it's £100. Rex gasps. "Christ," he says. "At that price the fish should give you a blow job." I am merely the reporter here. A kilo of John Dory retails for £26.50. Here it's £150. Red mullet is £36. At Gaia it's £140. And so on.

For dessert our waiter cheerily recommends the frozen yoghurt with honey and caramelised walnuts. Of course he does. It's the most expensive choice at £36. Sorry to bang on about the prices but they are the gilded, diamond-encrusted, Jimmy-Chooed elephants in the room. What do you get for that? Who knows. I'm not about to find out. There's also something called a Tarta me Fistikia, which is a name that conjures many images. It turns out to be a truly magnificent layered fridge cake with a crunchy base of peanut shortbread, stacked with salted caramel and a deep chocolate mousse. The portion will serve two for £18, so £9 a head. It is by far the best value on the menu and the best thing we eat. Come for a scoop of the exceedingly good tarama. Fill up on the free bread. Finish with the peanut tart. Laugh at the facelifts. Go home.

The day after my visit, I am emailed by Fundamental Hospitality, the company behind Gaia, offering me a free meal in any of their "esteemed locations in exchange for coverage". Damn. I could have saved the paper £200 (with no booze), and still written this piece. This is how Western civilisation ends: not with a bang, but with a £20 plate of mediocre calamari. ■

Notes on chocolate

A creamy, dreamy combo that will have you melting, says Annalisa Barbieri



Sometimes you come across a chocolate so delicious it's a real test of love to share it at all. However, if you don't like milk chocolate and nuts, then probably best you don't read this.

Melt Chocolate makes its chocolate in London's famous Notting Hill. I grew up down the road, so I know this area like the proverbial back of my hand (could you pick your hand out of a line-up though?) It always makes me laugh when I go in there, though, as I am invariably ignored, which is a shame, as... well... you know. I find a lot of the shops around there are really snooty and I'm not easy to snoot on, but I'm definitely not one of the Notting Hill set and, mercifully, never have been, so perhaps that's why. But I'm not going to let a little froideur influence me.

Anyway, Melt has some new

bars, in beautiful packaging, and they have my name all over them. Creamy, dreamy 38% milk chocolate stuffed full of nutty praline in pistachio, hazelnut, peanut or almond versions. I tried the last two and I couldn't really tell them apart (the shame), but that didn't matter as they were both wonderful (peanut had the edge perhaps). These aren't cheap bars – sorry – £14.99/90g, but then W11 rents don't come cheap.

If you are on their site, do look at the chocolate-coated nuts, £25.99/250g. These tubs have minimal inner packaging and are really stuffed full. I loved the milk chocolate-covered caramelised almonds, but if white chocolate and pistachio is your thing, then do peruse, as they are coloured pale green and very pretty. A great thing to take to a dinner party.



Wines of the week

The once dated cinsault grape is showing again what it can do.

By David Williams

@Daveydaibach



Discovery Collection Cinsault South Africa 2023
£10, Sainsbury's

South Africa's most famous red grape variety is almost certainly pinotage. This isn't entirely a good thing for Cape wine producers, since pinotage doesn't have the best of

reputations – a lot of it isn't very good. That's a little harsh on exemplary producers, such as Kanonkop in Stellenbosch, whose glorious Black Label Pinotage sits close to the top of South African wine's hierarchy of fine reds. But a handful of exceptions aside, I'm always happier when I see the name of one of pinotage's parent grape varieties, cinsault, on the label. Cape cinsault, especially when sourced from some of the country's very old bush vines, is more often than not a succulent joy, with Sainsbury's newbie a typically savoury wine of red fruits, warm earth and freshly milled pepper.

Le Bijou de Sophie Valrose Coteaux de Bézier France 2023
£10.99, Waitrose

South Africa's most exciting winemakers are clearly excited about cinsault: look for names such as Eben Sadie, Badenhorst, and Scions of Sinai for cinsault wines that are

utterly distinctive, albeit in a way that will appeal to fans of the lighter side of syrah in places such as France's northern Rhône Valley or the Languedoc, where the variety originates. In its homeland, cinsault was generally buried in blends, many of them undistinguished, in cooperative caves across the Midi. It's still performing that role in reds in France, but it is also prized by rosé producers: it's one of the key varieties in the classic rosé blend in Provence and in the high-quality pale pinks made in the same pale style in the Languedoc, such as the winningly soft Le Bijou de Sophie Valrose.



Domaine Combe Blanche Cinsault d'Enfer France 2021
£19.99, Cambridge Wine Merchants

Ambitious producers in the Languedoc have become skilled with single-varietal cinsault, producing characterful wines such as this fluent, lively Cinsault d'Enfer, with its juicy berries

and black olive tapenade. Adventurous winemakers have also brought a new lease of life to old cinsault vines in Chile, notably in Itata, home of the outstanding Rogue Vine Grand Itata 2021 (from £17, highburyvintners.co.uk), a wine which also includes a small portion of another Chilean rediscovered speciality, país. The oldest cinsault vines on the planet may also be in the Americas. The Bechthold Vineyard in Lodi, California, was planted in 1886 and the cinsault vines, now knocking on 140 years old, are the basis of the ethereal delight that is Birichino Bechthold Vineyard Cinsault Old Vines 2021 (from £30.95, nywines.co.uk).

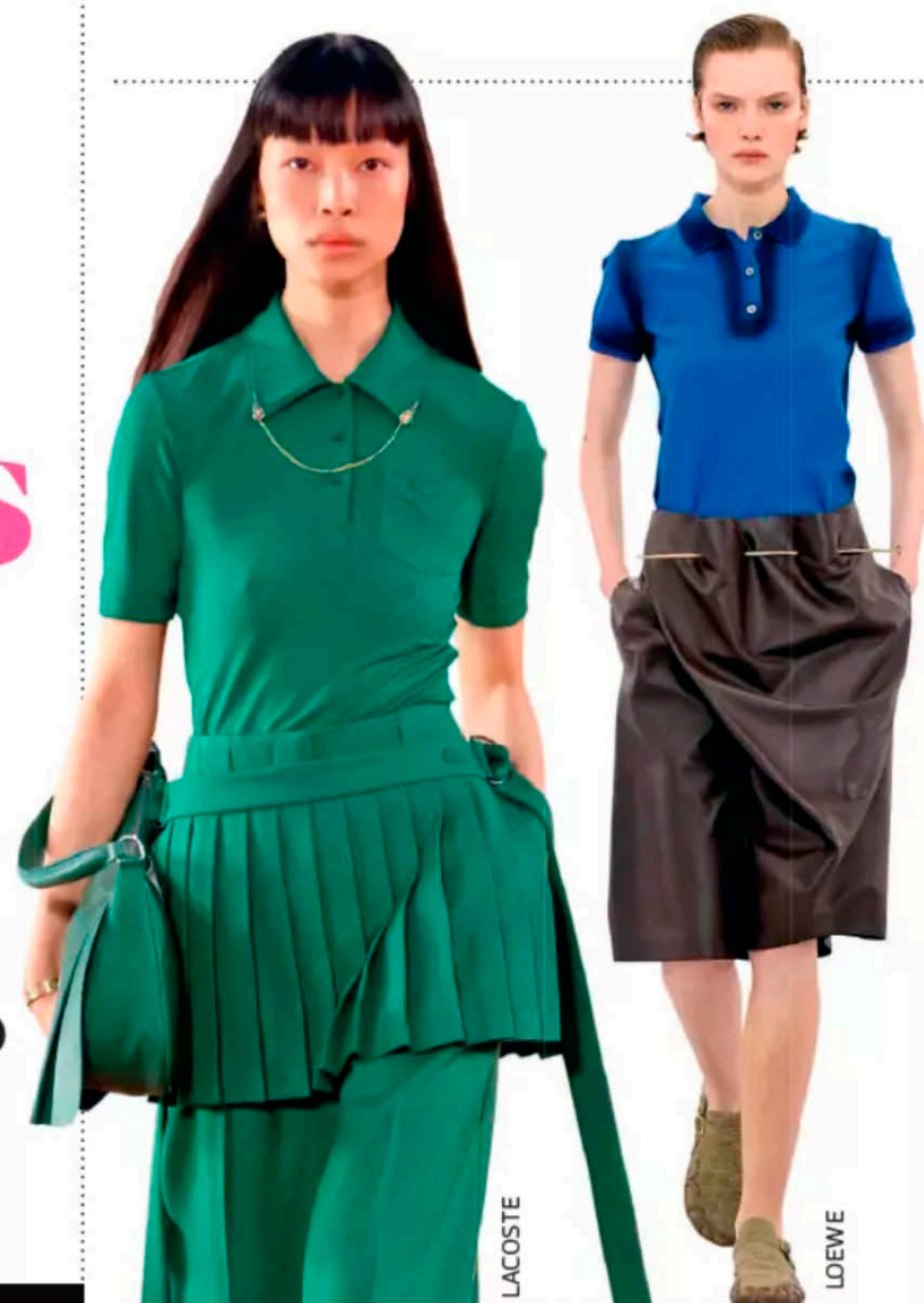


Style

The edit Women's polo shirts

The sporty polo has been turning heads this season at Miu Miu, Gucci and Loewe. Whether you go for bottle green, cropped or boldly coloured, it's just the thing to pep up your summer look

Edited by ROZ DONOGHUE



Editor's
choice



Yellow terry £144,
Sporty & Rich ([farfetch.com](https://www.farfetch.com))



Gingham £180,
Guest in Residence ([selfridges.com](https://www.selfridges.com))



Cropped £199,
[uk.sandro-paris.com](https://www.uk.sandro-paris.com)



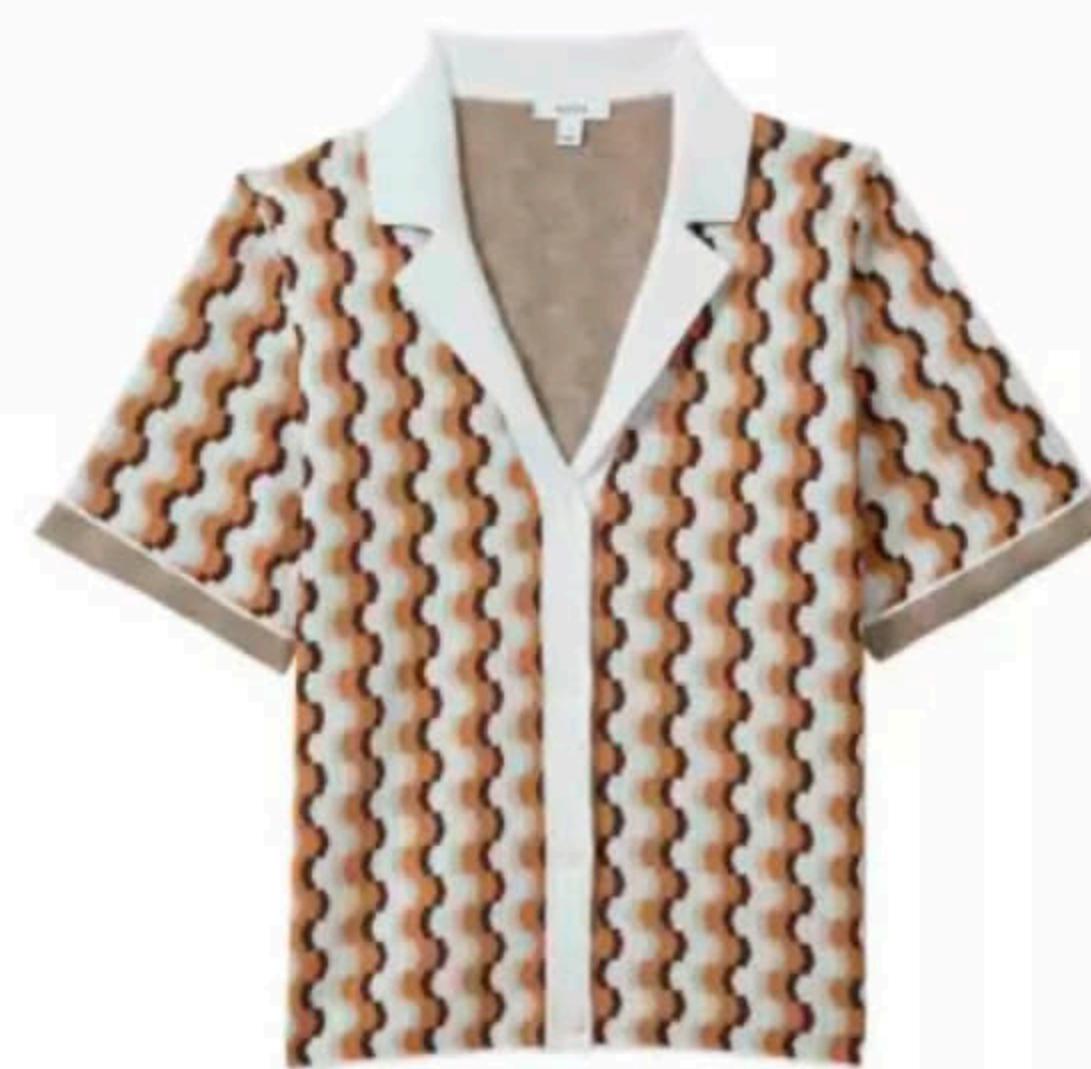
Brown £195,
[ganni.com](https://www.ganni.com)



Colour block £35.99, [mango.com](https://www.mango.com)



Grey £27.99, [hm.com](https://www.hm.com)



Jacquard £110, [reiss.com](https://www.reiss.com)

High
street
hero



Denim £29.99, [zara.com](https://www.zara.com)



Brown £345, [sunspel.com](https://www.sunspel.com)

Vintage
buy



Vintage £40, [rokit.co.uk](https://www.rokit.co.uk)



Green £96, [uk.varley.com](https://www.uk.varley.com)



Orange £69.95, [massimodutti.com](https://www.massimodutti.com)

GETTY IMAGES

Beauty Funmi Fetto

@FunmiFetto



Nail polish for a professional look at home

Despite the recent nail gel allergy scares, many people have found their way back to gels. Why? Convenience. But for me, not today. As I type, my gels are on their last legs – chipped, peeling, overgrown – but I don't have time to go to the salon. Normal nail polish offers much more flexibility. It's cheaper, easier and quicker to take off and less likely to weaken your nails. Still prefer gels? Then try Biosculpture, the professional gel brand that won't damage your nails.

1. Gucci Vernis A Ongles Nail Polish £26, [sephora.com](https://www.sephora.com) 2. Chanel Le Vernis Nail Colour £29, [chanel.com](https://www.chanel.com) 3. Manicurist Active Glow in Raspberry Nail Polish £14, [uk.manicurist.com](https://www.uk.manicurist.com) 4. Hermès Les Main Hermès Nail Polish £45, [hermes.com](https://www.hermes.com) 5. Pleasing Nail Polish £20, [selfridges.com](https://www.selfridges.com)



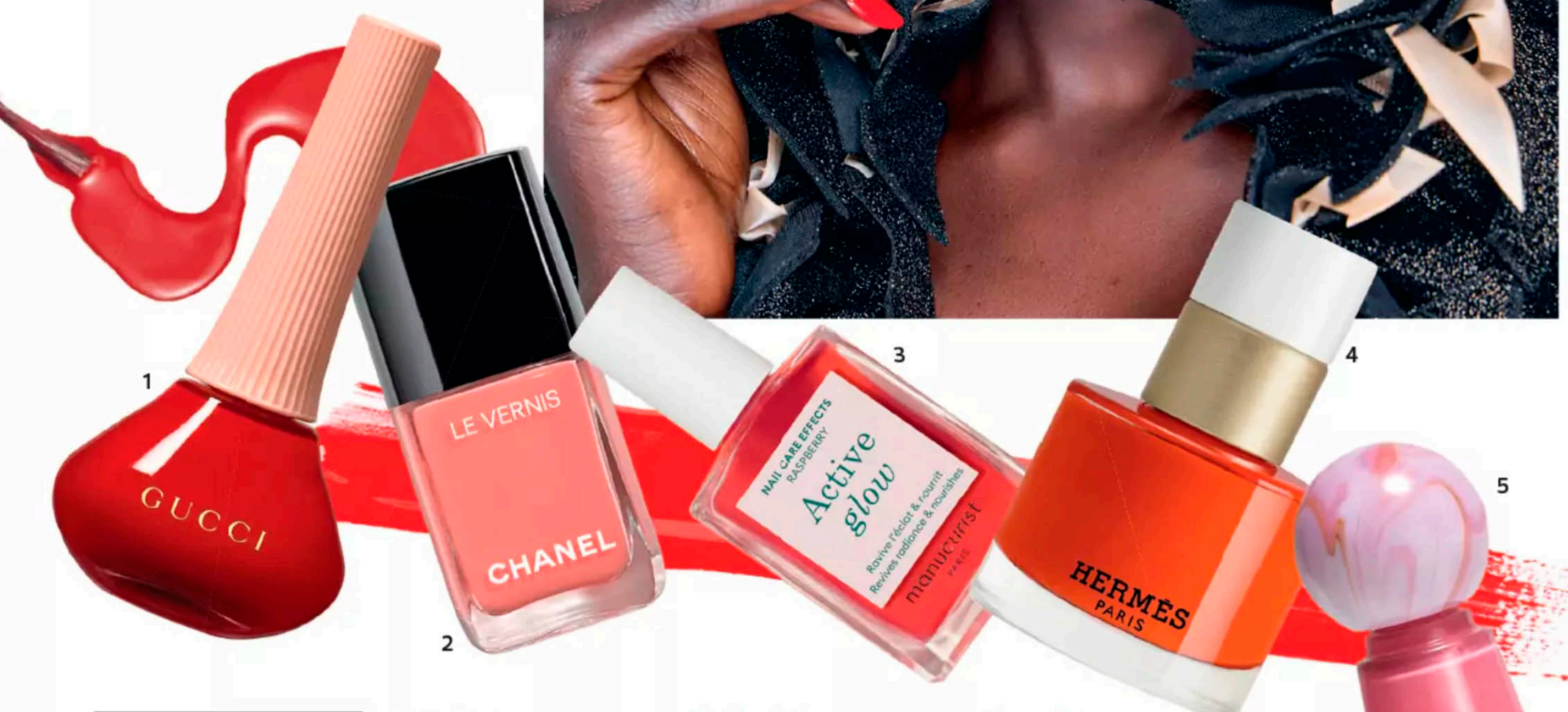
I can't do without...

A fresh, modern foundation with a subtle fragrance

Christian Louboutin Teint Fétiche Le Fluide Foundation

£62 [harrods.com](https://www.harrods.com)

I've long talked about the importance of having a wardrobe of foundations that you can rotate depending on the season. I hadn't done that for ages and wondered why I was suddenly looking like someone was holding an orange light under my skin. I finally got round to using the Christian Louboutin foundation – and I love it. Light, fresh, modern, it is dreamy. I should mention that it is perfumed. I know this is a no-no for some, but I didn't mind. It actually reminded me that the sensorial aspect of makeup products is disappearing in beauty. Brands have become so concerned with the pragmatism of getting the job done, they don't consider how little touches might heighten our experience. Anyway the fragrance was lovely and didn't irritate – probably because it is so well made – which leads me to the texture: a silky blend that feels like a light but super-hydrating moisturiser. I also love the way it looks – my shade reminds me of melted Dairy Milk. The finish you get is a smoother, more velvety version of your own skin. Neither super matte nor super glossy (increasingly, I find foundations that give you a glossy finish look terrible in photographs). Most of all, I'm just pleased my skin is simply looking like great skin.



On my radar

Combat dryness with three great new treatments

Smooth operator

Textured hair expert Mimi Kone has come up with a solution to dryness, dandruff and an itchy scalp which includes baobab and rosemary. **Mimi et Mina Hair & Scalp Oil Treatment, £38, [mimietmina.com](https://www.mimietmina.com)**



Gentle giant

Dry, sensitive skin? This cleanser by aesthetician turned beauty entrepreneur Caroline Hirons gently removes light makeup, grime and sun protection. **Skin Rocks The Cream Cleanser, £32, [spacenk.com](https://www.spacenk.com)**



Deep dive

Using 19 botanical oils – including rose and sandalwood – this blend will get rid of parched skin on legs (and body, too) quicker than you can say glow. **This Works Skin Deep Dry Leg Oil, £44, [lookfantastic.com](https://www.lookfantastic.com)**

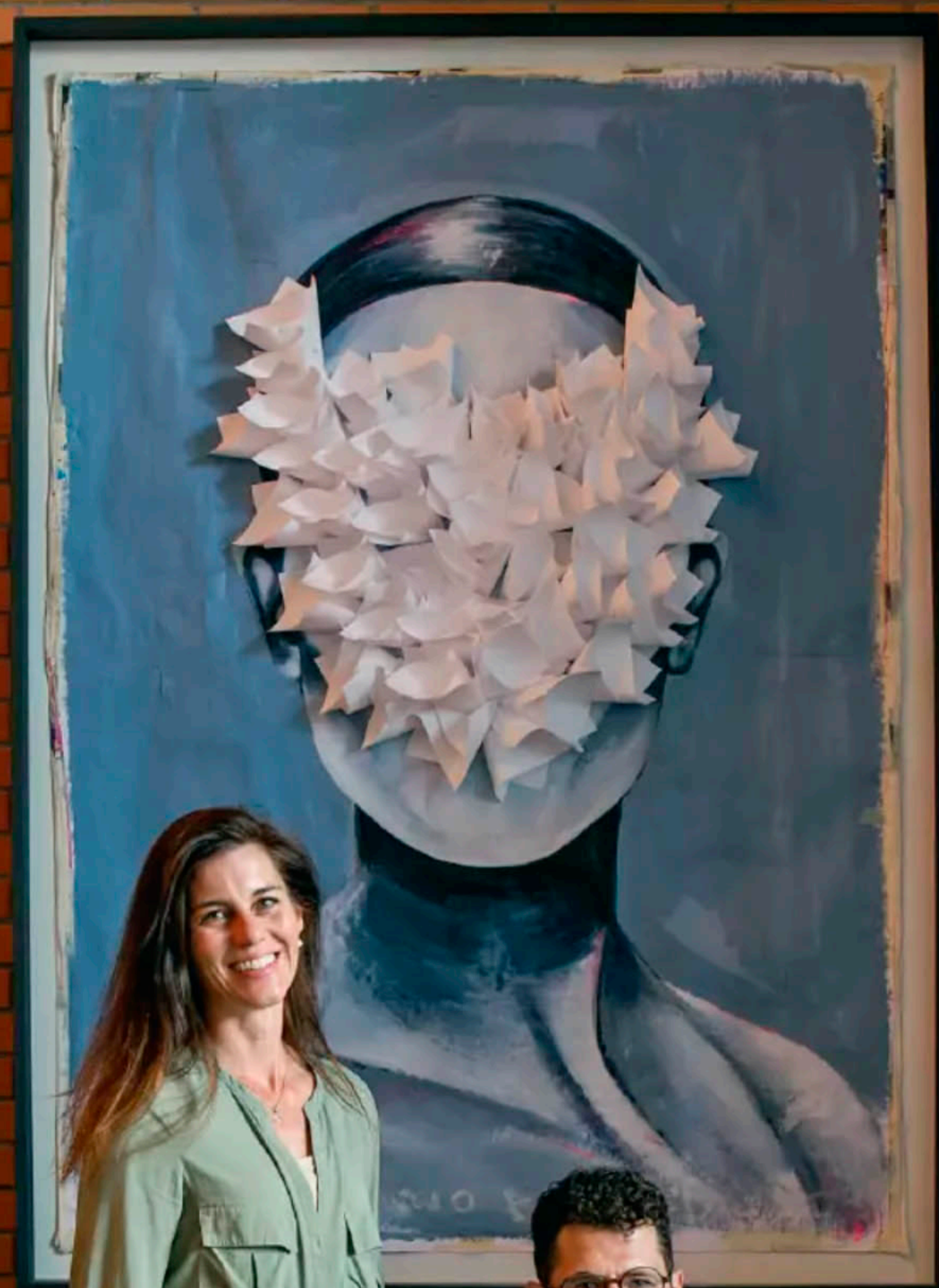




Shock of the new

A Swiss apartment block powered by its own hydro plant

Words and photographs RAMONA BALABAN



The write stuff: Andri Mengiardi and Martina Isler with their two young children, in front of a painting by Istépan Obsidian. Facing page: the spiral staircase and huge factory windows which were fully restored

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PETER CHRISTIAN
Gentlemen's Outfitters

It all started with paper. In 1657, when many people could neither read nor write, the foundations for the Papieri area, on the shores of Lake Zug in Cham, Switzerland, were laid. This first paper mill became a huge paper factory, which operated for 360 years until it was closed down in 2015 and the remaining Papieri buildings were classified as historical monuments. Now a bustling new quarter with apartments, lofts, studios and workplaces has been created.

The Papieri site has been designed to be fully energy-efficient, climate-neutral and sustainable. All power for the site comes from renewable sources. An estimated 40% of its electricity needs is produced onsite using photovoltaic systems and its own hydro power plant on the nearby river. It has a site-wide linked energy network, which provides heating, cooling and electricity directly to each property.

It's a popular and innovative development and so opportunities to buy a home have been limited, but Andri Mengiardi and Martina Isler were lucky. "Our second child was born in a hospital very close to the Papieri," says Martina. "A little later we happened to go past the building on a bike tour and saw a billboard advertising it. We decided to stay up to date with their newsletter and when the apartments were advertised in a pre-marketing campaign, we jumped at the chance. They were all sold within a few hours."

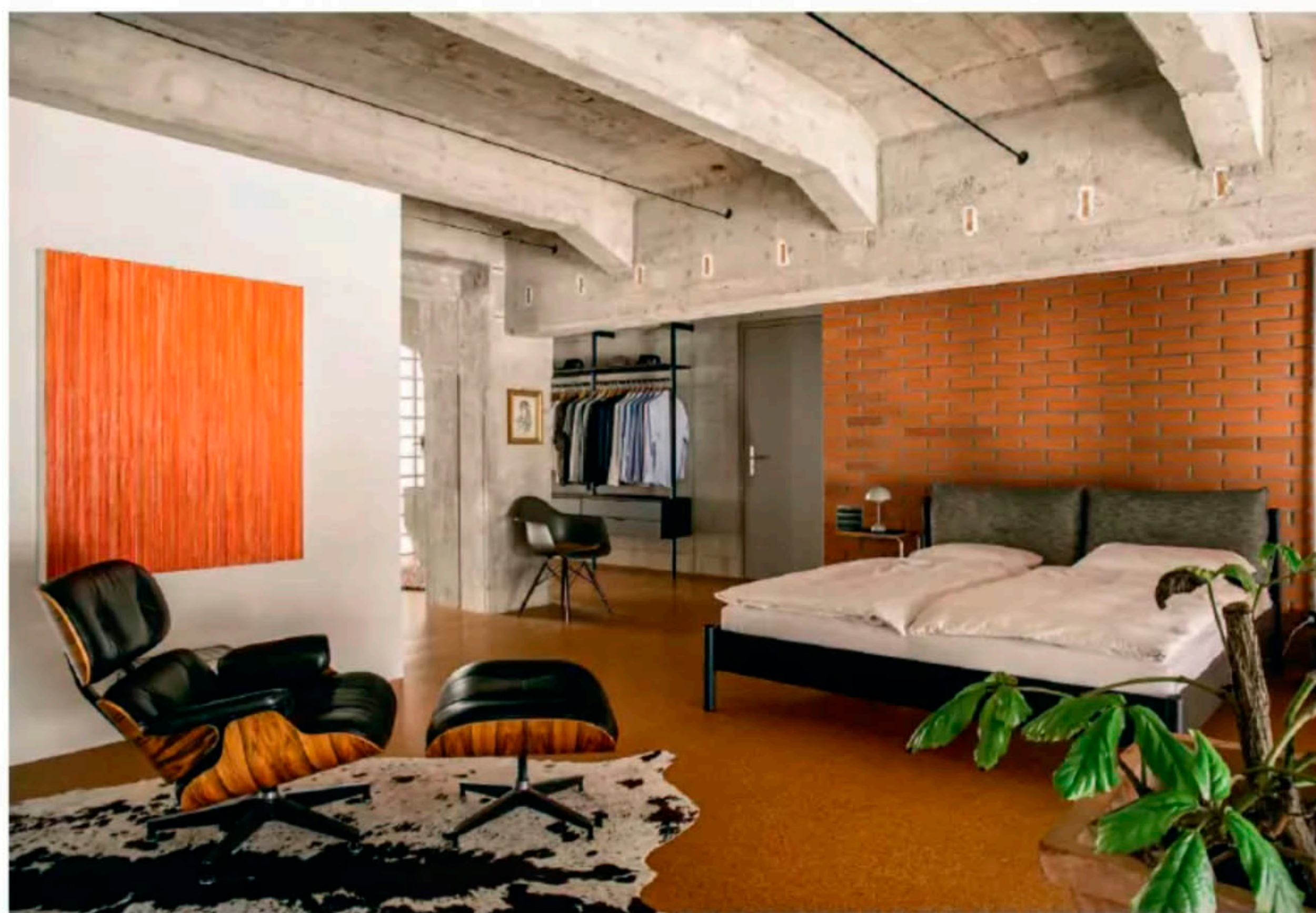
Living in a landmark building makes the co-ordination and implementation of your own ideas quite a challenge, but the blank canvas provided by the developers was fertile ground for Andri to express his passion for interior decoration.

"I'm CEO of a tech company, but my journey started somewhere else. I'm a chef/cook as well, which was the first thing I learned when I left home at 15. I also love to dance," says Andri. "Where do I see parallels between interior design, technology, cooking and dancing? It is about closing your eyes and feeling what can or could be felt. It's about imagination and trying to leave patterns behind and taking some risks. It's about reducing complexity."

The 200sqm loft is open plan with a mezzanine on the upper level accessible from a spiral staircase. At some points the ceiling reaches 6m high and the facade sections made of exposed concrete and sand-lime brickwork are retained and partially insulated inside the rooms.

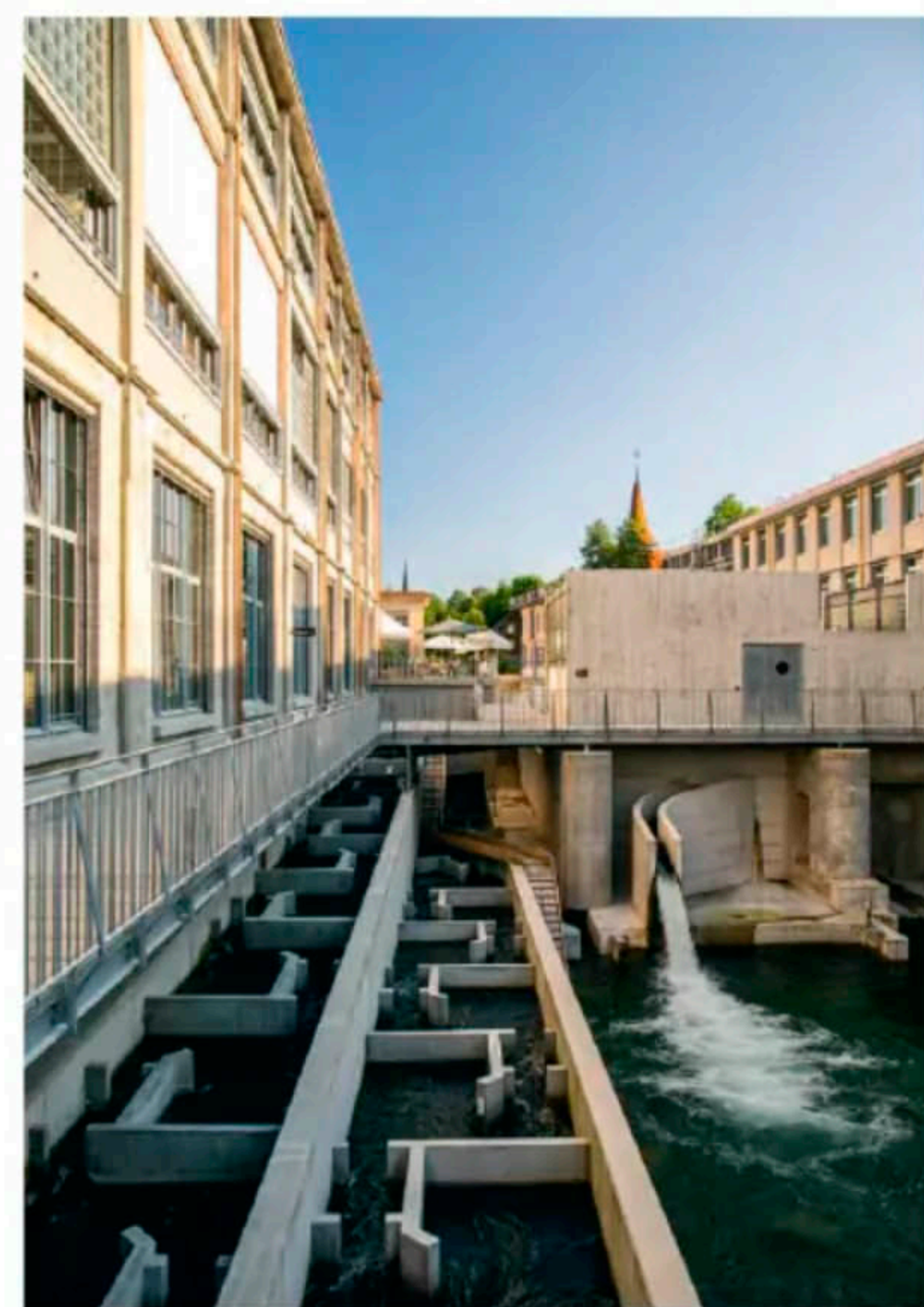
A loggia runs through the building and creates a climate buffer so that the windows, with their very slim profiles, can be left in place or replaced without

Looks good on paper: (clockwise from top) the spiral staircase up to the mezzanine level; the river that runs through the old paper factory; exposed concrete and brickwork in the main bedroom; and the children's room with its giant fern tree



'I like the idea of a city jungle. The kids lie on the floor and look up at the tree and ask themselves if they want to be the monkeys'

changing the design. Despite the profoundly industrial soul of the loft, Andri has created a style that is both unexpected and extravagant, such as the decision to place a 5m palm tree in the children's room. "First, I wanted to build a house inside the house. I did a lot of sketches for it, but in the end, it just felt right to create something completely different for the kids. The idea behind it is built around the notion of a city jungle. If our kids lie on the floor, they can now look



up at the trees and ask themselves if they want to be the monkeys there," he says. "It fits perfectly into the high room and fills it with life and warmth," adds Martina.

The furniture and lighting mixes classic pieces, such as chairs from Carl Hansen and an original Lounge Chair by Herman Miller imported from the USA, with refined elements from Vitra and Moormann and Swiss designs, including the Architonic shelving system. The kitchen features a Seiltänzer table and Bruto chair, both by Moormann, while the Aim suspension lights were designed by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec for Flos.

Andri and Martina's new home has many facets. It is rough, it is light, in part even delicate, but what dominates is the power of introversion it radiates. The height gives a sense of calm and the homogeneity of the colours a warm feeling, all directed inward. It's a place that encourages creativity. ■

Westward bound

South Somerset boasts rolling hills, golden villages, listed gardens and historic homes. Here are 10 glorious places well worth visiting

Words **HARRIET GREEN** Photograph **RODOLFO PARULAN**



Rising to the challenge: there are many fine walks and views in South Somerset, including this one on Burrow Hill

1 Lytes Cary, Somerton
The delightful manor house, dating back to the 1300s, was owned for generations by the Lyte family. The garden was cultivated by Elizabeth I's botanist, Henry Lyte, but the house fell into disrepair and the garden was ploughed up. In 1909, after a century and a half of neglect, a new family took over. They restored the interior (removing a cider press and farming equipment) and created the charming Arts & Crafts garden you can still enjoy today. Tranquil walks through the 350-acre grounds take you along the River Cary. You can stay on the estate in a part of the main manor house, or in a cosy cottage by the entrance gates (nationaltrust.org.uk).



2 Ham Hill Country Park
Heading west from Lytes Cary on the A303, you come to Ham Hill. Once an Iron Age hillfort, it's now a wildlife haven with fantastic views and is much loved by walkers and joggers. Start at Stoke-sub-Hamdon and walk to the top for a drink or food at the popular Prince of Wales pub, then towards the sloping woodland that takes you down to the village of Montacute. While you're there visit Montacute House, a masterpiece of Elizabethan architecture (pictured above). Built like so much else nearby with golden hamstone quarried on the hill behind you, the house is owned by the National Trust. There are two lodges to rent on the estate, one by the entrance gate and one in the parkland (visitsouthsomerset.com).

3 Hinton St George
It's hard to imagine a more beautiful village than Hinton St George: golden hamstone, thatched cottages and flowers that spill from walls. At the centre is the Lord Poulett Arms (pronounced "Paulett"). This gastropub dates back to 1680 and serves a mix of locally sourced ales and food. There are six bedrooms, four of them en suite. The Poulett family have an impressive chapel with numerous tombs in the church St George's, which includes 13th-century carving by masons of Wells Cathedral (lordpoulettarms.com).



4 Barrington Court, Ilminster
Barrington was once the site of a Roman villa. The present buildings were restored a century ago by the Lyles, heirs to the sugar company. With ambitious plans for the gardens, they sought help from Gertrude Jekyll: today you can still enjoy her Rose and Iris Garden and the largest, the Lily Garden. There are several holiday properties on the estate. Don't miss the Barrington Boar, a restaurant and pub with four lovely bedrooms, or eat in the converted Pip's Railway Carriage at the nearby Trading Post Farm Shop (nationaltrust.org.uk; thebarringtonboar.co.uk; tradingpostfarmshop.co.uk).



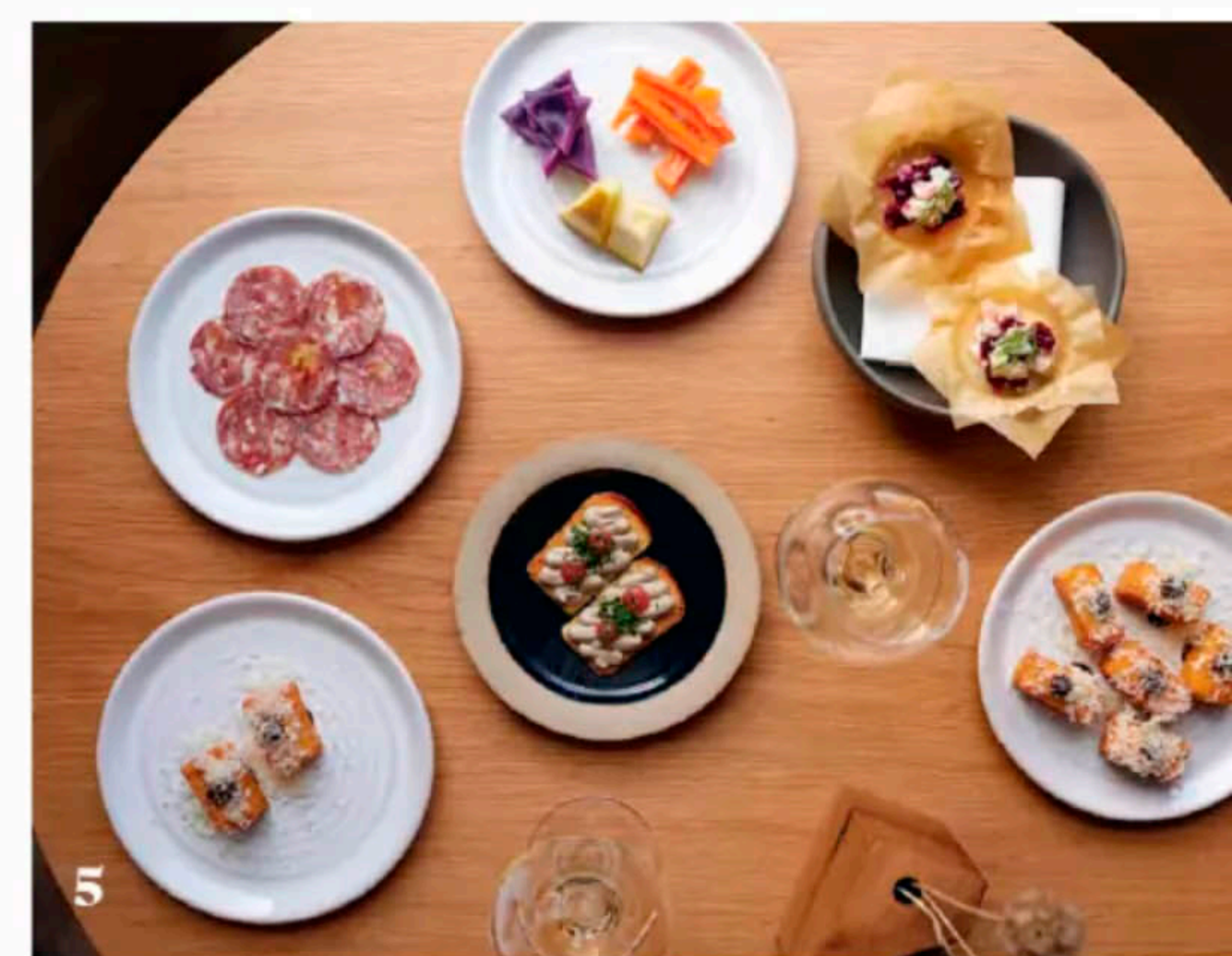
5 South Petherton
Built on the Roman Fosse Way, South Petherton is another village of gleaming hamstone. A bank built in the 1830s now holds one of South Somerset's most exciting restaurants, Holm. Co-founder and chef-director Nicholas Balfe is devoted to local, seasonal produce. His kitchen is open-plan and to watch the chefs at work you can book the dining counter. Late last year, Holm opened seven en suite bedrooms, filled with art and furniture by (you guessed) local makers. Be sure to visit East Lambrook Manor Gardens. It features winding paths through abundant borders and an impressive plant nursery (holmsomerset.co.uk; eastlambrook.com).

6 Muchelney
Venturing into the watery Somerset Levels, you may want to bring boots – especially if you visit the village pond dug by the potter. The grandson of artist-potter Bernard Leach, John presided until his recent death over Leach Pottery. Signed, collectible pots are available in the shop, which also hosts exhibitions. Muchelney once had a thriving medieval abbey. You can still see some of it, including a thatched loo for the monks. In nearby Langport is the family-run Brown & Forrest smokery, offering salmon, trout, chicken, pâtés and cheeses (johnleachpottery.co.uk; brownandforrest.co.uk).

7 River Parrett Trail
There are many beautiful paths for walking and cycling into the low-lying Somerset Levels. One route starts at Stoke-sub-Hamdon and crosses the fields to Bower Hinton. Lunch in Martock, then amble towards Kingsbury Episcopi with its 14th-century church and wonderful Burrow Hill Cider Farm, then onwards to Muchelney and Langport (visitsouthsomerset.com).

8 Forde Abbey, Chard
Built on the floodplain of the River Exe, Forde Abbey was founded and landscaped by Cistercian monks 900 years ago. It has been a home since 1649 and in the 18th century new landscaping reshaped the sweeping gardens (fordeabbey.co.uk).

9 The Newt in Somerset, Castle Cary
One part luxury hotel, nine parts visionary garden. The 17th-century manor was bought in 2013 by Koos Bekker and his wife Karen Roos, who set about creating a legacy estate with 2,000 acres of formal gardens, parkland, cider orchards and woodland. Invest in membership to see the garden and you can go several times a year. For those arriving on the train, the Creamery and café, set in a restored milk factory next to Castle Cary Station, opened last week (thenewtinsomerset.com).



10 Bruton
Bruton, on the River Brue, flourished in the Middle Ages thanks to its abbey. Today, it is South Somerset's most famous town thanks to its numerous boutiques, farm-to-fork restaurants and especially Hauser & Wirth, which opened its world-class art gallery at Durslade Farm 10 years ago. To celebrate the anniversary, artist in residence Oddur Roth has recreated the bar in the threshing barn as a site-specific artwork composed of salvaged materials. The garden, by Piet Oudolf, is spectacular all year and entry is free. Visit the shop for meat, cheese and treats from the farm (rothbar.co.uk; durslodefarmshop.co.uk). ■

They're 50 years apart and have never met, but Samuel and Pauline are the best of telephone friends

Words SAMUEL BURR

All best friends were strangers once. Why, then, does reaching out to someone you don't know, making platonic connections in the modern world, feel like such a bold, even brave thing to do?

Let me tell you about my friend, Pauline. Like all good friends, we make a point of catching up at least once a week, talking for hours about everything and nothing at all. But Pauline and I, while always there for each other, are unlike more conventional companions because, as well as being born 50-odd years apart, and living several hundred miles from each other, we've never actually met. We're telephone friends.

It was the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic and I was watching cat videos on YouTube. An advert popped up – an older-person charity seeking to combat social isolation through weekly telephone calls. Thirty minutes a week was the commitment. A simple chat could change an older person's life, so they said.

There were rules, of course. You were only to speak on the phone, only to know each other's first names, never to meet in real life.

Now I volunteer for several elderly charities, but back then I hadn't given much thought to it. Yet the idea immediately appealed. Perhaps it was an age thing. I had just turned 30, a milestone no one can fail to ignore, and I was beginning to wonder what mark I was leaving on the world, what my future held, who I was. And then there was Covid, of course.

It's no coincidence that this all started in 2020. Was it a sense of privilege I felt during the pandemic that drove me to sign up for these calls? Was I trying to cleanse my own conscience? A young man in a nice flat with a nice boyfriend, never going without food, or employment or, for that matter, company.

I'm sure I wasn't the only one who found myself pondering those big existential questions during those difficult weeks, months (years, wasn't it?).

It was around that time that I'd taken a break from my work in television to finish writing my novel, as indulgent as that sounds, and I had some time on my hands, to put it lightly. And so, after completing various vetting procedures, security checks and training programmes, the calls began.

"Do you watch a lot of television?" I ask.

"Of course!" Pauline answers. "I never have the telly off! It's become a kind of friend. What do you watch?"

She'd beaten me to it. I'd built a mental crib sheet of shows I assumed she would watch in preparation for the call: *Countryfile*; *Cash in the Attic*; *Countdown*. I'd watched them all the previous week in case the conversation dried up.

"I watch reality TV," Pauline announces. "I like *Made in Chelsea*."



'Despite all our differences, there is more that unites Pauline and me than divides us. Somehow it works': Samuel Burr

I spit my coffee out. "Really?"

"Of course. I watch it on E4. And that other one in Essex. Haven't missed an ep of that."

On paper it shouldn't really work, of course. Our lives are poles apart. And yet, despite all our apparent differences, there is more that unites Pauline and me than divides us. Somehow it does work.

A few months in and there's little we haven't discussed. And not just what we're watching on the telly, but memories from our past, dreams for our future. With every call we get to know each other a little better, become more comfortable revealing a little more of ourselves.

But how sad, I think, that it took a national pandemic for this to happen.

"My cat, Muriel," I say, one day, "she turned five yesterday. We threw her a party. She tried some Pawsecco. It's nettle and ginseng, lightly carbonated. I sound mad, don't I?"

There is a moment's pause. "It's nice to hear you

sounding more yourself," she cuts in, out of nowhere.

"Is it the tablets?"

"Sorry?"

"The tablets you told me about – are you feeling better? Happier?"

It was a few weeks earlier that I found myself divulging my mental health struggles to Pauline. I'm usually reluctant to talk about such things, even with close friends, but perhaps one of the perks of a telephone friendship is not having to look another person in the eye.

"I think so," I reply, tentatively. "I'm glad you've noticed, Pauline. I'm feeling much better. Thank you."

There is a straightforwardness to our relationship, I realise, a connection deeper than I could have imagined when I first signed up for these calls. I guess sometimes in life we're not sure what we're looking for until it presents itself right under our eyes or, in my case, ears.

"I hope you don't mind," Pauline says, "but the other day I was talking to a man from the electricity board and I got on to you. I called you my friend. Is that OK?"

"Of course you're my friend," I reply, but it is only as I say the words that I realise it is true. I'd be lying if I said I didn't take comfort in knowing that someone is there for me, as much as I am for them. Someone who

We catch up once a week and talk about everything and nothing

is always at the other end of the phone. Real friendships aren't transactional or philanthropic. They are mutually beneficial. Life enriching.

Pauline sighs deeply and I hear her shake her head.

"If only I had more gays in my life."

I start to laugh. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I've always had an affinity with gay people."

I smile into the phone.

"There's another name for someone like you, Pauline."

"There is?"

"Yes, and it rhymes with bag nag."

There have been many moments that have been anything but sweet. Thinking about her situation one day, during one of our chats, I am overwhelmed by her confinement, the cruelty of it all, and a thought enters my head. What happens when Pauline is no longer with us? When I ring and there is no answer?

I think it's a sickness in our society where older people are invisible

"Are you still there?"

"Sam?"

"Why are you crying?"

There is an ugly guttural cry that comes out of me that I can't control. It is a sickness in our society, I think. Where older people are invisible and neighbours are nuisances and no one cares for anyone but themselves.

"Let's talk about

something cheerier," Pauline says, and suddenly it is her comforting me. "How's Tom?"

At the mention of my partner, I smile.

"He's got a lovely accent, hasn't he?"

"He has," I reply. "Aren't I lucky?"

The previous week she'd overheard Tom on the phone to his mum, while we sat together on the sofa.

"And am I allowed to say that there is something very attractive about an Irish accent?"

"You are," I say. "And there is. It's like butter, Pauline. You should hear the things he whispers in my ear."

There is a naughty cackle down the phone. "I'm glad it's not just me then."

"What do you look like, Pauline? I've never seen you, have I? We only know each other's voices."

I regret the question immediately. In all the hundreds of hours we've been speaking, I had unconsciously painted an image of Pauline and I was reluctant to have that image shattered.

"I know what," she says, "I'll tell you what I used to look like." I feel myself exhale.

"I had long blonde hair, reddish blonde, really, and a heart-shaped face. Hazel eyes, a dainty little nose, and a cupid's bow mouth. And I used to wear a lot of jewellery – no point now, of course."

I beam into the receiver, imagining her.

"I should let you get on," I add, realising what a ridiculous thing it is to say.

"You will ring again when you get a moment?"

"I will! Why would I stop calling?"

This has gone beyond volunteering, I realise. It's been almost four years. Hundreds of hours of conversation. Countless stories. Laughter. Secrets. And now tears. It's no longer charity, if it ever was. We're friends, simple as that. I will keep calling Pauline, of course I will. I will keep calling until she doesn't pick up. ■

Pauline's name has been changed for confidentiality. *The Fellowship of Puzzlemakers* by Samuel Burr (Orion Fiction, £14.99) is available from guardianbookshop.com for £13.19

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Séamas O'Reilly

My son is ticking off many of life's early milestones, but there's one that's for me to reflect on myself

@shockproofbeats



I find it hard to look at my son and imagine what it's like to be his age. This is primarily due to the insoluble problem of memory. I hold a vaporous grasp on my early childhood, little more than a vague timeline of birthday parties, summer holidays and random interactions in primary school, mostly from eras so indeterminate they could be from any year before I turned 10.

His life is also so different from mine I'm not sure if transposing my own childhood on to his would be much use. At his age, my entire life had been lived with my massive family on Derry's rural border, a place he only knows as a sort of pleasant agrarian theme park that's been good enough to let his grandad live on site full-time.

My son, by contrast, is growing up in 2024 London, subsumed within a fully connected online age, sharing his time with one sibling instead of 10. He's familiar enough with hummus

and pomegranate seeds to refer to them by name as he refuses them from his plate, whereas I was 16 before I encountered a curry not listed as 'curry' on a menu.

When he hears friends chat to their parents in Urdu, Polish and Igbo, I remember that I was considered quite the exotic because mine were from Fermanagh. It is possible he has never heard the term 'potato bread' in his life. It is certain he's never heard 'bomb scare'.

The reason this is all coming back to me now is that he's passed a milestone. It is three weeks before his sixth birthday, which means my son is now exactly the age I was when my mother died in 1991. My memory of that time is, understandably, etched in dark marble and it gives me a dart of pain to place that event in his context.

I look at this small, silly and kind little red-headed person and, though he may be more startled by cows and familiar with quinoa than I ever was, I suddenly see myself all too easily. A boy too young

to comprehend the finality and horror of death. A boy so innocent he plays Uno with all his cards face-up, no matter how many times we tell him not to.

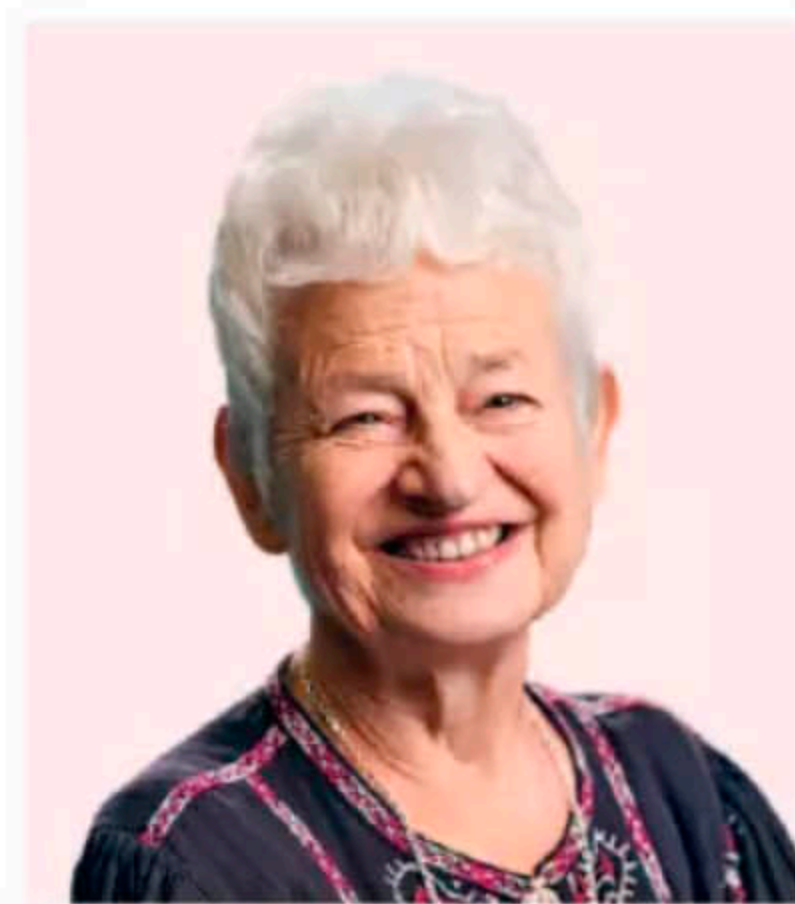
His own explorations about the granny he's never met are infrequent and often charmingly inept. A few months ago, he posited a theory that all humans died when they turned 100, to which we gently replied that most people died a little earlier than that. 'Oh yeah, like your mummy!' he remembered aloud with a breezy smile, invoking my mother's death as cheerfully as you might shout, 'Marinus van der Lubbe!' at a pub quiz.

He couldn't understand why we laughed so much, and I won't be mentioning this particular milestone to him either. It's for me to reflect on, as I console myself that we are all happy and healthy. It is a lovely evening and a game of Uno is on the horizon. I won't go easy on him – some things he must learn for himself – but I might just make him some potato bread.

Ask Philippa

Why do I keep falling in love with totally unavailable people?

@Philippa_Perry



Sunday with...

Author Jacqueline Wilson on walks and chickens

Sundays mornings?

Sundays have changed radically since I moved to the country. I loved to spend mornings going to a gallery, having brunch, reading the Sunday papers. It was gentle, couched, gorgeous.

And now? They start extremely early because we have animals: a cat, two dogs and a chicken. Animals don't understand Sundays. They don't think: 'Oh, how heavenly, we'll have a little lie-in.' The cat wants breakfast and the dogs need to be walked.

And the chicken? Poppy is desperate to get out for a peck. She gets treats: strawberry ice lollies in the summer and porridge in the winter. I have a very angelic partner who sees to the animals while I write for an hour. Then, as a reward, I get breakfast in bed.

Presumably eggs? They're delicious. When we had four hens, we were everybody's best friend. Even our postman got in on the act.

Out and about? The seaside is always gloriously tempting – 10 minutes away. You can walk along the esplanade, or head to the beach which is completely undeveloped: no ice-creams.

Sunday grub? We go to a cycling café – we don't ride bikes – for healthy, delicious sandwiches named after cyclists like Bradley Wiggins.

Sunday afternoon? We might go for a walk. It's called the South Downs, but it mostly seems to be up. The views are gorgeous, but you've got to check the weather first.

Sunday unwind? We're in the middle of *Clarkson's Farm*. I never willingly watched Jeremy Clarkson when he was a buffoon on *Top Gear*. Now I adore him. The episode where his piglets die is tragic.

Mondays? I don't mind Mondays. It takes time for people to gear up and send emails, so I can write in peace. **Rich Pelley** *My National Gallery, London, is in cinemas now*



The question I'm at my wit's end. I'm a 50-year-old gay man and I'm in a happy, long-term relationship. But I've fallen in love with a married straight guy 10 years my junior. He's a new colleague at work. We get on well and have struck up a companionable working relationship, but my feelings for him have become deeper – and it's agony.

I'm not an idiot. He's married with young children and I know nothing is going to happen. I don't think I'd even want it to, but I just can't stop the intensity of my feelings for him. He's a kind, thoughtful man, which somehow makes it worse. I couldn't bear it if he found out.

This is not the first time I've done this. Over the years there have been others that I've secretly fallen for, so I guess it's a bit of a pattern. The first time was when I was at school at 14. I fell in love with a friend and my feelings were so intense I couldn't tell anyone, not even him. I couldn't even admit I was gay at that age.

This current crush feels as bad as that. I know this sounds pathetic, but I feel absolutely broken by this. I'd like us to be friends, but how do I stop feeling jealous when he talks and laughs with others? How can I stop feeling these intense feelings?

Philippa's answer One thing you might consider is to explore the underlying reasons for why you tend to develop these intense crushes on unavailable people. It sounds like this has been a pattern for you since childhood, so understanding the roots of this behaviour could help you gain insight into your psyche. And insight can lead to healing. I'm going to suggest a few reasons that might be the cause, in case any resonate with you.

It could be that somewhere in your infancy and childhood you got confused between longing, which is agony, and love, which is bliss or at least comfortable. It sounds like you are a lifelong sufferer of intermittent limerence. Limerence is a term coined by Dorothy Tennov in 1979. It's when otherwise healthy individuals find themselves in a monomania for another person, which they might not have expected to happen and when they recover from the experience their lives go

back to normal... until the next time. The experience is distinct from simple sexual desire – it's more obsessive.

Remember, this isn't real love. It is possible this is a hangover from how you learned to attach and bond to others when you were a baby or young child. As you have a good long-term relationship you must also have learned how to have healthy attachments, too. But it is as though there was someone you once wanted who you could not have, maybe a nanny or carer who left, or perhaps a neglectful parent. You might be projecting

This isn't love, it's limerence. You need to talk about this to heal

your own iridescence on to your "love" object as though he, and all the former objects that caused you to become obsessed, aren't just people, but gods on pedestals, and they stand in for a person from your past. Essentially, there may be unfinished business from your infancy or early childhood that you are trying to conclude in the

present by longing for something unobtainable. Perhaps your psyche is saying, maybe this time I'll win – even though your logical self knows that would be disastrous. I noticed in my psychotherapy practice that we humans are vulnerable to obsessions and fixations when we want to distract ourselves from a deeper problem we can't bear to think about. This could be not facing up to a bereavement in your life, or a loss likely to happen soon, or it could be that you need to feel a deeper connection with yourself and it just seems easier to ache for a deeper connection with an unobtainable other. If there is something you are not facing up to, name it and face it – it won't be as bad as you think.

When you are able to create a narrative, it will be easier for you to separate the essential you from your obsession. You do this by observing the obsessive thoughts and feelings, explaining them to yourself, but not *being* them. You sound very alone with these feelings. It is understandable if you don't want to upset your partner or friends with them, but do consider consulting a therapist. Secrecy can encourage limerence to fester rather than fade, and I believe you need to talk about this.

You are not an idiot, neither are you pathetic. Many people, men and women of every sexual orientation, suffer from limerence. It will probably fade, but more than that and with the right help, it can be managed so it loses its power over you. Recovering from limerence is a process I have been privileged to witness several times.

Recommended reading: *Living with Limerence* by Dr L and *How to Stay Sane* by me, which has useful exercises to help you to train your mind and contain your feelings so that you can master them, rather than them mastering you. ■

➡ **Write to us:** If you have a question, send an email to askphilippa@observer.co.uk. To have your say on this week's column, go to observer.co.uk/ask-philippa



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