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# THE SUNDAY TIMES *magazine*



## THIS WEEK IN 1991

Princess Diana ditches her shoes to run the mothers' race for Wetherby School's sports day. Prince Harry was then six and a pupil at the London school. The princess finished a close second at Richmond Rugby Club on June 11. She had competed in the race before, in 1989 and 1990. Photograph by Arthur Edwards.

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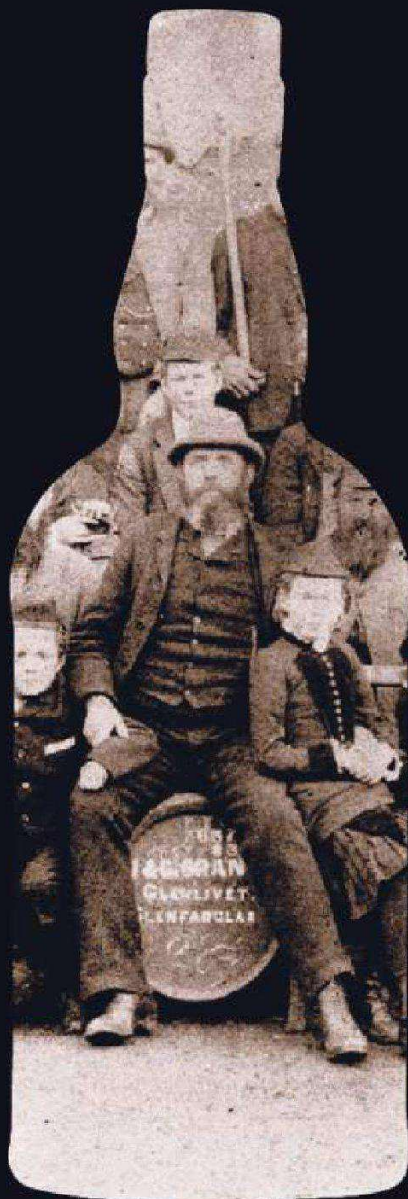
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MATT RUDD

## Surely the parent WhatsApp group couldn't be *that* bad...



**A**s a husband I consider myself something of an expert. Newer members of our order might not immediately detect when marital discord is serious, but I have the highly attuned instincts of the 20-year veteran. I can sense a changing mood. I can tell when a harmless tiff threatens to spill into something more troublesome. But this time I got it wrong. “You need to join the parent WhatsApp group,” Harriet said after a day dealing with the parent WhatsApp group. If I’d been on the ball I could have talked my way out of this terrible idea, but instead I said: “No way.” Too negative too soon. Wrong move. “I’m adding you to the group,” she said.

“Welcome Matt,” wrote the obergruppenführer of the channel, “and congratulations on steering clear of us until your youngest child’s very final term of primary school.” Her message quickly gathered emojis as the brigade of mums enjoyed a virtual collective eyeroll.

That night I tried to console myself. I’ve heard about parent WhatsApp groups. I know their reputation. We all do. But surely it wouldn’t be that bad. Surely... Oh my God.

The beeping began some time before seven the next morning. Someone needed a lift. Someone had forgotten their packed lunch. It was a teacher’s final week. Should we organise a collection? Or a present? What type of present? George has a nosebleed. Sam might have scarlet fever. Does anyone know if the school jumpers come up small or large?

About a hundred messages in, someone started worrying about a school trip the following week. When was drop-off? And where, exactly? Would the children need a snack as well as a packed lunch? And what about clothing? And would forest school still run the next day? I typed “Won’t it all just be in the Friday newsletter?” and then deleted it. Too soon.

As each thread snowballed into its own Pepsyan epic, the overall mood was one of teamwork, of charity, of togetherness. I felt as though I’d been initiated into a secret and powerful cabal. Here was the village it takes to raise a child. Here was the hive mind, the matriarchal bedrock of civilisation (with a few dads

watching from the sidelines and very, very occasionally chipping in). This is what Harriet means when she talks about “all the bloody unpaid labour”.

By the following Tuesday I’d changed my mind. The coach returning from the school trip was running a bit late and that meant WhatsApp frenzy. One mother was sending live traffic updates from a tracker implanted somewhere on her child’s person. Someone else was worried their son might starve, what with it being half-past his dinner time. Then there were further delays on the M25 and the coach driver needed to take a 30-minute break. Cue panic discussions on the long-term effects of momentary malnutrition and the rights and wrongs of government-mandated fatigue breaks.

The teamwork was still in evidence, but also quite an astonishing degree of mollycoddling. These kids, I thought, have had more hand-holding this week than I had for my entire childhood. If I forgot my packed lunch, I’d go hungry. If the coach was late, I’d find my own way home. If the school jumper came up big, I’d drag my sleeves along behind me for a term or two. And, apart from the deeply pessimistic outlook on life and the unacknowledged abandonment issues, I’ve turned out all right.

In a survey last month it emerged that parents think personal finance and cooking should be top priorities in education. I disagree. I still think education should be about the useless, useful stuff like trigonometry and oxbow lakes. The teaching of practical life skills should be up to us parents. Where do we start? It’s simple. Fewer WhatsApps. Far fewer. Like one per parent per week. The kids will be fine. They might even enjoy some small measure of self-reliance.

I typed my constructive criticism into the channel and then deleted it because I realised Child C had forgotten his PE kit. In my day I’d have been forced to do PE in my underwear and the humiliation would have stayed with me for decades. Thank goodness that didn’t happen. No, it didn’t. I don’t want to talk about it. But now?

“Can anyone drop Child C’s football kit up at school?” I asked the cabal — and they immediately came to my rescue. “No problem,” came one message. Then another, and another... ■



**GOOD NEWS!**

Spain and Portugal’s Iberian lynx population has reached 2,021, pushing the species away from extinction. In 2002 there were 94 of the animals,

compelling the countries’ governments, the European Union and the World Wildlife Fund to create four breeding centres. So far 372 of the big

cats have been reintroduced to the wild. If progress continues steadily the lynx’s conservation status should reach “favourable” by 2040.



## RELATIVE VALUES

# Benjamin and Alicia Hall

The Fox News reporter and his wife on the Kyiv bombing that changed their lives

### Benjamin

On March 14, 2022, I was reporting outside Kyiv for Fox News. The war in the Ukraine was less than a month in. As my colleagues — the cameraman Pierre Zakrzewski, the local producer Sasha Kuvshynova and two Ukrainian soldiers, Mykola Kravchenko and Serhiy Mashovets — and I drove back to the city a bomb fell in front of us and as we tried to reverse a second bomb landed beside us. Everything went black and quiet, as though all my senses had been taken from me. Out of the darkness I heard the voice of my eldest daughter, Honor, who was back home in London, saying, “Daddy, you’ve got to get out of the car.” I managed to open the door and propel myself out when the third bomb landed directly on the car. I was on fire and could see that my right leg was gone but I knew, in that moment, I was going to do whatever it took to return to my family.

I was the only survivor. Thanks to the heroic efforts and kindness of so many that day, and in the following months as I recovered at Brooke Army Medical Center in Texas, I never lost sight of what had been gifted to me: an understanding of the importance of family. It kept me strong through more than 30 surgeries to date, the pain and hallucinations. I suffered severe burns and there was shrapnel embedded all over my head and body. As well as having my lower right leg amputated I lost much of my left foot, the sight in one eye and the use of my left hand.

I was already covering conflicts when Alicia and I first met. She understood how much my work defined me. We married in 2015 and have three beautiful daughters, Honor, Iris and Hero. We want our girls to value hard work, to live a good life, whether that’s raising a family or reporting a war. More than ever we believe in the power of journalism. I’ve been back to Ukraine since and to Israel — although Alicia did send me a screenshot of my location saying, “What are you doing so close to Gaza?”

Alicia and I spoke many times a day when I was in Texas and she was at home in London. We never questioned whether the other could do what was required. She held our family together so I could focus on getting better. Her remarkable strength meant that when I spoke to the children on video they were happy and chatting about normal things. She explained things to them in such a way that, by the time I came home six months later, they were prepared and filled with joy.

Alicia is the hero of this story. I’m an optimist but I wonder if I could have done what she did. I knew there were going to be extra burdens for her. Small things such as household chores or taking the children out come with added complications. The other day we’d gone to bed and I’d taken off my prosthetics when we thought we heard a sound in the house. In the past I’d

have been the one to run downstairs with a bat, but I couldn’t. Alicia didn’t hesitate and, boy, I’d pity anyone who did break in and find themselves up against her.

Alicia has helped me become more in touch with my emotions and that’s made me a better husband, father and journalist. Other people’s stories move me deeper and I cry more easily, but that’s a good thing. I now run all my stories past Alicia. I wish I’d done that sooner.

I’m a firm believer that on the other side of something difficult is something good. Those who suffer terrible accidents can go in one of two directions — either they lose their identity and fear for the future or they come out stronger. I love life and believe in goodness. That’s down to Alicia. I probably don’t tell her that enough. She never for a second doubted we’d get through this.

I changed Alicia’s life for ever when I went to Ukraine, but each day since has been the next building block in our journey together. She gave me my future.

### Alicia

I had an uneasy feeling when Benji left for Ukraine. Call it a sixth sense but I felt very strongly that something was about to change. The day of his accident had been strange — I’d been unusually calm. Normally I’m busy rushing around but instead I was aware of some sort of

**It wasn’t useful to be crying. Benji had been blown up and had to be put back together. We were in total agreement**



**Main: Alicia and Benjamin, both 41, at home in west London. Right: on their wedding day in Knightsbridge, 2015**





higher power, of things being beyond my control. It's not a tangible explanation but it all made sense when I got the call from Suzanne Scott, the Fox News CEO, that evening. Benji had been in an accident and that's all she knew. I'd hear more news when they could give it to me. I went downstairs and had supper with the girls.

The sooner you accept a situation the sooner you find a plan and move forward. Benji was quick to get to that point and that allowed me to do so too. Thank goodness he's always had endless positivity. His glass isn't so much half full as overflowing. It was obvious he needed to be in a military hospital with a multitrauma treatment programme, and it was also obvious to us that I needed to stay in London and keep things stable for the girls. It wasn't useful to be crying. Benji had been blown up and had to be put back together. We were in total agreement.

Before Benji came home a disability expert came to assess our house and deemed it "very unsuitable". Stupidly, at the time, that upset me and I hated the ugly rails we had to put by the front door — what dreadful, superficial feelings to have in the scheme of things. The first couple of months were the shakiest because Benji was still recovering, but we adapted, moved house and every single month he has got better. We know we were the lucky ones. It could have been very much worse.

## STRANGE HABITS

**Benjamin on Alicia**  
Practically every night, just at the moment I'm about to fall asleep, Alicia suddenly asks me a question

**Alicia on Benjamin**  
He travels everywhere with the girls' toy hedgehog. He had it with him during the attack, and keeps it closer than ever now

Two years on, his recovery has plateaued and I know what he's capable of now. Although we have to be very organised, our lives haven't fundamentally changed. Perhaps I do a few more things for him than I might have done in the past — I'm not going to make him go downstairs to get a glass of water — but I don't think of life as before and after the accident. Benji's never made any of this a burden for anyone.

He has passed his amazing positivity on, not just to me and the girls but to others. Maybe because his injuries are physically visible it's made people open up to him about their own traumas and that's brought us in contact with a unique set of people. When you've peeked round the curtain of adversity you're different but in a better way. We tell our story in the hope it will shine some light for others. Benji is proof that with the right mindset you can turn a really bad situation on its head. I'm forever grateful to Benji for finding the strength to get out that day and come home to us. Ours is a happy ending ■

**Interviews by Caroline Hutton.**

**Saved: A War Reporter's Mission to Make It Home** by Benjamin Hall (HarperCollins £12.99). To order a copy go to [timesbookshop.co.uk](http://timesbookshop.co.uk). Discount for Times+ members. The *Searching for Heroes* podcast is available now







Before she was a billionaire pop sensation, Taylor Swift was a determined little girl with curly hair who once brought her pony into school for show and tell. *Megan Agnew* drives from Pennsylvania to Nashville to meet the teachers, classmates, neighbours and musicians who knew her best

Taylor made ♡

The singer on stage in Kansas City, Missouri.  
Left: another face in the crowd in her Hendersonville High School yearbook in Tennessee, 2005



**E**very few months, Scott Swift would hit the phones. The agenda: his teenage daughter, Taylor. Most likely sitting in his study at the family home in Hendersonville, near Nashville, Tennessee, overlooking the Cumberland River, he caught up with her former teachers, his business buddies, family friends, session musicians who had recorded demos with her and the producers who had mixed them, giving them a detailed download of information about his daughter's ascent.

Scott talked well. A third-generation banker and former radio salesman, he updated them on which songs she had cut (I am told he spent \$10,000 on building her a recording studio at their home); which singles were coming out next (by the age of 15, Taylor had a record deal with a company in which Scott had bought a 3 per cent stake); where she was touring (he had bought Cher's former tour bus for her); and the awards for which she needed votes. Nashville, after all, was an industry town where careers were built on fresh young faces and smoky old networks.

And — it worked. Today Swift, 34, is a billionaire, more of a phenomenon than a pop star, who sells so many concert tickets she shifts national economies. She arrived in the UK on tour on Friday. Her albums (11 original studio albums, 4 rerecorded albums and 4 live albums) are devoured immediately by her insatiable fans, the Swifties. She has sold the equivalent of five million albums this year alone, making her the top-selling artist of 2024, and has become the first artist in US history to sell 100 million album-equivalent units — the industry measure in the streaming era.

For the past few weeks I have been driving the Taylor Swift trail through the US to try to understand how she came to be: through Pennsylvania, where she was raised; New Jersey, where the family spent long summers; and Nashville, where they moved when Taylor was 14, to help her make it big. What I found was a story of megawatt talent, intense family nurturing and canny investment; of magic and money; of how a star was born — and then made bigger and bigger and bigger.

"What do I do with this child?" Scott reportedly asked a family friend, stunned by the sparkling talent and determination of his young daughter, who arrived in this world dead-set on stardom, who chatted endlessly and felt things so deeply she couldn't bear the death of birds she found in the garden; and who wrote poetry so relentlessly it was as if she couldn't stop.

The hills of Pennsylvania, just northwest of Philadelphia, are rolling rather than mighty, populated with rust-coloured



**From left: Taylor Swift with her parents, Scott and Andrea, in 2013; her first home — a former Christmas tree farm, where she had her own pony. Below, far right: the house in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, where the family moved when she was nine**

**"I WANT TO BE A STOCKBROKER," SWIFT WROTE IN HER YEARBOOK AGED 6, "BECAUSE MY DAD IS ONE." A YEAR LATER SHE WROTE "SINGER"**

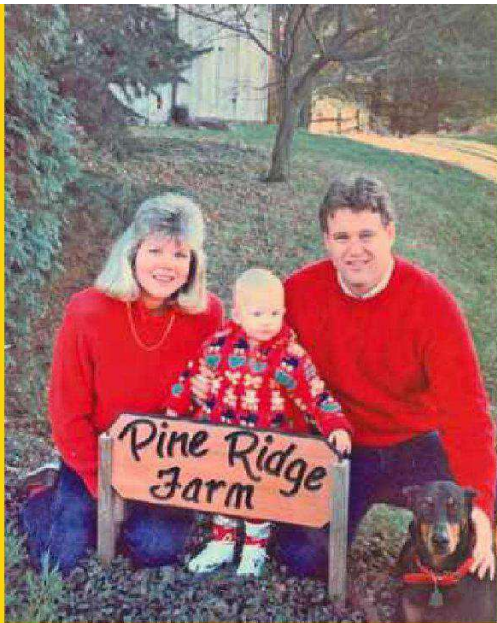
barns, stables, worn American flags and copses of ancient oaks. Swift's first home — Pine Ridge Farm, a former Christmas tree farm near Reading, where she spent the first decade of her life — is a Norman Rockwell painting of a place.

Her father, Scott, now 72, grew up nearby. He was a financial adviser at the investment firm Merrill Lynch. Swift's mother, Andrea, now 66, was a marketing executive born into a wealthy family who grew up between Singapore and Houston, Texas. Andrea's father was the president of a construction company, her mother an opera singer. Andrea met Scott at a drinks party and they married in 1988. Taylor was the Swifts' first child — born on December 13, 1989 — followed two years later by Austin, 32, who was quieter but cheekier.

I pull up outside the Swifts' old farm — a modest clapboard house overlooking the paddocks where Taylor kept a pony. Scott kept the farm as a hobby, mowing the meadows before work. Upstairs, in a corner room, was where she asked for three books to be read and five songs to be played to her every night. "We're not supposed to talk to anybody but People magazine," say the couple who live there today — referencing a popular celebrity tabloid in the US. And they have been instructed by Swift's team? "Yes," they say, closing the door.

Taylor went to a Montessori kindergarten and then Wyndcroft, a private school in nearby Pottstown, where the Swifts were known for their wealth. According to family friends they drove a Chevrolet Suburban — an SUV fit for the secret service — sent Christmas cards showing their impressive holidays and brought their daughter's pony to school for show and tell. They were also known for their generosity. Each year the people who had donated the most money to





Wyndcroft had their names published and the Swifts were often at the top. The family would also give teachers the keys to their holiday home as a thank-you present.

Scott seemed to know everybody, his friends often becoming clients and vice versa. One was James MacArthur, famous for playing Dan “Danno” Williams in *Hawaii Five-O*, with whom he apparently holidayed. I’m told Andrea played tennis at the Hillcrest Racquet Club in Reading, a members’ club where she often socialised.

Maureen Pemrick, 77, Swift’s teacher at Wyndcroft in first grade, says the first thing she noticed about Taylor was her wild curls — “She was strikingly pretty” — and her animated chatter. “She was a little sunbeam who just bounced around,” Pemrick says. One afternoon when it was time to go home, Swift suggested that the class had a group hug. “She gathered the children and started squeezing them together,” Pemrick says. “And from then on she was like that.”

Others remember her as dreamy but solid in confidence. “I want to be a stockbroker,” Swift wrote in her yearbook at six years old,

“because my dad is one.” By second grade that had changed to “Singer”.

“Taylor was a determined little thing,” says Barbara Kolvek, 78, who was a music teacher at Wyndcroft. When Swift was given the part of Freddie Fasttalk in the play *The Runaway Snowman*, she went to Kolvek’s office every lunchtime to practise her solo. “She didn’t care that she had to play a boy. She wanted to do it. And so she did.”

Down the road from Wyndcroft lives Barbara Lenzi, 75, an art teacher who has taught there for 45 years and who had Swift in her class for four years. “We’re huggers!” warns Lenzi, who has peroxide-dyed hair with pink tips, glittering flip-flops and iridescent nails. So is Nancy Boerner, 79, the cafeteria manager at Wyndcroft for 26 years, who has joined Lenzi to meet me.

“Taylor was the type of child you were just magnetised towards,” Lenzi says.

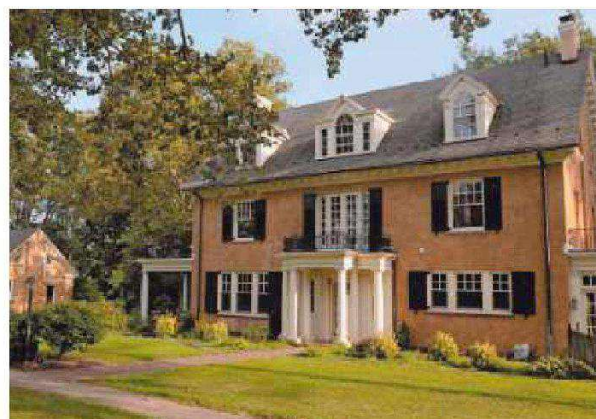
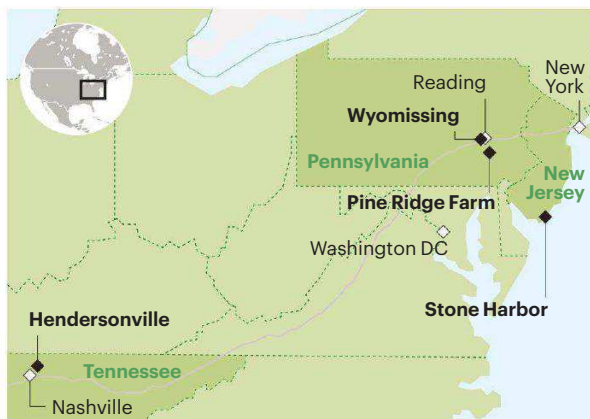
Swift was adored at school, they say. “I used to see her walk through that kitchen every day,” Boerner says, “with her smile and she would say” — she puts on a sing-song voice — “Hi, Mrs Nancy! And then she

was off, ‘Bla bla bla bla.’ She’d always have something sweet to say. Always.”

“She was confident — the whole family was — but never too much,” Lenzi says. “Just the way she walked, never looking shy.” “The curls boppin’!” Boerner adds.

“I’m going to show you something,” Lenzi says, switching on an ancient TV in her snug. “Open sesame,” she says to the machine, popping a CD into a slot. There, in front of us, is a 13-year-old Taylor Swift, on stage at Wyndcroft on a visit to her old school. “I’ve been a lot of lonely places,” she sings, a song she wrote, “being here on the outside, looking in... nobody ever lets me in.” After the performance she takes questions from the infant crowd. A water bottle appears, which she takes without looking. “Isn’t she just ador-baby!” Lenzi says.

Around three times a week until her early teens, Andrea took her daughter to Berks Youth Theatre Academy after school. Swift was the natural star: she played Sandy in *Grease*, Maria in *The Sound of Music*. “She was definitely the most gifted,” says Marjorie, 56, whose





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children were in the same group. “She stuck out. Once she was on stage, you couldn’t take your eyes off her.”

Swift gave out wallet-sized photos of herself as Sandy to the kids in the years below her at school, attended a performing arts summer camp run by Britney Spears and sang the national anthem at local baseball games on school nights.

Gena Levengood, 32, was two years behind Swift at the school. Levengood once asked Swift if she was going to audition for *American Juniors*, an *American Idol* spin-off for children. “She said she considered it but decided not to, because there was a line in the contract about not being able to release an album within a certain number of years.”

**A**t about nine years old Swift moved schools to Wyomissing Area Junior/Senior High School in West Reading — teachers say to be closer to theatre rehearsals. The Swifts moved house into the same town. I drive up the hill to the historic Dutch-style home, with its pillars, balconies and perfectly preened lawn. From the age of 11 Swift learnt to play the guitar in a room on the side of the house. She was taught two or three times a week for three hours after school by Ronnie Cremer, 57, a tech support guy by day who was introduced to the Swift family by his brother, who ran the youth theatre.

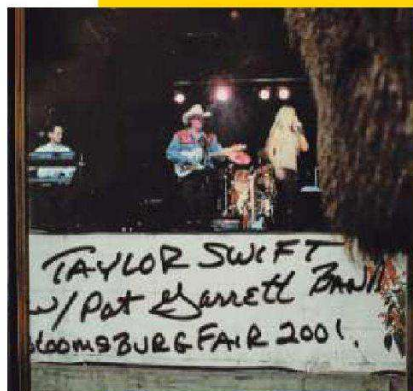
“I said I’d teach her what I know,” Cremer says. “She was sweet and kind and eager. She was never a guitar virtuoso, but the idea was to teach her how to project into a microphone and play as if on autopilot — to allow her to perform.” They listened to the Beatles, analysing the different band members’ writing styles, and she learnt to put chords to her own lyrics in her notebook.

The parents “made a fuss” over their daughter, who they called “T” or “Tay” or “Tay-Tay”. “Scott was the cash guy,” Cremer says. “He could sell ice to the Eskimos. Andrea was the one who kept Taylor on point. She had her eye on the prize.”

Later, Cremer was threatened with legal action by Swift’s team — which he says was dropped — for creating a website called *ITaughtTaylorSwift.com*. Today he says he has been “written out” of her biography.

Everyone I spoke to talked about the consistently close bond Swift had with her mother. “There were times when, in middle school and junior high, I didn’t have a lot of friends,” she told the *Great American Country* network in 2008. “But my mom was always my friend. Always.”

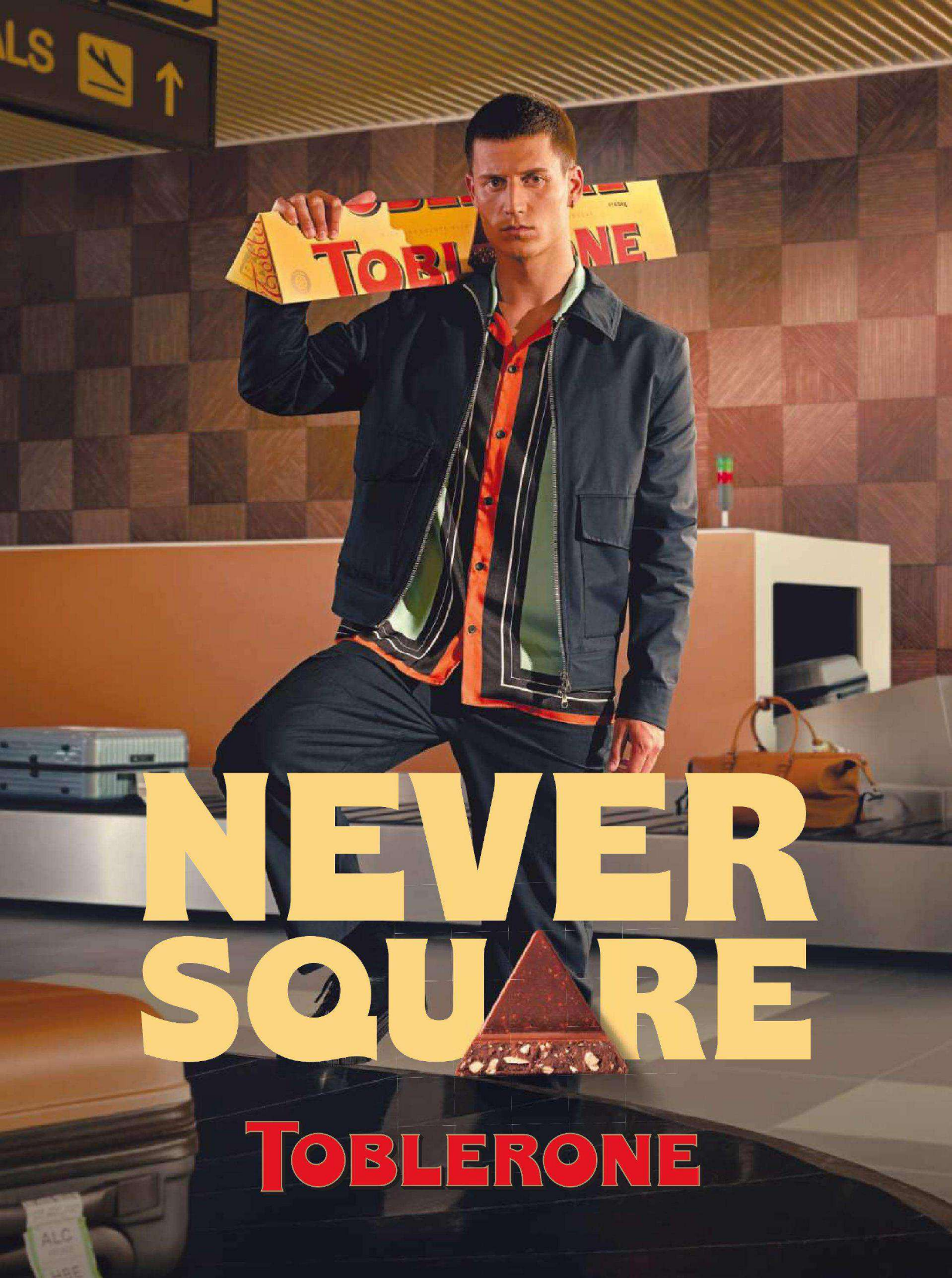
Half an hour’s drive north, at exit 19 of interstate 78, is a petrol station and sheepskin shop owned by a man called Pat Garrett, who is, in his words, “as old as water”. Over the road is a stage in a field, the Pat Garrett Amphitheater, where he holds country music concerts, and next ➤



From top: Barbara Lenzi, left, and Nancy Boerner worked at Swift’s school and have known her since she was a child; Pat Garrett, a local musician whose

band performed with Swift at county fairs when she was a preteen, above left. Above: Lenzi’s chihuahua, Carmela Lu-Chella, models a Swift-themed wardrobe





**NEVER  
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**TOBLERONE**



door he used to have a bar, the Pat Garrett Roadhouse, where he put on karaoke competitions. “Everything is Pat Garrett around here,” he says with a smile.

We walk through the shop, past a platinum album by Swift, through his workshop and its scraps of fur — “Skins and songs, that’s what I do” — and into his office. “I made that vest for the girl up there,” he says, pointing at a photo of a glamour model in a gilet, adding: “There’s nothing underneath.”

“Anyway,” he continues, “one week they showed up — 11-year-old Taylor and a whole gang of her people for the karaoke competition. Whoever won got to open the show at the Amphitheater. She kept getting better, so she won — and so she opened.”

She played with Garrett’s band at fairs and country music festivals in front of thousands of people, saying: “Hi everybody, I’m Taylor!” “She had a little bit of showbusiness in her,” he says. Her notebook, he claims, was filled with pages of her own autograph. “But she did good.”

One day he says Scott came in, not knowing what to do next with his daughter. “I told him, ‘Up here in Hershey they make bars. In Detroit they make cars. And in Nashville,’” Garrett lowers his voice, “‘they make stars. Move to Nashville.’ And he just kind of nodded. The rest is history, I guess.”

**T**he Swifts spent weeks of the summer at their holiday home in Stone Harbor, New Jersey, a small coastal town on a spit, the Atlantic on one side, a calm basin of water on the other. It’s a perfect little spot, with old-timey homes on the water — for sale in the estate agent’s window for \$6 million — crêperies and ice cream parlours. It is Springsteen country. During the long, hot summer days Swift would walk through town, her guitar slung across her back, much to the judgment of the local girls. “I think Taylor made herself known here,” says one of them, who still lives there.

Andrea handed New Jersey neighbours Swift’s early demos and would ring the local café, Coffee Talk, to ask if her daughter could sing at their open-mike nights.

Their former home has been knocked down and rebuilt, renamed Swift Waters. Lois Hamilton, 75, an old family friend of the Swifts who lives next door, invites me in. We walk through her living room and past the stone fireplace where an eight-year-old Swift opened her first guitar when she came over one Christmas. “Oh my God!” she said in a home video, surrounded by wrapping paper, “I Am. Happy.”

“She was very bright,” says Hamilton on the deck at the back of the house. The Swifts’ old garden is next door, backing onto the still water. They had a hot tub on the patio, a jetty with a boat from



**The “press kit” distributed to record executives at the Bluebird Cafe, where Swift was spotted. Below: with her childhood guitar teacher, Ronnie Cremer**

which they waterskiied and two jet skis. They were also members of the sailing club.

Swift was “cute and confident” but she didn’t have a lot of friends, Hamilton says. “She was more solitary, very happy in her own room.” Instead she would sit on the decking and sing out across the water. “Constantly singing, constantly writing, then singing what she was writing.”

Jim Hand is the third generation to own Fred’s Tavern & Liquor Store, five minutes down the road, and has known Scott Swift for much of his life. “When Taylor was young, the family came over for dinner and the kids were all swimming,” Hand says. “They [Swift’s parents] asked me if I had the Disney channel and I said no. There was some country singer on that was Taylor’s idol — and so they got up and they left.”



Scott, he says, still manages his investment portfolio. “I couldn’t trust anyone any more than I trust him,” Hand says. “If he came to me and said, ‘Hey, I need \$100,000,’ I’d borrow \$100,000 and give it to him. And he would pay it back.”

In the school holidays, when Swift was 11, her parents took her to Nashville’s Music Row, where she went knocking on the doors of record labels handing out demo CDs. “I would say, ‘Hi, I’m Taylor. I’m 11. I want a record deal — call me,’” she told Entertainment Weekly in 2008.

Aged 13 she was signed to RCA — a Sony Music Entertainment subsidiary — on a development deal, the youngest songwriter in the label’s history. And by 14 the Swifts had moved to Hendersonville, Tennessee, a town 15 miles northeast of Nashville, once the home town of Johnny Cash.

Cremer, the guitar teacher, says the family flew him from Pennsylvania to build a studio for Taylor in their new home when they first moved in, giving him about \$10,000 for equipment. In the driveway, in subsequent years, was Cher’s tour bus, which they had renovated, installing a sign in bronze script that read: “Never, Never, Never Give Up”.

Swift made an entrance when she first arrived at Hendersonville High School, says a former classmate, telling people she was going to be a star. “We kind of rolled our eyes because, being in Nashville, we hear that a lot,” she says. “It was just such a strong statement for someone of that age.”

Almost immediately she started dating an older boy. He was popular and had a “preppy look with a country flair” — he would fray the corners of his cap and stick a fishing hook through it. Within months, however, their relationship had ended.

Soon after that it was the school talent competition and Swift got up on stage to perform *Teardrops on My Guitar*, a song ➤



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she had written about him. “She’d better hold him tight, give him all her love,” she sang in front of the whole school, her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend. “Look in those beautiful eyes and know she’s lucky, ‘cause he’s the reason for the teardrops on my guitar.” It was ballsy. “Everyone was pretty taken aback,” the classmate says. “Like — she had just come out of nowhere.”

Many, however, thought she was “a bit of a brat”, from the moneyed side of town and modelling clothes for Abercrombie & Fitch. At 16, Swift bought a Lexus SC430 convertible, the car driven by Regina George, the meanest girl in *Mean Girls*.

Today it is thought that Swift’s parents still spend time in Hendersonville as well as at a home just outside Tampa, Florida, where they invite family friends for long weekends. Swift, I am told, calls them from her treadmill, singing her set list and running, rehearsing for her current 152-show tour.

In Nashville, Swift’s record label paired her with songwriters and producers. One was Angelo Petraglia, 70, a New Yorker whose work with Kings of Leon won a Grammy. “I was, like, oh my God, they’re bringing over a 14-year-old girl,” Petraglia recalls. “I didn’t know how to write with a 14-year-old girl.”

He called his friend and writing partner, Robert Ellis Orrall, 69, who had a similar-aged daughter and agreed to make a trio. “But it was incredible to write with her,” Petraglia says. “She had no fear. None at all. She seemed to know who she was already — she was Taylor Swift, even back then.” It was a confidence, he says, that never quite tipped into precociousness. “You can get plenty of people coming in here feeling a little too much of themselves, but she wasn’t like that at all,” he says. “She just knew what she wanted.”

The three of them wrote in after-school sessions, which she would always lead. “Between Angelo and I, we had over 100 years of experience,” Ellis Orrall says, “but I remember Angelo threw out a line and she just said, ‘Hmm, I dunno, Angelo, it sounds a little trite.’ And it was, like, ‘Boom! Shot down by the kid!’ Out of ten songs, one of hers would be perfection. Nothing could make it any better.” And every year the ratio has only got higher, he says.

Despite the quantity of songs they cut — about 25 — the label told her they needed 60 days to evaluate her when the contract ended, according to Ellis Orrall. After a family “huddle” between Andrea, Scott and Taylor, they walked away. “It was extraordinary. The biggest mistake in the history of the record label.”

With no label, Ellis Orrall suggested to the Swifts that they put together a press kit to hand out at a showcase at the Bluebird Cafe in Nashville, a haven for songwriters. He had a gig coming up and so he invited her to play. “That night we got her a record deal,” he says. Scott Borchetta — formerly of Universal Music Group and now setting



Swift, aged 15, in her home studio in Hendersonville, Tennessee, in July 2005. She released her debut album the following year

## SHE WAS DATING AN OLDER BOY. WHEN THAT ENDED, SHE PERFORMED A SONG ABOUT HIM IN FRONT OF THE WHOLE SCHOOL

up his own company, Big Machine Records — was in the audience, and “had found the one person he could build a label around”. Swift was 15. According to documents seen by Music Business Worldwide, Scott Swift bought shares in Big Machine at the time worth \$500,416.66, thought to be a stake of 3-5 per cent. Swift’s self-titled debut album was released in October 2006 and became the longest-charting album on the Billboard 200 of the decade, seven times platinum.

Until — again — she walked away. “For years I asked [Big Machine], pleaded for a chance to own my work,” she wrote in a blog post. In 2018 she left the label for the Universal Music Group, which gave her ownership over her music.

In June of the following year, Borchetta announced he was selling the company to the entrepreneur Scooter Braun for about \$300 million, a deal that included Swift’s back catalogue; her father, as a shareholder, is said to have made \$15.1 million from the deal. Swift accused Braun of “incessant, manipulative bullying”; Braun told *Variety* in 2021 that her reaction was “very confusing and not based on anything factual”. In 2020 the rights were sold again, to a private equity company. Swift, angry and determined, set about rerecording her first six albums — an act of brilliant business acumen, propelling her old songs back into the charts.

Today she has money (\$1.1 billion, according to Bloomberg); awards (14 Grammys, 39 Billboard Music Awards and an Emmy); Spotify streams (around 110 million listeners every month); and an A-list boyfriend, the Kansas City Chiefs Super Bowl winner Travis Kelce. Right now she is in Edinburgh on her Eras tour. Scott is probably on the tour bus too, the father linked to ten companies affiliated with his daughter, including merchandising and rights management; Andrea as well, described by the singer as her “guiding force”, who has a role in “every decision I make”; and maybe Austin too. “I always joke that we’re a small family business,” she told *Time* magazine in December last year.

And so just know that, when Swift is on stage in front of 100,000 people and the lights are flashing and there are sequins and dance routines and 44 songs and 10 acts and the ticket sales are pumping up the economy, this was always, always the plan ■



DRUGS

DIRTY

DUBAI



For the past year reporters from The Times, The Sunday Times and News Corp Australia have been unlocking the secrets of the global cocaine industry. An eight-part podcast of their findings launches today. Here they tell the inside story of the British beauticians recruited as cash mules by a criminal mastermind

SPECIAL REPORT BY DAVID COLLINS AND WILL ROE

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER CROWTHER



*lipstick*



# IN DUBAI'S GOLD SOUK



two British drug dealers browse the labyrinth of alleyways. The air is humid and the streets are packed with cars and motorbikes beeping at one another to move as private security guards patrol the area. Shop windows display gold necklaces in the shape of olive leaves, gold bracelets with names written in Arabic calligraphy, 24-carat-gold bangles studded with rubies, sapphires and emeralds, and pure gold bars sold by the half-kilogram or kilogram.

This marketplace has existed in the Deira district of Dubai since the early 1900s, but boomed considerably in the 1940s when merchants from Iran and India arrived to set up shop. At any one time it holds about ten tonnes — £600 million worth — of gold, according to local tourist guides.

Wearing smart shirts and designer sunglasses, the two drug dealers enter one of the air-conditioned shops, where a group of men are sitting around striking deals beneath a TV screen showing the day's gold prices. A large picture of Sheikh Mohammed al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, hangs upon the wall. One of the gold traders, in his early thirties, with thick black hair and an easy smile, appears a little friendlier than the rest. For his safety we have changed his name to Rashid.

"All right, boss, how are you?" Rashid says. He reaches into a safe and shows them a gold bar weighing 0.5kg, smaller than a mobile phone and deceptively heavy, worth about £30,000. Keen to make a sale, he hands over his business card.

A few days later the Brits get back in touch by phone. They have cash to spend, they tell him, but they have a confession to

make: the money may have been made from drug dealing in the UK. They are concerned about what checks will be made by authorities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Rashid considers the offer carefully. He wants the men to bring him the money in local currency, dirhams, rather than sterling. A single transaction, he says, can be for up to 3kg of gold, worth £180,000, without any checks on the source of the money: "Above four to five kilo, then we would require the source of funds. Below that — two kilo to three kilo — there is no problem. I can assure you."

Compare this to Hatton Garden, London's jewellery hub, where two gold-trading businesses tell us they accept no more than £10,000 in cash with two forms of ID, and one large gold-trading company says it stopped taking cash entirely last year.

Rashid says he has a workshop that can shape the gold into jewellery, such as a necklace, which can be worn under clothes to take it through customs in the UK. "I have one or two British customers," he says. "They usually buy a 24-carat chain. They say if you take a gold bar there will be a problem in the airport. So they usually will wear a chain and there is no problem with that."

How much can be spent on a gold chain, the drug dealers ask. "There is no limit, brother," Rashid says. All he requires for the transaction is a passport.

The two drug dealers are in fact undercover journalists from The Times and The Sunday Times: we are acting on information from the National Crime Agency (NCA) that Britain's organised criminals are smuggling millions of pounds of drug money through UK airports into Dubai, then laundering it by investing in the gold trade. The NCA has evidence that the smuggled cash is being used by criminals to buy gold bullion either in Dubai's marketplaces or in Africa, where illegal goldmining operations accept cash with no checks on the source of the money.

Money launderers are attracted to gold not only because the precious metal holds its value over time but because of its malleability — it can be melted down and recast, concealing its true source.

"One thing that everybody knows about gold is it costs a lot of money, and it has historically been shown to be an excellent store of value," says Sal Melki, the head of illicit finance threat at the NCA. The agency says gold is being stored by criminals, either

## THIRTY-FOUR "MONEY MULES" HAVE BEEN CONVICTED IN BRITAIN IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS FOR SMUGGLING £200M IN CASH TO DUBAI





**Opposite page:** outside Dubai's gold souk. **Above:** a trader at one of many shops, about whom there is no suggestion of wrongdoing. **Left:** a gold bar for sale

by smuggling it back to the UK as jewellery under clothing, or by keeping it in a safe in Dubai, where it can be sold or traded later.

This is just one way British criminals are using gold to wash their dirty money — a method the NCA says is used by relatively low-level crooks. As part of a new podcast series by The Times, The Sunday Times and News Corp Australia, called *Cocaine Inc*, which examines the global drug trade, we have uncovered a network of companies and shell companies that link drug money from the streets of Britain to money launderers in Dubai and whole goldmining operations in Africa. To do so we followed the money trail of the UK's largest cash-smuggling operation.

High-level drug dealers don't smuggle cash themselves. Organised crime gangs have been recruiting "cash mules" — airline passengers willing to smuggle cash in

suitcases out of UK airports — to move hundreds of millions of pounds out of the country. These mules, who are lured by the promise of business class flights, a free luxury holiday and a cash payment of about £3,000 at the end of the trip, have been found to carry up to half a million pounds in cash in each suitcase.

A total of 34 money mules have been convicted in Britain in the past five years as part of three separate criminal operations, including Jo-Emma Larvin, 45, a former glamour model who once dated the Welsh boxing champion Joe Calzaghe. Others include beauticians, Instagram influencers, west London-based gangsters and a Czech taxi driver. The 34 were responsible for smuggling £200 million in cash to Dubai. But according to investigators and a former mule who risked her safety to speak to us, they represent only the tip of the iceberg.

#### Francesca the cash mule

In a hotel in northern England a woman with coiffed hair and painted nails looks nervous. We have been exchanging WhatsApp messages with her for months. She is concerned for her safety and worried about the potential for violent repercussions. For that reason her name has been changed here to Francesca.

A beautician, Francesca acted as a cash mule for the Sunshine and Lollipops gang — the name of a WhatsApp group used to organise their flights and cash runs. This group smuggled up to £110 million out of UK airports into Dubai between November 2019 and October 2020. The operation was masterminded by Abdulla Mohammad Ali Bin Beyat Alfalasi, a UAE national whose wife is from a wealthy Emirati family. Alfalasi, who is currently serving nine years in prison in Britain for his part in the laundering racket, recruited a number of young British women with no criminal records so they wouldn't raise suspicions at UK airports.

Francesca, who is in her forties and has a grown-up son, was one of them. In 2019, just before she got involved with the gang, her life was in a good place. "I'd just got out of a horrible relationship, moved into a beautiful home." She was self-employed and made between £4,000 and £6,000 a month as a beautician. She was single at the time and a law-abiding citizen. "My career was exactly where I wanted it to be. I was massively into my fitness, had a great group of friends and was just very, very happy."

Then in March 2020 the UK went into lockdown as Covid took hold. "Lockdown completely turned my life upside down," ➤



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says Francesca, who makes her living seeing customers face to face. “I was out of work, so all of my money just stopped. I had to go to the Bank of Mum and Dad, and they don’t have a lot of money.” She was £20,000 in debt and falling behind on her rent. “I was thinking, am I going to lose my home?”

Word was going around the beauty industry about the chance to make quick and easy money taking suitcases to Dubai. “I met a friend of a friend and she was in a similar industry to me, so we were kind of exchanging notes and having a bit of a moan. And then she said, ‘Well, actually, I’ve been given this opportunity to work in Dubai... You get flown first class and you make X amount.’ My first question was, ‘Is it drugs?’ Because I just knew I would not smuggle drugs. But it was money.”

Her friend put her in touch with a “recruiter” — a woman who took a role in organising the mules. “I was asked to take suitcases full of money. I wasn’t told the exact amount, but I did know that it was more than was legally allowed.”

An airline passenger must declare cash of £10,000 or more to UK customs when travelling abroad, and Francesca knew she was breaking the law. “I was always told that once we got on the flight it was going to be absolutely fine because Dubai want the money in their country. So we just declare it [there] and there’s no issue.”

She says she was not aware at the time that the money came from the sale of drugs. The NCA says that the suitcases contained the street profits from a number of gangs selling drugs in British towns and cities. Those gangs have not yet been identified by the NCA, although recent evidence seen by The Sunday Times suggests that one of the principal beneficiaries was the Kinahan cartel, the international crime gang led by Christy Kinahan, believed to be living in Dubai.

#### The Dubai cash run

Francesca’s first assignment came in the summer of 2020. The day of the flight she and another woman, her “mentor”, took a train to London together. Francesca had barely slept the night before, every detail of the plan going through her head. They had been told, via WhatsApp, to arrive at a coffee shop in London at a certain time. “From my understanding everybody had to meet at a Starbucks,” she says. “It was just always a different Starbucks.”

They waited for hours. Her mentor told her this was common — the gang would often change plans at the last minute. Eventually a driver arrived. “This very swanky car, blacked out, you know. A proper chauffeur in a people carrier.”

The driver took them to the West End and pulled up outside a large townhouse. Francesca watched two people walk out with seven black hard-shell suitcases — “I thought, shit, that’s a lot of money” —



The former model Jo-Emma Larvin, convicted last year of smuggling money into Dubai. Below: cash totalling £1.9m found in Tara Hanlon’s luggage led to a prison sentence of almost three years for the former recruitment consultant in 2021



**“ONCE THE FLIGHT LEFT THE TARMAC AND YOU’VE GOT THAT GLASS OF CHAMPAGNE IN YOUR HAND, I CAN’T EXPLAIN THE SENSE OF RELIEF”**

and put them in the boot of the car. They were given a letter from a registered business based in Dubai called Omnivest Gold Trading, owned by Alfalasi. These letters provided the mules with an explanation for the cash in the suitcases that would satisfy UAE customs officials: it was, the letter said, the proceeds of international gold sales being transferred from London to Dubai. The letters were signed by Alfalasi.

The driver dropped Francesca and her mentor at Heathrow with little time to check in. “That’s for a reason, because they [the airline and airport staff] rush you through as you’ve not got a lot of time to get on to the flight.” Francesca had been told to “dress up” and look “a bit suave”. As the women loaded the suitcases on to the conveyor belt at Emirates’ check-in, Francesca’s mind and heart were racing. “The first time it was a million thoughts ➤



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like, shit, what if they open the case? But then equally just smiling and playing this role of this fancy lady... When you're in business class, they treat you like absolute royalty and they don't really ask questions."

It worked. Within an hour the women were walking on to the plane and being offered champagne by a flight attendant. But Francesca couldn't relax. She imagined herself "sat down on the plane, a little bit smug, thinking you've done it, and then you look up and there's security, police, dragging you out of your seat with everybody else looking". It didn't happen. "Once the flight left the tarmac, and you were up in the air and you've got that glass of champagne in your hand, the sense of relief — I cannot explain to you."

Seven hours later the plane landed in Dubai, the city of gold. Upon arrival the two women were sent a WhatsApp message with number codes to open the locks on their suitcases. Francesca walked into Dubai International Airport's customs office — a small room with opaque glass and a number of border officers inside. She opened the cases to reveal millions of pounds. She couldn't believe her eyes. "The first time I saw the money I felt like I was in a film or it wasn't real. I couldn't believe how much it was. I didn't really think it was going to be in the millions. And I thought, what the f\*\*\* have I got myself into?"

The women showed the officials the Omnivest cover letter. "They don't bat an eyelid," she says. She received a cash declaration form, needed by banks in Dubai to make a deposit. After customs waved her through, Francesca's final stop was the arrivals hall, where a man was waiting to meet the women and escort them to two luxury cars. "And then they basically just said, 'Thank you,'" Francesca says.

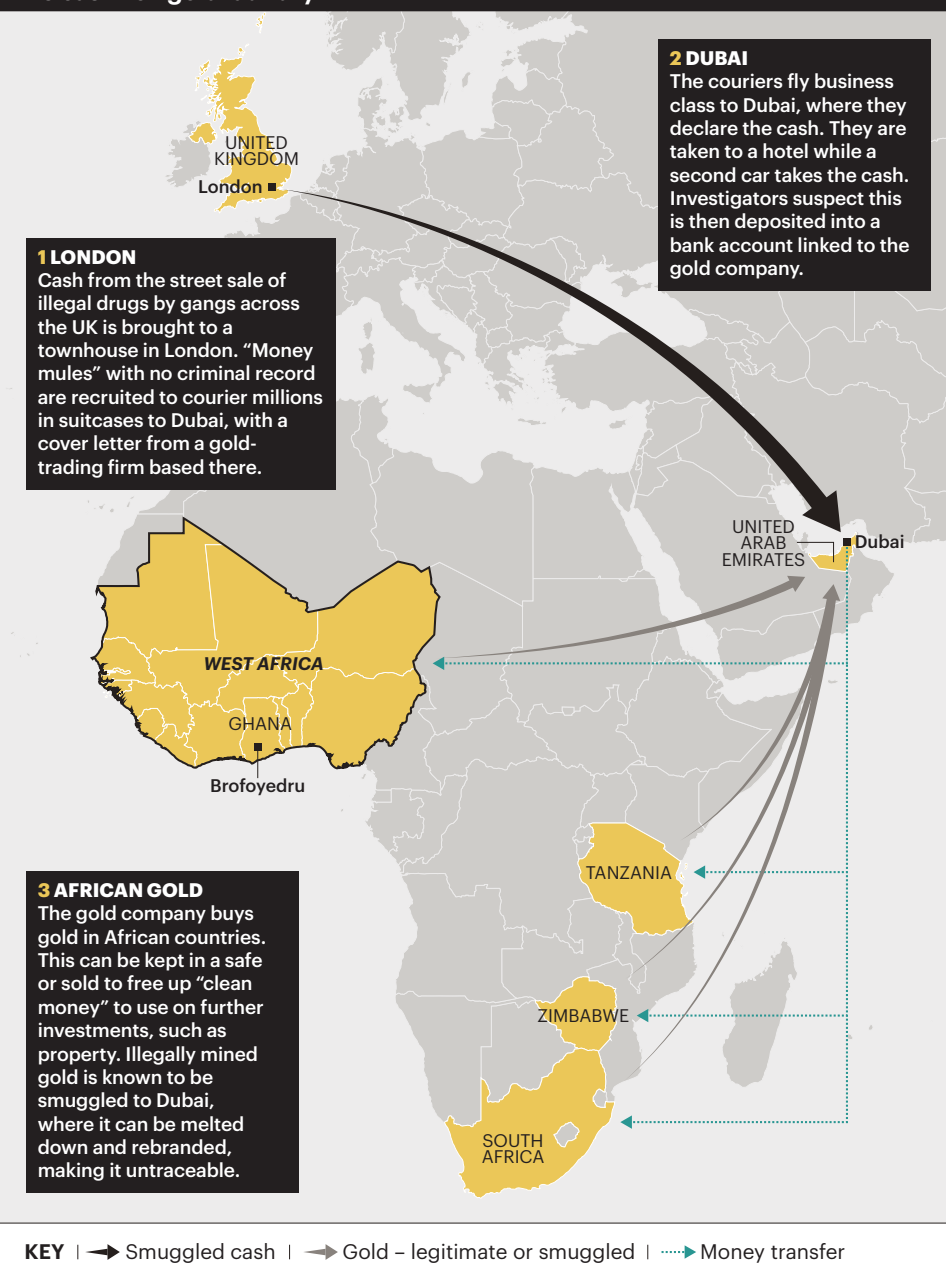
One car took the suitcases full of cash, the other took the two women to a five-star hotel, where they stayed for three days, sunning themselves by the pool.

A payment of £3,000 cash was delivered to their hotel on the final day of the trip, but only the mentor received the money. On this trip Francesca was classed as the "buddy" in training for a solo cash-mule run in the future. They also received the seven empty suitcases to fly back with and use again. Francesca carried out the trip three times in 2019 and 2020. She made £6,000, paid off some of her debt, and as far as she was concerned it was job done.

### The Emirati mastermind

In October 2020, in an office by Heathrow airport, Ian Truby, a senior investigating officer for the NCA, was about to get a telephone call alerting him to the arrest of Tara Hanlon, a 30-year-old former recruitment consultant who had tried to check in for a flight to Dubai with £1.9 million in cash in her luggage. The money was vacuum packed and covered

## The cash-for-gold laundry



with coffee, in an apparent attempt to put off sniffer dogs.

Hanlon, who has been said to bear a likeness to the reality TV star and influencer Kim Kardashian, had five suitcases with her for a weekend trip, which raised the suspicions of a sharp-eyed border official.

"She had no criminal record," Truby says. "By her own account she was out of work due to Covid. Nothing to suggest she was linked to crime in any way, shape or form. Just a person who appears to have had a fairly clean life... up until she somehow got herself involved in this."

Like Francesca, Hanlon had a copy of a letter from Omnivest Gold Trading. The signatory was Alfasasi. This gave Truby a crucial lead. His team began investigating and established that Alfasasi was an Emirati national who spent his time between Dubai and the UK. His wife's family owned a flat

in Belgravia, London. In December 2021 NCA officers arrested him at that flat. They seized his mobile phone before he could dispose of it, revealing the modus operandi, extent and scope of his smuggling operation.

They found a treasure trove of hundreds of WhatsApp threads, showing Alfasasi booking travel tickets, receiving images of cash mules' passports, providing details of the flights, who they were, who they travelled with, what luggage they had taken. "It was a bit of an oh-my-God moment," Truby says. "There is so much data on this phone... I think he just got away with it for a long time and probably got complacent."

They built up a picture of Alfasasi's lifestyle. Expensive watches, a plush London apartment, Mercedes cars. He had no criminal record and was not known to ➤





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law enforcement anywhere in the world. He had the front of a successful, legitimate businessman, largely based in the UAE. Alfalasi was considered the ringleader of the gang and admitted money laundering in June 2022. Aged 47, he was sentenced to nine years and seven months in prison.

Truby's investigation was significant. It taught the UK authorities that criminal gangs are working together to move large amounts of cash to the UAE. The money is gathered into a "counting house", which acts like a bank for criminals, bundling it up, keeping a record of the deposits and using mules to transport the cash to Dubai. One by one, Truby's team arrested the smugglers, each of their phones yielding yet more evidence. It was only a matter of time before they came knocking at Francesca's door.

#### Justice comes calling

In autumn 2020 Francesca read in the newspapers that Hanlon had been caught at Heathrow. She didn't know Hanlon but realised that her story was strikingly similar to her own. "That was it then," Francesca says. "The nail in the coffin. I thought, I'm so out of this."

She believes the group ultimately got caught because of complacency. "Because they were doing it so frequently, they were, like, 'Oh, this is a piece of piss.' And they did get a little bit cocky with it."

But the months went by after Hanlon's arrest and nothing happened. "So in my head I'd sort of buried it — I've got away with it. It's a part of my life that is done and buried and I'm just getting on with my life."

One day at 6am she heard loud banging at her door. "I was on my own in bed. I just had a bra on. I thought it was a postman. I was effing and jeffing, walking down the stairs." She opened the door and 12 NCA officers forced their way in. Francesca got dressed with a female officer in her bedroom. They seized her phone, tablet and laptop. "They basically read me my rights and said I was arrested for money laundering and being involved in an international crime gang — I was just, like, 'What?' I burst out crying and remember one of the officers being really nice and consoling me because I was in such a state."

Francesca, who was only two weeks into a new relationship, was taken to a police station and put in a cell. "I thought, how the hell am I going to tell him about this? He's going to wonder who the hell I am."

She was later convicted for her part in the smuggling operation. To maintain her anonymity we cannot reveal the details of her sentence. But she describes the experience as "awful", leaving her with serious anxiety. "It made me really poorly, really ill. I saw a video of myself from this time last year and I just look like I've got the weight of the world on my shoulders. I look like a completely different person."



## ALFALASI'S REACH STRETCHED FAR BEYOND THE UAE TO GHANA, WHERE HE HAD INTERESTS IN MINING AND GOLD-TRADING FIRMS

**Above: the money-laundering mastermind Abdullah Mohammad Ali Bin Beyat Alfalasi; open-pit gold mining in Ghana**

#### The Africa connection

In March this year Alfalasi was hit with a confiscation order of £3.4 million. He faces an extra ten years in jail should he fail to pay. Among his seized assets were savings and investments in Emirati banks, his share of UAE properties, cryptocurrency funds in a Binance account, vehicles including a Mercedes G 63, Ford pick-up truck and Toyota Yaris, three Rolex watches and a Patek Philippe watch. But what is the true extent of Alfalasi's criminal empire?

In 2018 a United Nations report found large amounts of gold mined in Africa were being smuggled to Dubai. The NCA has evidence that Alfalasi was investing in African gold. One of his alleged gang members was arrested carrying gold in Tanzania. It is suspected the gang would smuggle the metal into Dubai, where the bars could be melted down and rebranded, making it untraceable. The gold can then be kept in a safe or sold for "clean money" to use on investments such as property.

At the heart of Dubai's financial district stands Prime Tower, a 36-storey glass skyscraper filled with cameras and security guards. According to documents obtained by this newspaper and The News Movement, a news and investigations outlet, Prime Tower was the registered address of Omnivest Gold Trading. They show that Alfalasi was both managing director and

general manager of Omnivest, which was liquidated in November 2021, days before his arrest. When we visit there is no sign on the door of its former office high up in the building. A woman comes out and denies being part of Omnivest. "I'm not sure," she says. "We're completely different."

UAE company records show that, as well as Omnivest, Alfalasi has owned a wide range of businesses, including construction companies, an estate agent, a building materials firm, a yacht rental company, a doors and windows manufacturer, a flower business, a secretarial services firm, a marble and ceramic trading company and a metal trading firm. But Alfalasi's reach went far beyond the UAE, stretching into Ghana, West Africa, where he was an executive director of Atlantic Holdings, a large parent company that owned steel manufacturing, mining and gold-trading firms. According to the Atlantic Holdings website, which is no longer present online, Omnivest was just one part of its operation. "Omnivest Gold Trading LLC is our trading arm in Dubai specialising in gold and rough diamonds trading," the website reads. "We import raw gold, refine and sell to financial institutions within the UAE."

The website claims Omnivest was a member of the UAE Kimberley Process Certification Scheme — an initiative for stemming the trade in conflict diamonds.

Also part of Atlantic Holdings was My Gold, a mining company with land in Brofoyedru, Ashanti Region, Ghana. On its website Alfalasi goes by the name Abdullah Bin Beyat. His picture shows him in Emirati white robes and headdress, looking slightly younger than his police mugshot. It describes him as having "vast experience" in the real estate industry, with an MSc ►



“from the Dubai Police College” and a degree in business administration from the University of York. It states he is a director for Omnivest Gold Trading and Atlantic Investment Holdings Limited in Ghana.

Many of the companies once run by Atlantic Holdings are now run by another umbrella company called Atlantic Trust Holding, which has interests in steel manufacturing, banking, mining and real estate development. We contacted its founder and chairman, Alex Asiedu, about whom there is no suggestion of wrongdoing, who says: “Atlantic Trust Holding has been in existence for close to 20 years now and had no dealings with Atlantic Holdings of Dubai.” He adds: “The website for Atlantic Holdings of Dubai was controlled by Alfalasi and his business partner. We had nothing to do with any of his activities. As a matter of fact, I have had no contact with Abdulla [Alfalasi] for some eight years now. If anything at all, I would be someone to be jubilant because Abdulla used his influence to literally bully people.” He says his company has never been investigated by any law enforcement agency.

At this point the trail goes cold. What happened to the £110 million Alfalasi smuggled out of the UK remains a mystery. Once cash enters the global gold trade, tracking it becomes near impossible.

Last month a study by Swissaid found that about 435 tonnes of undeclared gold worth about \$31 billion were exported out of Africa in 2022 — 93 per cent of which was smuggled to the UAE. “This is a big quantity of money leaving Africa connected to money laundering, conflict and human rights issues,” said Marc Ummel, one of the report’s authors, adding that the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the international body that tackles money laundering, should reconsider the removal in February of the UAE from its “grey list” of countries with weak counter measures in place.

A UAE official said: “The UAE takes its role in protecting the integrity of the global financial system extremely seriously. In February the FATF... praised the UAE’s significant progress. In its continuing pursuit of global criminals, the UAE works closely with international partners to disrupt and deter all forms of illicit finance. The UAE is committed to continuing these efforts and actions more than ever today and over the longer term.”

#### Tightening the net

Truby, meanwhile, is still investigating the Sunshine and Lollipops gang. Some suspected members are still on the run. He says it is difficult to estimate the number of gangs using cash mules. “I’ve no doubt that there are a number of other groups who have done exactly the same thing and are probably continuing to do the same thing,” he says. Because current scanning technology at UK airports, which all



The reporter David Collins in front of Prime Tower, Dubai, the former registered address of Alfalasi’s company Omnivest Gold Trading

## WHAT HAPPENED TO THE £110M ALFALASI SMUGGLED IS A MYSTERY. ONCE CASH ENTERS THE GOLD TRADE, IT IS NEAR IMPOSSIBLE TO TRACK

luggage passes through after check-in, is used chiefly for counterterrorism purposes and does not scan for large amounts of cash, criminals are slipping through the net.

“We have an ongoing conversation with various authorities to try to do more around cash-scanning technology and tactics at the UK border,” the NCA’s Melki says. “What people don’t want is to wait hours to get on their planes as a result of enhanced screening.”



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Francesca believes the problem is much bigger than the UK authorities realise. “I think it is the tip of the iceberg,” she says. “Most of the people involved in my group have never done anything wrong before. But I think Covid had a lot to do with that. It was the desperation of the time.”

She says she never felt she was doing any harm to anyone. “I do realise that when you’re part of this sort of organised crime that people are affected by it. You know, washing drug money. But I didn’t see it. If I could turn the clock back, I’d have told the person who introduced me to it to do one.”

After we revealed our identity to Rashid, the trader in the gold souk, over the phone, he said his business would actually require evidence of the source of funds for gold purchases of 50,000 dirhams (about £10,600). He said he did not know anything about criminals buying gold in Dubai.

We finish our trip with a visit to the observation platform on Palm Jumeirah, a man-made island in the shape of a palm tree, which gives a perfect view of the city’s skyline of glittering skyscrapers. Beneath that wealthy veneer of business and tourism is a growing gangster’s paradise ■

**Additional reporting by John Simpson, The News Movement and Sam Chantarasak**



# 10 Years at the Top

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Clockwise from top left: Branson  
toasts Virgin's inaugural flight  
in June 1984; an encounter with  
Zulus in South Africa, 1996;  
tucking up on a sleeper seat, 1999;  
the face fits in Sydney, 2002







# OLD VIRGIN



Richard Branson's airline is celebrating four decades of disrupting BA's flight path. But with profits elusive in recent years, is it destined for a midlife crisis?  
**John Arlidge quizzes the boss**





On June 22, 1984, a second-hand jumbo jet called Maiden Voyager tore down the runway at Gatwick airport en route to New York and disappeared into an ashen sky. On board were celebrities including Phil Collins, Holly Johnson — and Christopher Biggins — and media titans, notably Sir David Frost. Welcoming them at the jet's door, dressed as a pilot, was a buccaneering entrepreneur who had made millions by signing the Sex Pistols to his Virgin record label — Richard Branson.

Virgin Atlantic VSI turned into the greatest party in the sky. Butlers served beluga caviar and Dover sole with 1982 Chassagne-Montrachet to guests in all cabins. The in-flight entertainment was the classical cellist Julian Lloyd Webber, brother of Andrew, performing live. So thick were the cigarette and alcohol fumes that billowed out of the door of the 747 after it landed in Newark, goes the tale, the ground staff almost fainted on the air jetty.

Few people, including most Virgin executives, thought the airline would survive. Yet tomorrow, Branson — now Sir

**Branson, David Frost and Christopher Biggins board Virgin Atlantic's maiden flight from Gatwick to New York, 1984. Below: Virgin's salt and pepper shakers are frequently "borrowed"**

**HE LEASED A SECOND-HAND JET FROM BOEING. IT WARNED THAT NO ONE WOULD EVER FLY ON AN AIRLINE CALLED VIRGIN**

Richard — will host another sky-high party to mark its 40th birthday. Two Virgin jets, one from London and one from Manchester, will fly to Las Vegas for a "Love at first flight" pool party at the city's Virgin hotel. They will be packed with the airline's longest-serving staff, some of whom were on that first flight, plus a few famous faces.

"We'll celebrate the spirit of Virgin, which is so similar today to what it was on that inaugural flight," says Branson, 73, as he takes a seat in his private apartment atop the Virgin hotel in New York and orders his umpteenth cup of tea of the day. He looks at his decaffeinated milky brew and adds: "I've avoided getting drunk for quite a while — but I'll let myself go at the party."

It's a moment to savour but there's no time to sit back. After four decades of "surviving against the odds", Branson once again finds himself fighting to keep Virgin Atlantic aloft. His arch-rival, British Airways, is investing tens of billions of



## In for the long haul

■ **June 1984**

Virgin Atlantic's first flight, VS1, takes off from Gatwick to New York

■ **1986**

Virgin leases its second Boeing 747 and launches Gatwick to Miami flights. Services to destinations across the US, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia from Heathrow and Gatwick follow

■ **1989**

First airline to include a sit-up bar on board

■ **1992**  
First leading international airline to introduce premium economy



■ **1993**

Opens its first branded Clubhouse at London Heathrow. Branson successfully sues British Airways for libel after BA's "dirty tricks" campaign. BA pays Virgin Atlantic £3.5 million in compensation and legal costs

■ **1999**

Branson sells 49 per cent of Virgin Atlantic to Singapore Airlines for £600 million

■ **2003**

BA rejects Branson's offer to buy its five Concordes as they retire from service, first for £1 each, then for £5 million each





pounds to improve service after a wretched few years. The snazzy Gulf carriers, such as Emirates, are stealing his best ideas, adding bars and showers to their planes and spas to their lounges. While most other carriers are racking up record profits thanks to the post-pandemic travel boom, Virgin recorded a pre-tax loss of £139 million last year. The last time it made a profit was 2016.

To convince travellers he still flies higher, Branson is introducing new perks for economy and business-class passengers, including “a seat that is better than British Airways first class”. He also plans to return to Gatwick airport after pulling out during Covid. Of all the businesses he has started — music, trains, gyms, a bank, cola, vodka, weddings, hotels — the airline is his favourite and “I’ll fight tooth and nail to keep it going”, he says.

It’s not hard to understand why. Branson transformed aviation from a high-price, low-quality chicken-or-beef form of travel — “Everyone hated it!” — into an experience you looked forward to. Virgin was cheaper than its rivals. You could get a London to New York economy return in the 1980s for about £200, half what most of the big airlines charged at the time. Yet it was — gasp! — fun. Sporting trademark lipstick-red uniforms with matching shoes and handbags, its trolley dollies (it *was* the 1980s) served ice cream in the cheap seats. From 1991, for the first time, there were seatback TV screens in all cabins. They were “the most expensive TVs in the world”, Branson jokes. A tech outfit quoted \$10 million to install them, “so I rang up Boeing and said, ‘If I order ten brand-new 747s, will you include the price of the seatback videos?’ They agreed.” The price? Two billion dollars.

Those jumbos, which soon started flying from Heathrow and Gatwick to the Caribbean, Africa and Asia as well as the US, had names that harked back to the golden age of the New York and Los Angeles jet set: Uptown Girl, Leading Lady. Branson put the big seats on the upper deck and called business class Upper Class, a name that has endured long after



**The Virgin boss carries the supermodel Kate Moss along the wing of a 747 to mark his airline’s 25th anniversary, 2009**

Virgin axed its 747s. (Mercifully his plan to call economy class Riff Raff was jettisoned.)

Virgin used nudge-nudge, wink-wink ads and other “cheeky” marketing methods to attract attention — but Branson won’t celebrate in Vegas tomorrow by turning Kate Moss or Pamela Anderson upside down on the wing of one of his aircraft, as he used to when marking a milestone or launching a route. “I’ve lived long enough to know times change,” he says.

It was a more simple advertisement that got Virgin started. Forty-three years ago Branson’s American Airlines’ flight from Puerto Rico to the British Virgin Islands was abruptly cancelled. Anxious to get back to his home on Necker Island, he chartered a small Caribbean Airlines propeller plane, grabbed a blackboard and used a chalk crayon to write: “Virgin

Airlines to the BVI. One way \$35!” His fellow disgruntled passengers paid up and “I made a profit of \$39”, he recalls. The next day he phoned Boeing and asked to lease a second-hand jumbo jet to start Virgin Atlantic. Boeing agreed — but warned that no one would ever fly on an airline called Virgin.

Whether or not you like Branson’s style, he has proved his doubters wrong. He was the first person to break the stranglehold that British Airways, Pan Am and TWA had on flights across the Pond.

When Sir Freddie Laker tried it with Skytrain in 1977, the big carriers, whose combined fleet totalled about a thousand jets, reduced their fares to drive the upstart into bankruptcy — and, once it was eliminated, put fares back up. Branson had studied Skytrain, learnt from Laker’s mistakes and thought he had a chance. He kept costs down by initially leasing rather than buying aircraft, as Laker had. He had a lucrative business-class cabin — not simply economy class, which was all Laker had offered. Crucially he decided to give the ►

**2006**

Virgin Atlantic replaces BA as James Bond’s favourite airline in Casino Royale



**2012**

The US giant Delta buys the 49 per cent stake in Virgin Atlantic owned by Singapore Airlines

**2013**

Branson launches Little Red, a domestic airline flying from London Heathrow to and from Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Manchester

**2015**

Little Red closes after failing to break BA’s dominance of UK routes

**2019**

Branson makes a second attempt to establish a short-haul service by agreeing to buy the ailing airline Flybe, as part of a consortium including Stobart Group

**2020**

Flybe collapses with the loss of 2,400 jobs as Covid paralyses aviation. Virgin Atlantic axes 3,500 jobs, pulls out of Gatwick and moves London-based services to Heathrow

**June 2024**

Branson celebrates the 40th birthday of the airline with a party at the Virgin hotel in Las Vegas





Virgin Atlantic's 25th anniversary TV ad. Far right: the airline was the first to offer flyers a sit-up bar



airline a face — his own — and cast himself as David versus Goliath.

His timing was perfect. The Conservative government, led by Margaret Thatcher, hailed Branson as the kind of never-say-die entrepreneur Britain needed to shake it out of its corporate torpor. To this day Britain remains the only European country to have two “flag carriers”. There is no national long-haul alternative to Air France, Iberia in Spain or KLM in the Netherlands. Passengers backed the plucky Brit with their wallets. One frequent flyer gave the airline a PR boost Branson could only have dreamt of: Princess Diana wore a sweatshirt with a “Fly Virgin Atlantic” logo.

Yet survival remained a struggle. BA, after failing to see off Virgin by slashing fares, tried a new tactic. In the early 1990s BA staff, working in secret, gained access to Virgin’s booking system. BA employees then impersonated Virgin Atlantic staff and telephoned Virgin customers to tell them their flights had been delayed or cancelled and encouraged them to switch to BA. Smear stories about Virgin Atlantic were planted in newspapers. When Lord King, then BA chairman, denied wrongdoing and dismissed Virgin’s claims of “dirty tricks” as yet another publicity stunt, Branson sued BA for libel. BA countersued but the court found in Virgin’s favour, ordering BA to apologise and to pay £3.5 million in compensation and costs, which Branson distributed to his staff as a “BA Christmas bonus”.

**E**mboldened by the victory, Branson began to attack BA — mainly using humour. He proclaimed “BA doesn’t give a shiatsu” to promote Virgin’s free on-board massages for Upper Class passengers. When the BA-sponsored London Eye observation wheel had not been erected in time for the millennium, Branson flew a blimp over it carrying a banner that read “BA can’t get it up”.

By targeting BA directly, Branson pulled off perhaps his greatest coup. He convinced

## THE DECISION TO REMOVE THE BAR “WAS A DREADFUL MISTAKE. WE’LL BE BRINGING IT BACK AS SOON AS WE POSSIBLY CAN”

consumers that Virgin Atlantic was a global rival to BA, offering all the routes, comfort and reliability of a giant carrier. In fact it has only 44 planes and carries 5.3 million passengers a year on a handful of key long-haul routes, compared with BA’s 276-strong long and short-haul fleet, which carries 43 million passengers all over the world. “The Virgin Atlantic brand punches way above its weight,” says the branding analyst Rita Clifton.

The dirty tricks scandal was the first in a series of storms that Virgin Atlantic has weathered: the Gulf war, the 9/11 terror attacks in New York, the global financial crisis, and then Covid. Survival has come at a steep cost. Branson sold a 49 per cent stake in the airline to Singapore Airlines in 1999, which was later bought by the US behemoth Delta, with which Virgin now works closely. Virgin Group, the holding company for all Branson’s ventures, retains control with 51 per cent. After controversially asking for a state-backed loan from his sunlounge at his Caribbean home during Covid and being publicly rebuffed, Branson was forced to sell £550 million worth of shares in his space flight operator, Virgin Galactic, as part of a £1.2 billion rescue package, which later rose to £1.5 billion.

What has seen the airline through so many crises? Innovation and joy, Branson says. “Lord King once said about me, ‘Why on earth is somebody from the entertainment business going into the airline business?’ That summed up the difference between Virgin and other airlines. I’ve always thought that people — passengers and crew — want to be entertained, surprised, delighted. They want originality and a smile.”

It’s true that Virgin pioneered many of the things passengers take for granted today. As well as being first to introduce seat-back TVs, it was the first big carrier to introduce premium economy; the first international airline to create a bar with stools on board its jets; the first to offer customers a dedicated security line at Heathrow; and the first to provide a limousine transfer service and drive-in check-in. Lately it has introduced economy seats with extra legroom, creating a new class of travel optimistically named Economy Delight.

It is also true that Virgin staff, 2,500 of whom Branson will welcome to another 40th party in London later this month, act differently from employees of other carriers. Branson gives them “the freedom to joke with passengers or throw a line back at them”. He recalls an email he received shortly after he started operations in Australia to illustrate his point. “A customer wrote to tell me a story about an obnoxious guy who would not wait in the check-in queue for a Virgin flight at Sydney airport, despite being repeatedly politely asked to do so. The guy eventually marched up to the nearest Virgin check-in desk and shouted ‘F\*\*\* you!’ at one of the female staff. Without hesitating she replied, ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to get in the queue for that too.’”

Less liberal, until recently, was the dress code — red skirts for female employees, burgundy trousers for male. Since September 2022 Virgin’s cabin crew, pilots and ground staff have been allowed to choose whichever of the Vivienne Westwood-designed uniforms they feel most comfortable in, regardless of gender.



Virgin Atlantic may be the great survivor but there are dark clouds on the horizon. After almost two decades of penny pinching that reduced what was once the world's favourite airline to the butt of jokes ("I'm flying Abba — anyone but British Airways"), BA's new CEO, Sean Doyle, has brought back free water and snacks in short-haul economy and improved the food in all cabins on long-haul flights. Its jets have plush new business-class and premium economy cabins and a new first class is on the way.

Emirates, Qatar Airways and Etihad offer stiff competition on routes to Asia, the Gulf and Africa, which is one reason why Virgin's services to Tokyo, Hong Kong and Sydney have all been axed and flights to Dubai are now only in winter, and then just four times a week. The "Gulfies" have stolen Virgin's clothes. Each has a bar on board its largest aircraft. Virgin dumped the bar on its new planes in 2019 in favour of a "loft", which is a glorified bench between Upper Class and premium economy. The Gulfies offer chauffeur services for business and first-class passengers and have also introduced spas at their hub airports. Virgin passengers have to pay for limousine transfers and the airline has closed its spas.

Some Virgin staff say its tie-up with the

Atlanta-based Delta has diluted its USP — its distinctiveness. They point out the new Upper Class suite is a Delta seat, tarted up with some Virgin trim. Some even now call Virgin "Virgin Atlanta". Analysts agree. "Virgin may have been the first to do a lot of things, but it hasn't been a leader for at least 15 years," says Henry Harteveldt of Atmosphere Research Group.

**D**oes Virgin Atlantic need to rediscover its innovative spirit to survive and thrive again? Yes, says Branson without hesitation — starting with the bar. The decision to replace the bar with the loft on new aircraft "was a dreadful mistake. We'll be bringing back the bar as soon as we possibly can." Why was the error made? Branson won't be drawn — perhaps because he does not want to concede what many at the airline suggest: Delta nixed it because it meant removing up to four lucrative Upper Class seats.

**Branson promotes Virgin's new route to Toronto at Niagara Falls in 2001. Bottom: charming locals as the airline launches flights to Mumbai in 2005**



Branson simply repeats: "If we make a mistake, let's own up to it quickly and sort it. That's what we'll do."

He also promises "ridiculously good" new seats in Upper Class "better than BA first class", based on the vast two-person Retreat Suite on Virgin's hangar-fresh Airbus A330 jets. New routes to North America and beyond will be announced soon, some of which will eventually be from Gatwick. The airline withdrew from the airport during Covid but retained ownership of its take-off and landing slots, leasing them to easyJet, and Branson says it will return. "It matters — it's where we started. I will twist arms."

Is he worried that BA is getting its mojo back and will threaten Virgin? "No — as long as we never slip up. That's up to the team," he says, glancing over at Shai Weiss, the chief executive of Virgin Atlantic, who has joined his boss in the Virgin hotel's private apartment.

"Every decade we've had people talking about the Virgin Atlantic brand disappearing," Branson says. "It will outlive myself and, hopefully, outlive my children and grandchildren as well." And he can now reveal his succession plan. He wants his children, Sam, 39, and Holly, 42, to take over the airline. "I plan to keep it in the family and they plan to keep it in the family." Holly is on the board of Virgin Group and serves as its chief purpose and vision officer; Sam works as an informal adviser to Virgin Group.

Looming over every airline is the giant carbon footprint of every flight. Branson recently completed a transatlantic trip from Heathrow to New York's JFK on a Virgin Boeing 787 Dreamliner powered entirely by sustainable aviation fuel (SAF). Critics dismissed it as a "Richard come lately" stunt, pointing out that other airlines had run SAF flights before. Can Virgin Atlantic really be carbon neutral by 2050, as he aims to be? "The point of the flight was to prove that current engines can take biofuels and that it is safe. We did that. Now it's up to the fuel companies to supply the SAF. We have 25 years. It can be done."

None of these questions will be on Branson's mind when he jets into Las Vegas from his home on Necker to cut Virgin Atlantic's 40th birthday cake. "I couldn't be more proud of what everybody at Virgin Atlantic has achieved," he will tell his guests.

He has spent the past week finalising the guest list. Has he invited Willie Walsh, the former boss of BA who in 2012 bet him that Virgin would not exist in five years' time? He needs no reminding of the stake: a kick in the balls. "He's very welcome to come," Branson says. "We can toast the fact that Virgin Atlantic is still here." Will he claim his painful prize? "I think we've moved on from that."

Over to you, Willie. There's still time to get to Sin City ■









Handstand practice  
for two girls on  
Southam Street in  
north Kensington,  
London, 1956.  
Left: boys and girls  
in a building still  
bomb damaged  
from the war,  
Bermondsey, south  
London, 1956

# The kids are all right

The indomitable spirit of youth in  
postwar Britain — as captured by  
the photographer *Roger Mayne*





Y

oung people were at the heart of the postwar photography of Roger Mayne. Born in Cambridge in 1929, his pictures form a visual record of the emergent British youth cultures of the Fifties and Sixties.

Mayne's obsession with cameras and the photographic process began while studying chemistry at Oxford University. After teaching himself the basics, he started training his lens on real life. He became fascinated by Southam Street in north Kensington — not far from his home in a more upmarket part of the city — in the heart of an overcrowded slum full of crumbling, bombed-out Victorian houses. Mayne visited the street 27 times from 1956 to 1961. "My reason for photographing the poor streets is I love them and the

life on them," he said at the time. One of his most renowned images, *Girl Fiving, Southam Street* (right), bears testimony to Mayne's ability to capture the innocence and ebullience of young people living in challenging circumstances. Much of Southam Street was demolished in the late Sixties to make way for Ernő Goldfinger's brutalist Trellick Tower.

Mayne died at the age of 85 in 2014. He had been influential in helping photography to gain acceptance as an art form. Fittingly, his work now forms the first ever exhibition of photography at the Courtauld Gallery ■

**Roger Mayne: Youth is at the Courtauld Gallery, London WC2, from Friday until Sep 1**





**Family life on the doorsteps of terraced houses in the St Ann's area of Nottingham, 1969**

**Below: teenage girls in rock'n'roll skirts at a community centre dance on the Park Hill council estate, Sheffield, 1961**



**Bottom: jive dancing on Southam Street, 1957. Jive was first brought to Britain by American GIs during the war**





STUDIO

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**Teddy girls at a funfair in Battersea Park, southwest London, 1956**

**Bottom left: children playing and laughing on Southam Street, 1956**

**Bottom right: a child runs down Southam Street screaming and crying, 1956**



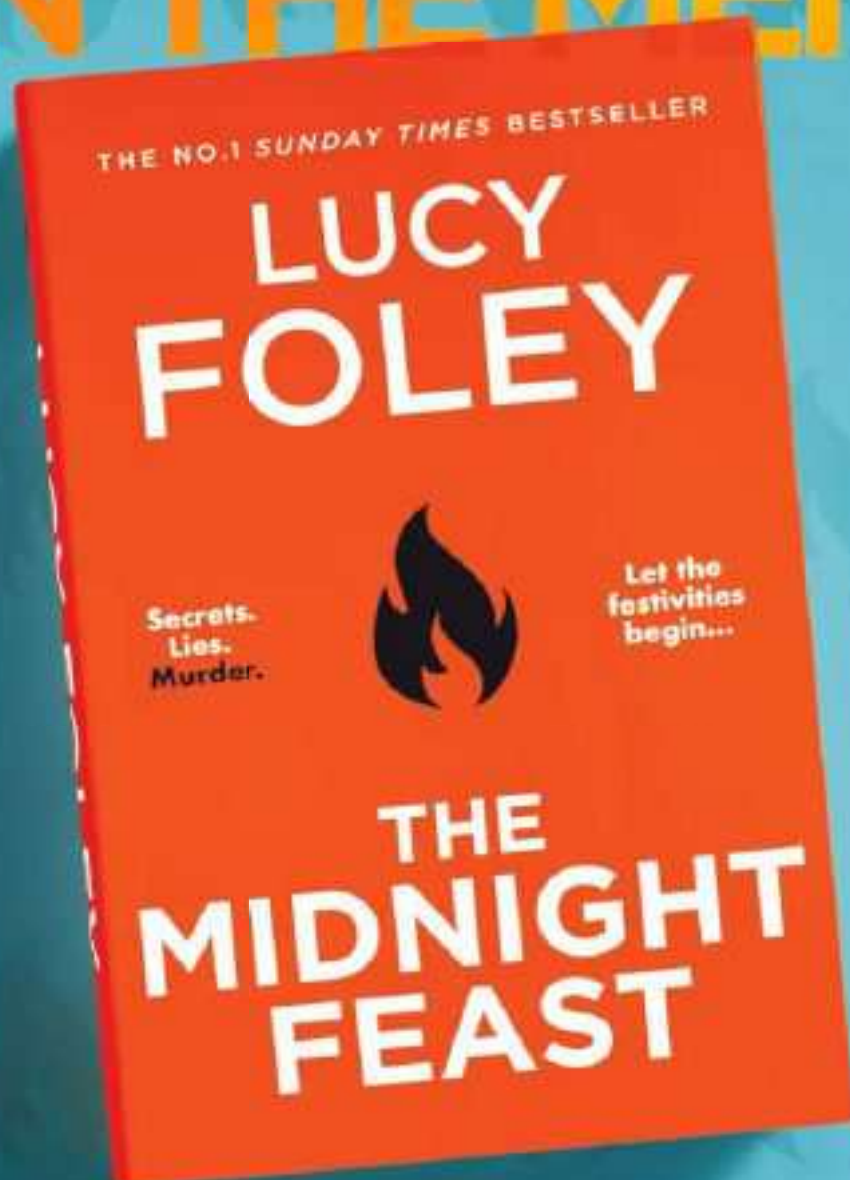


'Wicked fun'  
Alex Michaelides

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# THE TABLE IS SET... AND MURDER'S ON THE MENU



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# TABLE TALK

## Cooking with kimchi



Marc Diacono's caesar salad with kimchi and mayonnaise dressing

**PLUS** Will Lyons's picnic bottles ● Charlotte Ivers likes to be beside the seaside ● ... and Hannah Evans's favourite kimchi to buy ➔



**MARK  
DIACONO**

**K**imchi — the spicy dish of fermented cabbage and carrot — is very in vogue at the moment, not just because of a general fashion for all things Korean but also because Tim Spector, co-founder of the Zoe health app, champions it as a great way to improve the diversity of good bacteria in your gut microbiome. Much as I love it as an accompaniment or a side dish, it's not to everyone's taste. So if you are looking for a gentle way to introduce it to your diet, why not use it as a seasoning of sorts? Its lively, fresh acidity works wonderfully to enhance familiar recipes.



### Caesar salad with kimchi and mayonnaise dressing

A century ago, in the kitchen of his restaurant in Tijuana, Caesar Cardini invented a salad that has been adopted and adapted ever since. Often made with eggs and anchovies, this chicken variation is perfectly lifted by the liveliness of kimchi in the dressing. A quick and pleasing sunny-day supper that you can make even swifter by using leftover chicken.

#### Ingredients

(Serves 2)

- 3 tbsp olive oil
- 2 skinless, boneless chicken breasts
- 3 slices ciabatta, crusts removed and cut into small pieces
- 1 garlic clove, peeled
- 2 romaine lettuce, in 2cm slices
- 40g parmesan, shaved
- Salt and pepper, to taste

#### For the dressing

- 3 tbsp kimchi, thinly sliced
- 3 tbsp mayonnaise
- 3 tbsp yoghurt
- A good grind of black pepper

**1** Add 1 tablespoon of olive oil to a good-sized frying pan over a moderate heat and cook the chicken for 5-7 min until golden. Flip and fry for another 3-5 min. Continue to fry, flipping every couple of minutes, until the chicken is cooked through. Remove to a plate to rest and cool to room temperature before slicing.

**2** Add 2 tablespoons of olive oil to the pan and fry the bread with the garlic for 3-5 min, turning occasionally, until golden and crisp. Place on some kitchen roll to drain, discarding the garlic.

**3** In a small bowl, mix together the dressing ingredients.

**4** In a large salad bowl, combine the lettuce, chicken and croutons. Toss with half the dressing to coat evenly, then drizzle with the rest. Scatter the salad with the shaved parmesan, then season with a good amount of black pepper and a little salt.

#### Kimchi risotto

Risotto is all about the details — the quality of the stock makes a huge difference — but the stirring and resting are crucial. Stint on neither. If you don't have cider to hand, red or white wine will be excellent in a different way.

#### Ingredients

(Serves 4)

- 40g butter
- 1 small white onion, very finely diced
- 400g risotto rice
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 175ml medium cider
- 1 litre vegetable stock, hot

- 200g kimchi, finely chopped
- 80g parmesan, grated
- 4 eggs
- ½ small bunch chives, roughly chopped

**1** Melt half the butter over a moderate heat in a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan. Add the onion and cook for 10-12 min, stirring often, until soft and translucent.

**2** Stir in the rice and ½ a teaspoon of salt, turning the heat up slightly and stirring for a minute to toast and coat the grains. Add the cider and cook, while stirring, until it has evaporated.

**3** Lower the heat again to moderate and add a ladleful of hot stock. Stir continuously until it has evaporated. Repeat with another ladleful of stock. Continue to add a ladleful at a time, stirring constantly, until all the stock is added. Taste





the rice about 15 minutes in; you want the grains to be tender but with a little bite.

**4** When the rice is ready, stir in 150g kimchi. Remove from the heat and beat in the remaining butter and 60g parmesan. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Cover and leave to rest for a few minutes while you poach the eggs.

**5** Bring a wide saucepan of water to a gentle simmer and stir to create a vortex. Crack the eggs into the pan swiftly; the motion of the water should help the white cling semi-tidily to the yolk. Simmer for 2 min. Lift out the eggs with a slotted spoon and transfer to a tray lined with kitchen paper to soak up any excess water.

**6** Serve each portion dotted with the rest of the kimchi, topped with an egg and scattered with chives, the

remaining parmesan and a generous helping of pepper.

### Kimchi omelette

The kimchi's sour heat goes so well with eggs and this is one of those simple, quick recipes that works equally well as a restorative breakfast, a speedy, satisfying lunch or a too-tired-to-wait supper.

### Ingredients

(Serves 1)

- 2 large eggs
- 60g kimchi, drained and chopped
- 1 tbsp kimchi juice (liquid from the kimchi)
- 3 sprigs coriander, leaves and stalks separated
- 2 spring onions
- 1 tbsp olive oil or butter
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- A pinch of chilli flakes, to serve (optional)

**1** Crack the eggs into a bowl and beat until well combined.

Add half the kimchi and the kimchi juice and mix well.

**2** Cut the coriander stalks and spring onions into 3cm lengths and thinly slice the coriander leaves.

**3** Heat the butter or olive oil in a frying pan over a medium heat, add the coriander stalks and spring onions and cook for 30 seconds until softened.

**4** Pour the kimchi eggs into the pan and, as the omelette begins to set around the edge, use a spatula to gently lift the edges, tilting the pan to encourage the uncooked egg to flow into the space.

**5** Once the omelette is set as you like it, season with salt and pepper and sprinkle with the rest of the kimchi, the coriander leaves and chilli flakes, if using. Serve open or folded, as you like ■

## Tasted! The best supermarket KIMCHI



### The Cultured Collective Classic

**Ocado, 250g, £4**

Fizzing! In a good way. I'd have it in a salad or on its own **5/5**

### Eaten Alive Classic

**Amazon, 375g, £19.99 for a pack of three**

Kimchi with a capital K. Spice from the ginger and chilli fires you up but doesn't make your eyes water **5/5**

### Vadasz

**Tesco, 400g, £4.50**

Kimchi lovers might like more spice or farmy flavours, but if you've never tried it before, start with this **3/5**

### Kim Kong Kimchi

**Ocado, 330g, £6**

You can smell this from a mile off. The funky aftertaste is odd **3/5**

### Yutaka Korean

**Tesco, 200g, £3.45**

More sweet than spicy, this is disappointingly soft for my liking **2/5**

### Sun Hee Spicy Fermented Cabbage

**Sainsbury's, 190g, £2**

All I could taste here was sweet cabbage without any heat to balance it out **1/5**

### Baxters

**Ocado, 300g, £3.50**

Nice over a stir-fry, but this is not kimchi — it's pickled cabbage **1/5**

Hannah Evans

# It's Groucho-on-Sea. But maybe I'd prefer sandy sandwiches



## THE SEASIDE BOARDING HOUSE

BURTON BRADSTOCK, DORSET



Is there any better indicator of the British appetite for masochism than our national insistence on the beach holiday? Not the luxury resort on the Med, but the wind, the rain, the self-flagellation of the British seaside. Every year we trudge back, Sisyphus-like, windbreaker in hand, vainly claiming this time it will be different as our families wail and our partners google “cheap divorce lawyers near me”.

I know this partly from hard-won experience, but also because I recently went to the Hive Beach Café in Burton Bradstock on the Jurassic Coast, where the owners proudly presented me with a review by one of my predecessors, AA Gill, in which he made precisely this point.

It was, the owners' daughter told me happily, “the most negative positive review anyone could wish for”. I settled down to read it and — on this most bright and sunny of days — had to scramble to catch the paper as a huge gust of wind carried it away. “You know what?” I thought as I shivered into my catch of the day. “I think this guy is on to something.”



Except we change, and times change with us. Just next door to the Hive is the Seaside Boarding House. This place is not the boarding house of your youth — replete with dry bacon and proprietors who view your very presence in their establishment as a personal insult.

From the outside, it might look like it is. But inside it's cosmopolitan chic — a place that people who earn slightly more than me, and consequently have slightly better lives, keep telling me to visit. The type of people who tell me they've found an undiscovered gem where the cocktails are “only” £18. Kick down your windbreakers,

the seaside's going upmarket.

Given this, it will not surprise you to learn that the Seaside Boarding House was set up by Anthony Mackintosh and Mary-Lou Sturridge, formerly of the Soho members' club the Groucho — a place that also used to be a bit grimy but is now owned by the people behind the bouji art gallery Hauser & Wirth, and gets more California every day. Are we losing something as every establishment that's slightly rough around the edges cleans up its act? Maybe. But what do we gain?

Well, a view over the cliffs that would have the stoutest of Europhiles toasting to British exceptionalism, for a start. To

THE DAMAGE	
Whipped cod's roe	£8
Oglesfield croquette	£3
Asparagus with potato	£16
Skate in brown butter	£25
Tiramisu ice cream	£6
Glass of champagne	£12.50
Glass of picpoul de pinet	£6
Subtotal	£76.50
Optional service charge (12.5%)	£9.56
<b>Total for 1</b>	<b>£86.06</b>



toast with it, a cocktail and wine list to rival any luxury hotel. Whipped cod's roe, thick and rich like a Soho socialite, with a drizzle of expensive-tasting olive oil and an almost sweet, almost sticky and definitely satisfying sourdough crisp. A fat croquette with hazelnut, truffle and Oglesfield cheese. Again, teetering pleasingly on the edge of sweetness.

The main, however — skate in brown butter and sherry vinegar — took the sweetness too far. The saltiness of the skate's samphire garnish could in another life have provided a counterbalance but here it adds to the sense of being hit in the face by the sea. A slight shame after a terrific starter of fresh asparagus, Jersey royals, crunchy broad beans and an egg with a yolk so orange and gloopy I'd forgive anything else. Plus tiramisu ice cream with a clever scattering of toasted pecans — surprisingly savoury, which is a relief.

Overexcitable skate aside, it's good food. They aren't doing anything revolutionary but everything is smart, elegant and easy, and next morning I have perfect scrambled eggs that flow in the same way a perfect risotto is meant to. I'd recommend the Seaside Boarding House to anyone wanting to get away to the coast and experience it from a beautiful, luxurious vantage point. And yet...

And yet I can't stop thinking about the Hive Café, the little place next door on the beach, where even on the sunniest day this year I still had to grab my napkin every thirty seconds to prevent its hasty departure. Most of the café is a glorified tent, flaps shaking dangerously in the breeze. But there I had the freshest, most perfect fillet of mackerel — the catch of the day — in a simple buttery sauce with a scattering of fresh veg and capers. Nothing fancy, nothing clever. But with the cold sea air in the background it's hard to imagine a more ideal meal. The luxury of the Boarding House is lovely, but this was the proper British seaside experience ■

## WINE • Will Lyons

### Six bottles to pack for a perfect picnic

**P**icnic season is upon us and no doubt you'll be considering which bottles to slip into your basket to enjoy alfresco. Picnics don't have to be grand affairs, in many ways the simpler the better, and that goes for the wine too. A chilled vin ordinaire with a few hunks of cheese, a slice of terrine and a freshly baked baguette in a French field is my idea of heaven.

A crowd-pleasing rosé such as Aldi's vibrant and refreshing 2023 Assyrtiko Syrah Rosé from Athlon in Greece (£9.99) would be a commendable choice, but equally I've enjoyed salt beef sandwiches with a good dollop of English mustard beside the river with a fruity, hoppy ale — perhaps Timothy Taylor's Landlord from Yorkshire (Tesco, £2.25). In the evening, a simple salad and cold meats under the tree in the garden will be enhanced by an easy-drinking red such as Asda's 2023 Extra Special Pinot Noir from the Leyda Valley in Chile (£7.50).

Despite our volatile weather, picnics are meant to be enjoyed in the sunshine, so for whites you're naturally looking for light, refreshing contenders such as muscadet, vermentino, albariño and sauvignon blanc. If these sound a little predictable, try Aldi's 2023 Unearthed Custozza Bianco (£9.99). Produced in the north of Italy, it's a little like a more tropical and floral pinot grigio. Another reliable all-rounder is Sainsbury's crisp and appley 2023 Taste the Difference Muscadet Sèvre et Maine (£10.50). Tangy and spritzzy, it's a great accompaniment to grilled tuna or prawns.

You'll need a few reds on hand for when the weather turns cloudy or if meat is on the menu. Beaujolais and light examples from the Loire are ideal here, but something like the 2021 Lentsch Zweigelt from Burgenland in Austria (Waitrose, £9.99) has enough juicy, sappy cherry to savour the occasion in style ■

**Côtes du Rhône Pont du Fleur Rosé France (12.5%) M&S, £8.50** This crisp, bone-dry rosé from the Cellier des Dauphins is one of the best value in the M&S range. Serve well chilled.

**2022 Tukituki Sauvignon Blanc New Zealand (12%) Asda £8.50** A classic, intense Marlborough sauvignon with grassy notes of gooseberry, tropical fruit and green apple.

**2022 Paul Mas Reserve Pinot Noir France (13.5%) Morrisons, £8** The Languedoc comes up trumps with this rich, generous pinot noir, imparting aromatic notes of cherry and dark fruit.

**Nuit de Lumières Petit Verdot France (12.5%) House of Townend, £10.99** This smooth, rich, succulent red has a soft texture and warming notes of blackcurrant and violet.

**Codorniu Cuvée Original Organic Brut Cava Spain (11.5%) Majestic, £11.99** The secondary fermentation gives this a yeasty, biscuity texture and a nutty, creamy finish.

**2022 Julien Sunier Wild Soul Beaujolais France (12.5%) Berry Bros & Rudd, £23.50** Sunier makes some interesting wines and this is light, fruity and ideal for posh picnics.

#### Bargain of the week

**2023 Specially Selected Buenas Vides Malbec Argentina (13%) Aldi, £6.29** This is a real bargain from the Uco Valley, with smooth dark fruit, violet and plum.



## HEALTH

# Real men, crying

Would a touchy-feely retreat just for blokes make *Ralph Jones* a better dad?

It's pitch black, the air is thick and I'm covered in sweat. Around me are 27 similarly moist men, packed nearly naked into a makeshift tent no bigger than a Land Rover. An ageing electrician called John, the leader of this ritual, has his assistant bring in another red-hot rock to be laid gently into the soil ("Hot rock coming down the spirit line"). With a sizzle the temperature rises. We might as well be sitting on the sun itself.

My fellow sweaty tent men aren't members of a cult. They're regular guys. Chiropractors. Counsellors. Bankers. Software engineers. Some are retired international rugby players. And they're in swimming trunks in a field because a few days ago they all embarked on a five-day men's retreat, Men Without Masks, which promises transformation.

Much has been written about toxic male role models. Violent misogynists such as Andrew Tate offer unpalatable solutions to a real crisis. In Britain, 74 per cent of suicides, 85 per cent of homeless people and 96 per cent of prisoners are male. This crisis might explain the boom in men's retreats: The Unmasked Man, Both Sides, The ManKind Project, Menspedition. Men want ways to navigate their feelings.

My cohort includes people who have lost loved ones to suicide, those who want to be able to hug their daughters and those who simply want to feel joy again. For many, the retreat is a last resort after therapy, counselling and medication. I feel self-conscious: I'm here



**"My overriding memory is the noises coming out of me. I was just a sobbing heap of meat"**

mainly as a journalist but also because I worry I'm not the dad I wanted to be. This now feels trivial in comparison to others.

Our programme for this week involves talking, dancing, swimming, doing breathwork — consciously controlling your inhaling and exhaling — and experiencing "transcendental states of consciousness". Among the retreat's guidelines are: "listen compassionately", "use 'I' statements to own your story" and "only one man at a time for a piss". One of my fellow recruits, Tony, suggests the experience will be like a bank account: you'll only get something out if you put

something in. This is apt. Men Without Masks charges between £2,395 and £2,995 for the five-day programme.

Our home is Broughton Hall, the 16th-century country house near Leeds. While finishing a ham sandwich, the last meal I am permitted during my stay, I wonder what I've let myself in for. My retreat journal says "true growth happens at the edge of our comfort zone". There are 29 lavish paintings in my room alone, and a freestanding bath in a massive marble bathroom.

The founder is Craig White, a twinkly-eyed 51-year-old from Hebden Bridge who has the sweet habit of applying air

quotes to words such as "Zoom". A former coach for the Welsh national rugby team, he created Men Without Masks — which he describes as "an ecosystem of services to support men" — in 2016. After spending a month at a retreat in Thailand he decided to create his own camp incorporating elements he felt men needed, such as cold-water therapy, shamanism, access to nature, meditation and yoga.

"The next five days is an opportunity to bring everything," he tells us. While sombre music plays, we deposit into a treasure chest our electronic devices like smokers binning packets of cigarettes.

I'm sceptical about the benefits of things such as breathwork, which is supposed to deliver better sleep, less stress and better focus. By the end of the retreat I've exhaled enough



air to pump up a bouncy castle, and to be honest my feelings haven't changed. But Jason, 53, who owns a building company and lost his son Gryff to suicide in 2021, has a remarkable experience during one session. "I felt this beam of light come out the top of my head," he says. "I could see it going through the roof of the yoga hall and a beam of light came out of the sky and it was exactly the same circumference as my beam of light coming out of my head. They met and touched. I just knew it was Gryff."

On another exercise I stand staring into the eyes of Paul, a towering 55-year-old who struggles with depression. We have to ask and answer soul-baring questions such as "Tell me about loss" and "What do you really love?" For the latter I say, "Hearing my daughter say 'I love you.'" My voice cracks. I watch Paul's face dissolve and all of a sudden we are crying with each other. I reach out to hold his hands. I count these few minutes as some of the most profound of my life.

Men Without Masks isn't performatively macho like The Modern Day Knight Project in the US, which involves men getting bags put over their heads, digging their own graves, and paying \$12,000 for the privilege. At no point do I feel as if Craig will force me to dig my own grave. But it is physical. At one point we do star-jumps nonstop for ten minutes. (You



try it.) There's method to the masochism: after intense exercise, Craig says, there is "a whole new level of honesty and courage and presence".

On day three, after we've leapt into a cold lake, Craig introduces us to "the 100 club": a ritual in which each man batters a punchbag 100 times with a baseball bat while other men stand by him, representing people in his life. As soon as I've seen the demo — which also involves Craig saying, "Do you own your balls? Or does your mother?" — I don't think I can do it. Though I perform comedy on stage, this kind of exposure terrifies me: the certainty that I will be found out as a man of insufficient passion.

I watch as men warp the bag with colossal blows until they are weeping. After Pat, 51, has exhausted himself, we hold him as he lies on the floor.

**Clockwise from left: a queue to enter the hot tent; reflecting outside the tent; an emotional breathwork session; Jones and his fellow men are encouraged to "dance with abandon"**

"My overriding memory is the noises that were coming out of me," he says. "I was just a sobbing heap of meat on the floor." In a way, what frightens me is that I won't become a sobbing heap of meat on the floor, that people won't get anything like as good a show.

While Men Without Masks could barely be further from the misogynistic world of Andrew Tate, I do hear some careless simplifications from Craig. "Women still like to gather... to go shopping" (hmm); it's sometimes "not natural" for women to assume the role of men (hmmm); patriarchy was necessary for science to flourish (hmmmmmm). But in general, men take responsibility for their problems and show courage and introspection. The retreat reinforces my belief that the strongest men are those who are in touch with what is often lazily called their "feminine" side. I hear men saying they want to be better fathers and husbands.

On the final day we wear crowns, sit on a "throne" and ask others: "What do you see in me?" Because of the week we've just had, this feels less weird than it sounds. I tell one man I love him.

It is intense, though. I perceive a lot of the comments about me

as criticism. While a group retreat creates strength in numbers — and a wonderful WhatsApp group that still pings months afterwards with reflections on how the experience has affected us all — it also makes it tempting to feel as though others have passed the assignment while I failed. "Yours was a beautiful journey," Craig says, generously. "There's something quite beautiful about speaking about what we're scared of."

"Has it changed my life?" asks Pat, who now does regular breathwork. "I think it probably has. This shit works." There is precious little the men would change about the retreat, though one thing stands out: "I felt like I ate far too many eggs," Jason says. But I see in people's eyes that they have been radically affected by the week.

As for me, I resolve to do various things — "Be a more patient, present daddy"; "Try not to carry shame" — some of which I've managed to do. It's not possible to be the me I want to be at the end of the week for ever, but I hope and believe I am a better version of myself than when I arrived. I don't think that Men Without Masks can solve everything, nor is talking to strangers in a stately home everyone's cup of tea, but it was wonderful to experience and something that made me very grateful for what I have ■

**Ralph Jones was a guest of Men Without Masks; [menwithoutmasks.com](http://menwithoutmasks.com)**





**D R I V I N G** • Jeremy Clarkson

## What's the score? You can ask this Merc yourself



### REVIEW MERCEDES CLE

**U**nderstanding the Mercedes range used to be so simple. You had the C-class, which would arrive outside your house at the appointed hour with an air freshener dangling from the rear-view mirror and take you in a cloud of pine-fresh chemicals to Luton. Then there was the larger E-class, which would whizz you to Gatwick. And then, right at the top, there was the S-class, which would get you in

sumptuous silence to the very end of Terminal 5 at Heathrow. Because that's where BA's first-class check-in is located.

Even the numbering made sense. If it said 200 on the boot lid, you knew it had a 2-litre engine. If it said 350, you knew it had a 3.5. And if it said 6.3, you knew it had a 6.2-litre V8. I never did understand that one, but we'll let it slide.

Today, though, the Mercedes range is all over the place. You've got the EQS and the EQA and the CLA and the GLB and on and on it goes. And none of it makes any sense.

They sent something called a CLE 450 to my house last week, so I assumed it would have a 4.5-litre engine. Wrong. It is a 3-litre turbo. So what about the CLE bit then? It's halfway, apparently, between a C-class

coupé and an E-class coupé. So it's a niche, then, inside a niche. And when they thought of it in some dismal marketing meeting I bet there was a lot of high-fiving and some oompah music.

As we are not in a marketing meeting, it's probably best to tell you that prices for the CLE range start at £46,620, and despite a rather jelly-mould profile it's quite a pretty car, and that the interior, finished in quilted white, Miami-spec leather, is a lovely place to sit.

To find out what it's like to drive, I decided to use it to get to an early morning *Grand Tour* meeting. And obviously, as it's a modern car, built to comply with all the latest net-zero and safety requirements from our glorious leaders, I had to climb aboard 15 minutes before

I needed to set off so that I had time to disable all the annoying beeps and bongs.

It wasn't too hard. Just a couple of submenus, a bit of gentle scrolling and some light swiping and I had full, manual control of the brakes and the steering. Then I gave the sat-nav system my destination, which was also easy, and set off. Lovely.

Except that on my farm's drive it started bonging at me and flashing up warning notices on both the dashboard and the windscreen's head-up display to say that I was breaking the 20mph speed limit. Realising I had forgotten to turn this function off, I stopped and spent 20 minutes trying to work out how it might be done. I failed.

So now I'm late and I couldn't make up the time because every time I went near the throttle the



## She's Alexa with windscreen wipers. I asked her to turn my speed warning off, and she did



bonging resumed. At one point I found myself behind a furniture removals lorry being driven in a very spirited fashion. If your grand piano was recently delivered with one leg missing, I know why. But when all is said and done, it was still a lorry. And I couldn't keep up.

Well, I could. But if I drove at the same speed he was going, I was driven to distraction by the endless warnings that I was breaking the law. I know, I know, speed limits are just a Liberal Democrat's opinion, but, whatever, I surrendered and decided to be Nick Clegg.

And just as I was thinking, "What was the point of

designing a car like this when you can never go faster than people were going in 1904," a pleasant woman's voice suddenly said, "Would you like to know the football results?"

As it was 7.50am on a Wednesday morning, I didn't think there were any results of any great importance. But that wasn't the main issue. Why had the car, out of the blue, said this? I was driving along at 19mph, minding my own business, and it had decided to ask me a completely random question. And then, a few moments later, the same robot woman oiled her way out of the speaker system to explain that she wants to

"evolve". Hmm. I've seen enough sci-fi stuff to know that quite the last thing we need is a machine that can learn to learn. Because, the next thing you know, she decides you're not necessary, takes control of the steering and the accelerator and drives you at 100mph into a tree.

It turns out that if you begin by saying "Hey Mercedes", she will reply by saying "I'm listening" or "How can I help?" She's basically Alexa with windscreen wipers. So I said "Hey Mercedes" and then asked, "Can you turn this f\*\*\*ing speed limit warning off?" And she did.

I then got carried away. I asked her to name the village we were driving through, and who I was, and what is the capital of Peru. She did, so I upped the ante, asking her if she knew how many people died on the Titanic. Easy. "OK, clever clogs," I said, "name them."

A petulant silence. The sort of robot silence that made me think she was busy searching for the nearest tree and routing the throttle controls through her hardware. I noticed this a lot in the coming days. If you asked a difficult question she didn't reply. It was as if she was too embarrassed to say she didn't know. Which suggests she has an ego. And who wants two of those controlling a car at the same time?

But the worst thing is if you asked a lot of questions, one after the other, you eventually got to the point where she sounded annoyed. You'd say, "Hey Mercedes" and she'd say, rather petulantly, "Yes". Which tells me that on top of the ego there's a temper. As a result I asked her if she could turn herself off. There was another petulant silence. So I said "Hey Mercedes" again. And she replied. Which means that, no, she can't turn herself off. She is Skynet. She's evolving. And she has control over the car you're in.

So, what's her car like then? Pretty good actually. It's got a decent amount of space in the back, the boot's huge, there's that usual sense that everything is very well screwed together. It's comfortable too. And, thanks to the EU rulemakers, it's very nearly as fast as a well-driven removals lorry ■

## COLLECTORS' CLASSICS Mitsubishi Evo



Back in 2003, as pop fans were arguing over whether Christina Aguilera was better than Britney Spears, car enthusiasts were locked in heated debate about the merits of the Mitsubishi Evo and the Subaru Impreza.

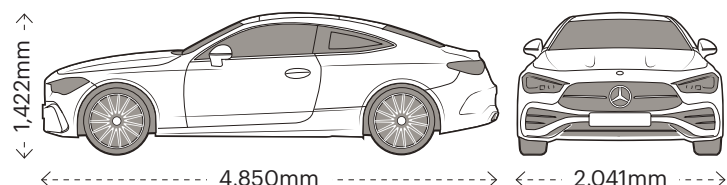
In June of that year *Top Gear* decided to settle the matter. After racing a Mitsubishi Evo VIII and a Subaru Impreza STi around Scottish lochs, Jeremy Clarkson concluded it was impossible to split the cars on performance. Both had been designed for the rigours of rallying and could go from 0-60mph in under five seconds, with top speeds of about 150mph.

The final reckoning was left to the Stig, who tested the cars on *Top Gear's* track at Dunsfold Aerodrome in Surrey. The Subaru managed a lap time of 90.1 seconds, the Mitsubishi an astonishing 88.9 seconds, beating the time of even a Lamborghini Murciélago. Then it emerged that Mitsubishi had swapped the Evo Clarkson had tested in Scotland and supplied the Stig with a souped-up FQ version. And so the debate was unresolved.

The Evo was discontinued in 2016; the Impreza morphed into another grey crossover built on something depressingly called the Subaru Global Platform. It outlasted its rival but is lost without it. Today a Mitsubishi Evo VIII in good condition will set you back at least £25,000. If you can afford it, buy a Subaru to keep it company.

By Nick Rufford

## The Clarksometer Mercedes CLE 450 Premier Edition



**Engine** 2999cc, 6 cylinders, turbo, petrol **Power** 375bhp @ 5800rpm **Torque** 369 lb ft @ 1800rpm **Acceleration** 0-62mph: 4.4sec **Top speed** 155mph **Fuel** 36.2mpg **CO<sub>2</sub>** 176g/km **Weight** 1,945kg **Price** £72,820 **Release date** On sale now

**Jeremy's rating** ★★★★★☆



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Feeling tired and don't know why? You're not alone. According to a recent study, less than half of us consume our recommended daily amount of magnesium, a mineral that helps turn the food we eat into energy.

Best known for helping to reduce tiredness and fatigue, magnesium is also vital for our health.

Deficiency can cause mood swings, migraines, eye twitches and muscle cramps.

If you have low magnesium levels, you are also less likely to get a good night's sleep.

Magnesium is present in foods such as black beans, bananas and pumpkin seeds, but to get the benefits we need to absorb it into our bodies.

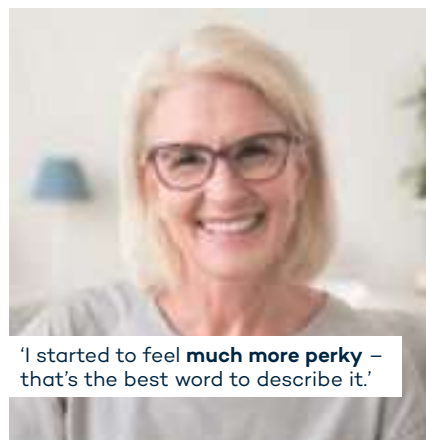
One way to ensure we consume a consistent level of magnesium is by taking a daily supplement – but not all supplements are equal.

Your body's ability to absorb the magnesium depends on the way that the supplement is made.

'Most supplements use magnesium oxide – it is the most common form, as it has a high concentration of magnesium but it's not easily released into the body,' explains Dr Miriam Ferrer PhD, head of product development at FutureYou Cambridge.

'Taking more magnesium to try and make up for the problem isn't the best approach, as too much can cause an upset stomach so we created Magnesium+ using magnesium lactate which is twice as absorbable as a standard magnesium oxide supplement. This means you need much less per capsule to deliver the same amount, making it a much more efficient way to take this essential mineral.'

Reviews gathered on



'I started to feel **much more perky** – that's the best word to describe it.'

independent website Trustpilot speak of its effectiveness. Nicole, 57, says: 'I genuinely started to feel different within a couple of weeks. I started to feel much more perky – that's the best word to describe it.'

'I feel like I've got more energy and more desire to do stuff. I've taken them religiously ever since.'

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Cambridge firm received a flurry of positive reviews for its best-selling energy product on Trustpilot, the independent online review platform.

'I am a woman of 74, and a few months ago I realised that I had no energy at all. I put it down to my



age, but it was really impacting on my life in so many ways.

My husband read an ad for Magnesium+ and I thought I would give it a try. Within two weeks I was a different woman, with energy to spare,' says Anne.

**"Within two weeks I was a different woman, with energy to spare"**

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## A LIFE IN THE DAY

# Michel Roux

Chef, 64

**R**oux was born in Kent, the son of the French chef Albert Roux. After leaving school at 16 he trained in France before joining his father's restaurant, Le Gavroche, in Mayfair, London, in 1985. He took it over in 1993, running it until it closed in January this year. Roux has appeared on many shows including *Food & Drink* and *MasterChef*. He is married to Giselle, a food consultant. They have one daughter, Emily, 33, also a chef, and live in south London.

I wake early, often as early as 5.30, but I try not to get up then as it would upset my wife. I do like to attack the day, though, and I can't sit still in bed. I've lived here in south London for 38 years with my darling Giselle.

Breakfast is essential, I never leave home without it: double espresso and homemade sourdough with salted butter — with crystals in it — and some of my wife's extraordinary homemade marmalade.

Even though Le Gavroche has closed I still come in most days because there are still lots of things to do. It's all looking a bit sad now — no pictures on the wall, little furniture. My father had started this restaurant back in the Sixties and I joined him in the Eighties. It was open for 57 years in total, but I felt the time was right to close. The lease was coming to an end and I'm not getting any younger.

I was a very hands-on chef, there most days, and that takes a toll on you. My daughter, Emily, and her husband, Diego Ferrari, have their own restaurant, Caractère, in



Notting Hill and I wanted to be available to do a little more babysitting for them. My grandsons, aged four and seven months, are delightful.

I'm still doing events, and that requires a lot of menu and recipe development. Oh, and there are also reams of bloody paperwork to do — always so much paperwork!

The only thing I was ever going to do was become a chef, or else work in hospitality. I love the fact that I can make people happy through what I do.

Working at Le Gavroche made me famous, I suppose, and if that was an inevitable consequence of having a successful restaurant, then it was never planned. I actually

consciously stepped back from television work because I feared I was being overexposed. I did not want to be a celebrity chef.

Do I like watching other famous chefs on TV? Hmm. I'm not sure celebrity chefs are a true reflection of themselves, and being on television was taking me in a direction I didn't want to go in. I just love to cook. Le Gavroche had two Michelin stars, which is wonderful of course, but it also comes with a huge burden: expectation from your customers, from yourself. There's a lot of stress.

I love lunch and today I had it in the restaurant kitchen — 12.30, a big bowl of pasta and tomato. Chefs tend to like carbs.

Afternoons I like to go for a run. I used to have debilitating migraines — and was what is perhaps best described as an “angry chef”. All chefs go through that phase. The cure for me was sport. I've spent most of my life on my feet, either in the kitchen for 12 to 16 hours a day or running marathons. My knees creak now.

The rest of my afternoon is meetings, and then it's home. Dinner used to be at the restaurant before evening service, lots of carbs again, all gobbled down at 100 miles an hour. It's nice now to cook at home, for myself and my dear wife. Tonight it's cod with spinach, wild leeks, Jersey royal potatoes and a glass of wine. Good food but nothing fancy, 20 minutes' cooking time tops. It will be an absolute pleasure.

I still run lots of evening events but I do like a night in, watching something on TV. But I didn't like *The Bear* — I couldn't get into it. I did like the BBC's *Boiling Point*, though. It was accurate and I fully sympathise with the stress, but as far as the drug abuse goes I wouldn't know.

I never got home before 11.30 when running the restaurant but I'm now in bed by ten and get a good seven hours' sleep, ready for tomorrow. Food remains my main motivation. It's not my work, it's my life. I take it incredibly seriously ■

**Interview by Nick Duerden.**  
**chezroux.com**

### WORDS OF WISDOM

#### Best advice I was given

That being a head chef is not just about the food on the plate. It's a true team game

#### Advice I'd give

Get into sports

#### What I wish I'd known

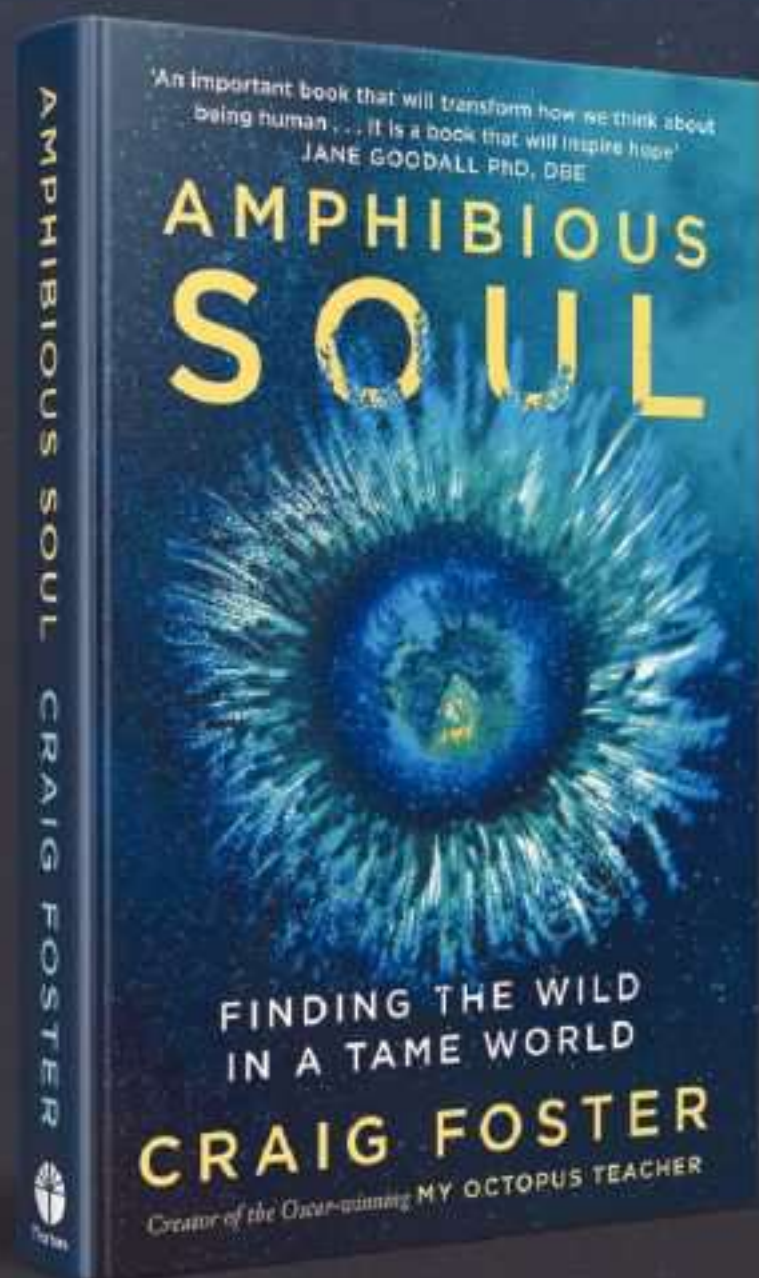
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