THE TIMES
MAGAZINE
07.12.24

THE WOMAN WHO REFUSED TO BE SILENCED

In court with Gisèle Pelicot

By Janice Turner

An ornate, ceramic house brimming with all-butter gingerbread biscuits, a light-up house filled with our luxury gold tea bags, and a little push-along car full of sweets – these treat-filled tins are worth driving home for.

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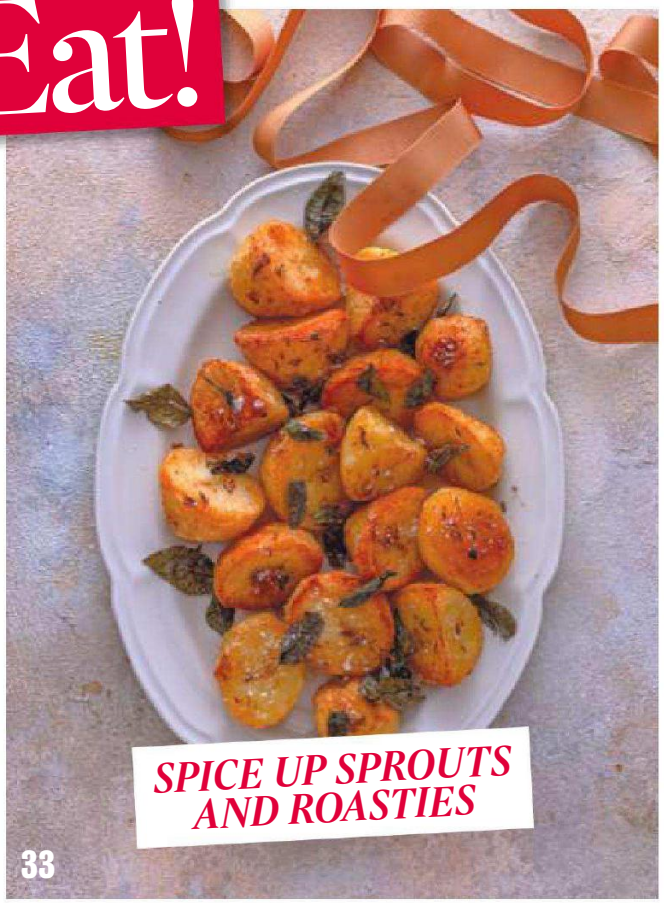

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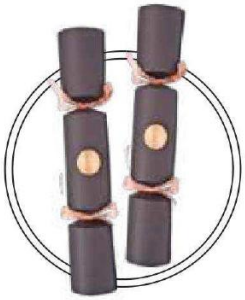
FAB FIVE: CRACKERS FOR GROWN-UPS



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COLUMNIST OF THE YEAR

CAITLIN MORAN

Too many boys are killing themselves. We have to encourage them to talk, cry and scream

Don't "man up". "Man up" means nothing. What does "man up" mean? What does it result in?

Five. Five young men, in my social circle, who have taken their lives in the past 18 months. Brothers of friends. *Children* of friends. Boys in their teens, men in their twenties. The oldest was 31. In this country, the leading cause of death for men under the age of 50 is suicide. They didn't complain. They didn't ask for help. They were stoic. They coped with their problems *on their own*. They never *bored* anyone with their fears. They never *weakened* enough to list all their shames, their horrors.

Presumably, that is why most of these boys and men didn't leave a letter or a note. The bedrooms were turned over, the phones examined, but – nothing. Most didn't explain *why* they took their own lives – presumably because they *couldn't*. They kept their stiff upper lip, even into death. They dutifully stuck to the rules of being a man. Those letters and notes don't exist because the *language* doesn't exist for men and boys to say, "I feel scared. I feel small. I already feel it's too late to get better." They were obedient. They stayed silent. They manned up. They were good boys. And now they are gone.

Who has taught them this? Where did this bleak, dark, *wrong* information come from? For boys aren't born with a death wish – baby boys cry out for help *just as much* as baby girls. Our understanding of little boys should be that there is rich, luxuriant, endless time for boys to experience *all* their emotions. That their love world is just as huge and tender as that of girls.

Instead, it starts at six. This is what I have heard, time and time again. From counsellors, psychologists, parents, teachers. Especially the teachers.

Before the age of six, boys and girls are roughly the same. They hold hands. They kiss. They cry. They show fear. They are exuberant in their love.

And then, at six, this is the first time they hear a classmate say, "Boys don't do that. Boys don't hold hands. Boys don't cry. *Man up*."

Who says this? Again, everyone I spoke to agreed: *it's the most screwed-up kid in the class*. It's the one with an abusive father, an absent father, an abusive older sibling. And the most screwed-up boy in the class tells all the other boys in the class how to be a man. Don't hold hands. Don't cry. Boys don't do that.

ROBERT WILSON

'Any man who is telling boys to stay silent might as well be handing out poison at the school gates'

So now the bet – the existential bet – is, how strong is your family? How much can parents blot out what a boy hears every day? What he hears in school, what he sees online? In the manosphere – the internet's dark, inverted iteration of feminism – there are battalions of influencers insisting a man is in the gym at 6am. A man gets his money. A man should never rely on *anyone*, because that is weak. A man is on his own.

But of course, this is wrong. As these boys would learn if they could see the impact of their suicides. A suicide is never just one death. In a way, the whole family dies. He was never, ever alone.

And so whoever gives little boys these lessons – these lessons of silence and stoicism and internalised shame – is guilty of mass manslaughter, really. Any man who is telling boys to stay silent might as well be handing out poison at the school gates.

Some *will* be immune to it.

Some will just be mildly ill for the rest of their lives.

And some will die before they even become the men they were supposed to be manning up into.

Oh, boys! Boys and young men. You will be told, by these brutal, merciless, *blithe* influencers, that it's all about the "survival of the fittest", which, for men, is presumed to be the toughest. Able to defeat others in a fight. But – surprise! – these dark, strident, barking men haven't actually *read* Darwin. These men don't even know the sentence they are quoting. Darwin's theory of who was *actually* the fittest was "those best adjusted to their immediate environment".

And what is the immediate environment? One in which the leading cause of death for men under the age of 50 is suicide. *That's* the immediate environment you must survive. One in which young men's biggest enemy is their *idea* of what it is to be a young man. One in which young men don't fight or go to war against anyone *apart from themselves*.

And so, obviously, the genuinely fittest young man wouldn't "man up". He would *shout out*. He would talk, cry and scream. He would *rebel* against this old, awful idea.

He would still be here. ■

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What I've learnt Arlene Phillips

Dame Arlene Phillips, 81, is a choreographer, theatre director and former dancer. She has choreographed West End and Broadway musicals as well as films and has been a judge on television talent shows including Strictly Come Dancing. She's also published a series of children's fiction books. She lives in London with her partner, Angus Ion.

This has not been a good year for my weight, not at all. Sometimes I make a decision that I'm actually going to eat frugally and carefully, and my mind can stick with it. Other times I just think, "You're in your eighties – you can have what you want! Make sure you're enjoying everything you eat!"

I was one of the have-nots. I was one of three children. My mum was desperately trying to find part-time work because of my father's ill health. It was very, very difficult. I was an envious child because I didn't have new things. I wore the same pair of shoes whether I was going to school, playing outside or at a party, so I thought about materialistic things often. A girl who lived down the road had black patent leather shoes – I longed to have a pair of my own.

My only dieting rule is that wherever I go, I'll have a packet of chicory in my bag. Because if I'm hungry and ready to reach for crisps or a Cadbury Dairy Milk Wholenut bar, I will then say to myself, "No! You've got your chicory."

Tweakments like Botox and fillers? That all stopped during Covid. Now I just use serious electrical implements to massage my face.

Len Goodman's death was difficult for me. He was a beautiful human being and we had a wonderful dynamic as fellow judges on *Strictly*. Everything you saw in Len was Len. There were no airs and graces. He always used to say, "I'm just a boring teacher from Dartford." And I think that's where he kept himself, no matter how his career expanded.

I can't absolutely say that ageism led to my leaving *Strictly*. I've never been told that my going had anything to do with my age. The thing about contracts is that they're for a finite time and we were on yearly contracts back then. We all knew they weren't guaranteed to last. I think the BBC wanted a change, and I was the one to go.

I had a dream to dance, but we couldn't afford ballet shoes. Let alone the cost of the lessons. I was still always taught to look out for others, despite the financial hardship. Growing up we had a charity box and, if any of us got money from an aunt or uncle, we'd have to put some of that money into the box. It helped us to realise that there were others who were actually far worse off than we were.

ALEX JAMES/OK! MAGAZINE

PORTRAIT Alex James

'I'd like to lose weight. If I'm hungry I snack on chicory. I don't have the courage to use Ozempic'

INTERVIEW Elisabeth Perlman

The government has to look at how they're going to ensure people are taken care of. From councils to schools to the NHS, everyone is crying out for money.

I wish I had the courage to go on Ozempic. I don't like injections and I don't know how highly it has been tested to make sure it is OK. But I'd love to lose these extra 14lb that seem to have attached themselves to my body. I'd like to make it easy.

I did anything I could to earn some money. In my early years as a dance teacher I had many jobs to pay the bills, including working in a factory in Dagenham checking Second World War coats for bullet holes. I ended up smelling like mothballs, because all of the coats were packaged up with them. It meant that no one wanted to come anywhere near me when I got to the dance class. At least I had a lot of space!

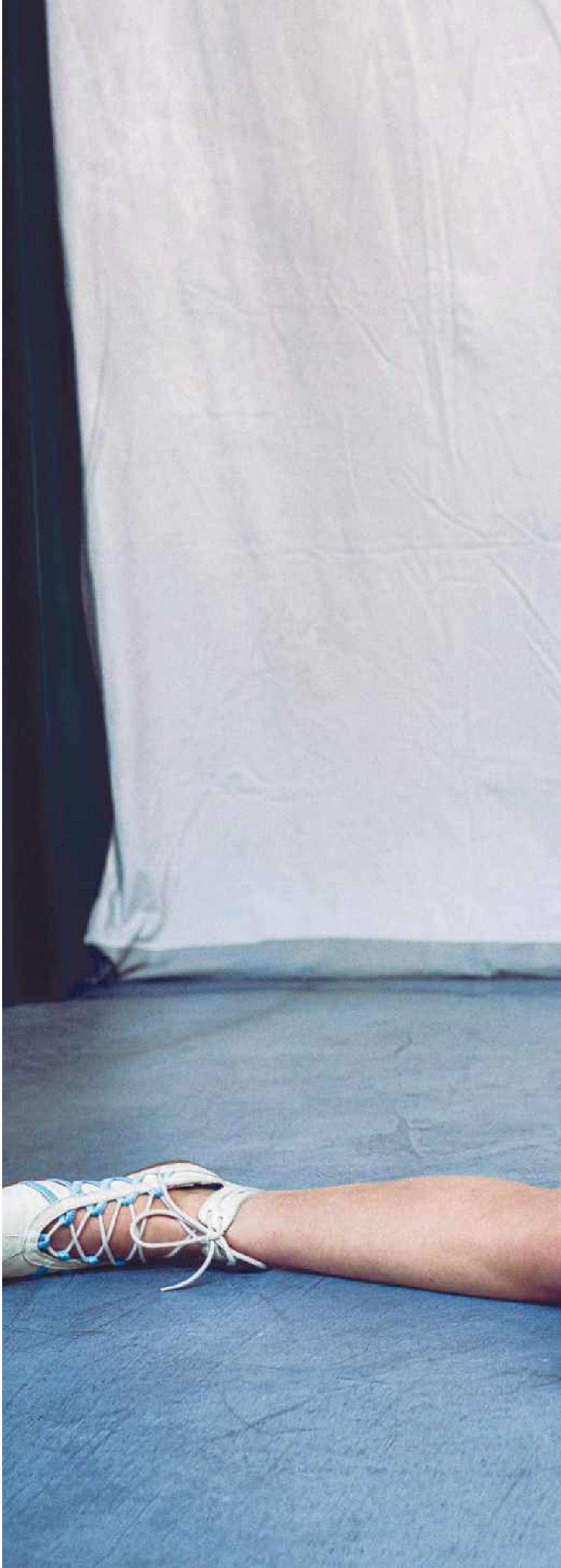
I babysat for Ridley Scott. I needed somewhere to live and I needed to earn money, so I'd help out in his house. It was just a very nice semi-detached family home, but to me it was a palace. Everything was perfectly lined up, from the way that the newspapers were laid out in the morning to everything in the kitchen cupboards.

Hot Gossip, my very sexy, sensual dance group, was on the telly at 6.30pm. Mary Whitehouse, the conservative activist who was a self-proclaimed protector of public morals, was horrified. The newspapers caught on to what was going on and we made front-page news. ■

To find out more about Save the Children's Christmas Jumper Day on December 12, visit savethechildren.org.uk/christmas-jumper-day and donate whatever you can

‘I feel so lucky that it was my leg and not my life. If I’d stepped out a second later, I could have died’

Georgia Stannard was a 22-year-old student when a bus ran over her foot and her right leg had to be amputated. She struggled to cope, then came an unexpected offer – she’s now a model and the face of a high-street shoe brand. Interview by Jane Mulkerrins



Georgia Stannard, 27,
photographed by Sane Seven

Georgia Stannard was running late, trying to shave a few seconds off her journey when she saw "in the corner of my eye, in the periphery of my vision, this red big thing coming really fast towards me.

"I didn't feel pain at first," she says. "I think it was all adrenaline and shock."

It was September 2019, and Stannard was en route to meet a friend for lunch in south London before heading to Leeds to start the final year of her art history degree. At a multilane, multilight traffic junction by Clapham Common, while checking Google Maps on her phone, she stepped out – unwittingly – into a bus lane.

Incredibly, though the bus ran over her right foot, crushing it completely, Stannard was otherwise unhurt. "I didn't feel any pain until the fire brigade came and poured cold water on my foot to clean it. Then the pain was just excruciating."

In the ambulance, Stannard started to panic. "I remember asking the paramedics if I was going to die," she says. "And I think I just accepted, very quickly in that ambulance, that I needed an amputation. Because the paramedic was saying, 'We need this to happen so that you don't die.'"

Days after the surgery to remove her right foot, doctors advised that she have a second operation to amputate her leg from ten centimetres below the knee. "The way they explained it to me – that I'd have much less discomfort and pain with a longer prosthetic – made complete sense and I had hardly any hesitation," she says, before adding, wryly, "Granted, I was also on a lot of medication."

And remarkably, in the days following her surgeries, rather than self-pity or fear or anger, "I remember being overwhelmed with gratitude," she says. "I felt so lucky that it was my leg and not my life. If I'd stepped out a second later, I could easily have died or had a permanent head injury."

The other powerful sense she had, "and this might sound woo-woo or cheesy", she warns, "but I remember having this distinct voice in my head saying, 'This is going to be the making of you, and this is your purpose. It doesn't have to be clear yet, but just trust that something really big and good is going to come from this.' And that's never left me."

Five years on from her accident, 27-year-old Stannard's purpose has started to take shape. On a bright, chilly afternoon, we are meeting in a picturesque corner café ("Used as Dexter's café in *One Day*," Stannard tells me, excitedly) off Highbury Fields, north London, to discuss her role as the face of Schuh's single-shoe campaign, which allows customers who require only one shoe due to a limb difference or disability to buy just one shoe, at 50 per cent off the pair price.

"It seems like a no-brainer because it's so simple, but it stands for something so much greater, which is people with limb difference or leg loss having the choice. How was this not a thing already?"

While Stannard herself mostly wears two shoes now, "For the first two years [after my accident], and especially the first year when I was in a wheelchair, I was only ever wearing one shoe – and my right shoes were all gathering dust," she says.

"And now, when I'm at home or if I'm popping to the local shop, I'll often be wearing two different shoes, because there are shoes that just don't feel as comfortable on my prosthetic foot."

But for amputees in wheelchairs, or who may not have a prosthetic foot at all, "Buying a pair of shoes, knowing that only one is ever going to get used, is frustrating," Stannard says.

In April this year, the former British Paralympian Stef Reid urged Nike to begin selling individual trainers to single-leg amputees after spotting that the brand was using mannequins with running blades to promote its products.

Reid accused Nike of failing to live up to the values of diversity and inclusion it was claiming in using para-athlete mannequins if it refused to sell single shoes. But, at present, Schuh is still the only major footwear company offering single shoes.

Stannard – while tall, at 5ft 9in, with wide-set green eyes and excellent cheekbones – had never considered modelling until she was scouted, via Instagram, three years ago. She struggled to understand why Zebedee, an inclusive model and talent agency representing trans, non-binary and plus-size models as well as those with disabilities, wanted to see her. "But my mum said, 'Give it a chance and see what it's like,'" Stannard recalls. "She said, 'You never know what it'll do for your confidence.' And she was right."

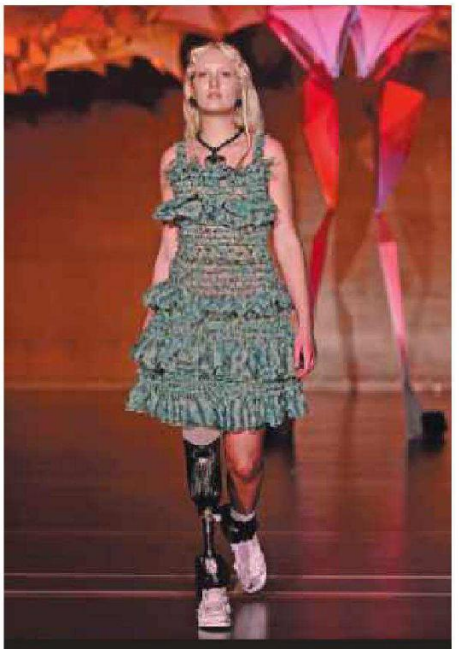
On her first shoot, for Adidas, in Times Square in New York, "I had such impostor syndrome. I remember walking on set and thinking, what the hell am I doing here? I was mute the whole day, just taking it all in. And in the pictures, I look really shell-shocked."

Since then, she's appeared in campaigns for brands including Marks & Spencer and the inclusive swimwear company Youswim. And yet she has what she calls "an identity struggle". She's conflicted. "I don't want to be defined by my disabilities, but I also want to advocate for disability rights and awareness."

She's happy to do campaigns for which she's told, "'We need to make sure the leg's on show. Can you wear a short skirt?' – I get that you're doing that for inclusivity and representation." But some of her favourite campaigns, she says, "have been ones where I'm wearing trousers. Where they've hired me for me, not my leg."

With her mother in hospital after the amputation

'I didn't feel pain until the fire brigade poured water on my foot to clean it. Then it was excruciating'



Modelling for Susan Fang, London Fashion Week, 2023

And, while she's walked at previous London and Copenhagen Fashion Weeks, the last two London Fashion Weeks, in February and September this year, "had no one with a disability in them", she says. "And there were hardly any plus-size models either. It was really only sample-size models on the runway.

"Is it all just trend-based?" she queries. "I don't want to sound cynical, because I'm incredibly grateful for all these experiences, but I am beginning to wonder how much the industry genuinely, truly cares about people with disabilities."

The youngest of three, Stannard grew up in Singapore, where her father was stationed with the Ghurkas. "It was a great

GETTY IMAGES, GEORGIA_STANNARD/INSTAGRAM

At a rehab centre in London, 2019

place to have a childhood," she says. "It was safe and practically the jungle – we had monkeys in our back garden."

Her parents split up in 2004, when Stannard was seven, but the family travelled together to Phuket, Thailand, for Christmas that year, "to show us kids that we could still be a united family".

Her father, Major Simon Stannard, was swept away in the Boxing Day tsunami, his body never recovered. This Christmas will be the 20th anniversary of the tragedy.

"Going through something really difficult like that, and growing up without a dad – and also not having a dad through quite intense circumstances – I grew up to be a bit tough-skinned," Stannard says.

This has, she believes, built the resilience that's helped her cope with losing a leg.

On the flip side, she suspects her accident may have triggered some previous trauma and "brought out things that were maybe buried quite deep; things that were dark and have come to the surface now.

"I also feel like I've needed a dad more than ever now," she says. "And I wonder what it would be like, the adult conversations I could have had with him, and how we would have got on as people."

Once discharged from hospital, Stannard was transferred to a 12-bed rehab centre in Kennington, south London. "The staff were all great, but it was a lot more confronting," she says. "It was the first time I'd seen other amputees, most of whom were a lot worse off than me. Suddenly everything felt very real. I realised, this is going to be tough."

She spent four weeks in the unit, relearning how to walk with apparatus, which was physically and emotionally gruelling. She was also the only patient under 50 in the unit, "and the mentality of a lot of the older patients was, 'I've lived my life and I've done everything I wanted, and this is kind of the end,'" she says.

"I remember thinking, 'I'm 22. F*** that. This is the beginning of my life. I am not going to let this get in the way of my life.' So it was actually a really huge motivator."

Just six months after her accident, in February 2020, she returned to Leeds to live with her friends in the shared house she'd been paying rent on since the previous September. She describes a typical large student townhouse, across multiple floors, with a basement kitchen; Stannard's bedroom was on the first floor.

In the first couple of years post-surgery, she was mainly still in a wheelchair, as her amputated leg changed frequently in size with swelling – "I got through 11 prosthetic legs in 9 months because it was changing shape so much" – and she developed rashes and sores, pain and rubbing from early prosthetics, which she was able to wear for only a short time each day.

Her sister had bought her a set of knee pads as a post-operative joke. But back in Leeds, unable to walk up and down the stairs, she used them daily to crawl between floors. "Those moments were probably the closest I got to, 'Why me?'" she says. "It felt humiliating."

Unsurprisingly, she soon had what she casually calls "a bit of a mental breakdown", which coincided with the UK's first Covid lockdown. She briefly moved out of the student house to stay with her mother in a rental nearby.

"That was the lowest I've ever felt," she says. "The reality was just sinking in and I felt really scared. I felt like giving up, and like I didn't want to be there any more."

After one particularly dark night, she sought out a therapist the next day who worked on her PTSD and flashbacks using EMDR – eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing – among other techniques, and began taking antidepressants. "Within three months I felt great. Therapy really changed my life, and antidepressants saved me," she says.

While isolating, the lockdowns were a blessing for Stannard, she admits, as she was able to learn how to live with her new limb while the world slowed to a halt. And there were no parties or club nights to miss out on.

"I was really worried about how I was going to fit into the social part of my life again. I thought, I'm not going to be able to go clubbing or go to a festival for four days. How am I going to have the stamina to be at dinner parties?

"Although I like to push myself and prove my physical strength – not just to myself but to everyone – I do get tired really quickly," she admits. "And I struggle to tell people how the things they find OK, I don't. The same exercise or the same walk to the shop will tire me out a lot more."

Cities are extremely challenging. "I love London a lot. But as I figured out quite quickly when I moved here, for someone with a physical disability it's just not made for me." Not all Tube stations are step-free, and the walk between lines at large interchanges can take ten minutes and prove exhausting.

"I also really struggle with asking for a seat [on the Tube]," she admits. "Because – especially if I'm wearing trousers – I look able-bodied. I look like a healthy young woman in her twenties. I get red and hot if I have to ask someone for a seat; I don't like drawing attention to myself."

Worse still, she says, is when her prosthetic is visible "and people are sitting in the priority seat and they'll look me up and down and still won't give a shit", she says, laughing. "What do I do with that?"

As a single woman in her twenties, she admits she worried about meeting someone post-amputation. "I made profiles on dating apps and I remember thinking, are people going to be put off by photos of my prosthetic leg?"

Then, at a Halloween party in 2023, she met her boyfriend, Robbie, who works in fashion production. "I remember after the first few dates, in a moment of insecurity, saying, 'I hope my leg is OK,' or whatever. He said, 'If anything, I am with you because of your incredible strength and resilience.' He's definitely helped me regain my confidence," she says.

"I find it really hard to think of life before my accident now," Stannard says. "If I see a photo of myself from summer 2019 I'm like, 'Who is that?' That girl and who I am now are very different people. Because of how much it's taught me.

"I know myself in a way that I never thought I would, because I've had to be there for myself," she says, adding quickly that she receives incredible help and support from friends and family. "But there are quiet moments that not even my boyfriend or best friends or family see or know about. Moments when I'm constantly having to reassure myself."

She reflects that she could, perhaps, be better at sharing or offloading things. "But independence is so important to me. I have this feeling like I've got to be able to look after myself; I've got to be able to do this for myself." ■

'I struggle with asking for a seat on the Tube, especially if I'm wearing trousers. I look able-bodied and healthy'

Mural by @maca_dessine in the Paris suburb of Gentilly


A march in Mazan in support of Gisèle Pelicot, October 5

GISÈLE PELICOT AND THE TRIAL THAT SHAMES FRANCE

Gisèle Pelicot's decision to waive her anonymity and attend the trial of her husband and 50 other men accused of raping her while she was drugged has made her a symbol of courage. It has also ignited fierce debate about sexual attitudes in France and the law surrounding rape. Janice Turner sits in court and finds out how the case is tearing French society apart

Gisèle Pelicot, 72, outside the court in Avignon on November 20

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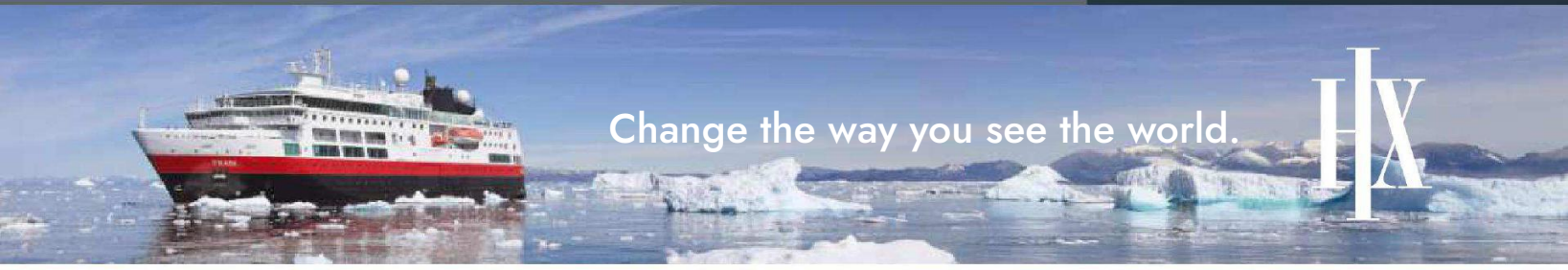

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There is no collective noun for rapists but spend a week at the Pelicot trial and you wonder why. As the early morning queue of women who've come to support Gisèle Pelicot passes through security at the Palais de Justice, Avignon, you spy men with downturned faces scurrying across the lobby past the press. In court they sit on the left, clustered around a glass box containing more men, those in custody for the gravest crimes. Since there are 50 in total, the alleged rapists have been tried in batches and I'm just here for the final seven: Boris, Philippe, Nicolas, Nizair, Joseph, Christian, Charly.

Plus Dominique Pelicot himself, who invited them all into his marital bedroom, where he had his wife waiting, drugged and naked, and who joined in and filmed it all. Pelicot, 71, crumpled and fat now, but with a residual bulky power, sits sullenly alone with his guard in a separate glass box, protected from the other men who blame and detest him. Often after lunch he appears to doze off.

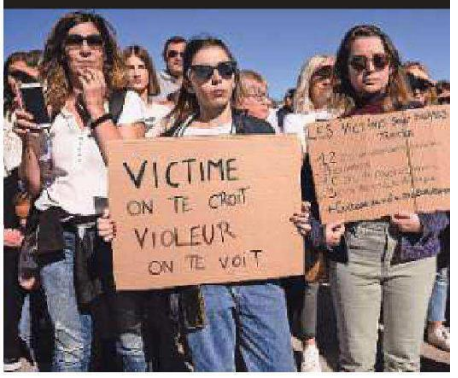
Such nondescript men. Grizzled, middle-aged (the mean is 47 years old), smart-casual in windcheaters or leather jackets and their best trainers, like minicab drivers waiting for fares. Ordinary men in many respects, not vagrants, junkies or career criminals. This week's seven includes a fireman, an electrician and a journalist; several are fathers, two were keen weightlifters, one bred dogs. French trials helpfully begin with a personality profile formed from interviews with the men, their friends and colleagues. Poverty, domestic violence and mental breakdowns feature, but also that a man is "kind" or "gentle", had a lovely childhood, adored his grandparents or is devoted to his mum.

Yet each one had sex with an unconscious woman, that is beyond doubt, thanks to Pelicot's camera mounted on a tripod beside the bed, and by his own admission. "I am a rapist," he has declared, "like the others in this room."

From the Pelicot affair have come demands for reform to French rape law, for sexual violence to be treated more seriously, for an investigation into "chemical submission" – the coercive use of sedatives. But one question overshadows all others. How many men would have done the same? If Pelicot could recruit at least 70 willing participants (a number could not be identified) within a 25-mile radius of Mazan, the Provençal town where the couple retired, how many in the whole of France? As I walk through Avignon with Juliette Campion of radio station France Info, who bears the strain of reporting this case since September, she gestures to a *bureau de tabac*: "You think, 'Would a guy in there have raped Gisèle? Or men in the *boulangerie* or those on the street?' Women are looking at men differently: they're asking, 'Could you or you or you?'"

Gisèle Pelicot with Blandine Deverlanges, who is campaigning to get new proposals before the French parliament

Law graduates Marion Spiteri and Amélie Planche, who have been attending the Pelicot trial



A protest march in Mazan. The placard reads, 'Victim we believe you, rapist we see you'

Her composure is remarkable. Every evening, women line up to clap her out of court

On the right of the court, behind her counsel of three serious, dark-haired young men, is Gisèle Pelicot with her female companion from victim support, leaning on the wall, as far from the men as the room allows, but facing her ex-husband. Her composure is remarkable. Although clearly tired and strained, she retains a quiet vivacity reflected in her clothes. Instead of shrinking away in black, she dresses each day as if meeting friends for drinks on a sunny terrace. A chic scarf, a faux fur bag, patent leather boots. Clothes that say, "I still have a life." Every evening, when women line up to clap her out of court, she speaks to them warmly, neither reticent nor relishing the attention. Every day she walks through the cobbled streets past graffiti saying, "*Gisèle, les femmes te remercient*" (Gisèle, women thank you) to lunch at the same excellent brasserie, and people turn to gaze at her in awe.

The humiliations of Gisèle Pelicot have a mythic quality. This is a woman who discovered the man she married aged 20, with whom she had three children and seven grandchildren, waited until she was deeply asleep before removing her pyjamas, dressing her in "sexy" underwear or writing on her buttocks, "I am a good submissive bitch," then he let a stranger penetrate her inert body, filmed it, washed her intimately and replaced her pyjamas. This is a woman who thought she was going insane, had Alzheimer's or a brain tumour, whose children thought she was dying, who stopped driving and going out alone, who slept all day and once woke ➡

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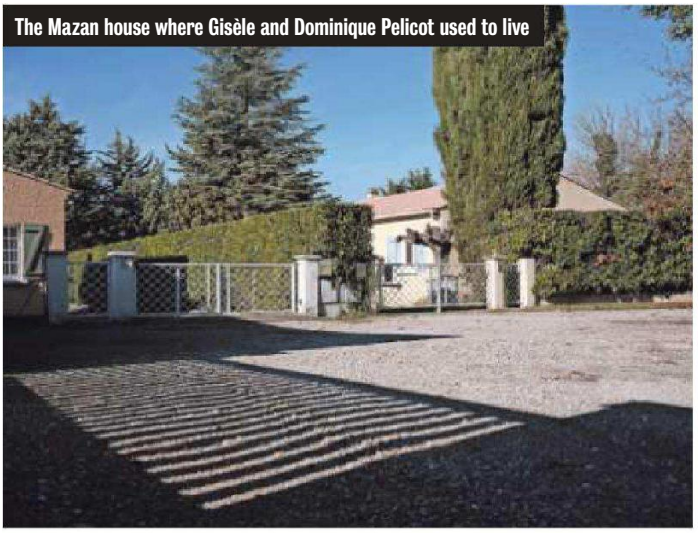

The Mazan house where Gisèle and Dominique Pelicot used to live

Members of Les Amazones d'Avignon, a feminist group that has created graffiti across the city in support of Gisèle Pelicot

MAGALI DELPORTE, EPA

puzzled why her hair was shorter. "But *madame*," said her hairdresser, "you came in yesterday." This is a woman who had mysterious gynaecological problems, including a swollen cervix (and still lives with four STDs), who thought her husband wonderful for accompanying her to medical tests, including an MRI.

This is a woman who, when her husband was arrested for "upskirting" in a Leclerc supermarket and police found the contents of his phone, discovered her whole 50-year marriage was a travesty, that he'd raped her in a service station car park, on Valentine's Day and on her 66th birthday, and may have raped their daughter too. This is a woman who has listened to legal arguments about whether a man put his tongue inside or merely kissed her vagina, who heard another man say he'd only returned to rape her a second time because he couldn't find anyone better, who sits in a courtroom while three giant TV screens show clips of her body being coldly humped by yet another "ordinary" guy.

Yet this is a woman who gathered up every scrap of her humiliation and with it constructed a mirror that she holds up defiantly to the court and to French society itself. "Shame must change sides," she said, and in insisting the entire trial be conducted openly, that the worst men can do to women is witnessed by the whole world, she has done exactly that.

I ask many women I meet in Avignon how men in their lives regard the accused. They say they call them losers and freaks, that these are men on the margins, with no relation to themselves. But, along with the testimony I hear, the people I talk to believe this case raises many questions about French sexual mores. Whatever the decision later this month by five judges – there is no jury – Gisèle Pelicot will never be forgotten

The court turns to Christian L, a fireman with a straggly castaway beard, who speaks from the glass box because after he

He'd raped her in a service station car park, on Valentine's Day and on her 66th birthday

The Pelicot children: Caroline, Florian and David

was arrested, police found 4,000 child sex abuse and zoophilic images on his hard drive. We hear from his girlfriend, Sylvie, a small blonde in a grey hoodie, who says he's a wonderful man, and is suspected of destroying evidence. Christian L recalls the victims he watched die in fires, the coffins of 11 colleagues he carried, the mental breakdowns that ensued. He was married but after his two daughters were born says he went off sex with his wife and turned to *libertinisme*. Strange, I think, that the French have coined this noble, philosophical concept, with its whiff of the barricades, to describe what we call swinging or dogging.

Like all the men, Christian met Pelicot through coco.fr – the murky, unmoderated site since closed down and now the focus of many major police investigations – on a forum called "*À son insu*" (without her knowledge). Christian L had already enjoyed "Sleeping Beauty" encounters with ten other couples. He spells out the rules: that you only dealt with the husband, sending him photos for approval, and during the sexual encounter he ran the show. Sometimes the wife woke up, other times not. How did he know, asked Gisèle's lawyer, Stéphane Babonneau, that she consented?

"In a libertine encounter," Christian L explained, "it is the husband's responsibility to ensure consent."

But how could you be sure?

"Are we expected to sign a contract?" Christian L spluttered.

"You could ask the woman," Babonneau suggested.

Given the overwhelming video evidence, the defendants can only claim Pelicot deceived or drugged them, or they believed Gisèle was collaborating in a game. If this case were before a British court, rape would be decided by two tests: whether Gisèle had "capacity to consent" (tough to argue given Pelicot admits to drugging her) and whether the men had "reasonable belief" in her consent. Unlike most European countries, French rape law has no concept of consent. Rather, it is defined as penetration "by violence, constraint, threat or surprise". (The prosecution case rests on a convoluted definition of surprise.)

But rather than demand consent be added to the law, French feminists are divided. Some agree with President Macron, who supports change; many others argue that consent would put the onus on the victim to prove her conduct was not an invitation. This seems an odd objection, especially as the whole purpose of the video evidence is to show no one could believe Gisèle capable of consent, given she was so lifeless one man asked Pelicot, "Is your wife dead?"

Alice Géraud is the author of *Sambre*, an investigation into how, due to the indifference and cruelty of police, a caretaker called Dino Scala in northern France managed to rape 54 women over ➡

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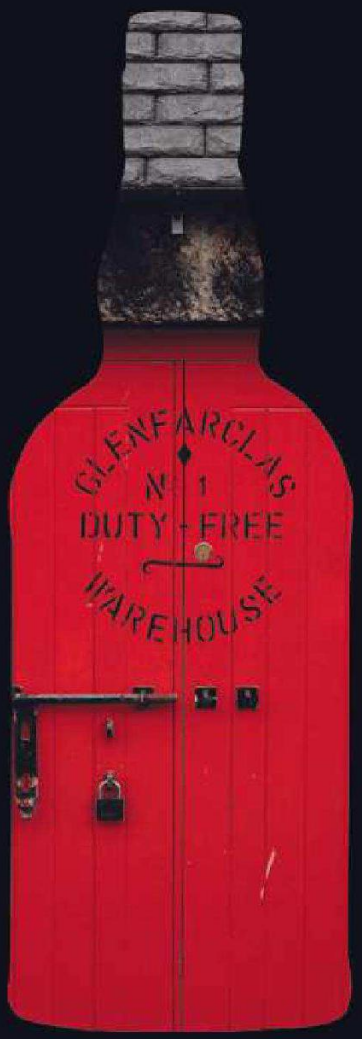

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a period of 30 years. "The Pelicot case with 50 defendants and one victim feels a strange inverse of *Sambre*."

Géraud believes the Pelicot affair could provide the same impetus for change as a famous 1974 case of two Belgian tourists, Anne-Marie Tonglet and Aracelli Castellano, who, camping near Marseilles, were brutally raped by three local men. As was normal practice, the crime was downgraded from felony to misdemeanour on the basis the victims eventually stopped resisting. But the women, a lesbian couple, persisted and thanks to their feminist lawyer, Gisèle Halimi, it became the first rape case to be heard in the higher assizes court. Like Gisèle Pelicot, the women waived their anonymity. "We believe that it's one thing for a man to rape," said Halimi, "and another to know it'll get around his village, his work, the papers." Shame changed sides: the men were jailed and the French criminal code was rewritten defining rape as a serious offence.

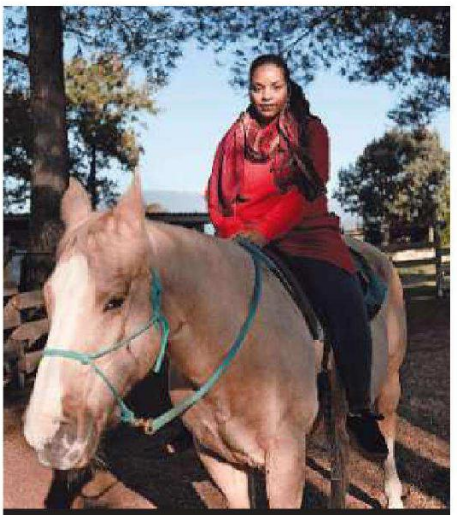
For Géraud, the greatest current injustice is that whether a man has raped one women or 50, the maximum sentence is 20 years (here a serial rapist can be jailed for life). "This is law made by men," she says, "with a grave lack of knowledge of rape culture." She is scornful too about *libertinisme* as a universal excuse for male sexual exploitation. "*Libertinisme* was why Coco existed for so long," she says. "It is the justification for prostitution, for the porn industry."

Charly A is the youngest of all the defendants, just 22 when he first entered the Pelicot house. Small, bearded, now 30, we learn his childhood was chaotic, his father an alcoholic, his mother had many sexual partners; there are hints of abuse. "This is a family of secrets," concludes the personality profiler. A psychiatrist adds he is immature, struggles to sustain relationships and instead consumes porn, "especially the Milf [Mother I'd like to f***] category with mature women". In 2016, he made contact with Pelicot via Coco: "He said his wife would be lying there pretending to be asleep, he doesn't tell me more."

Over time Pelicot asks Charly if he knows anyone they could drug for sex and he proffers the only woman in his life – his own mother. Pelicot gives him pills (which Charly claims to have thrown away), shows him how to crush them, keeps pressing him to use them. "When can I come and we f*** your mother?" he asks in one video, but Charly keeps stalling, saying his brother is at home. Yet he returns to violate Gisèle, always with Pelicot, once with another man, a total of six times. "Did you feel like you were in a porn film?" asks Babonneau. Charly shakes his head.

Until this point, very late in the trial, the influence of internet pornography has barely been explored. The court only notes paedophiliac images, not "normal" usage. Yet Mathieu Lacambre, a psychiatrist who evaluates Charly A, remarks how porn sites not only push users to more extreme content but to enact porn fantasies in real life. "Until now Charly A was behind the screens," he says. "Now [in Gisèle] he has an object served up on a platter a few miles from home. The sleeping princess Milf, *voilà*."

Given four Temesta, an anti-anxiety drug, Gisèle was like a patient on an operating table



Latika, who helped organise the Mazan march for Gisèle and is herself a victim of chemical submission

MAGALI DELPORTE

I drive out to Mazan, a lovely honey-stoned French village set in the vineyards below Mont Ventoux, where the Pelicots retired from Villiers-sur-Marne, a Paris commuter town where he was electrician and she was a manager at EDF. I imagine Gisèle browsing the little boutique, dropping into the beauty salon, sipping an aperitif outside the bistro. The home they rented for ten years is five minutes away in a quiet cul-de-sac of four houses behind tall cypress trees. It is lemon yellow with blue shutters, a pool, a very prominent alarm system, and new tenants. Given how many men knew her address, Gisèle fled four years ago for her own safety, with just a suitcase and her dog.

Today an immense cloud of migrating starlings swoops over the house like pixels in a photograph. This was where their grandchildren loved to visit in the summer, but also the centre of Dominique Pelicot's porn operation. For what else was this grotesque man but a pornographic auteur?

We leave our car, just as Pelicot instructed the men, in the sports ground car park, by the bottle bank. I think of them texting their arrival, then creeping down the lane. (One man made his girlfriend wait in the car.) Pelicot would meet them at the door by the light of his phone, tell them to undress in the dark living room and warm their hands on a radiator. (They'd been instructed to be clean, not smell of cigarettes or wear cologne.) Then they were led into a bedroom with a TV, a chest of drawers, a bed with a naked Gisèle motionless on white sheets, and a mounted camera.

Whatever followed next was carefully orchestrated by Pelicot, a director urging on actors in stage whispers, since the objective was to do what they desired without waking Gisèle. Pelicot would tell them how and when to penetrate her, or hold his wife's gaping mouth to facilitate oral sex. Given four Temesta (lorazepam), a powerful anti-anxiety drug he'd crushed into her wine or ice cream, his wife was like a patient on an operating table. Even so, if her arm gave an involuntary spasm, the men would scuttle from the room. A friend who has sat through many court videos says it was Pelicot ordering the humping men to go *doucement* – softly – that upset her, since she knew this was not out of tenderness for Gisèle.

All the while the camera rolled. Why did these men agree to have their crimes recorded? They say it was part of the deal, that Pelicot told them Gisèle was shy and liked to watch the sex later. But perhaps also because, in taking part, these men were promoted from porn consumers to creators. Filming was central to their fantasy. When Christian L finally climaxes he turns to give the camera a cheery thumbs-up.

For Pelicot, each film added to his oeuvre. Police discovered a carefully curated archive of 20,000 images and videos on hard drives and memory sticks showing 200 rapes. He gave each film a title like "Squirt on the ass", "Cock in mouth" or "Jaques fingering". This man, once caught by his daughter-in-law masturbating at his computer, was now a porn impresario.

Why did Pelicot do all this to a wife he professed to love, whom he called "a saint"? Was it to punish Gisèle for an affair early in their marriage (although he was serially unfaithful himself)? Or because when he'd asked her to join him in the *libertinisme* scene she'd refused – so he devised a way to make her. But Gisèle was not his first victim: Pelicot has admitted to the rape of an estate agent, using ether to drug her, in 1999, and will be tried for the rape/murder of another young estate agent, Sophie Narme, in 1991. The French police cold case bureau is investigating his possible links to many other unsolved crimes. ➡

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But as the "Without her knowledge" forum suggests, his was not a unique fantasy. The Pelicot case has illuminated the issue of "chemical submission", not only drinks being spiked by strangers in bars, but drugs used to control partners within relationships. The French health service is noted for being blasé about prescribing heavy-duty medications, which is how Pelicot stockpiled his vast stash of Temesta.

Documentary-maker Linda Bendali has made a film for French TV about chemical submission, featuring seven cases, including a 13-year-old girl drugged by her father with medicine supposedly for her allergies, put in lingerie and raped over two years, and a 60-year-old woman drugged then raped at home by a man she was mentoring at work. "I've looked back at 30 years of press reports of rape," says Bendali, "which includes dozens of women saying they woke up – mainly with men they know – unable to remember what happened."

The Sleeping Beauty scenario, she says, is not merely a means for a man to get easy sexual access, but a way to enjoy absolute domination. "You are not even giving her the chance to consent," says Bendali. "You can do anything you want to a drugged woman, for as long as you want. You can dress her how you want. These men want total power." Pelicot is typical in filming his crimes: "Pictures are trophies. He was driven by a mix of desires for blackmail and voyeurism."

Gisèle's daughter, Caroline Darian, who was also drugged and photographed naked by her father, is heading a campaign on chemical submission, demanding police take samples of hair from rape victims, the only way sedation can be proved.

In court, I hear another psychiatrist tasked with assessing whether each of the final seven defendants has the profile of a sexual abuser. One by one, he exonerates the men, saying they are not dangerous or likely to reoffend, to the growing exasperation of Gisèle's team. Then he reaches Charly A. "He doesn't search [for victims] systematically," says the psychiatrist. "He's not a predator." Finally, Babonneau explodes: "Six times with a sleeping woman and he's not a sexual abuser?" The men do not identify as rapists because, like this psychiatrist, they define rape as frenzied sexual violence, not an opportunistic act performed to whispers in a private home. As one defendant put it, "It's her husband, his house, his room, his bed, his wife."

Both in religious and political terms, Mazan is a conservative town: for 500 years it was part of a papal enclave and in the recent French election voted heavily for Marine Le Pen. Villagers regarded the Pelicot case with horror and sympathy which turned quickly to resentment when press named it *l'affaire Mazan*. Amid longstanding families who've known each other for generations, the Pelicots were outsiders who'd brought disgrace into a rural community. Tired of inquiries, the mayor, Louis Bonnet, 74, told the BBC, "It could have been far more serious. There were no kids involved. No women were killed."

At the Lucky Horse Ranch outside Mazan, women victims of sexual violence receive equine therapy. I'm sceptical at first about how grooming and riding horses could help rape victims, but somehow these large, placid animals are calming and restorative. Here I meet Latika, 33, who at first was too timid to touch a Shetland pony, but now sits high on a saddle for our photograph.

Latika was separating from her husband, the father of her two children, but still sharing a house. He was violent, hitting her daughters, putting her in hospital with cuts and a broken rib. Two years after they'd last had sex, she woke to find him inside her. She believes the sweet tea he often gave her was laced with sedatives, but that night she hadn't drunk it all. She realised he'd been drugging her for years – her mother recalls finding her deeply unconscious early in her relationship – and, worse, she was pregnant with a third child. She told the police, who addressed the domestic violence but ignored the rape. Her husband fled to Guadeloupe and she was left traumatised, fearful of leaving the house.

"I didn't feel people really believed what had happened to me until Gisèle Pelicot spoke out," says Latika, who has since made the police reopen her case. In October, as women across France holding white flowers protested in support of Gisèle, Latika headed the local march into Mazan and the next day Gisèle herself visited the ranch. "She said it is almost unbearable to return to this place where terrible things happened," says Latika, "but she wanted to thank us. She told me, 'I didn't know the meaning of my life before this happened – but I do now.'"

Watching Gisèle take such sustenance from her supporters, you wonder how she will cope when the trial finally ends. She is writing a book and could, if she chose, become a global campaigner. "There is something particularly powerful," says Linda Bendali, "about her being an older woman – she represents all our mothers. All generations identify with her." But those close to Gisele say that, at 72, she may just return to a quiet life of friends, grandchildren and her garden, in the secret location where she now lives.

But she is already an icon of courage for the women who come from across France and beyond just to watch the trial on a screen in an overspill room. Some want to witness history, a few enjoy the sensational evidence like *tricoteuses* at the guillotine, but many have risen at 5am, taking a day off work, to support a woman they deeply admire. Marion Spiteri and Amélie Planche, both 24 and law graduates, feel the case opened their eyes. "How can it be," Spiteri says, "that so many men did this without her consent?" "It is terrifying," Planche adds, "that a woman cannot even trust her own husband." They tell me, astonishingly, that neither they nor their friends ever go to the toilet in a bar or club alone.

But then the nation of *libertinisme* lags behind in its attitude to violence against women. Until 2021, France did not even have an age of consent, effectively decriminalising even incestuous relations between children and adults, allowing several high-profile child abusers, including firemen who groomed a 13-year-old girl, to evade rape charges. Each time a prominent Frenchman is accused of rape – whether politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn or, currently, actor Gerard Dépardieu – famous French actresses leap to defend him. This is the nation that convicted child rapist Roman Polanski fled to from America, and is still fêted. The #MeToo movement was regarded by many as a wave of Anglosphere prudishness, contrary to the spirit of French seduction. So what can the Pelicot trial achieve?

> 'This is a trial of one extraordinary man, the monster Pelicot, and many ordinary men'

I meet feminists from Les Amazones d'Avignon, the creators of graffiti across the city supporting Gisèle. (So as not to spoil the city walls, they write slogans on paper that can be removed.) Their latest reads "*20 ans pour chacun*" – 20 years for each one. I suggest a drink in a café nearby: "Not in there," says one Amazone, "that's where all the rapists go." Blandine Deverlanges, 56, is part of the Coalition Féministe Loi Intégrale putting 130 proposals about sexual violence before the French parliament, including a ban on lawyers harassing victims in court. They are disgusted the defence asked Gisèle why she swam naked in her own swimming pool.

"This is a trial," says Deverlanges, "of one extraordinary man, the monster Pelicot, and many ordinary men." And as we talk I see a group of them emerge nervously from their favoured café and head back to the court. A collective noun for rapists? A violation, a banality, a shame. ■

INSIDE THE SCHOOL FOR BRITAIN'S MOST DANGEROUS CHILDREN

The pupils are murderers, drug dealers and gang members. In the past they would have been locked up for 22 hours a day. But can a radical new school in Kent change their lives? Rachel Sylvester, the first journalist to be allowed to visit, meets the man behind it

Steve Chalke photographed at the Oasis Restore academy, Kent, by Jude Edginton

In many ways the Oasis Restore academy in Kent looks like any other school. It has classrooms, a playground with a basketball hoop, a sports hall, a theatre, an art room and a music studio. But there is a difference. The pupils here are all murderers, rapists, drug dealers, gang members and serious violent offenders. These children are some of the most dangerous and damaged young people in the country and have been convicted or accused of heinous, horrible crimes. Yet instead of being sent to a traditional young offender institution (YOI), a noisy, frightening place where they would be locked in a cell for large parts of the day, they are living in Britain's first secure school, with no bars on the windows and teachers rather than guards.

The groundbreaking facility is trialling a new approach to youth custody that puts the emphasis on education and therapy, rather than punishment and retribution. Set up under the academies programme, it is run not by the prison service or G4S, a company that manages private jails, but by Oasis, a multi-academy trust that operates more than 50 mainstream schools around the country.

"It's not a young offenders' institute or a prison," says Steve Chalke, the founder. "It's a school. We have bedrooms not cells, we have student flats not wings and we have fobs instead of jangling keys. The staff don't wear uniforms. They are youth workers, they are teachers, they are health professionals. They care for children. The philosophy behind everything we do here is not, 'What have you done wrong?' but, 'What's happened to you?'"

I visit on a cold, wet autumn afternoon, driving through the village of Borstal near Rochester and down the winding road that leads to the school. On the right is the notorious Cookham Wood, surrounded by barbed wire, surveillance cameras and huge metal fences. This was until recently a YOI so dangerous and dysfunctional, it was closed down after inspectors found widespread weapon-making, serious violence and children held in solitary confinement with very poor access to education. It is now an adult male prison.

On the left stands Oasis Restore, a low-rise complex of buildings with wooden doors, soft furnishings, walls painted in calming colours and a welcoming receptionist. There are gardens, beanbags and pictures of animals on the walls. The environment is designed to be compassionate and nurturing. Here young offenders are known as pupils rather than inmates. A sign in the hallway declares that the facility is offering a "secure future for young lives" and lists the principles of the school. "We are committed to relationships through building trust," it says, "empowerment through providing choices and nurturing responsibility [and the] restoration of hope and dignity."

The contrast between the two institutions could not be more stark. This is a "revolution in the criminal justice system for young people", Chalke says. The question is: will the experiment work?

The secure school, which opened in August, can take up to 49 young offenders between the ages of 12 and 18 who are on remand or have been sentenced to custody. At present there are 12 children – 11 boys and 1 girl – as Oasis Restore builds up slowly to full capacity. Classes are small – no more than five – and some children receive one-to-one tuition. Many pupils struggle to read and write, so basic numeracy and literacy are woven into every subject. There is enormous flexibility in the lessons on offer. In maths, one 15-year-old, who has a learning age of 8, has been studying basic multiplication while another, just a few months older, has been learning about ISAs.

The emphasis is on vocational courses. The school has a workshop where young people can learn bricklaying and decorating, recording booths for those considering a music career, a hair and beauty salon, a design and technology room with a 3D printer and a kitchen.

Jamie Oliver is helping with the cookery classes. "The education is bespoke," Chalke says. "It starts where the child is, instead of where the system thinks they should be. It's understanding that there's no such thing as normal, that we're all atypical, that every human brain is as different as every human fingerprint. Our task is to offer to each young person an opportunity that works for them, to light a fire of interest and passion for education and for life."

There are limits. Oasis Restore is surrounded by a security fence, children are not allowed to leave and they are locked in their rooms at night. They cannot have mobile phones or access to the internet although they all have a screen in their room, which they can use to watch television, listen to music or make video calls to approved numbers. The aim is to make the secure facility feel more like student accommodation or even a family home than jail. Children live in supervised flats with their own bedroom and a shared kitchen, dining room and sitting room. They can choose their own duvet cover and put up posters if they want. There are board games, a fruit bowl on the table and milk in the fridge. The young people wear their own clothes, although hoodies are banned. The strings could be a strangulation risk.

On the day I visit, the pupils are busy negotiating the terms and conditions that can allow them to get a PlayStation in return for good behaviour. One group has been learning to cook spaghetti bolognese

Chalke with, from left, Michelle Divine, Lisa Harvey-Messina, Clare Wilson and Dayna Raeburn

– many of the young people here have been convicted of weapons offences, but some will soon be allowed to use knives in controlled circumstances, under strict supervision. Another child is writing poetry in a music lesson. Teenagers are laughing and joshing with each other in the playground. There is the sound of competitive ping-pong coming from one of the accommodation blocks. One new arrival burst into tears when he saw the facilities and asked, "Am I allowed to use all these things?" He said, "I don't know why I'm crying but I've never been in a place like this." Stefan Paulden, the cookery teacher, says, "It made us realise what we're here for. The vastness can be overwhelming for us as adults as well. It is about building a genuine relationship with each individual child."

For most of these young people, it is the first time in their lives that they have had the emotional support they need. Each pupil has a core team around them that includes therapists and social workers as well as educators. "Though it's called a secure school, it's a secure home to start with," Chalke says. Staff eat with the young people around a table in small "family" groups. There are "firm but fair" boundaries. "If they smash up their TV, for instance, it doesn't immediately get replaced and then we think about what's safe for them to be dealing with right now," says Clare Wilson, the chief operating officer.

It is tough love, says Chalke. "We're

OPENING SPREAD: GETTY IMAGES. THIS SPREAD: JUDE EDGINTON, GETTY IMAGES

One new pupil burst into tears. 'Am I allowed to use all these things?' he asked

not a bunch of softies or happy-clappy hippies. What's easy is locking a child in a cell for endless hours. All you need to be able to do is turn a key and have a cup of tea. What's really hard, as every parent knows, is to sit with an anxious teenager. The whole thing is about trust. Everyone needs someone they can believe in and who can believe in them."

He insists staff are not naive. "Every student here has committed a violent crime. We're aware of that. There's always a victim of violent crime, a family who are victims of violent crime. There's a family that sits around the child who's here, with all sorts of emotions running through their heads about what's happened. Nothing about the school is seeking to dismiss any of that, but it's attempting to say, 'So, what is the pathway back to a life that's going to contribute?' The core belief here is that you can't hurt someone to heal them. It doesn't work. You can't punish people into being wonderful, community-oriented citizens."

Chalke, who is also a vicar, says almost all the children in the criminal justice system have suffered some kind of trauma. Many have been abandoned, neglected, beaten or abused. Some have witnessed domestic violence, been exploited by organised crime gangs or have special educational needs. "People are capable of evil things but I don't believe there are people who are inherently evil," he says. "We do evil things as an outcome of what's happened to us."

He points to scientific research that shows the impact on the brain of adverse childhood experiences. "I was addressing a bunch of leading educationalists yesterday and I said, 'You all congratulate yourselves on your manners. You all congratulate yourselves that you open the door for someone else, that you think rotten things about another person and you think, I could strangle them, but you don't do it. That's a gift you've been given. You can't take the credit for that, because through the influences in your life your brain has been wired up well. You've been trained. But what if you've never been loved? What if you've never been cared for? What if you've been pushed from pillar to post? What if your parents abandoned you? What if you've been in the looked-after system where you've been raped?'

"Deep in your brain sits this memory of being beaten or raped or abused or neglected. It will not go because your brain is committed to your survival. It's a bit like a beach ball in a swimming pool. You try to hold it under but however much you push it down, it rises up. All it takes is a random thing to happen that will trigger you."

He recalls a boy he met at another school who flew into a rage every time he went into a certain classroom. He was about to be expelled for violent behaviour until the head teacher called in a therapist. It turned out that the form teacher was the same build and wore a similar belt to the boy's abusive stepfather. "This kid used to watch his mother being beaten with the buckle of the belt and at a deep level, way below consciousness, every time he saw that man's stature and that belt, the pain came flooding up."

The young people at Oasis Restore are just "a very extreme version", Chalke says. "People might say, 'They're bad kids. Lock them up and throw away the key.' Everybody's entitled to their opinion, but there's a science behind this. I might have an opinion that four plus four equals seven. That doesn't make it true."

The teachers at the secure school study neuroscience and psychology as well as pedagogy. "All behaviour is communication and it's our job to see beyond the behaviour, to understand the story that's informing that behaviour," Wilson says. "Many of these children have been permanently excluded from school. Nearly all of them are neurodiverse. They have additional learning needs, speech and language and communication issues. A lot of them are looked after [grew up in care]. They've been rejected by the education system and in some sense rejected by what we think is normal."

Drawing on his faith, Chalke has no time for "self-righteous hypocrites" who think they are morally superior to the young people at the school. "I want to reclaim the term 'sinner' and say to all the guys who say, 'Those are sinners,' well, Jesus hung around with the sinners. They were the untouchables, the people who were left out. They were the excluded and they were labelled sinners by the religious and societal leaders. If we're not hanging around with the excluded ones, if we do not believe that every life matters, then we've lost some of our humanity." He thinks the age of criminal responsibility, ➡

THE DIFFERENCE IS

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which is ten in England and Wales, the lowest in Europe, should be raised.

"The UN charter on the rights of a child says that in no country should you be held criminally responsible under the age of 14. That's an absolute minimum. If you go to Luxembourg, the criminal age of responsibility is 18. If you go to Portugal, it's 16. In Spain, it's 14. We have a criminal age of responsibility that is so low as to be shameful, in my view. We look at a 12-year-old who commits a crime and we say, 'Lock them up,' whereas in Portugal they say, 'How have we failed this child?'"

Over the past 20 years, the number of children in the secure estate has dropped consistently and dramatically. In October 2002 there were 3,200 under-18s locked up. By January 2024 the number was just 397. The threshold for incarceration is high, so those who are now sent to secure institutions have all committed extremely serious offences. Nick Hardwick, the former chief inspector of prisons, once told me that the only times he felt in real danger during his five years touring Britain's jails were in the juvenile establishments. Once, on a visit to Cookham Wood, the prison across the road from Oasis Restore, he saw a group of young offenders holding a "mock trial" of another boy in a kangaroo court. The guards had completely lost control. There is, he said, a "level of reckless violence" in these places that is not evident even in the most high-security adult prisons. Reoffending rates are also worse than in the rest of the prison estate. A third of young offenders go on to commit another crime within a year of their release compared with a quarter of adults.

Charlie Taylor, the chief inspector of prisons, has repeatedly raised concerns about the experiences of children in custody. In his latest review, he found that most young people were spending the majority of their time locked in their cells, with little done to increase the chances of them turning their lives around. When they were able to mix with other children, "This was often marred by conflict and violence," he wrote. Some children were spending more than 22 hours a day locked up, only half of them felt cared for by staff and 15 per cent of them felt unsafe, more than twice the proportion the previous year. At the same time half of frontline staff reported suffering from low morale and fears for their personal safety. Only one YOI in England and Wales – Parc in Bridgend – was judged by the inspectors to be safe. "Most sites were unable to break out of a vicious circle of conflict leading to children being locked in their cells for long periods of time," Taylor said.

Almost everyone working in the youth criminal justice system agrees that it is not working and that something has to change. Most welcome the fact that Oasis Restore is trying a new approach. The secure school, which is jointly funded by the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Health, is expensive. Chalke says that once it is full, a place will cost more than a YOI (about £100,000 a year) and less than a secure children's home (more than £200,000 a year). The Ministry of Justice is unable to provide a more precise figure, but if the new model reduces reoffending – which the government estimates costs the country £18 billion a year – then the programme would quickly pay for itself.

As we walk around the school, the atmosphere is calm. The children are laughing and smiling, engaging well with each other and the staff. The teachers speak passionately about their determination to give young people who have struggled with education the skills they need to turn their lives around. There is a lot of collaboration between the staff. The music teacher, Michael Hamilton, known as "Smooth", says he works closely with the English teacher. "Music involves creative writing. I'm trying to get the kids to learn to express themselves through language. They haven't necessarily learnt to verbalise how they feel and all I do is enhance that side of themselves." He will not only help them with spelling and vocabulary but with emotions too. Sometimes the children will open up through the poetry of the lyrics they write in a way they have not been able to do in a more formal therapy session.

"There was somebody here who, when they realised it was OK to feel the way they felt, shed a tear. I said, 'It's a judgment-free zone. If you feel like crying, cry. If you feel like laughing, laugh.'" The school is also building links with businesses that are open to employing former offenders, to try to ensure that those who leave have a job when they go.

It has not all been plain sailing. The school has not been able to avoid violence and self-harm entirely, although the levels have been far lower than in a conventional YOI. The principal who helped set up the school left just three months after it opened. The emotional and physical strain on staff can be extraordinary. This is not a job that fits easily into a 9-to-5 timetable. Wilson says, "It's hard, because we're breaking new ground."

Anne Longfield, the former children's commissioner for England and chairwoman of the Centre for Young Lives, who has visited many secure facilities over two decades and is now an adviser to the Oasis Trust, helped shape the secure school. "The difference hits every one of your senses," she says. "Often when you approach a YOI you can hear the shouting of the boys locked in their cells. They are bored and frustrated. There will be lots of antagonising going on, banging on the pipes. You go through security and it's raised voices by default, lots of clanking of keys and slamming of doors. It's very extreme, very intimidating. There's a general sense of tension. It's perilous. You just feel that at any point things could tip over into violence. Restore is completely the opposite. It's calming, nurturing, safe, homely."

The way in which children are brought into the facility embodies the difference, she says. "You will often see kids who are in fight or flight mode. They will be pumped up, aggressive. In a YOI the staff tell the kids, 'You've got to get yourself ready to go on the wings. It's not going to be easy so you'd better toughen up.' When they come to Restore, it's about bringing them down and enabling them to start functioning in a way that is going to help them. It's about building and restoring and enabling those young people to gain the skills, the confidence, the relationships, the knowledge, so when they come out, they have the best chance possible that they won't return. Whereas with YOIs, they are taken to a worse place and they're going to find it even more difficult to reintegrate when they come out."

'At ten, our age of criminal responsibility is the lowest in Europe. It's shameful'

Sometimes children will arrive in the middle of the night because the safest time for them to be transported is under the cover of darkness. Often they struggle to sleep. For some, there is a form of comfort in their bedroom door being locked at night. It is the first time they have felt safe in years. Jen Milne, the head of care and safeguarding at the school, is a mother figure for the pupils. "Some children hold my hand to walk in because they're so scared," she says. "We sit down with them and give them a drink. Sometimes they have not eaten properly or showered for days. I've washed and combed a child's hair because it was so matted. We make it as soothing an environment as possible. It's not what they expected or have experienced in the past. We've had children come back here and call it home. They feel safe here, but we want to create a pathway out." ■

Rachel Sylvester is chairwoman of the Times Crime and Justice Commission

GROWING UP, DEAN FORBES WAS HOMELESS. NOW HE TOPS BRITAIN'S BLACK POWER LIST

With his wife, Danielle, at a gala in London this year

Dean Forbes was raised on a rough housing estate in London, caring for his mother who had muscular dystrophy. When his career as a professional footballer failed, he worked in a call centre. Now he's head of a private equity firm worth £1.7 billion and friends with Idris Elba and Rio Ferdinand. Sathnam Sanghera meets him at his mansion to find out how he made it

Dean Forbes, 46, photographed at home in Kent by Tim Jobling

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With Danielle and their children, from left, Dean Jr, Deanne and Darcy, at the Powerlist Celebration of Black Excellence Awards

With his friend Idris Elba

His sprawling home includes a beauty salon for his wife, a cinema and a gym

If you've not heard of Dean Forbes, it's probably because he's in private equity, and private equity is, well, private. The executives involved in his sphere of the corporate world usually invest on behalf of institutions and individuals and don't need to sell themselves to the public, like the CEOs of companies listed on stock markets. But the fact that he's a significant cheese in business is evident in the bank of trophies lined up on a side table in his home study, underneath the perhaps inevitable item of Muhammad Ali sports memorabilia.

There are multiple so-called deal "tombstones" for many of the "exit" deals he has been responsible for, to the tune of £100 million, £208 million, £434 million and £833 million respectively. There are awards for being one of the Daily Telegraph's top 50 business leaders, for business excellence at the Best of Africa Awards of 2022, and for being CEO of the year at the UK Tech Awards in 2022. Then there's the freshest and shiniest trophy, for topping the Powerlist 2025, when he replaced the former British Vogue editor-in-chief Edward Enninful as the most influential black Briton.

Though the sprawling mansion we're in, on a private road in a gated community in Sevenoaks, Kent, probably provides a clearer indication of his success. There are six cars on the drive when I arrive, including a top of the range Bentley and Range Rover Sport. The mild scent of chlorine as you enter gives away the indoor swimming pool nearby. The large hallway leads on to an enormous kitchen, which takes you through to a snug, a spa, another kitchen (for the chef who looks after the family on weekends), and a small underground nightclub/bar, which, despite its size, has entertained some of the most famous names in Britain. (His celebrity mates include Idris Elba and Rio Ferdinand.)

Taking the lift (a lift!) to see some of the remaining 15,000sq ft of living space, there's a beauty salon for his wife, Danielle, a cinema, a gym and a dual-floor main bedroom suite. "The first flat that my wife and I owned in Penge was smaller than this room," Forbes reflects. "Our whole existence – kitchen, bathroom, everything – was in 25 per cent less space than here. I always come back to this when we're thinking about how life has changed."

This feels like an understatement. Forbes's life hasn't just "changed"; it has flipped around entirely. As the CEO of software company Forterro, Britain's sixth largest privately held tech firm, his days are spent managing 3,000 employees in 14 European locations, and the task of turning a company recently valued at €2 billion (£1.7 billion) into a €4 billion concern by 2026. But the 46-year-old grew up poor on a rough estate in Catford, south London, as the eldest of three sons in a single-parent household. His mother has muscular dystrophy, which meant that as a child he was caring for her, putting his siblings to bed, making dinner in the evenings, doing the shopping, cleaning, washing and sorting out medication when necessary. On two separate occasions the family found themselves homeless.

It gives Forbes satisfaction to reflect on how far he has come, but he talks down the intensity of the struggle. "Catford was great," he says, taking a seat in a front room that is about half the size of my flat, as we leave his head of staff, PR, wife and excitable cockapoo behind. "Was it dangerous? Yes. Did I see a lot of things which I hope my kids don't see growing up? Of course. Did we experience economic hardship? As an adult, I now understand it was extremely difficult. But I enjoyed it. I made great friends. I learnt a lot about community. I learnt a lot about helping people."

I recognise this: there's a cosiness to poor communities that the middle classes struggle to comprehend. It comes from people needing one another. Also, his Caribbean mother, now aged 64, sounds as incredible as my own. She worked hard to shield her children from the fact of their poverty: turning making pizza into a game, for example, to disguise the fact that they could sometimes only afford flour and tomatoes, and insisting they always looked presentable, even though they often only had their school uniform to wear.

Medical advice told her to stay off her feet, but she insisted on walking when she could and had several administrative jobs, giving her children an example of someone who, in Forbes's words, "made no excuses for their situation, no excuses for her disability". He adds, "I was more scared of my mum than any other authority on earth. We celebrated a lot when we got the grades. The one time I got suspended from school for three days – for some kind of football-related fight in the playground – I had to get up at the same time in the morning as for school and had to do schoolwork for the entire day."

This effort was enough to result in ten GCSEs, but there was also a limit to what his mum could do. With no father on the scene to help (when I ask if he has passed away, Forbes responds only that he "passed on parenting"), the family found themselves homeless, on one occasion because of a difficult family situation ("Something was happening that meant the best way to change our situation was to flee that household pretty abruptly"), and again when his mother got a job and a mortgage, but then lost the job and became unable to pay the mortgage ("We

Continues on page 38

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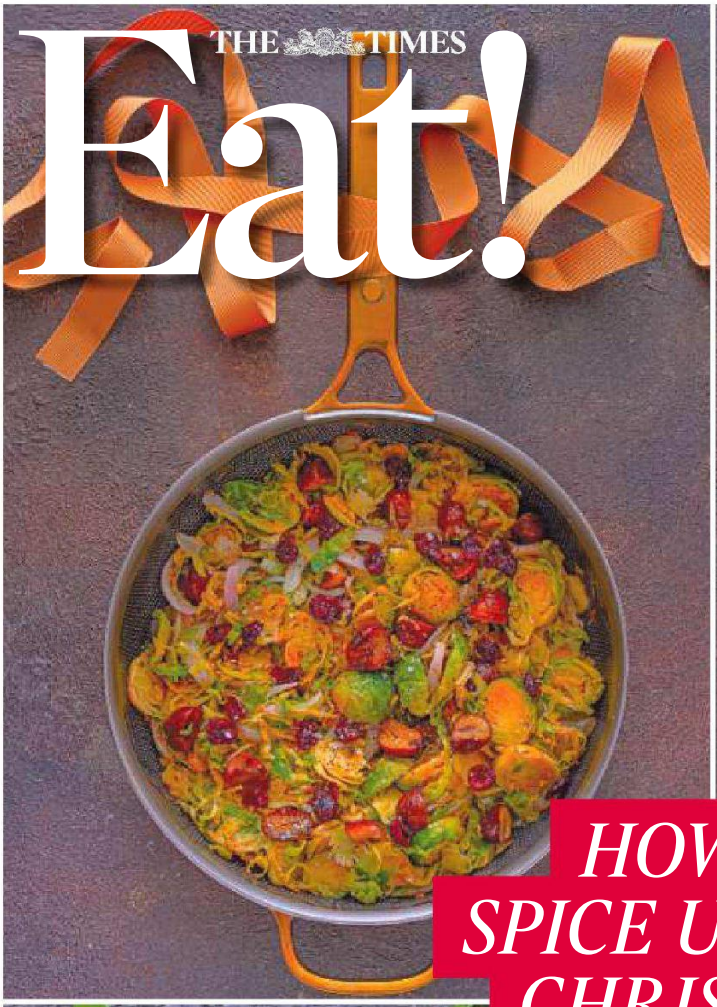
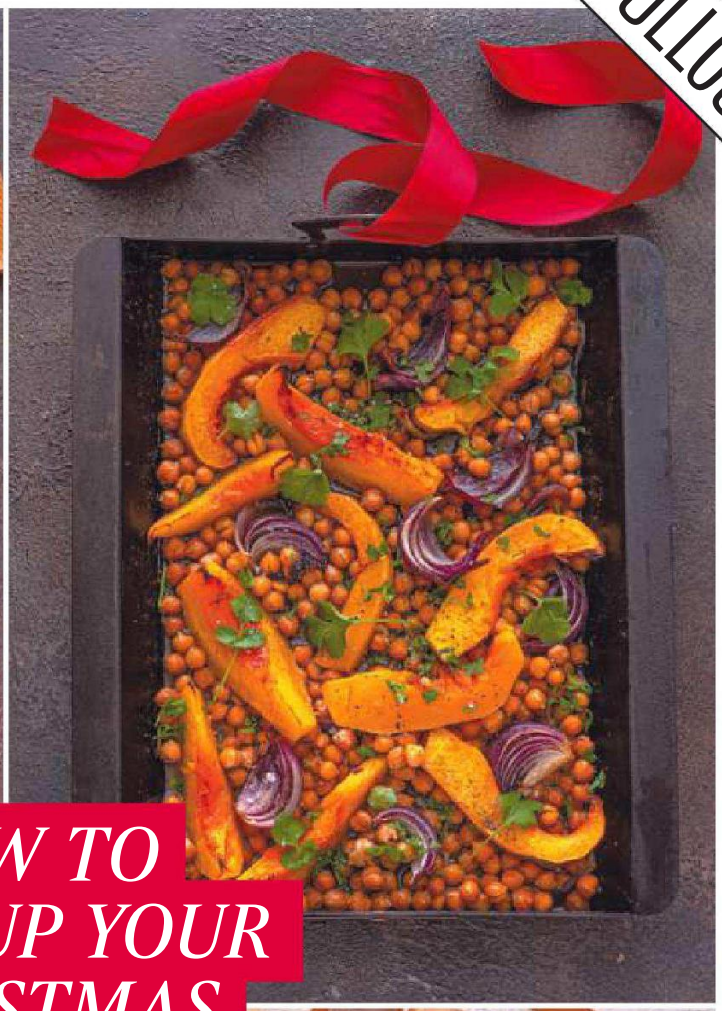
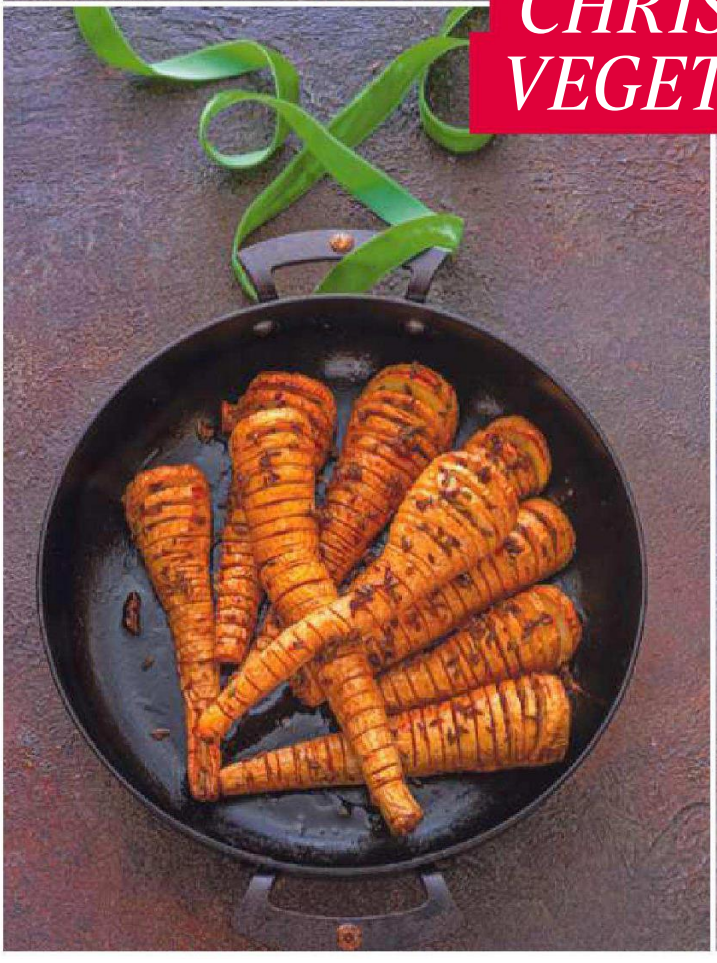
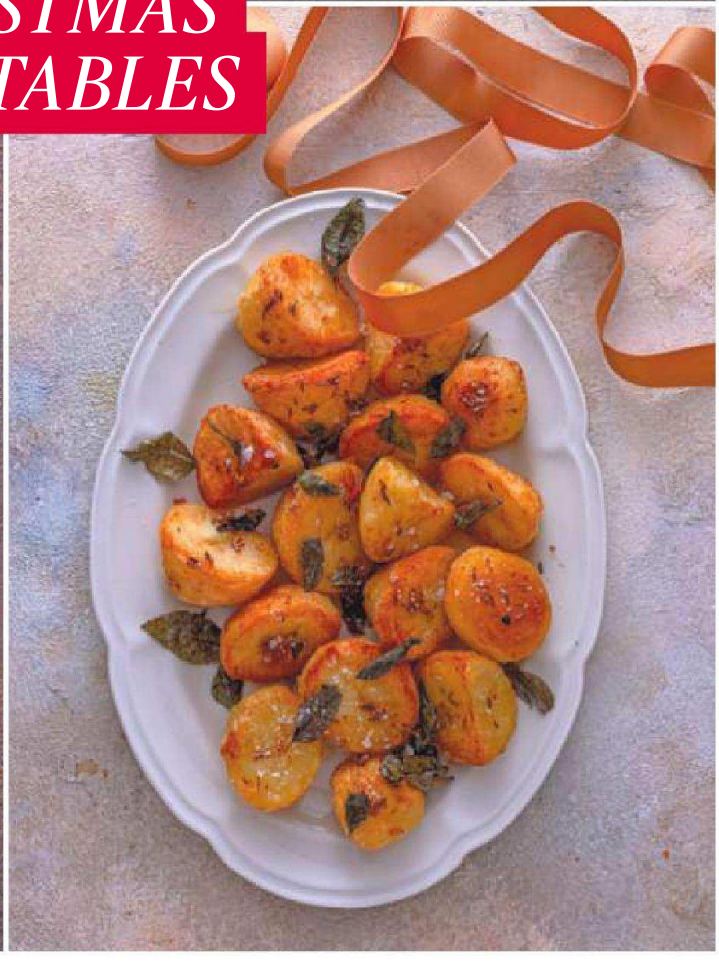


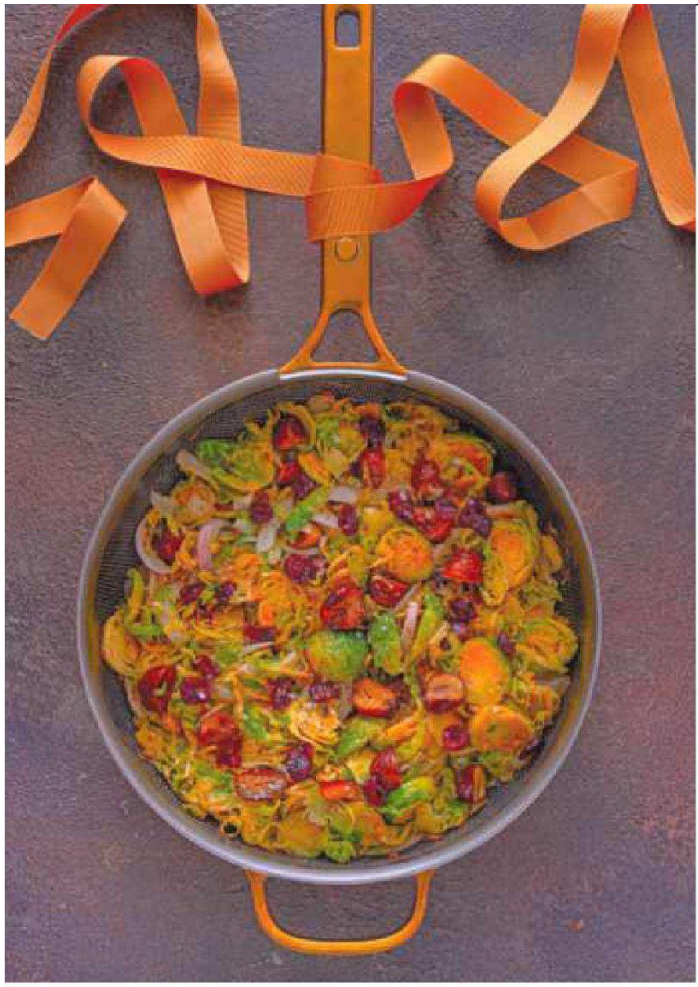


HOW TO SPICE UP YOUR CHRISTMAS VEGETABLES





Rahul Mandal's five easy ways to transform (boring) festive side dishes



If you want to update your side dishes this month, reach for the spice rack. Rahul Mandal is an enthusiastic adopter of our Christmas food traditions, but he likes to bring a taste of his native India to his cooking. By adding a pinch of fenugreek here and a sprinkle of curry leaves there, he introduces a hint of heat without blowing the doors off.

BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH MUSTARD SEEDS AND FENUGREEK

Serves 6-8

Preparation time: 10-15 minutes
Cooking time: 15-20 minutes

Chestnuts and dried cranberries add texture and a bit of tartness to the sliced sprouts with mustard seeds and fenugreek.

- **2 tbsp salted butter**
- **½ tsp mustard seeds**
- **½ tsp fenugreek seeds**
- **500g Brussels sprouts, trimmed and thinly sliced**
- **1 onion, thinly sliced**
- **2 garlic cloves, finely chopped**
- **½ tsp salt**
- **75g cooked chestnuts, roughly chopped**
- **Handful of dried cranberries**

1. Heat the butter in a pan and add the seeds. Cook for a minute, then add the sprouts, followed by the onion and garlic. Cook over a medium heat for 10-15 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the leaves start to wilt.
2. Add the rest of the ingredients and cook for a further 5 minutes until warmed through, then serve.

ROAST POTATOES WITH CURRY LEAVES AND CUMIN

Serves 6-8

Preparation time: 10 minutes
Cooking time: 1 hour 10 minutes-1 hour 20 minutes

To finish the potatoes, add ghee and cumin seeds for the last ten minutes of roasting.

- **1kg Maris Piper potatoes**
- **Sea salt**
- **50ml sunflower oil**
- **30g ghee**
- **1 tsp cumin seeds**
- **1 tsp mustard seeds**
- **Handful of curry leaves**

1. Wash and peel the potatoes. If they are big, cut them in half; leave smaller ones whole.
2. Place the potatoes in a large saucepan with cold salted water and bring to the boil. Once the water is boiling rapidly, cook for 5 minutes, then drain the potatoes in a colander and toss to fluff up the edges. Put on a cooling rack to steam dry.
3. Preheat the oven to 180C fan/gas 6. Add the oil and half the ghee to a large roasting tin and place in the oven. Once the oil is hot, carefully place the potatoes in it one by one. Make sure to arrange them in a single layer and don't overcrowd your tin.
4. Return to the oven for 25-30 minutes, then take out the tin and individually turn the potatoes. Place them back in the oven to roast for a further 25 minutes.
5. Remove the tin and sprinkle over the seeds and curry leaves. Mix carefully and return to the oven with the rest of the ghee for 10-15 minutes more or until the potatoes are crispy and golden. Place them on a serving dish, sprinkle with salt and garnish with the curry leaves from the pan.

HASSELBACK PARSNIPS WITH CUMIN AND FENNEL

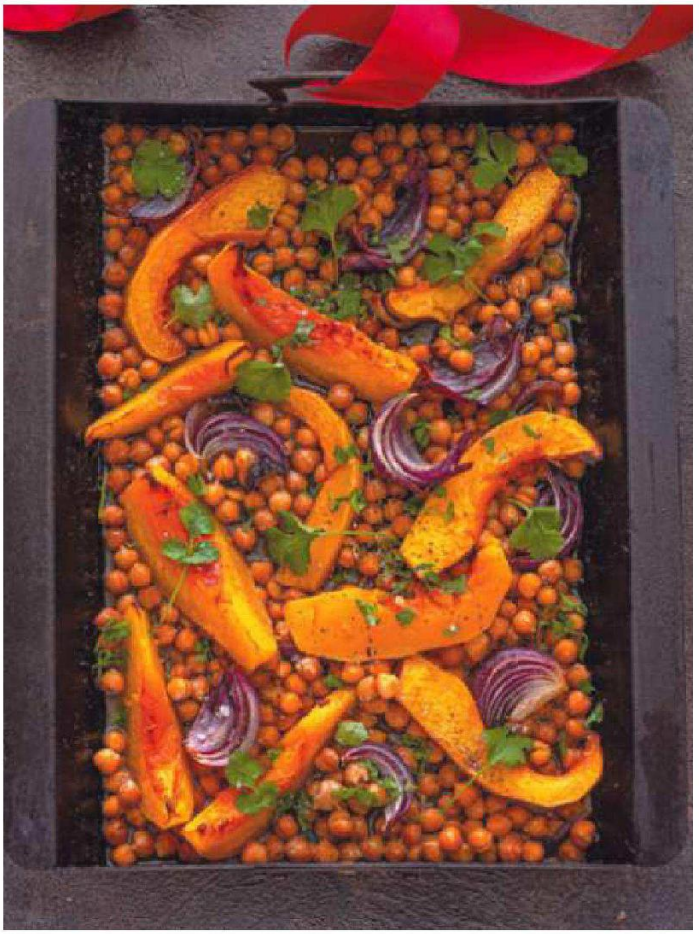
Serves 4-5

Preparation time: 10-15 minutes
Cooking time: 35-40 minutes

These roasted parsnips are sliced like Hasselback potatoes and served with crushed fennel and cumin seeds. ➡

PHOTOGRAPHS Romas Foord

Roasted parsnips sliced like Hasselback potatoes and given a spicy kick



- ½ tsp cumin seeds
- ½ tsp fennel seeds
- 4-5 parsnips
- 2 tbsp vegetable oil
- 2 tsp honey
- 2 tbsp salted butter, soft

1. Preheat the oven to 160C fan/gas 4. In a dry frying pan, roast the cumin and fennel seeds for a few minutes, then crush them using a pestle and mortar.
2. Wash and peel the parsnips and halve them. Make some horizontal cuts, about 5mm apart, without going through the flesh completely.
3. Place the prepared parsnips on a roasting tray so that the cut sides are facing up. Drizzle the oil on top and bake in the oven for 25-30 minutes.
4. Meanwhile, to make a spice butter, mix the honey, butter and crushed spices and set aside. Once the parsnips are baked, brush them with the spice butter. Return to the oven and roast for a further 10-15 minutes. Serve immediately.

ROASTED BUTTERNUT SQUASH WITH CHICKPEAS AND SPICES

Serves 6-8

Preparation time: 10-15 minutes
Cooking time: 45-50 minutes

Serve the butternut squash and chickpeas with a sprinkling of fresh coriander.

- 1 medium butternut squash, peeled and sliced into 1½-2cm pieces
- 1 onion, peeled and cut into wedges
- 2 tbsp butter, melted
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp ground coriander
- ½ tsp paprika
- 1 tin chickpeas
- Salt, to taste
- Fresh coriander leaves, to serve

1. Preheat the oven to 170C fan/gas 5. Add the squash and onion to a roasting tray and drizzle with the melted butter. Bake for about 25-30 minutes, then add the garlic, cumin, coriander, paprika and chickpeas with a splash of their water (to stop the spices from burning). Mix well and return to the oven for 20-25 minutes.
2. Season generously with salt, then scatter the coriander leaves on top before serving.

GOCHUJANG CAULIFLOWER CHEESE

Serves 8-10

Preparation time: 10-15 minutes
Cooking time: 1 hour-1 hour 15 minutes

This is a revelation: gochujang (fermented chilli paste) will completely transform cauliflower cheese.

- 700-800g cauliflower, cut into medium-sized florets
- 2 tbsp vegetable oil
- 50g unsalted butter, soft
- 2 garlic cloves, roughly chopped
- 1½ tbsp gochujang
- 50g plain flour
- 500g whole milk
- 150g mature or extra mature cheddar, grated

1. Preheat the oven to 160C fan/gas 4. Toss the cauliflower florets with the oil and spread them on a baking tray. Roast in the oven for 20-25 minutes.
2. To make the sauce, melt the butter in a saucepan. Add the garlic and gochujang. Cook until you see the fat separating, then sprinkle over the flour and cook for 2 more minutes, stirring constantly.
3. Start adding the milk a little at a time, using a whisk to prevent any lumps from forming until you get a thick sauce consistency. Finally add 100g grated cheese and mix.
4. Once the cauliflower florets are baked and have a bit of colour, take them out of the oven and add them to the sauce. Mix well.
5. Pour the cauliflower cheese into an ovenproof dish and sprinkle the remaining 50g grated cheese on top. Bake in the preheated oven for about 30-35 minutes until the top is bubbling, then serve. ■

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were evicted... and at that point it made more sense to break the family up because I was 17").

His brothers and mother ended up in one hostel and he ended up in another, an experience without merit. He found himself living next to drug dealers and stumbling across men threatening each other with guns in the hallways. But there was still hope for him and his family: he was one of the most promising young footballers in the country. On trial at Millwall, QPR and then Crystal Palace, he was playing alongside the likes of Rio Ferdinand and Jimmy Bullard. "I was clearly above average at this thing, plus it was nice to be out of the house. It took me away from all the other responsibilities."

Agonisingly, this beautiful dream gradually fell apart. He got injured. The physical advantage that had marked him out between 12 and 15 was eroded by the relative growth of other players. Also, he says, with a brutal frankness that suggests he might be a rather demanding boss, his work ethic "was off". "I was complacent. For most years I'd been one of the best players on the pitch and I hadn't connected it to practice, commitment, endeavour. As [football] got more serious, I didn't get more serious."

This was a disaster, not least because he had got into £90,000 of debt keeping up with his footballer friends, buying Gucci watches, pitching in for tables in nightclubs with four-figure minimum spends and purchasing a yellow convertible Renault Megane. "I got it because Jason Euell, who was playing in the first team at Wimbledon and probably had £6,000 coming in a week, had a convertible yellow Escort and he was a good friend of mine. And what was the next car up from the Escort? That's the one I went for, without thinking, 'He can afford four of those. I can afford none of these.'"

When he was released by Crystal Palace, his agent got him a sales job at a call centre for Motorola in Hounslow. The manager there was merciless: "High volume, very aggressive, very insulting." Forbes cried most days in the toilets. His colleagues mocked him. "It was a nightmare. Football didn't feel like work at all. Here, you were in your seat by eight, making 80 outgoing calls per day. At football, you laughed for three hours a day. There wasn't a smile or a window in this place. You could see them talking about me; you could hear the condescending comments."

There is a pause in our conversation at this point as his wife enters the room bearing a plate of croissants. Like everything here – including Forbes, who comes in at over 6ft, works out four times a week, rises at 5.30am every day after five hours' sleep (without an alarm clock), and sometimes fasts for three days at a time – they're massive. In his manner, however, Forbes is quiet, even introverted, by the standards of CEOs. This introversion is echoed in his recent decision to renew his wedding vows on a private rented island, in his stated ambition to buy an island of his own, in his general aversion to TV gigs and in his tendency, when relaxing, to turn off entirely. "Any micro-responsibility causes extreme adverse reactions in me. The absence of responsibility – that's when I'm most relaxed. I recently spent eight days in the Maldives and I didn't move outside a 70-yard square. My normal Sunday consists of zero. I'm comfortable being in charge because that's how I've lived the majority of my life. But to escape, to refresh, to relax, I need the complete opposite."

He tears a corner off a croissant; I dare not copy him and risk spilling crumbs over the immaculate white furniture. We return to the subject of his failure at football, and how he kept himself going at that call centre. "I remember wondering, if I don't do this, what might happen to me? Like, if I didn't go in for a day, then two days and then three days and then a month? So I was forcing myself to go in every day. Also, while I didn't want to be there, I didn't want to be ridiculed by this set of people I didn't respect."

One executive refused to have a meeting with him. 'It was explicitly about race,' he says

He got the hang of the work eventually and it turned out, in the months and years that followed, that he had a real talent for business. Forbes spent some five years working in sales, a time that enabled him to develop skills that would prove useful for the rest of his career. And joining the tech firm Primavera Systems in 2000 supercharged his progress. Not least, a cluster of bosses rated him and coached him into taking one senior position after another. Before he knew it, he was running the private equity-backed firm's business outside the US. Oracle ended up buying the firm for $550 million in 2008. Having played a key role in its expansion, lots of other businesses wanted to hire him to achieve something similar.

Since then Forbes has led a bunch of tech companies through comparable transformations and large deals. As well as running Forterro, which offers highly specialised software to help businesses, he is also a partner at Corten Capital, where he has a stake and has helped raise a €1 billion fund to invest in promising businesses. Not that this success has made him immune to racism, as one of the rare black executives in private equity. He is often the only black person in the room, and while he is reluctant to apply the word to "tons of situations where the energy didn't feel right", he recalls one incident "that was explicitly about race".

An executive in eastern Europe refused to take part in a meeting if Forbes attended, despite Forbes being the senior decision-maker. The meeting was to agree a seven-figure deal, and Forbes let colleagues go ahead without him. "I still think about that to this day. Did I do the right thing in allowing the meeting to take place? I could have made that a big issue for the company he was working for, which is a fairly big household name. I would never accept that now. Today, if that were to happen, I would address that pretty ferociously. But the other side of me says we got the deal done, the deal was helpful to my career and a chain of events since."

One of the events in this chain was a massive payout. When Oracle bought Primavera, Forbes netted millions for his share options. It was a surreal and disorientating time for a boy who grew up with so little. He bought his mum a house a few miles from where he lives now – "One of the greatest moments of my life." And he admits to going a little crazy, buying every car he ever dreamt of. "I was finding it difficult not to buy cars." He struggled to invest the money because he felt the need to be able to see what he had made. "If I had it in my bank, I could log on and look at the amount, which was incredibly satisfying." And he admits that the wealth differential within the family caused problems. "You give family a lot of money because you want everybody to have a positive experience, but over time that has proved not to be the best way to help people."

I am struck, not for the first time, by Forbes's openness. I've never interviewed a businessperson who is willing to let me in their home, let alone to show me around and discuss their personal finances. Needless to say, he has a better handle on money now. He has two cars, rather than six. He invests actively in a range of assets, from art to technology, property and watches: "I've probably got 50 or so." Rather than dishing out money to family, he has "brought family members into investments". And if he credits his mother for his work ethic, he credits his wife, whom he met when he was just 18, with providing the structure for this new life. "The other night my two daughters said they thought I'd still be homeless if it weren't for their mum." He laughs. "They might be right. She met me when football was coming to a crashing end. I had no money. I was struggling to afford my rent. So she met me at my worst. That's helpful, because I don't lose any sleep about her motivations for being here."

Their mutual devotion is something

@FORBESFAMILYGROUP/INSTAGRAM

With his mother, centre, and Auntie Pauline at the Powerlist Celebration of Black Excellence Awards

to behold: on a TikTok video, Danielle describes him as the "perfect" husband and father, while he tells me, off the top of his head, the precise date they met at a party in a club in Vauxhall.

He adds that Danielle has been relentlessly supportive of his career, even when it meant weeks of travel when they had a young family. Which raises the question of how they are bringing up their three kids, a son aged 17 and twin daughters aged 16, in a very different socio-economic setting to his own. "We talk about it all the time. Recently, I took my son back to show him where I grew up." Do they get it? "Yeah, I think they really do. I see evidence of it in the way that they conduct themselves." The children attend state schools because Forbes wants them to learn what he did, the art of "getting on with different people", and their parents are careful about how they disburse money.

When they were younger, they only got pocket money in exchange for performing basic chores. Now, they've extended the principle: they can have whatever they want, from designer clothes to cars, as long as they come up with half the money. But when they travel with their parents, they do so first class. Does he worry it will spoil them? "There have been moments as they've grown up that we've seen a bit of brattish behaviour. And we are so scared of that, we are aggressive when we see it." He says that he is resisting lobbying from his daughters to go away for Christmas, when they had two months in Mykonos over the summer. "But their family is still their family. They've got aunts and uncles and cousins who don't live in places like this." One of his brothers has a commercial role at a tech startup, the other is a musician and teacher.

One of his daughters wants to go into fashion, another wants to be an influencer ("I haven't managed to talk her out of that yet"), while his son, Dean Jr, is following in his father's footsteps as a footballer and has been signed up by Millwall. "He came back from a spinal injury and broke his nose three weeks later. It's been brilliant watching him deal with what life throws at you. And for that, I'm really grateful. He's much better than me and he deserves, for his talent, a career in the sport. But I couldn't care less if he does or he doesn't."

I believe him: you won't find anyone more unimpressed by football careers than Dean Forbes. When he looks back at the desperate efforts he made to enter the sport, he almost shudders. "I probably could have had a below-average professional career, but thankfully I didn't." He also shudders when he recalls the difficulties the family faced when his youngest daughter, Darcy, suffered from acute myeloid leukaemia when she was two years old. She needed multiple blood transfusions. As a result, her parents are keen blood donors and sit on the board of the African Caribbean Leukaemia Trust.

The couple have also set up the Forbes Family Group for their philanthropic work, and it recently raised more than £400,000 in one night for the trust. It also runs a number of social mobility programmes, which have helped 3,000 young people across Britain, has provided subsided childcare to 1,700 low-income families, operates projects to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage in "underserved communities", and works to give young people positive role models. He has said that the only successful black people he could see as a kid were in sport, entertainment or criminal gangs, and that he wants to make business more "relatable" in part through networking and mentoring projects.

It's a difficult time to be an advocate for increased diversity in business. Only 22 of around 1,500 senior investment bankers in Europe are black, but there is also a backlash against diversity schemes, with Elon Musk calling "DEI" (diversity, equity and inclusion) the real racism, and many large American companies closing down their DEI departments. "If the narrative is we should put down these programmes because they are adversely affecting white people, then I can't subscribe to that mentality," he responds. "If we're putting down these programmes because we're saying they're not the right way to promote equality and to promote diversity, then I'm supportive. Statistically, they haven't worked. As a leader in business, I don't ever want to be promoted or advantaged because of my colour. Do not ever do that to me, because I will react very badly to that. But I do want to be given equal opportunity. I want to compete with everybody else."

The hands on the face of his large Rolex watch tell me we are running out of time. As we wrap up, he tells me that he wants the Forbes Family Group to help people in the way he was helped, through mentoring and coaching. As for his burgeoning media profile, he is only interested if it shows young people that "black achievement is happening" in business and that you can remain true to yourself as you achieve. He adds that one of the defining moments of his career involved being sent to a presentation specialist who was supposed to polish his communication skills. The coach, a female consultant from Texas, refused to go along with the idea that there was something wrong with the way he said "ain't" and carried himself. "It endorsed me to carry on talking the way I was, and I was quite conscious of that at the time."

Furthermore, he is proud that when he celebrated heading the Powerlist 2025 at a party attended by friends including Idris Elba and the rapper and actor Kano, he did so at Silks nightclub in Catford rather than one of the top London venues that had not been "welcoming" when he was younger.

"Silks is 500 yards from the house I lived in for the longest and one mile from the hospital I was born in, and a place I went to often as I was growing up. Maybe the thing I'm proudest of, and maybe my greatest achievement, is how unashamedly myself I now am in work. I'm in this environment dominated by people who were educated in a very, very different way. Some of them still are economically ahead of me. But fewer and fewer of them are now. With every day that passes, I am more and more myself." ■

THE HOMECOMING

How hope is returning to war-torn South Sudan

Some 300,000 people fled the South Sudanese region of Kajo Keji as civil war swept across the country. Ten years later, a delicate peace process has prompted tens of thousands to flood back. Damian Arnold meets the locals and volunteers rebuilding houses, schools and lives shattered in the fighting

PHOTOGRAPHS Tom Price

Emmy Florence, left, and Pita Rose John. Top: local people atop Jebel Kujur, west of Juba town

The Rt Rev Dr Lule James Kenyi, bishop of the Anglican diocese of Kajo Keji

Julius Gwolo Alfred sits under the same mango tree every Wednesday evening and turns on his radio.

Having worked from dawn, he walks half a mile to the only spot where he can get reception and turns the dial at 7.30pm. The aptly named Hope FM spreads a message of self-empowerment.

For years the mangos on the tree ripened in the rains, fell and rotted on the ground because Gwolo was not here to harvest them. He is one of an estimated 300,000 people who fled the South Sudanese region of Kajo Keji because of civil war, living in neighbouring Uganda's refugee camps.

Even after an interim peace agreement was signed in 2020, most people were too afraid to return and work the land in the vast verdant valley, renowned for its rich soil and plentiful rains, known as the "bread basket of South Sudan". This year there has been a mass migration back to the villages, where people huddle around radios to receive motivation on how to mend their broken minds and raise their drooping spirits.

"It is very appealing because they are teaching about discovering your own resources to transform your situation," says the 58-year-old Gwolo, a tall, stoic figure with a saucer-sized indention in his left bicep and a rod-straight back. "For me, that was my land. You can do a lot of things on the land."

Gwolo has created at least three businesses on his land, where he, his wife and the younger of his nine children have returned. His pride is evident as he talks of how he has made family life on their farm or *shamba* viable again.

"The people do not want to be dependent on aid as they were in the camps," says the Rt Rev Lule James Kenyi, bishop of the Anglican diocese of Kajo Keji. "They are hard-working farmers. All they need are seeds and tools. Nature will do the rest. The process is about discovering for yourself. And when you do, you'll be able to make that idea grow. We are seeing this flourish in Kajo Keji."

The region is an enormous patchwork of smallholdings crisscrossed by terracotta-coloured dirt roads in the extreme south of the mainly Christian South Sudan. The country was created in 2011 to bring to an end Africa's longest-running civil war with the mainly Muslim north (Sudan). South Sudan has a population of 12.7 million, is the world's most recent sovereign state and also one of the poorest and the second most corrupt.

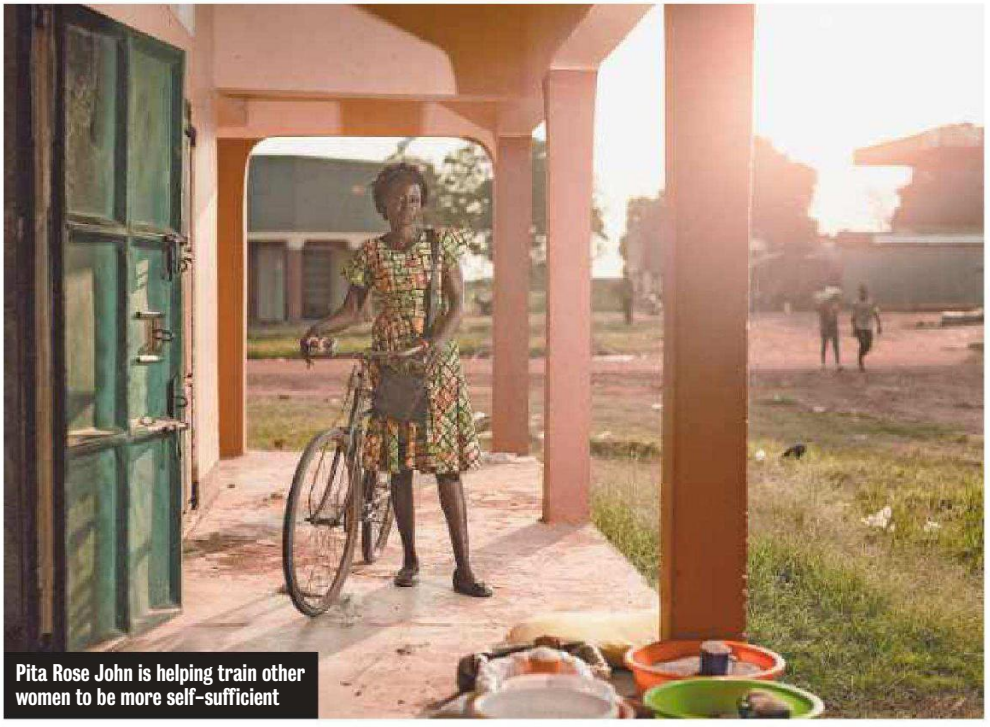
Civil war in South Sudan began to rumble in 2013 when Riek Machar challenged the government of the Stetson-wearing Salva Kiir Mayardit. Other rebel groups became involved and the conflict spread to Kajo Keji in 2016, when Machar's South Sudan People's Defence Force began forcibly recruiting young men. Fighting stopped in 2020 when Kiir and Machar agreed to form a coalition government. By then, some 400,000 people had been killed and 4 million displaced.

Conflict continues to boil in Sudan to the north, but an uneasy peace has held in South Sudan. And while refugees from war-torn parts of Africa and the Middle East take perilous smuggler routes to Europe, the mass migration home to Kajo Keji of refugees has accelerated this year.

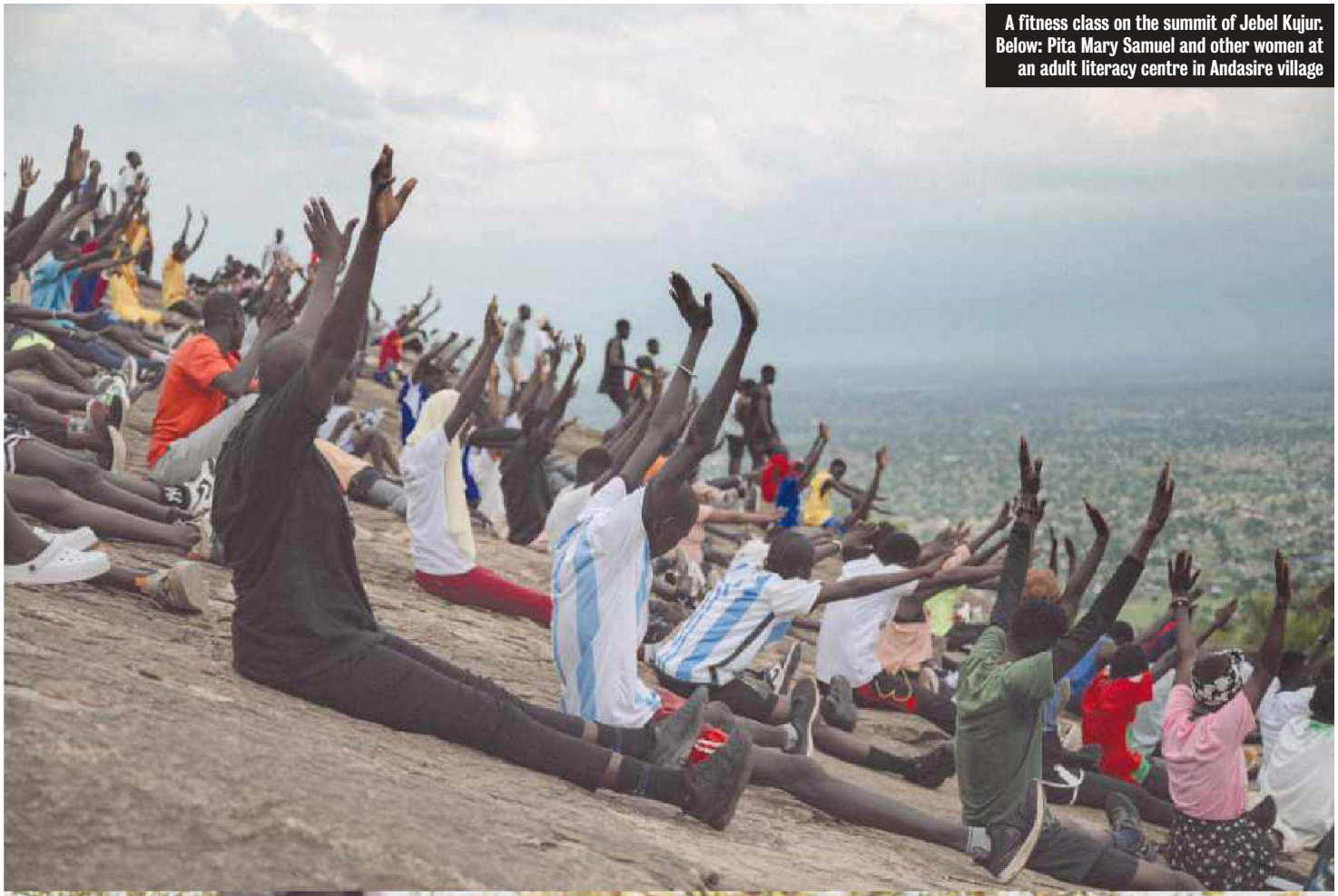
They've returned to a country where three quarters of the population depend on humanitarian aid and inflation of the South Sudanese pound had soared to Weimar Republic levels for a decade. And because of civil war in Sudan, there is little chance of exploiting South Sudan's rich oil reserves because the pipelines are routed through Sudan and are regularly damaged. "The impact of the civil war effectively means that there's no revenue from the oil resources," says Erickson Bisetsa, the South Sudan director ➡

Farmer Julius Gwolo Alfred

'THE PEOPLE DO NOT WANT TO RELY ON AID. THEY JUST NEED SEEDS AND TOOLS'



Pita Rose John is helping train other women to be more self-sufficient



A fitness class on the summit of Jebel Kujur. Below: Pita Mary Samuel and other women at an adult literacy centre in Andasire village

Yes, we do
money too

JOHN LEWIS
MONEY

of international relief and development agency Tearfund, which is working in partnership with the Anglican diocese.

Anthony Duku James, a local farmer, joined the mass exodus to refugee camps in Uganda in early 2017. "There were kidnaps at night or along the roadside. Opium-addicted rebels raped local women on their way to water points. Many were taken as brides."

Government troops arrested and tortured people suspected of being opposition collaborators or spies. Grass-roofed dwellings or *tukuls* were burnt down. An estimated 2,000 people were killed.

"During the night you would hear people crying in deep pain. That was when the community started feeling really scared," says Duku, who was one of the first to return and has worked for Tearfund. "You would find people beaten, their property looted and animals taken. Some would be imprisoned, some hanged."

When opposition forces attacked the main police station in February 2017, killing officers and recruiting prisoners, the steady flow on the roads to Uganda became a stampede. "That was the moment everyone ran for their lives, leaving their belongings behind," Duku says.

In the refugee camps families would be given a tent on a tiny strip of land. In recent times food rations have been cut to 3kg rice, corn, maize and beans. This has to last a month, but would only feed an average family for a week. After a huge influx of refugees from the latest civil war in Sudan and from continued hostilities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, life in the camps has become intolerable. Jane Aba Bure, a former refugee and mother of five, says, "Lack of food and drinking water was very difficult in the camp. That's what made me return to Kajo Keji."

The people of Kajo Keji have a choice: stay in the camps where they are half-starving but safe, medical facilities are better and children are given at least a rudimentary education, or return to their farms to rebuild their former lives with the freedom to improve their situation but the jeopardy of conflict flaring up again. "They have a really difficult decision to make. Life in the camp is harder and yet they're still fearful of returning," says Yanta Daniel Elisha, a project officer for cross-border initiatives in the Anglican diocese of Kajo Keji.

The return began as a trickle. To start with men would go to and fro, cultivating crops to bring back to the camps and feed their families. Now the dirt roads from the camps some 30km over the border are rutted with the tracks of lorries laden with people and their few possessions, motorbikes and bone-shaking bicycles with packages precariously loaded on the back. The majority walk. In the past six months tens of thousands have returned.

TRAUMA IS A WORD YOU HEAR MORE THAN ANY OTHER IN THE REGION

Hope FM radio presenter Joseph Longa

To date, an estimated 150,000 people have come back to the charred shells of their homes and started to rebuild them. Much of the rest are expected to follow in the next few months – if peace holds. Most are tilling the soil again and as the "big dig" gathers pace, markets in the bigger villages and small towns, once ghostly and silent, are bustling with people selling their produce.

Today, villages resound to the laughter of children again, but most of the school buildings have been badly damaged. Of 50 Anglican schools, only 10 have reopened. It is hoped that ten more will reopen in the next year. However, South Sudan's bankrupt government has not paid teachers' salaries for nearly a year. Many teachers are working as volunteers and the church is asking parents to make a small contribution to pay the teachers.

Tearfund and Christian Aid have implemented a water, sanitation and hygiene project. The main hospital in Kajo Keji county has reopened with support from the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières. It lacks equipment, but women are going there to give birth.

The bigger problem is trauma, a word you hear more than any other. It is etched on solemn faces. "When people come back and see their homes destroyed, the stress comes and they need to be supported," James says.

Pere Evans, 53, a former primary school teacher from the village of Andasire, lost his house and 18 cattle; his brother and sister-in-law were shot dead. He was arrested and locked up, expecting the same fate. After three months he was set free and, as one of the first people in his village to return from the Palorinya refugee camp in 2020, decided to create a centre of healing in Andasire, where local people could learn to read and receive counselling.

He persuaded the authorities to give him some land and four years later pupils cram into a teaching building with a rough concrete floor. An open grass-roofed structure serves as a crèche and other classes take place under a tree. Hundreds of people attend the centre from 14 surrounding villages. The oldest pupil is 70 years old.

"When I started the programme, I mobilised the widows and orphans first," Evans says. "We began by sharing testimonies. Some of the women feared anyone in uniform. They feared even to see men."

Today the women greet our arrival with a dance and song of their own devising about their need for school uniforms and sanitary towels.

When 16-year-old Gladys Sumure Moi became pregnant, the father ran away to the capital, Juba. While five-month-old Annabel sleeps on her lap, her mother brightens as she talks about the centre. "There is counselling on trauma healing," she says. "I have begun to forget some of the memories that were tormenting me and concentrate on my studies." Her ambition is to become a nurse.

Jane Aba Bure recalls sitting down with the other women and sharing their experiences in the conflict. "That reduced the trauma," she says. She has learnt to read and now counsels new arrivals at the centre. "I advise the young girls to continue with their education before they think of marriage."

Pita Mary Samuel, 36, has been coming to the centre for three years. Her husband became an invalid during the conflict. They have six children, the eldest 17 and the youngest a 2-month-old girl called Uyako. Mary walks 5km each day to fetch water. "Counselling has helped my relationship with my husband to be more peaceful and it has made me more creative," she says. She is growing cassava, beans and onions and has been given a female goat to rear on the condition that she gives away its offspring to other women at the centre. "The thing I enjoy most is feeding myself and not having to wait for the ration any more," she says.

If the women are showing tangible signs of recovery, many of the young men are still deeply troubled, says Evans, who is sitting under an ancient tree that has survived an attempt to hack it down during the conflict. War trauma has led to alcoholism and drug addiction, he adds. A lot of youths are chewing *murungu* (the stimulant khat) and smoking opium. With no school to go to, idleness has bred antisocial behaviour, including sexual violence.

"There have been a lot of suicides among youths and young men and also older men who have lost their livelihoods and can't provide for their family,"

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Evans says. "They commit suicide because they feel disrespected and unworthy."

Land at the centre is being cultivated to raise money for a larger teaching building and vocational training centre, offering courses in bricklaying, carpentry, mechanics, hairdressing and dressmaking.

Numbers at the centre grew steadily until February 2023, when the flow of returning refugees was staunched by news of a large armed group from the Jonglei area in the north arriving to herd their cattle. They drove their animals onto people's farms, destroyed their crops, robbed and raped. Twenty-eight people were massacred in Mere Boma. The village's Anglican priest of 20 years, the Rev Canon Edward Jale, 68, looks sorrowfully at their mass grave – an unmarked slab of concrete – amid the boisterous shouting of girls playing football in the field beyond.

Jale regularly visits his flock. "Some people are very quiet and some keep talking. Some have started drinking heavily and some just stay indoors. There are many signs of trauma."

Meanwhile, he is mediating on "land grudges" that start when people return to find others cultivating their land. "We ask people to give back the land when the owner returns. When everyone comes back, I think the situation will be settled because we are only one tribe [Kuku] and people here listen to one another."

Cattle herders have tried to enter the area several times in the past 18 months but have been turned back by government troops. And as the return to Kajo Keji gathers pace again, the diocese's radio station, Hope FM, is communicating a programme called Transforming Communities (TC), devised by the Anglican church (about 70 per cent of the population is Anglican) in partnership with Tearfund. The message in the local Bari dialect is simple: make a list of what skills and resources you have and you'll often find you have more than you thought.

Hope FM presenter Joseph Longa is an exemplar of the message, having rebuilt his family's life in Kajo Keji. "I grew up in a very poor family and had a lot of difficulties. My father died when I was six and I didn't have money for my studies. But I managed to get to the level where I am able to do something. I started transporting milk for cattle owners. I used to bring 10 litres, then upgraded to 20 litres. At first, I was using a bicycle and then I bought a motorbike. Now I am transporting 80 litres a day. I am using that money to put my children through school. I have four children and four children from my late brother."

He is inundated with calls from people eager to share their testimonies. Among them is Pita Rose John, a young woman who is breaking the mould of the traditional mother. "We were trained in how to transform holistically, physically and spiritually and then to develop a personal vision," she says. She is separated from her husband and is bringing up her four children and two more she has adopted after her brother was killed. Singing as she goes, she has focused on the family's four acres, where she is growing ground nuts, cassava and maize. She takes the produce to market on her bicycle and has added dried fish and rice to the wares she offers. With more people returning and demand higher, prices she can charge are increasing, she says. She wants to start sending her goods to Juba, where she can trade on a bigger scale.

'GIVEN FIVE YEARS OF PEACE, PEOPLE WILL THRIVE IN THIS PLACE'

Jane Aba Bure at an adult literacy centre in Andasire

She is training 30 other young women in the principles of TC, including Emmy Florence, 22, who is selling pens and notepads in Wudu village to pay for her studies. Florence's ultimate goal is to open an IT training centre.

Those like Duku are showing others what can be achieved and many local people visit his farm. On the journey back in 2020, the father of three was robbed of all his money, about 120,000 Uganda shillings (£25). Eventually, he found his farm in Mere and rebuilt the smallholding. He has started growing tomatoes, onions, green peppers and watermelons, which make more money than the region's traditional crops. "I didn't even have to take them to the market. Buyers would come and look for me." He's invested the profits in 200 chickens, which he sells. His children have returned and are attending the recently reopened local Baptist school.

A long-promised election in South Sudan, scheduled for December 22, has been postponed for two years while a constitution is written. Many in Kajo Keji greeted the postponement with relief because of the danger that an election might trigger a return to civil war, James says.

He regularly visits the refugee camps to encourage people to come home. "I tell them that the situation is relatively calm and there is no threat at the moment. Many people are coming."

Talks for a permanent settlement – the Tumaini Peace Initiative – between the government and the opposition forces are continuing in Kenya. If an agreement is signed by the end of the year there is predicted to be another big migration back to Kajo Keji in 2025, when the United Nations is expected to implement a farming support programme, offering training on modern farming techniques, entrepreneurship, market linkages and the forming of farming groups and loan associations. Some say that farmers need to be weaned off their attachment to traditional crops, which take two years to harvest, to focus on higher value produce such as okra, tomatoes, garlic and onions that can be harvested in three months.

"The UN can only do that when it is sure that peace has been signed. Otherwise, it will not risk bringing people in," says the Rev Dr Michael Paul Kiju, the principal of Kajo Keji Christian College, a teacher training facility for the Anglican diocese.

His dearest wish is for a tarmac road to be built to Juba, 150km away. The bumpy track used at the moment is virtually impassable during the rains. "A better road would be a game-changer. The journey could be less than two hours instead of seven or eight. I mean, it's crazy. It's so close but you can't transport food there because sometimes the vehicle would turn over," Paul says. With crop production rapidly increasing, such a road he argues would play a vital role in distributing foodstuffs to areas of South Sudan suffering drought and severe food insecurity.

"People here are peace-loving," Paul adds. "They know how to till our ground and how to produce food because it has been handed down over generations. Given five years of peace this place will be very different. People will thrive."

Julius Gwolo Alfred feels like he already is. He made bricks from the soil to rebuild his house and has planted 200 teak trees and is making furniture to sell. He is also planning to invest in cattle and is making a ploughing machine that can be pulled by his motorbike. His cassava, maize, ground nuts and bean crops are fruitful. He says that the produce will pay for his children's education. Perhaps most importantly, he is giving seeds to others. ■

Tearfund is raising funds for its Transforming Communities programme, working through churches to give people in Kajo Keji a helping hand to help themselves (tearfund.org/south-sudan)


Drunk flirting with the boss, sexting the wrong person, waking up in a taxi...

What happens at the office Christmas party stays at the office Christmas party. Until now!

Confessions from the festive work knees-up

Oliver, 30, wealth manager
We all ended up partying into the early hours after the Christmas party. One colleague was getting all the guys to suck her toes, another had passed out in the corner. I got wrapped in bubble wrap and rolled down the stairs. We were still drinking at 7am, and at that point we all decided to do semi-naked yoga. So there we were in the middle of the office – ten of us doing yoga in our pants and boxers – as we watched the sun come up.

Rachel, 30, marketing
After the official office Christmas do, which was in a private room at a swanky bar, my managers and I went back to one of the directors' houses. When we got there he opened a fridge that was full of expensive champagne. We were all pretty half-cut already, but none of us was going to turn this down. Then, after an hour or so, he plonked a serving bowl full of cocaine in the middle of the coffee table. It looked like a boulder. He said it had cost him £1,000. I have no idea if that was true or not. I had never seen anything like it in my life. Without blinking, everyone started chipping away at it with their debit cards. You could say it was a white Christmas after all.

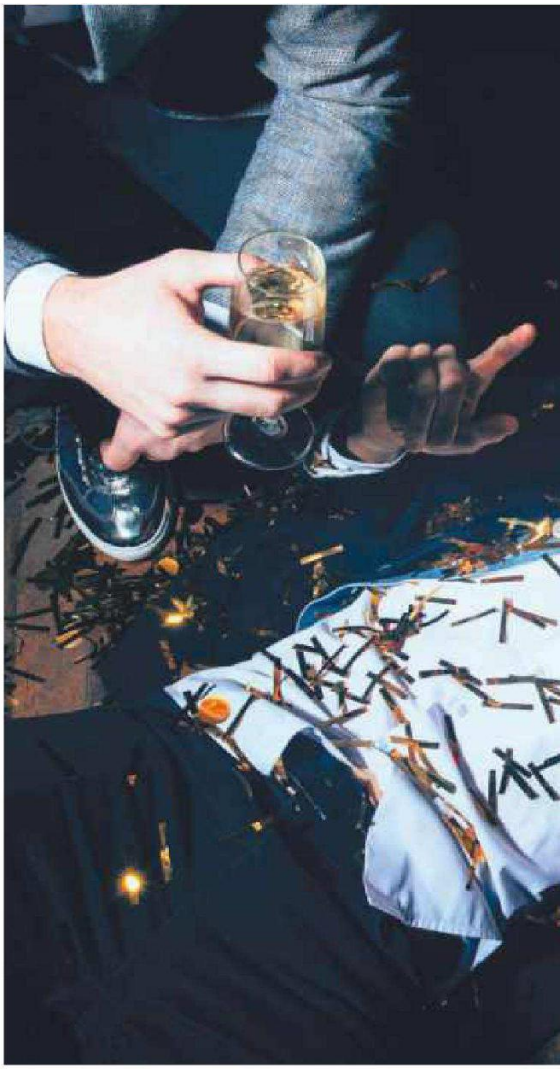
Poppy, 35, journalist
I went to my boyfriend's work Christmas party. It's an American tech company with a small team of about 15 men in the UK. There were pub drinks and then a meal with cocktails and wine, and by the time dessert came everyone was pretty loose. The boss stood up and gave a cheesy speech, American style, about the employees being a family. He invited other employees to stand up and talk and a sales director gave some spiel about how talented everyone was. Then my boyfriend, who was very drunk by this point, raised his hand and went up to speak. He proceeded to pour his heart out and describe in detail why he loved me so much, slurring over his adulation, welling up and choking over the mic, almost weeping with emotion, and said absolutely nothing about the company. Everyone was cheering and laughing. Shame I was in the toilet and missed the whole thing.

Amanda, 49, TV drama producer
One of my first jobs was working as an intern at an "interactive TV" company, which at the time was considered very cutting edge. The cool, urbane 45-year-old married boss of the company invited me to a huge industry Christmas party in a hotel in Bedfordshire. It was decked out as a massive music-themed wonderland, with Disney-like props hanging from the ceiling. I wore a little black dress and high heels – the standard uniform for parties back then. All evening my boss was great fun and kept promising to help me with my career and introduce me to a lot of people. Later, after I had gone back to my hotel room and was getting undressed, there was a knock on my door. I was petrified and mortified. I knew it was him. He knocked several times while I stood like a statue in my room, glued to the spot. Eventually he went away. The next day we had to get the train home together. He acted completely normally and so did I, although I was dying inside with shame and anger. It was never mentioned. I can't help thinking how differently I would have responded today.

Mia, 28, graphic designer
I skipped dinner before the Christmas party – never a good idea when you're drinking a lot. I woke up the morning after with a hangover from hell. I realised it would be too obvious to call in sick, so at 9am I began to make my way into the office. In between two stops on the Tube, I suddenly started feeling very queasy. I stood up and tried to hide the fact I was gagging. I was sure I could hold in the vomit until the next stop. But I didn't quite make it and threw up all over the train doors. Morning commuters looked at me, disgusted. Two women on the train ushered me off to be sick in a bin on the platform. When they asked me in concerned voices, "Are you pregnant? Is it morning sickness?" I lied and said, "Yes."

Hannah, 43, journalist
In my late twenties, I got my first job on a national newspaper as deputy features editor. Immediately, the young deputy sports editor caught my eye.

> 'I got wrapped in bubble wrap and rolled down the stairs. At 7am we decided to do semi-naked yoga as the sun came up'



He was extremely smart but quite shy. Gradually we moved into the same work friendship circle, often going to a bar after work for drinks. For a year I nursed a crush on him, making excuses to walk past his desk or go and have a cigarette outside the building at the same time as him, but I couldn't tell if it was mutual. He seemed to enjoy my company, but was never overly flirtatious. Then after 18 months of this, at our Christmas party – where he was, as usual, friendly but self-contained – I engineered to leave at the same time as him. As we were waiting for taxis I suddenly blurted out, "How about one for the road?" pointing at a bar opposite. "Sure," he said. We propped ourselves up at the bar, already pretty hammered, and ordered old fashioneds. I finally plucked up the courage to ask about his love life, joking what a mystery he was and if he had his eye on any girls. He turned round, looked straight at me and gave a big sigh. "You. It's always been you," he said. The work thing had always held him back, he confessed, slurring. After that, we didn't care. We went out for five years and I am now married to someone else, but I still count that moment as one of the best of my life.

OPENING SPREAD AND THIS SPREAD: GETTY IMAGES

Jamie, 27, recruitment
One of my more senior colleagues got so drunk at our office party that he soiled his pants while stumbling off the makeshift dancefloor and had to go and find another pair of trousers from the lost property section of our office bike store. The next day he sent an apologetic email to our team claiming he'd had a "gluten intolerance flare-up". I'm pretty sure there isn't any gluten in prosecco.

Bob, 56, writer
Back in the day, a large mobile phone sales company used to have an enormous annual "Christmas Festival" at Earls Court Olympia, where every employee from every store nationwide was bussed in to join in the fun. There would be thousands of people there. Angel wings and little black dresses were the main party outfit. From midnight, all you would hear over the loudspeaker were things like, "The bus back to Skegness is leaving from Bay 2." National Express famously cancelled the contract one year after every bus was filled with vomit.

Amelia, 23, tech sales
I was chatting to the CEO at our Christmas party. It was all going well until I ended up in the toilets with one of my older colleagues, doing cocaine. I accidentally dropped his wallet down the loo, including the cocaine. For some reason, I then went up to the CEO and said, "Do you want some cocaine?" This was madness for several reasons. First, I had dropped the cocaine down the loo; second, it wasn't mine anyway; and third, obviously the CEO didn't do drugs. He replied, "That is so inappropriate." I was thinking, "Oh no." Luckily, he never mentioned the incident again. He pretended it had never happened.

Annabel, 42, architect
At our work Christmas party a few years ago in a bar, I ended up talking for much of the night, then slow dancing, with a very attractive colleague called Kevin from our design department. The chemistry between us was really quite steamy, but because this was a work environment we kept it contained. We had a long snog by the cloakroom as we were getting our coats and put each other's numbers in our phones before I had to rush to get the last train home for the babysitter. I am divorced and live alone with my son, who was six at the time. On the train, all riled up and quite drunk,

'I was so drunk on bourbon, I shouted at the wife of a famous rock star. The following day I had to send a grovelling apology'

I decided to be a bit daring and send Kevin a "sexy text" describing how in my fantasy we'd be escaping all our colleagues and getting a hotel room at this point and how we'd undress each other slowly. Then I got quite explicit. After pressing send and sitting back waiting for a flirty reply, I got a message shortly afterwards: "I don't think this was meant for me." It was then that I realised I already had another Kevin in my phone – one of the school-gate dads I see most afternoons at pick-up time.

Jude, 29, finance
I was only a few weeks into my new job when I was invited to the Christmas party. I was nervous about making a good impression and made sure I didn't drink too much. Two of my female colleagues asked me to take a photo of them when we were standing outside having a cigarette. The next thing I heard was, "Excuse me, mate," in a gruff voice and suddenly this random guy came out of nowhere and punched me really hard on the nose. There was blood all over my shirt. I was beyond confused. Luckily, my two bosses were standing next to me and saw the whole thing, or it would have seemed like I had got myself into a drunken fight.

Adam, 54, photographer
One year I was invited to donate one of my pictures to a charity auction at a Christmas lunch and party at the Groucho Club, also attended by a host of magazine editors and sceney people. It was held on a freezing day in early December, so I arrived at the Groucho bundled up in a big coat and woolly hat, feeling very nervous. What if no one bid for my print? The first person I bumped into was the wife of a famous British rock star. She said, "Why have you come to this lunch ➡

Katie Howie brings seasonal cheer to locals in her village

CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

One York village is bringing people together to combat loneliness and make sure everyone feels festive joy this holiday season

Village life is the dream for many but it isn't always cream teas and cricket on the green. It can be just as hard to make friends and meet new people here as it can be in the city. That's one reason why the folk of Wheldrake near York – population 2,000 – will come together just before Christmas for a bustling festive brunch in the village pub.

"People think: village life, everybody knows everybody and they're in and out of each other's houses. But we still have loneliness," says Katie Howie, who runs the cross-generational project Wheldrake Sharing Life, which brings locals together. "In some ways, people are more isolated because of things like accessing transport – accessing anything really. We've got a pub, shop, church and school – that's about it."

Katie's mission is to make sure everyone enjoys that Christmas Day feeling together. "We start at 10am with coffee, mince pies and warm croissants. The local school sings carols. Then we say, 'Off you go, kids, go and have a chat,' and they wish people a merry Christmas and talk about what they're getting," says Katie, 53, a former occupational therapist who lives in the village with farmer husband John and their sons, Robbie, 14, and Ben, 10.

"Then it's bacon butties and sausage rolls. We want people to feel stuffed, so they've got to wobble out of that pub."

Next to arrive are the littlest pre-school children to moisten eyes with a cheerful rendition of *Jingle Bells*, before everyone, whether four or ninety-four, gets a present from Father Christmas.

"Gradually, one by one, the children look behind them and see Santa. I watch the older guests watching the children looking at Santa and it's just beautiful. It's wonderful," says Katie. "We had one lady last Christmas who said, 'This is the only present I'm going to get this year,' which is quite a powerful thing to say."

Admission is free or by donation only. "We never want anyone to feel they can't come," says Katie, whose project relies on grants, donations and fundraising.

Wheldrake Sharing Life runs coffee mornings and befriending and board game sessions, and even offers technology support. It is also planning a Christmas coach shopping trip to Tingley Garden Centre near Leeds.

On the big day itself, a kind family plates up extra Christmas dinners for those who might not see anyone.

"Many people say the project has transformed the community," adds the organiser, who insists she couldn't run the group without fellow committee members Emma Warmington-Boanas, Ruth Smith and Karen Martin, plus the help of her amazing volunteers.

"A 90-year-old gentleman said the project had transformed his life. He used to be the headmaster of the school. He's got a wonderful family but he lives on his own. It's just so meaningful."

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAN BURN-FORTI

dressed as a Big Issue seller?" I was completely crushed, which compounded my terror that nobody would buy my print at the auction. I had with me a £100 bottle of Colonel EH Taylor bourbon, which I'd bought in a posh wine shop in Soho for Christmas Day. Halfway through the lunch, I escaped to the loo and bumped into another photographer who was also worried about selling his print. We hid in the loo, passing the bottle between us. By the time we got back, the auction had taken place and we were hammered. The rock star's wife had bought my print. I was so drunk and insecure that I thought she'd done it to mock me. Rather than thanking her, I staggered up to her and began berating her in front of the horrified party guests for taking the piss out of me. Still shouting at her, I had to be bundled into a cab by her friend. My wife knew many of the guests and was furious, and I had to send numerous grovelling apologies. I gave the rock star's wife an even bigger framed print than the one she'd bought to say sorry. She thought the whole thing was hilarious and couldn't have cared less.

David, 31, film

One of my responsibilities was to get a cosmetics company to come to the office to do hair and make-up for the women on the night of the Christmas party. My two middle-aged female bosses each spent two hours in the chair getting done up. When they walked into the party, which was full of people, I said, "Oh my goodness, girls – mutton dressed as lamb!" The whole room went silent. Everyone was staring at me. I didn't realise that "mutton dressed as lamb" was an insult to older women. I thought it just meant they were dressed up and they looked really nice. I was marched out of there by a woman from HR who said, "Do you realise what you've just said to a director?" I did know that mutton was an old sheep, so I should have put two and two together.

Sienna, 29, accountant

A woman in her sixties and a guy in his twenties were flirting all night and dancing together at our work Christmas party. Despite the age gap, things were clearly getting heated and a bit sexual between them on the dancefloor. They snuck off downstairs. Someone discovered them having sex over a table. The story spread around our office like wildfire. It was scandalous. She continued to work there for a bit longer, but he wasn't seen in the office again.

Esther, 55, PR executive

Before the #MeToo era, I worked at a heavy-hitting PR agency. It was notorious for its lavish Christmas parties, where

'Despite the 40-year age gap, they were spotted having sex. She carried on working in the office. He was never seen again'

GETTY IMAGES

more than 100 staff would be taken to a swanky hotel. Every year it was standard practice to have a big party room and then a second "private" room for the three main directors. They would have pots of coke and pills, tequila and vodka. Once the main party had got going, they would have "spotters" who were sent out to tap girls on the shoulder, who were invited into the private room. I never got the tap, but I forced my way in there anyway. Usually the private room would have a hot tub with all sorts going on. I remember one year, right at the end of the night, once everyone else had left and there was only the director and his friend left in the water, one employee stripped naked, walked up to the hot tub and said to them both, "Take me now." The director looked up and made a comment about her having too much pubic hair and told her to leave the room. She never came back to work and was paid £25,000 never to mention it.

Daisy, 24, insurance

All I remember is being on the ground throwing up outside the bar where the Christmas party was being held. Next thing I know, I'm in a taxi with a senior member of staff. He's asking me, "Where do you live?" I was saying, "I don't know." I had no idea where I was or who I was with. The colleague was trying to call my boyfriend to ask where I lived, but he was not answering the phone. Apparently, we got kicked out of three taxis because I was throwing up in them. It took two hours to get back, even though it was a short journey. The colleague had to take me into my house because I couldn't walk through the door. When I saw my boyfriend, I said, "Who are you?" In hindsight, I think I must have been spiked by some random person in the bar, because I have never been so drunk that I don't know where I live or who my boyfriend is.

Hamish, 29, recruitment

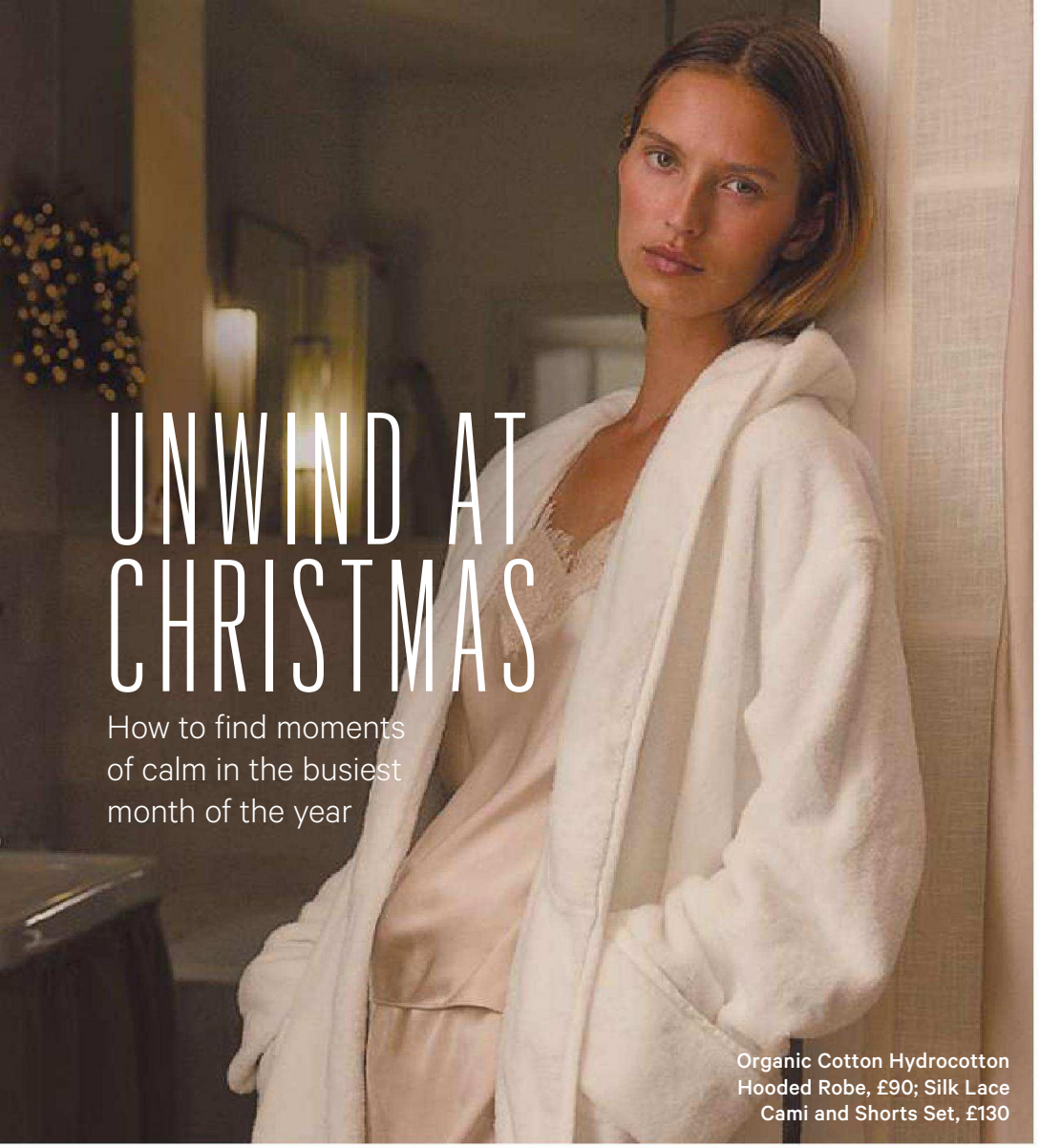
My colleague recruited a man who was going in at a very senior level. The company invited him to its Christmas party before he started so he could bond with everyone. He got absolutely steaming drunk. He went up to the CEO and started being really flirty with her. The problem was, her husband was standing right next to her all the time. The morning after the party, the company withdrew the job offer. My colleague missed out on the ten grand recruitment fee.

Joey, 30, estate agent

We always go out for a big meal and drinks for our Christmas party. But one Christmas during the pandemic, the rules meant you could only meet in groups of six. We behaved and split off into groups for separate dinners. But then we drunkenly decided to all go back to someone's house for an after-party. A couple of days later, 70 per cent of the people at the party were testing positive for Covid, including a girl who had been drunkenly licking my face. I was so scared I'd caught Covid because I had a family wedding the following week, to which only close relations could go. I was terrified of making older family members ill and felt so guilty. Thank goodness I tested negative.

Henry, 40, lawyer

I work at a magic circle law firm. At our last Christmas party, a couple of colleagues hit it off so well they decided to sneak back into the office to have sex. That night there were still several people working late on a huge acquisition. So they wouldn't be spotted, the pair sneaked into the plant room, from which all the computers and servers are run. During their tryst, the female colleague managed to knock a switch with her outstretched leg, which cut the power to all the computers of the workers who had missed the party to get the deal done. They were furious. ■



UNWIND AT CHRISTMAS

How to find moments of calm in the busiest month of the year

Organic Cotton Hydrocotton Hooded Robe, £90; Silk Lace Cami and Shorts Set, £130

The season is here for filling up the calendar and getting together with loved ones before the year is out.

But to approach the festivities with gusto, it's worth carving out pockets of tranquillity to ensure you don't end the month feeling completely frazzled. With the nights drawing in and temperatures dropping, it's all about embracing moments of calm at home. A few key pieces from The White Company that promote rest and relaxation will ensure you feel super-charged for the celebrations ahead.

Stepping out of the day's clothes and into luxurious loungewear is an ideal way to clock off from the world outside. Effortlessly casual separates offer ultimate comfort for long, chilly evenings and self-care days. Hoodies, joggers and socks are the cosy investment pieces you'll reach for throughout winter and for years to come.

Fragrance is also a powerful way to tell the body (and mind) that it's time to unwind. Spritzing a room or lighting a candle as you hunker down with a book or a box set puts a sense of ceremony into staying in. Look for scents laced with spices or infused with tones of oud and amber, enveloping you in warm, comforting layers. Choose a double-wick candle for a stronger fragrance throw and brighter ambiance, filling your space with soothing light and scent.

> LIGHTING A CANDLE AS YOU HUNKER DOWN GIVES STAYING IN A SENSE OF CEREMONY

When it's time for sleep, reach for natural, breathable fibres. Pure silk gets top marks as it helps the body to regulate its temperature and retains the skin's moisture (ideal if you've slathered yourself in body lotion). Silk pyjamas demand a little maintenance through hand-washing but they offer the luxury of rejuvenating rest, enhancing your nighttime routine with indulgent self-care.

As for bed linen, sweet dreams are made of simple but considered sheets. Soft Egyptian cotton with a high thread count (400 or above) is the benchmark to aim for. Set up your bed for quality sleep: plump up the pillows, drape the duvet so it's just right and add a pair of scatter cushions. A hotel-worthy bedscape looks and feels irresistible, filled with the promise of a restorative night's slumber. Bedtime at home has never felt so good.

A TOUCH OF OPULENCE

OVERNIGHT SENSATION

Silk Jacquard Stripe Pyjama Set, £220

SOFT FOCUS

Cosy Stitch Detail Hoodie, £98

FOLLOW THE THREAD

Savoy Oxford Pillow Case, from £28

SCENT OF OCCASION

Kyoto Oud Luxury Double-Wick Candle, £35

Explore the collection in store and online at thewhitecompany.com

THE WHITE COMPANY
LONDON

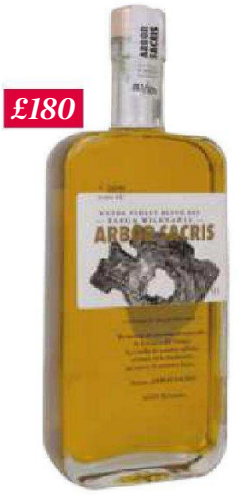
Glug! THE NEW STATUS GIFT IS HAUTE OLIVE OIL

Would you pay £180? Hannah Evans chooses the bottles to impress

A L'Olivier Huile d'Olive Vierge Extra, 500ml *Très chic!* Made by a family-run company that's more than 200 years old, this pretty stone bottle is filled with French olive oil. Naturally sweet with a mild flavour, it contains a dash of basil extract. *£37, fenwick.co.uk*

Yiayia and Friends Supreme Quality Greek Product, 500ml One to eye up this Christmas: extra virgin oil made from handpicked olives grown on the island of Crete, and packaged in this fun, distinctive bottle. *Yamas! £37, harveynichols.com*

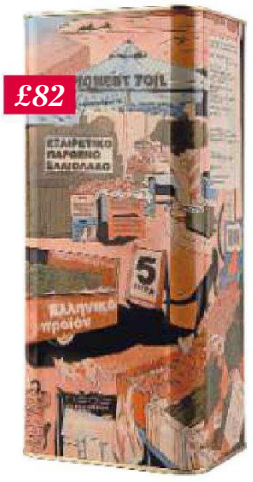
José Pizarro Spanish Extra Virgin Olive Oil, 500ml Everyone's favourite Spanish chef has brought out his own line of oil made from Manzanilla cacereña olives. It's great for dressing charcuterie or frying tortillas. *£15, shop.josepizarro.com*



Arbor Sacris, 250ml Only olives grown on ancient trees that are at least 1.3 metres tall are picked by hand to make this Spanish extra virgin olive oil. Savour it. This very special oil is for dressings, sauces or simply dipping. *£180, harrods.com*

Lemon Olive Oil, 100ml Beautifully scented and flavoured with citrus, bergamot and petitgrain, this extra virgin oil is made from Spanish olives including the rare Morisca variety, and comes in a hand-blown bottle. *£150, perfumerh.com*

Gonnelli 1585 Olio Extravergine Di Oliva, 500ml Forget extra virgin olive oil – this Italian blend is "grand cru", which means it's ultra premium extra virgin, darling. The chunky glass bottle makes it look like perfume. *£62.55, theoliveboffin.com*



Honest Toil, 5L A chef's dream: a super-sized tin of peppery extra virgin Greek olive oil to see them through the rest of the year. This oil is unfiltered, giving it a rich, opaque green colour and soupy thickness. *£82, souschef.co.uk*

Centonze, 500ml Made from Nocellara del Belice olives grown in Sicily, this limited-edition oil is dense, intensely green and has a fully rounded flavour with a spicy finish. Not to mention the beautiful bottle. *£58.50, theoliveboffin.com*

Terre Di San Vito Olio Extravergine Di Oliva, 475ml Hand-harvested Puglian olive oil in a hand-painted apple-green terracotta jar. This will look lovely under the tree and then on your kitchen shelf in the weeks to come. *£39, terredisanvito.co.uk*

Fina La Barca, 500ml Oil you won't forget. This limited edition Spanish variety is smoked with oak wood in ancient barns for 15 days, giving it a soft, complex aroma. The smart bottle includes an oil pourer. *£30, vinegarshed.com* ➡

TOM JACKSON

TIMES Travel Partner

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IN FINLAND

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Spend four nights in Finnish Lapland, enjoying a relaxed search for the Northern Lights

Located in the heart of the small village of Inari, Wilderness Hotel Juutua beautifully combines traditional Lappish charm with modern comfort. It's the perfect place to relax and experience the authentic spirit of Finnish Lapland.

Set on the banks of the frozen Juutua River, the hotel's restaurant and lounge offer stunning views of snow-covered boulders and the winter landscape beyond. The kitchen serves exquisite dishes made from local, organic, and seasonal ingredients, and you'll enjoy two renowned tasting menus during your stay.

Your trip includes a selection of activities at a leisurely pace. You'll attend an Aurora Workshop to learn about the science behind the Northern Lights and how to photograph them. In the evenings, you'll head to one of the nearby Aurora Camps on Lake Inari, sitting by a crackling campfire while scanning the skies for the aurora.

You'll also enjoy a guided walk along the scenic riverbank and through snow-covered forests, as well as the chance to meet a traditional reindeer herder and their animals. After your day outdoors, unwind in the hotel's riverside sauna and private hot tub, taking in the stunning views of the frozen landscape.

During your free time, you can choose to add activities like dog sledding, ice fishing, or snowmobiling, or simply enjoy the peaceful surroundings. This holiday offers a perfect mix of adventure and relaxation, all set within the beauty of Finnish Lapland.

Price Includes

- Direct return flights with British Airways from London Gatwick. Business Class upgrades available.
- Return airport transfers to Ivalo
- Four nights' accommodation in an Arctic Room at Wilderness Hotel Juutua
- Fully qualified guides and instructors during activities
- Winter walk to Jäniskoski Rapids, Aurora Workshop, Reindeer Farm Visit, Aurora Camp, Private Sauna and Hot Tub Session
- Cold weather clothing for the duration of your stay
- 24/7 assistance from the UK based operations team and in destination support from local partners

What we love

A perfect blend of adventure and relaxation in the serene beauty of Finnish Lapland, with stunning aurora views, authentic Lappish experiences, and luxurious comfort at Wilderness Hotel Juutua

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HOW MUCH WOULD YOU SPEND ON OLIVE OIL?

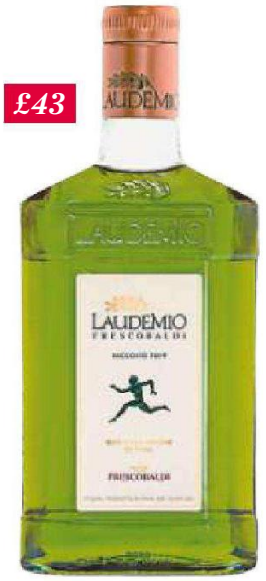
£38

Frantoio Franci Grand-Cru, 500ml Top-quality oil produced from the frantoio olives grown in just one small grove in the hills of Montenero d'Orcia, Tuscany. Serve with soups, red meats or fresh cheeses. *£38, artisan oliveoilcompany.co.uk*

£65

River Cafe, 750ml Your guests might not have been to the River Cafe (poor them) but at least you can treat them to the restaurant's own oil, made from olives grown on the Fèlsina Berardenga estate in the Chianti region. *£65, shoptherivercafe.co.uk*

£43

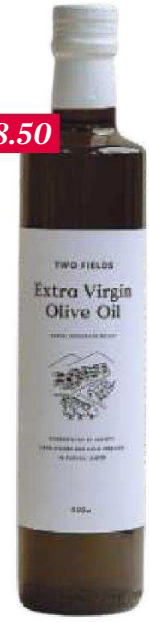


Laudemio Frescobaldi, 500ml Often referred to as one of the best oils in the world, this emerald green Tuscan oil has a complex flavour. It's aromatic with a hint of basil and will be the ultimate status symbol on your pantry shelf. *£43, fenwick.co.uk*

£38

Xylo Greek Olive Oil, 750ml There is a lot of brag about this oil. It's extra virgin, organic, high in healthy polyphenols and is from a single source in Zakynthos. The koroneiki olives were picked and pressed just last month. *£38, xyloporta.co.uk*

£18.50



Two Fields Extra Virgin Olive Oil, 500ml Small-batch Greek oil made using regenerative farming practices. A light and fruity choice that is guaranteed to keep you off the naughty list this Christmas. *£18.50, twofieldszakros.com*

£33

Château Léoube Huile d'Olive Vierge Extra, 500ml Made from a blend of French and Italian olives for an exceptionally fresh finish, this premium extra virgin oil is perfect for all your drizzling, dipping and dressing needs. *£33, daylesford.com*

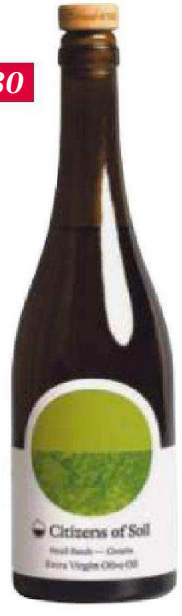
£25.50

Zaytoun Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil, 750ml Fair trade oil made with Palestinian grapes grown on stone terraces on the hillsides of the West Bank. This cold-pressed organic oil has a lively, peppery flavour. *£25.50, ethicalsuperstore.com*

£64

Manni 2023 Grand Cru gift set, 100ml x 2 Raise eyebrows at your next dinner party with these mini bottles of Tuscan oil. The *Per Me* bottle is robust and pairs with red meat; *Per Mio Figlio* is more delicate, for fish or pasta. *£64, mannioil.com*

£30



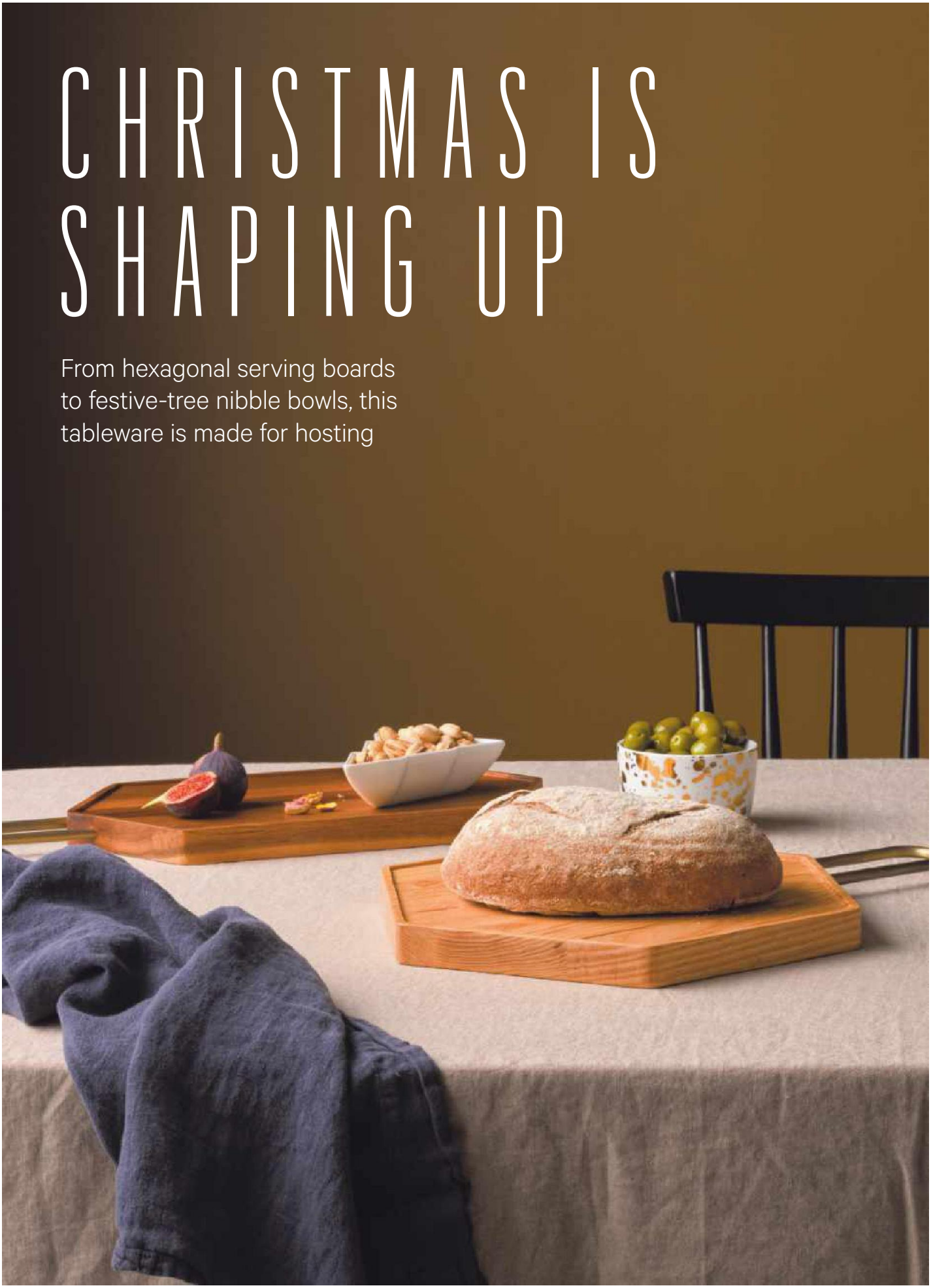
Citizens of Soil, 375ml For the past eight years, Istria in northern Croatia has been ranked as the best olive oil producing region in the world. This comes from an award-winning producer with a 10-hectare plot; Gordon Ramsay is a fan. *£30, souschef.co.uk*

£65

Marqués de Valdueza Extra Virgin Olive Oil, 1.5L Nothing says luxury quite like a magnum. This one contains some of the very best Spanish olive oil, produced in Extremadura by the world-famous Valdueza farmers. *£65, fortnumandmason.com* ■

CHRISTMAS IS SHAPING UP

From hexagonal serving boards to festive-tree nibble bowls, this tableware is made for hosting



1. Add instant sophistication with inky ombre flutes
Set of four stem champagne glasses, £17

2. Bring a golden sheen to the table with this splattered platter
Habitat 60 Gold Edit Jackson porcelain serving platter, £12

3. The organic shapes of the Scion dinnerware range have curve appeal
Twelve-piece stoneware set, £45

4. A beautifully crafted wooden board perfect for creating tablescapes
Habitat 60 block ash wood chopping board, £22

Christmas is nearly here and the cupboards are stacked with mince pies, hors d'oeuvres, puddings, snacks and canapés, plus the odd bottle of something fizzy in the fridge for entertaining. Whether you're preparing for a slew of guests or just want everything to be extra special for the family, Habitat has all you need to set the table to perfection.

A full complement of glasses makes life so much easier when there's a flow of visitors, and having the right vessels for the right drinks earns instant hosting points. Fill the kitchen shelves with elegant champagne flutes, tumblers and martini glasses – Habitat's matching ombre blue glassware is a sophisticated touch – and be the bartender du jour.

With the glassware covered, set your sights on ways to serve nibbles. A scattering of super cute Christmas-tree dishes (pictured left) will do the trick – lay out these little treat stations about the place and raise plenty of smiles.

For buffets and sit-down meals, beautiful serving dishes with subtle gold accents will bring the table to life. Few will make an aesthetic splash like Habitat's gold "splatterware" dish, commissioned to celebrate 60 years of the brand's leading British design. The gold splatters, inspired by traditional southern European ceramics, give the table a playful, glitzy feel.

If stylish dinnerware is your thing, Habitat's collaboration with fellow British brand Scion will impress. Their 12-piece stoneware dinner set has an organic feel with irregular pebble-shaped dishes and bowls – ideal for presenting meals in a fresh way. This crockery – the perfect look for a contemporary Christmas table – will serve you well all year long.

The hot trend? Grazing platters loaded with cheese, figs, grapes and canapés

And finally, the secret weapon for seasoned entertainers is a cool-looking chopping board – or several. Boards are the catering trend of the moment – they serve brilliantly as grazing platters: load up wooden trays with cheese, figs and grapes or crowd them with delicious canapés. It's easy-peasy and provides the ultimate picking feast.

Habitat's stylish block ash chopping board, designed in house by David Hutcheson, was created with tablescaping in mind and has a practical handle that makes it convenient for carrying and hanging when not in use.

Choose the flat side for chopping or the side with the exterior ridge to present food, and keep crumbs and oozing cheeses contained. The hexagonal shape allows you to tessellate multiple boards together, creating an eye-catching display that guests will love.

However you plan to celebrate this year, the food and drink will be elevated with Habitat's dinnerware. From elegant glasses to dishes with a golden touch, it's just a matter of laying the table and watching guests' faces light up.

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TOM JACKSON, DAVE WATTS

Gary Lineker said nothing about Match of the Day at lunch. 'You didn't ask,' he texted later. It's true. I do talk mainly about me

Osip, Somerset

I heard about Osip 2.0 without ever really being aware of Osip 1.0. Just like I never got an iPhone until about number 6 or 7. It's not about being there from the start, it's about getting there eventually. And anyway, I've known the chef, Merlin Labron-Johnson, since he was a baby. For he was the 23-year-old cook at Portland in London that I called "a perfect restaurant" when it opened in 2015.

I guess he carried on doing that for a while (winning a Michelin star nine months later), then moved to Bruton in Somerset to open Osip, garnered fresh plaudits there with his locally focused, plant-heavy menu, 85 per cent sourced from his own organic shareholding, then outgrew that (it was a bijou high-street spot, by all accounts) and moved to this larger site a couple of miles out of town, to go hard at getting that second star.

It's a heavily renovated old 18th-century inn on the edge of a pine forest, the old brick white-washed to an ethereal, ghost-like presence in the misty countryside, walls blown out at the back and then glassed to give wild green perspectives from the supermodern show kitchen, everything stripped back and bare and white, but cosy too, with log fires, flowers and pretty, posh young wait staff bustling about in charmingly ill-fitting whites in a way that simply screams "World's 50 Best".

I took with me my old friend Jonathan Downey because he knows them here and could get us a table, Ed Woodward because he doesn't run Man Utd any more and always brings great wine (some of it not grown by him at his winery in the Douro) and Gary Lineker, obviously. It was just before the announcement of his departure from *Match of the Day* and when I texted to say, "You kept that quiet at lunch," he pinged back, "You didn't ask." It's true; I do tend to talk mainly about me.

We decided against a "drink before we go through" because, appealing though the set-up was, that's all a bit 1970s suburban for me. So instead we handed over some bottles to be opened (there was a 2000 Palmer, a Lynch-Bages from the same year, and a gorgeous bottle of as yet unnamed white from Ed's place, Quinta da Pedra Alta) and headed to a table with a view of the kitchen and of wide green fields beyond.

I started with a confit tomato martini that was a compelling improvement upon a traditional "dirty", with a real, sundried meatiness to it. The perfect cocktail to blast away a morning train ride and to sip against the first thing out of the kitchen, a "Westcombe

red gougère", served on a pure white alabaster (or alabaster-adjacent) plinth, with a lid of fermented carrot, that was deeply, toastedly cheesy, like a rarebit. And also a band of pure white lardo rolled around a caramelised walnut.

It's the long, ever changing £125 set menu that we chose (there is also a shorter, cheaper one at lunchtime), which "evolves daily and is an expression of the Somerset landscape, using produce grown by the team on our nearby farm".

Which meant, next up, a root vegetable tea, strong and beefy and full of heady parsnip florals with globules on top of what the menu calls "burnt garlic oil". I am not one to get into the technical nitty-gritty of each dish, but I'm passing that on so you know.

Then a curl of Baby Gem lettuce (I'm all about Baby Gem these days. I eat four or five a day, whole, dipped in vinaigrette or tarama, for my fibre – they go through you like a plunger) holding a sliver of smoked eel and cubes of hay-baked apple, to stand, perhaps, for apple-bobbing, Guy Fawkes and the harvest festival. And with them on their plinth were two crunchy purple fingers of daikon.

On my next plinth (someday your plinth will come) was a riot of brown: a Jerusalem artichoke on a swirl of black garlic puree under a shower of togarashi. "This is always the highlight for me," said Downey, who has been here a few times already and is a huge cheerleader not only for Osip but for young British chefs, high ambition and massive tasting menus generally. And sure enough, the artichoke, steamed and then fried in tempura batter to maximise the creamy interior and crunchy skin that underpins all great roasted artichokes, is a fantastic bit of eating.

Then there was a pale pink beetroot taco, which picked up like a thing of flesh and had a lovely, earthy taste filled with the tang of crème fraîche, chewy beetroot (fruity like raisins) and, I think, grated venison heart. Not much meat so far, you'll notice, beyond a small ribbon of cured fat, a grating of heart, a sliver of eel, the base of a stock.

And none at all in a bright, pale, translucent, vertical salad of Tokyo turnips, smoked almond and pear, or in the next course, a foaming, savoury balm of wet polenta, roasted corn and pied de mouton mushrooms. The perfect answer on an autumn morning to fizzing but undeniably cold pears and turnips.

Then more heat and salt and sweetness with a lobster claw stacked on a scallop, pumpkin foam, satay sauce, very French, very haute. We are getting deep into a long lunch in the countryside now, with good friends and great wine – the specifics will be increasingly blurred. If you want to hear from a guy who goes alone with a pen in his top pocket and stays on the water, *The Good Food Guide* was here not long before me and you'll find its write-up online.

There was fermented potato brioche, glazed in lamb fat, and my photo of it suggests it was seasoned with more of the grated venison heart, although it could have been lamb heart. Hearts were grated more than once that afternoon, as I recall.

The thing most like a main course was what I have on my menu as "Lamb merguez, ewe's milk" but my (blurry) photo shows little that is milky. There was the section of mildly spiced lamb sausage, a very rare grilled loin of winter lamb, its fatty edge charred, and a small cube of what I think was slow-roasted shoulder.

And then there was a pie. That was extra. It was a game pithivier and when I saw it on the menu I remembered suddenly the game pithivier I had at Portland years ago, on that occasion a very rare breast of mallard surrounded by confit pigeon, "in glorious pastry – burnished gold outside, rich and floppy within... a perfect pie", so we ordered a couple of those.

They arrived together – each a meal for two in itself – two shimmering amber parcels, funnelled for the felicitous egress of steam, on a silver platter with a branch of pine, and were served sliced, a very rare loin of venison wrapped in thinly sliced breast of wild quail, with some green leaves (spinach?) for clarity and colour, a fruity sauce, roasted quail legs served on the side and a long pull on the Château Palmer. Or was it the Lynch-Bages?

Three or four puddings: autumn truffle on a maltloaf, pumpkin sorbet, yuzushu, chocolate pear, nori macaron, meadowsweet madeleine... Lovely-sounding stuff... poetry almost... no idea at all whether I ate it. Not really a one for puddings. Top place, you can stay the night, wander the gardens, tour the kitchen, do it all again for dinner and then breakfast. Sadly, we had to get the train home. ■

Osip
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Service 9
Space 9
Score 9
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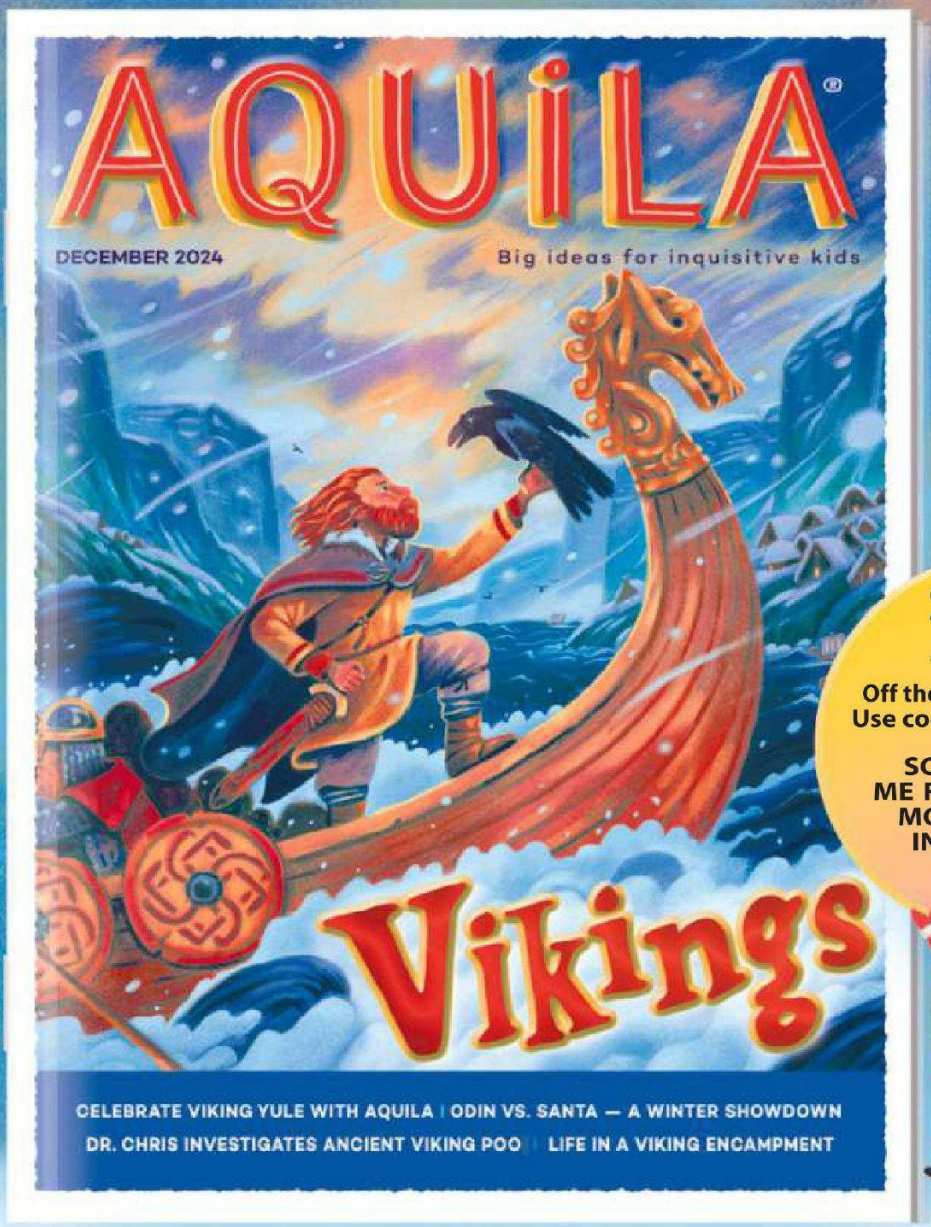

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Beta male
Robert Crampton

‘I’ve never known what to do with my little patch of lawn. Is now the time to build a bunker?’

DAN KENNEDY

My in-laws, Reg and Pauline, came to stay for a long weekend. On the Saturday, my wife Nicola and her mum went shopping, while me, Reg and Sam (his grandson, my son) went to the Imperial War Museum. So, no gender stereotyping in my house.

Reg, 86, did his national service with the RAF Regiment in Cyprus in the Fifties, where he worked chiefly as the company clerk, like Ewan McGregor in *Black Hawk Down*. “If any Eoka terrorists had got on the base,” Reg always says modestly, “I’d have chucked my typewriter at them.”

Joking apart, Reg was disappointed there wasn’t anything about the Cyprus conflict at the museum. Nor much about Korea, Kenya, Malaya, the Falklands or Northern Ireland. We chatted about it with one of the guides. Basically, emerged the consensus, “We’ve just had so many wars, it’s impossible to show them all in one building.”

The next day, prompted by the visit and also by more dire warnings from defence experts in the papers, and also by Storm Bert making everything feel a bit apocalyptic, I thought I’d better do some resilience planning. We are advised, as you know, to follow the Finnish model by getting in supplies to last 72 hours in the event of a breakdown in any or all of the utility, food, fuel or comms supplies. So I made a shopping list including bottled water, candles, batteries, tins of beans and a wind-up radio. I didn’t buy anything, but I felt much better and duly got on with the important business of larger scale doomsday fantasy prep.

We’re lucky, living in inner London, to have a garden. It’s a small square garden, about seven yards wide and long, but it’s got potential. In particular, there’s a circle of lawn, about 9ft in diameter, which we’ve never quite known what to do with. Sam and I once campaigned to dig it out as a wrestling arena – “The pit of pain, two go in, only one comes out!” – but as you can imagine, that plan didn’t get far. We’d both just watched the film *300*, and enjoyed the bit where Leonidas boots the enemy emissary into a deep hole while shouting, “This. Is. Sparta!”

Anyway, it struck me now, pacing around, that this soggy little disc of grass, moss, nettle and clay has got emergency bunker written all over it. Not just one bunker either, but a whole network of tunnels, as pioneered by William Lyttle, aka “The Mole Man of Hackney” (worth a Google), who burrowed far, wide and deep – as deep as the water table – under his house not far from mine over four decades, starting in the Sixties. I’ve always been into secret underground lairs – who isn’t? – and the urge to get busy with a spade there and then was hard to resist.

Well, not that hard. For one, I had conceived a similar plan 50 years earlier as a child in suburban Hull, getting as far as digging a 2ft hole in some scrubland behind our house. I got tired, it rained, the hole filled with water, that was that. And two: Nicola. I don’t think explaining that I’d dug up the garden out of an urge to protect her would have been acceptable.

I’ve got a friend who’s into dowsing. Not just dowsing for water, but dowsing for pretty much anything buried beneath the earth. He assures me there’s a fair chance of a stash of Nazi gold sitting in an old tunnel under my house. Earlier this year, he suggested splitting the cost of hiring ground-penetrating radar (about £500 each) just to check the gold was there, prior to excavation. I was up for it, but Nicola said no to that project too.

I decided to explore reinforcing the under-stairs cupboard instead. That’s where we keep the beans, after all, so it makes sense.

The doors and windows need fortifying too. Supply crisis = civil disorder = attempted home invasion + possible Zombie involvement…

I’ve seen too many films. I’ll settle for upgrading the first-aid kit we keep above the washing machine. A sensible start.

On the walk back from the museum to Waterloo, Reg had been in reflective mood, recalling being bombed out as a small boy in one of the raids on Hull, which became the most severely damaged British city during the Second World War. His first memory of his dad, Grandad Stan, was aged seven, meeting him off the train at Paragon station in 1945. Stan had been posted abroad for the entire duration of the war. “There’s not many people,” Reg likes to say, “who can remember when they first met their father.”

On the Tube, Sam sat between his dad and grandad. For a couple of stops he rested his head on my shoulder, while on Sam’s other side, Reg rested his head on his grandson’s shoulder.

It was a lovely moment. The woman opposite smiled indulgently. ■

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