

PERSPECTIVES

After a chaotic election, what will 2025 bring?

Columnists reflect on a year that included two attempts on Trump’s life. Plus, a thank you.

**ANITA CHABRIA AND
MARK Z. BARABAK**
REPORTING FROM
SACRAMENTO

How do you summarize — or make sense of — 2024? It’s been a year of upheaval, division, winners and losers. And perhaps most disturbingly, a year that has exposed fault lines in American democracy that at times seem too wide to cross.

Our columnists Anita Chabria and Mark Z. Barabak continue a tradition of closing out December with a little perspective and a dash of crystal-balling for what lies ahead.

As we enter 2025, here’s how they’re leaving behind the old and ushering in the new.

Chabria: The word I am hearing most as we head into the New Year is exhaustion. Many of us can’t even remember the big events of 2024 outside of a presidential campaign like no other. But we’ve had them: In March, the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore collapsed. The wars in Gaza and Ukraine continued, and a Syrian dictator was recently toppled. Taylor Swift finally stopped touring, and Sean “Diddy” Combs was arrested on sex trafficking charges. We even had a summer Olympics in Paris, which seems about 300 years ago.

But all of that was eclipsed by a presidential election that has left half of America cheering and half of America reeling; at the end of the day, the popular vote was nearly evenly split, with neither candidate reaching 50%. So much for a mandate.

If exhaustion is the word to close out 2024, I’m nominating “commitment” as the word for 2025. How committed are Republicans to implementing Trump’s campaign promises to fundamentally remake America by kicking out immigrants and implementing conservative social policies such as further restricting abortion access? And how committed and capable are Democrats of regrouping and opposing those plans?

What do you think? How are you feeling as the year ends?



RICK SCUTERI Associated Press

SOME VOTERS have said they like President-elect Donald Trump’s brash talk, which they see as posturing. To many, the main issue was bringing down inflation.

Barabak: I’m feeling both hunky and dory, but that’s because I don’t let things beyond my control — earthquakes, asteroids, crushingly disappointing election results — get me down. But this isn’t a self-help column, or a prescription for better (or impervious) living. So I’ll stick to our brief, which is assessing the year past and looking ahead.

If I were to choose a word for 2025, I suppose I’d go with “curious.” As in curious to see what 2025 brings with a president hellbent on disruption (war with Panama, anyone?), operating with, as you suggest, the most tenuous-to-nonexistent of mandates.

In my view, Trump was elected mainly to tame inflation — bringing down the oft-discussed price of eggs and bacon, for starters — and securing the country’s southern border with Mexico. We could search high and low and we’d probably find precisely zero people in America who voted for Trump because they wanted the U.S. to take control of Greenland.

I won’t deny there’s a deep-seated unhappiness with government and politicians, a widespread feeling the status quo isn’t working and an eagerness to see Washington — and Sacramento — shaken up. But randomized, unceasing chaos? We’ll see how that goes down. If you think the 2024 campaign was wild — a switcheroo of Democratic

nominees, two attempts on Trump’s life, too many weird campaign-trail moments (Hannibal Lecter! Arnold Palmer’s penis!) to possibly list here — well, buckle up.

Chabria: True words, Mark. We are in for a ride. As you and I have spoken about in the past, what’s best for America and democracy is giving our incoming president both respect and a chance. But I also think it’s critical that we remember that Trump has a history of lying and lawbreaking, as evidenced by both his criminal convictions and his loss in a sexual-abuse civil lawsuit to E. Jean Carroll.

His actions show us that he is not a man to be trusted. But we are in the strange days of rewriting recent history to soften the unpleasant parts, while also gearing up to repeat them.

For example, Trump’s once-and-future “border czar,” Thomas Homan, said he plans on not just bringing back policies that sepa-

rate families, but giving American-born children (and therefore citizens) of undocumented immigrants the painful option of being separated from parents or being deported with them.

Some Trump supporters have said they like his brash talk but believe it’s no more than posturing. This coming year will be revelatory on that front. Whether you trust Trump now or not, we’re about to find out if he’s all talk.

But it’s not just Trump. We’ve seen those around him, most notably Elon Musk, grab power and move swiftly to cram their self-serving agendas down our throat.

Barabak: A candidate elected as the populist tribune of the aggrieved working class surrounds himself with a team of billionaires and names foxes to guard government henhouses and dismantle programs serving many of those very same hard-

pressed voters.

Only in America! But I don’t want to be too much of a churl.

For years, the legendary Washington Post political cartoonist Herbert Block, aka Herblock, drew Richard Nixon with a menacing 5 o’clock shadow. After Nixon was elected president in 1968, Herblock drew a freshly shorn Nixon, on the theory that every new president deserves “a clean shave.” (I’m not *that* old, folks. I just read a lot of history. And assorted political trivia.)

So there is something sporting and noble about a fresh start and leaving bygones in the past, as you suggest.

That said, we agree there’s a danger in too much memory-holing — especially if you’re expecting an emboldened 78-year-old twice-impeached, feloniously convicted leopard to suddenly change spots. Let’s hope for the best, but not be delusional or too quick with the whitewash. We saw how Nixon’s presidency turned out.

On a more cheerful note, you were quite taken with Beyoncé’s NFL halftime performance at the Ravens-Texans Christmas showdown.

Chabria: As were we all! Beyoncé is queen of her craft, and reminded us all what fun looks and sounds like. We can all use a dose of that right now.

But Beyoncé is also a reminder about the importance of knowing yourself and standing your ground. Of all the many forgotten history lessons of recent years, hers is one of the few with a happy ending.

In 2016, after she appeared on the Country Music Assn. Awards, there was backlash to her supposedly wading outside her

genre and into the boot-stomping, flag-waving — very white — world of country.

Flash-forward to her recent NFL appearance and the release of her country album, “Act II: Cowboy Carter,” and it’s quite clear, she persisted.

Sometimes, resisting is simply persisting, one day at a time.

So with that in mind, and with journalism under attack, I’ll end this year with a thank you. To all the readers who have stuck with Mark and me through this election, I appreciate your willingness to hear our perspectives. I won’t speak for Mark, but for myself, I generally don’t care about Republican or Democrat, but I do care about writing with compassion and truth.

So whatever comes next, my New Year’s resolution is to persist in staying true to those core principles. Any final thoughts from you, Mark?

Barabak: Just a question: Will you think less of me as a colleague and human being if I confess I hadn’t the slightest clue about Beyoncé’s halftime performance until you mentioned it? I guess I was too deeply burrowed in my history books, absorbing political trivia.

But, like you, I want to thank our readers for sticking with us and echo that sentiment as regards compassion and truth.

I also hope we managed to inform and occasionally entertain you along the way. And a special thanks to the paid subscribers among you, for helping keep the lights on.

We’d both like to wish each and every one of you — Democrat, Republican, libertarian, vegetarian — a happy, healthy and prosperous New Year.

We’ll see you in 2025.

Trump wants to handle TikTok issue himself

President-elect argues the Supreme Court should stand aside as a U.S. shutdown of the platform looms.

By DAVID G. SAVAGE



MATT SLOCUM Associated Press

THE TikTok app, which faces a possible U.S. shutdown on Jan. 19, has 170 million users in this country.

federal regulations, they are wary of overturning an act of Congress, particularly one that is based on threats to national security.

The U.S. appeals court in Washington cited national security when it upheld the law earlier this month. In a 3-0 decision, the judges said the law did not target speech or expression. Rather, lawmakers were convinced the Chinese parent company could gather personal data on millions of Americans, the judges said.

If the law took effect on Jan. 19, Apple, Oracle and other U.S. companies could have faced large civil fines if they continued to work with TikTok.

Trump’s attorney D. John Sauer filed a friend-of-the-court brief that differed in tone and substance from all the others. Rather than weigh in on the 1st Amendment question the justices had agreed to decide, he explained why Trump was better-suited to decide it.

“Through his historic victory on November 5, 2024, President Trump received a powerful electoral mandate from American voters to protect the free-speech rights of all Americans — including the 170 million Americans who use TikTok,” he wrote. “Moreover, President Trump is one of the most powerful, prolific, and influential users of social media in history.”

Noting that Trump has

14.7 million followers on TikTok, Sauer argued that the president-elect is well-positioned “to evaluate TikTok’s importance as a unique medium for freedom of expression, including core political speech.”

He also wrote that as the founder of another social-media platform, Truth Social, Trump has “an in-depth perspective on the extraordinary government power attempted to be exercised in this case — the power of the federal government to effectively shut down a social-media platform favored by tens of millions of Americans.”

“In light of these interests — including, most importantly, his overarching responsibility for the United States’ national security and foreign policy — President Trump opposes banning TikTok in the United States at this juncture, and seeks the ability to resolve the issues at hand through political means once he takes office.”

In 2020, Trump had voiced alarm over TikTok because of its Chinese ownership. Lawmakers later heard classified briefings that convinced them the foreign ownership posed a danger.

But by the time the law won approval, Trump had switched sides. He said he believed TikTok helped him win the support of young voters.

“TikTok had an impact, so we’re taking a look at it,” he told reporters two weeks ago. “I have a little warm spot in my heart.”

A year ago, his attorney Sauer drew criticism from some legal experts for boldly asserting that Trump as a former president had an absolute immunity from criminal charges for his official acts while in office.

But in July, he won a 6-3 ruling from the Supreme Court that gave him and Trump what he had sought.

Sauer is now set to represent Trump and his administration before the Supreme Court as U.S. solicitor general.

He did not say precisely what the court should do now, only that it “should consider staying the statutory deadline to grant more breathing space” to the incoming administration and that one provision in the law allowed for a 90-day extension before it took effect.

The court asked for responses to the competing briefs by next Friday. It scheduled two hours of argument for Jan. 10.

It’s not certain the justices will readily comply with Trump’s request.

Two weeks ago, former Trump attorney Noel Francisco filed an appeal on TikTok’s behalf urging the justices to put the law on hold for a brief period. But the justices brushed aside that suggestion and said they would decide whether divestiture law violated the 1st Amendment.

“I am skeptical Trump’s intervention will make a difference,” said Alan Rosenztein, a University of Minnesota law professor who has written about the pending law.

He noted that the Supreme Court denied TikTok’s request to stay the law because it did not think TikTok could meet the requirements for a stay: a reasonable chance of winning on the merits.

“Trump’s argument does not change that,” he said. “It may be bad luck for TikTok (and Trump) that the law goes into effect the day before inauguration, but such is life.”

How to contact us

(800) LA TIMES

Home Delivery and Membership Program

For questions about delivery, billing and vacation holds, or for information about our Membership program, please contact us at (213) 283-2274 or customerservices@latimes.com. You can also manage your account at myaccount.latimes.com.

Letters to the Editor

Want to write a letter to be published in the paper and online? E-mail letters@latimes.com. For submission guidelines, see latimes.com/letters.

Readers' Representative

If you believe we have made an error, or you have questions about our journalistic standards and practices, our readers' representative can be reached at readers.representative@latimes.com, (877) 554-4000 or online at latimes.com/readersrep.

Advertising

For print and online advertising information, go to

latimes.com/mediakit or call (213) 237-6176.

Reprint Requests

For the rights to use articles, photos, graphics and page reproductions, e-mail reprint@latimes.com or call (213) 237-4565.

Times In Education

To get the digital Los Angeles Times at no cost (along with our newspaper-based teaching materials), contact us at latimes.com/tie, or email Heidi.stauder@latimes.com

The Newsroom

Know something important we should cover? Send a secure tip at latimes.com/tips. To send a press release go to the newsroom directory at latimes.com/staff.

Media Relations

For outside media requests and inquiries, e-mail commsdept@latimes.com.

L.A. Times Store

Search archives, merchandise and front pages at latimes.com/store.

Los Angeles Times

A California Times Publication
Founded Dec. 4, 1881
Vol. CXLIV No. 26

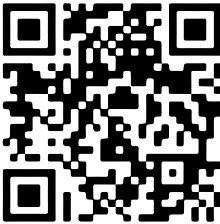
LOS ANGELES TIMES (ISSN 0458-3035) is published by the Los Angeles Times, 2300 E. Imperial Highway, El Segundo, CA 90245. Periodicals postage is paid at Los Angeles, CA, and additional cities. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to the above address.

Home Delivery Subscription Rates (all rates include applicable CA sales taxes and apply to most areas)

Print + unlimited digital rates:
Seven-day \$28/week, \$1,456 annually.
Thursday-Sunday \$16/week, \$832 annually.
Thursday & Sunday \$10/week, \$520 annually.
Saturday & Sunday \$9/week, \$468 annually.
Sunday \$8.50/week, \$442 annually.
Monday-Saturday \$18/week, \$936 annually (also includes Sundays, except 3/31, 5/26, 9/1, and 10/13).
Monday-Friday \$16/week, \$832 annually.



Printed with soy-based ink on recycled newsprint from wood byproducts.



Download the app.
Discover more.

Los Angeles Times

THE WORLD

Putin apologizes over crash of Azerbaijani plane

But the Russian leader does not acknowledge responsibility after the disaster in Kazakhstan that killed 38 people.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday apologized to his Azerbaijani counterpart for what he called a “tragic incident” following the crash of an Azerbaijani airliner in Kazakhstan that killed 38 people, but stopped short of acknowledging that Moscow was responsible.

Putin’s apology came as allegations mounted that the plane had been shot down by Russian air defenses attempting to deflect a Ukrainian drone strike near Grozny, the regional capital of the Russian republic of Chechnya.

An official Kremlin statement issued Saturday said that air defense systems were firing near Grozny airport as the airliner “repeatedly” attempted to land there on Wednesday. It did not explicitly say one of these hit the plane.

The statement said Putin apologized to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev “for the fact that the tragic incident occurred in Russian airspace.”

Russia has launched a criminal probe into the incident, and Azerbaijani state prosecutors have arrived in Grozny to participate. The Kremlin also said that “relevant services” from Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are jointly investigating the



Administration of Mangystau Region

IN A PHOTOGRAPH taken from a video released by the administration of Mangystau region, part of Azerbaijan Airlines’ Embraer 190 lies on the ground near the airport of Aktau, Kazakhstan, on Thursday.

crash site near the city of Aktau in Kazakhstan.

The plane was flying from Azerbaijan’s capital, Baku, to Grozny when it turned toward Kazakhstan, hundreds of miles across the Caspian Sea from its intended destination, and crashed while making an attempt to land. There were 29 survivors.

According to a readout of the call provided by Aliyev’s press office, the Azerbaijani president told Putin that the plane was subject to “external physical and technical interference,” although he also stopped short of blaming Russian air defenses.

Aliyev noted that the plane had multiple holes in its fuselage and that the occupants had sustained injuries “due to foreign particles penetrating the cabin mid-flight.”

He said that a team of international experts had begun probing the incident at Azerbaijan’s initiative but provided no details. Earlier last week, the Azerbaijani Prosecutor General’s office confirmed that investigators from Azerbaijan are working in Grozny.

On Friday, a U.S. official and an Azerbaijani minister made separate statements blaming the crash on an ex-

ternal weapon, echoing those made by aviation experts who blamed the crash on Russian air defense systems responding to a Ukrainian attack.

President Biden, responding on Saturday to a reporter asking whether he thought Putin should take responsibility for the crash, said: “Apparently he did but I haven’t spoken to him.”

Passengers and crew who survived the crash told Azerbaijani media that they heard loud noises on the aircraft as it was circling over Grozny.

Dmitry Yadrov, head of Russia’s civil aviation au-

thority Rosaviatsia, said Friday that as the plane was preparing to land in Grozny in deep fog, Ukrainian drones were targeting the city, prompting authorities to close the area to air traffic.

Yadrov said that after the captain made two unsuccessful attempts to land, he was offered other airports but decided to fly to Aktau.

Earlier in the week, Rosaviatsia had cited unspecified early evidence as showing that a bird strike led to an emergency on board.

In the days following the crash, Azerbaijan Airlines blamed “physical and tech-

nical interference” and announced the suspension of flights to several Russian airports. It didn’t say where the interference came from or provide any further details.

If proven that the plane crashed after being hit by Russian fire, it would be the second deadly civil aviation accident linked to fighting in Ukraine. Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was downed with a Russian surface-to-air missile, killing all 298 people aboard, as it flew over the area in eastern Ukraine controlled by Moscow-backed separatists in 2014.

Russia has denied responsibility, but a Dutch court in 2022 convicted two Russians and a pro-Russia Ukrainian man for their role in downing the plane with an air defense system brought into Ukraine from a Russian military base.

After Wednesday’s suspension of flights from Baku to Grozny and nearby Makhachkala, Azerbaijan Airlines announced Friday that it would also halt service to eight more Russian cities.

Several other airlines have made similar announcements since the crash. Kazakhstan’s Qazaq Air on Friday said it would stop flying from Astana to the Russian city of Yekaterinburg in the Ural Mountains for a month.

Turkmenistan Airlines, the Central Asian country’s flagship carrier, on Saturday halted flights to Moscow for at least a month, citing safety concerns. Israel’s El Al carrier recently suspended service from Tel Aviv to the Russian capital, citing “developments in Russia’s airspace.”

Bloodied Ukrainian troops risk losing more hard-won land in Kursk

The awe of their gains gives way to weariness as they come to terms with losses on front lines in border region.

By SAMYA KULLAB

KYIV, Ukraine — Five months after their shock offensive into Russia, Ukrainian troops are bloodied and demoralized by the rising risk of defeat in Kursk, a region some want to hold at all costs while others question the value of having gone in at all.

Battles are so intense that some Ukrainian commanders can’t evacuate the dead. Communication lags and poorly timed tactics have cost lives, and troops have little way to counterattack, seven front-line soldiers and commanders said on condition of anonymity so they could discuss sensitive operations.

Since being caught unaware by the lightning Ukrainian incursion, Russia has amassed more than 50,000 troops in the region, including some from its ally North Korea. Precise num-



EVGENIY MALOLETKA Associated Press

UKRAINIANS mourn a soldier killed in Kursk. Battles are so intense there some dead are abandoned.

bers are hard to obtain, but Moscow’s counterattack has killed and wounded thousands, and the overstretched Ukrainians have lost more than 40% of the 380 square miles of Kursk they seized in August.

Russia holds a fifth of Ukraine, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has hinted that he hopes controlling Kursk will help force Moscow to negotiate an end to the war, which started with a full-scale Russian invasion nearly three years ago.

But five Ukrainian and Western officials in Kyiv who

spoke on condition of anonymity to freely discuss sensitive military matters said they fear gambling on Kursk will weaken the whole 621-mile front line, and Ukraine is losing precious ground in the east.

“We have, as they say, hit a hornets’ nest,” said Stepan Lutsiv, a major in the 95th Airborne Assault Brigade. “We have stirred up another hot spot.”

Border raid turns into an occupation

Army chief Oleksandr Syrskyi has said that

Ukraine moved into Russia out of the belief that Russia was about to launch a new attack on northeast Ukraine.

It began on Aug. 5 with an order to leave Ukraine’s Sumy region for what officials thought would be a nine-day raid to stun the enemy.

It became an occupation that Ukrainians welcomed as their smaller country gained leverage and embarrassed Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Gathering his men, one company commander told them: “We’re making history; the whole world will know about us because this hasn’t been done since World War II.

Privately, he was less certain. “It seemed crazy,” he said. “I didn’t understand why.”

Shocked by the success achieved largely because the Russians were caught by surprise, the Ukrainians were ordered to advance beyond the original mission to the town of Korenevo, 16 miles into Russia. That was one of the first places where Russian troops counterattacked.

By early November the Russians began regaining

territory rapidly. Once in awe of what they accomplished, troops’ opinions are now shifting as they come to terms with losses. The company commander said half of his troops were dead or wounded.

Some front-line commanders said conditions are tough, morale is low and troops are questioning command decisions, even the very purpose of occupying Kursk.

Another commander said that some orders his men have received don’t reflect reality, because of delays in communication. Delays occur especially when territory is lost to Russian troops, he said.

“They don’t understand where our side is, where the enemy is, what’s under our control, and what isn’t,” he said. “They don’t understand the operational situation, we so act at our own discretion.”

One platoon commander said higher-ups have repeatedly turned down his requests to change his unit’s defensive position because he knows his men can’t hold the line.

“Those people who stand until the end are ending up MIA,” he said.

He said he also knows of at least 20 Ukrainian soldiers whose bodies had been abandoned over the last four months because the battles were too intense to evacuate them without more casualties.

No option to retreat as Russia pushes on

Ukrainian soldiers said they were not prepared for the aggressive Russian response in Kursk and cannot counterattack or pull back.

“There’s no other option,” said one drone unit commander. “We’ll fight here because if we just pull back to our borders, they won’t stop; they’ll keep advancing.”

Ukraine’s General Staff told the Associated Press in a written response to questions that Ukrainian combat units are inflicting losses to Russian personnel and military equipment on a daily basis, and are provided with “everything necessary” to carry out combat duties.

“Troops are managed in accordance to situational awareness and operational information, taking into the account the operational situation in areas where tasks are performed,” the response said.

Ukrainian troops said that American longer-range weapons have slowed the Russian advance and that North Korean soldiers who joined the fighting last month are easy targets for drones and artillery because they lack combat discipline and often move in large groups in the open.

On Monday, Zelensky said 3,000 North Korean soldiers had been killed and wounded. But North Korean troops appear to be learning from mistakes, Ukrainian soldiers added, by becoming more adept at camouflaging near forested lines.

Until recently, the area was under Ukraine’s control. Last week, part of it was lost to Russian forces, and Ukrainian troops fear they will reach a crucial logistics route.

Eying front-line losses in the eastern region known as the Donbas — where Russia is closing on a crucial supply hub — some soldiers are more vocal about whether Kursk has been worth it.

“All the military can think about now is that Donbas has simply been sold,” the platoon commander said. “At what price?”

Kullab writes for the Associated Press.

Syria suspends consular services at its embassy in Lebanon

By ABBY SEWELL

BEIRUT — Syria’s embassy in Lebanon suspended consular services Saturday, a day after two relatives of deposed Syrian President Bashar Assad were arrested at the Beirut airport with allegedly forged passports.

Lebanese authorities also handed over dozens of Syrians — including former officers in the Syrian army under Assad — to the new Syrian government after they were caught illegally entering Lebanon, a war monitor and Lebanese officials said.

The embassy announced on its Facebook page that consular work was suspended “until further notice” at the order of the Syrian foreign ministry. The announcement did not give a reason for the suspension.

But two Lebanese security officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly, said

the suspension was ordered because the passports belonging to Assad’s relatives — the wife and daughter of one of his cousins — were believed to have been forged at the embassy.

Assad’s uncle, Rifaat Assad — who has been indicted in Switzerland on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity — had flown out the day before on his real passport and was not stopped, the officials said.

The U.K.-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported Saturday that 70 Syrians, including former army officers, were handed over by a Lebanese security delegation to the security forces of the new Syrian government, led by the former insurgent group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS. Three Lebanese judicial officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed the report.

Regional countries have been quick to establish ties with Syria’s new rulers. Delegations from Libya and

Bahrain arrived in Damascus on Saturday on official visits.

HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has largely succeeded in calming fears within and outside Syria that his group would unleash collective punishment against communities that supported Assad or attempt to impose strict Islamic law on the country’s religious minorities.

However, in recent days, sporadic clashes have broken out between the HTS-led security forces and pro-Assad armed groups. The country’s new security forces have launched a series of raids targeting officials affiliated with Assad and have set up checkpoints to search for weapons in areas with significant populations of the Alawite religious minority to which the former president belongs.

There have also been ongoing tensions and clashes in northeastern Syria between Kurdish-led forces

and armed groups backed by Turkey.

Ankara sees the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces — a key U.S. ally in the fight against the Islamic State group — as an affiliate of its sworn enemy, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, which it classifies as a terrorist organization.

The U.S. State Department said Saturday that Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken had spoken with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to “discuss the latest developments in Syria.”

“Secretary Blinken emphasized the need to support a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process that upholds human rights and prioritizes an inclusive and representative government,” the statement said, adding that they “also discussed the shared goal of preventing terrorism from endangering the security” of Turkey and Syria.

On Saturday, hundreds of protesters convened by Kurdish women’s groups

participated in a demonstration in the northeastern city of Hasaka to demand women’s rights in the new Syria.

Perishan Ramadan, a participant from Hasaka, said the new government “is worse than Bashar” and that its leaders are Islamist extremists who “don’t accept any role for women.”

Although the country’s new leaders have not attempted to impose Islamic dress or other conventions, it remains to be seen what role women will have in the new order and whether they will hold political or government positions.

“Women must be present in the new constitution for Syria,” said Rihan Loqo, spokeswoman for the Kongra Star women’s organization. “... Women’s rights should not be ignored.”

Sewell writes for the Associated Press. AP writers Hogir Abdo in Hasaka, Syria, and Ellen Knickmeyer in Washington contributed to this report.

THE NATION

Abortions up in U.S.; women turn to pills, travel

Even with bans in most states controlled by Republicans, the number of people obtaining them grew.

By Geoff Mulvihill and Kevin S. Vineys

Abortion has become slightly more common despite bans or deep restrictions in most Republican-controlled states, and the legal and political fights over its future are not over.

It's now been two and a half years since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe vs. Wade and opened the door for states to implement bans.

The policies and their effect have been in flux ever since the ruling in Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health Organization.

Here's a look at data on where things stand:

Abortions are slightly more common now than before Dobbs.

Overturning Roe and enforcing abortion bans have changed how woman obtain abortions in the U.S.

But one thing it hasn't done is put a dent in the number of abortions being obtained.

There have been slightly more abortions each month across the country recently than there were in the months leading up to the June 2022 ruling, even as the number in states with bans dropped to near zero.

"Abortion bans don't actually prevent abortions from happening," said Ushma Upadhyay, a public health social scientist at UC San Francisco.

But, she said, they do change care.

For women in some states, there are major obstacles to getting abortions — and advocates say that low-income, minority and immigrant women are least likely to be able to get them when they want.

For those living in states with bans, the ways to access abortion are through travel or abortion pills.



CHARLIE RIEDEL Associated Press

ERIKA, left, and Leeann (who declined to give their last names) react at a watch party in Kansas City after an abortion rights amendment to the Missouri Constitution passed Nov. 5. Five states passed such measures.

Pills become bigger part of equation, legal questions

As the bans swept in, abortion pills became a bigger part of the equation.

They were involved in about half the abortions before Dobbs. More recently, it's been closer to two-thirds of them, according to research by the Guttmacher Institute.

The uptick of that kind of abortion, usually involving a combination of two drugs, was underway before the ruling.

But now, it's become more common for pill prescriptions to be made by telehealth. By the summer of 2024, about 1 in 10 abortions was via pills prescribed via telehealth to patients in states where abortion is banned.

As a result, the pills are now at the center of battles over abortion access.

This month, Texas sued a New York doctor for prescribing pills to a Texas woman via telemedicine. There's also an effort by Idaho, Kansas and Missouri to roll back their federal approvals and treat them as "controlled dangerous substances," and a push for the

federal government to start enforcing a 19th century federal law to ban mailing them.

Travel for abortion has increased

Clinics have closed or halted abortions in states with bans.

But a network of efforts to get women seeking abortions to places where they're legal has strengthened and travel for abortion is now common.

The Guttmacher Institute found that more than twice as many Texas residents obtained abortion in 2023 in New Mexico as New Mexico residents did. And as many Texans received them in Kansas as Kansans.

Abortion funds, which benefited from "rage giving" in 2022, have helped pay the costs for many abortion-seekers. But some funds have had to cap how much they can give.

The abortion map has been in flux

Since the downfall of Roe, the actions of lawmakers and courts have kept shifting where abortion is legal and under what conditions.

Florida, the nation's sec-

ond most-populous state, began enforcing a ban on abortions after the first six weeks of pregnancy on May 1.

That immediately changed the state from one that was a refuge for other Southerners seeking abortion to an exporter of people looking for them.

There were about 30% fewer abortions there in May compared with the average for the first three months of the year. And in June, there were 35% fewer.

While the ban is not unique, the impact is especially large. The average driving time from Florida to a facility in North Carolina where abortion is available for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy is more than nine hours, according to data maintained by Caitlin Myers, a Middlebury College economics professor.

The bans have meant clinics closed or stopped offering abortions in some states.

But some states where abortion remains legal until viability — generally considered to be sometime past 21 weeks of pregnancy, though there's no fixed time for it —

have seen clinics open and expand.

Illinois, Kansas and New Mexico are among the states with new clinics.

There were 799 publicly identifiable abortion providers in the U.S. in May 2022, the month before the Supreme Court reversed Roe vs. Wade. And by this November, it was 792, according to a tally by Myers, who is collecting data on abortion providers.

But Myers says some hospitals that always provided some abortions have begun advertising it. So they're now in the count of clinics — even though they might provide few of them.

No access in emergencies threatens some lives

How hospitals handle pregnancy complications, especially those that threaten the lives of the women, has emerged as a major issue since Roe was overturned.

President Biden's administration says hospitals must offer abortions when they're needed to prevent organ loss, hemorrhage or deadly infections, even in states with bans. Texas is

challenging the administration's policy and the U.S. Supreme Court this year declined to take it up after the Biden administration sued Idaho.

More than 100 pregnant women seeking help in emergency rooms were turned away or left unstable since 2022, the Associated Press found in an analysis of federal hospital investigative records.

Among the complaints were a woman who miscarried in the lobby restroom of a Texas emergency room after staff refused to see her and a woman who gave birth in a car after a North Carolina hospital couldn't offer an ultrasound. The baby later died.

"It is increasingly less safe to be pregnant and seeking emergency care in an emergency department," Dara Kass, an emergency medicine doctor and former U.S. Health and Human Services official told the AP earlier this year.

Abortion rights are popular with voters

Since Roe was overturned, there have been 18 reproductive rights-related statewide ballot questions.

Abortion rights advocates have prevailed on 14 of them and lost on four.

In the 2024 election, they amended the constitutions in five states to add the right to abortion. Such measures failed in three states: In Florida, where it required 60% support; in Nebraska, which had competing abortion ballot measures; and in South Dakota, where most national abortion rights groups did support the measure.

AP VoteCast data found that more than three-fifths of voters in 2024 supported abortion being legal in all or most cases — a slight uptick from 2020.

The support came even as voters supported Republicans to control the White House and both houses of Congress.

Mulvihill and Vineys write for the Associated Press. AP writers Linley Sanders, Amanda Seitz and Laura Ungar contributed to this report.

New year brings new laws on hot topics, including AI and gender

Measures kicking in will affect low earners, big-screen and social media stars, schools and chatty drivers.

By David A. Lieb

Artificial intelligence. Abortion. Guns. Marijuana. Minimum wages.

Name a hot topic, and chances are good there's a new law about it taking effect in 2025 in one state or another.

Many of the laws launching in January are a result of legislation passed this year. Others stem from ballot measures approved by voters. Some face legal challenges.

Here's a look at some of the most notable laws taking effect in various states:

Hollywood stars, young influencers

California, home to Hollywood and some of the largest technology companies, is seeking to rein in the artificial intelligence industry and put some parameters around social media stars. New laws seek to prevent the use of digital replicas of Hollywood actors and performers without permission and to allow the estates of dead performers to sue over unauthorized AI use.

Parents who profit from social media posts featuring their children will be required to set aside some earnings for their young influencers. A new law also allows children to sue their parents for failing to do so.

Social media and deepfake limits

New social media restrictions in several states face court challenges.

A Florida law bans children under 14 from having social media accounts and

requires parental consent for 14- and 15-year-olds. But enforcement has been delayed due to a lawsuit filed by two associations for online companies, with a hearing scheduled for late February.

A new Tennessee law also requires parental consent for minors to open accounts on social media. NetChoice, an industry group for online businesses, is challenging the law. Another new state law requires porn websites to verify that visitors are at least 18 years old. But the Free Speech Coalition, a trade association for the adult entertainment industry, has filed a challenge.

Several new California measures aimed at combating political deepfakes are also being challenged, including one requiring large social media platforms to remove deceptive content related to elections and another allowing individuals to sue for damages over the use of AI to fabricate images or videos in political ads.

Parent notification of gender changes

In a first, California will start enforcing a law prohibiting school districts from adopting policies that require staff to notify parents whose children change their gender identification at school. The law was a priority for Democratic lawmakers who wanted to halt such policies, which were passed by several districts.

State protections for abortion access

Many states have passed laws limiting or protecting abortion rights since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a nationwide right to the procedure in 2022. One of the latest comes in Delaware. A law there will require the state employee health plan and Medicaid plans for lower-income residents to cover abortions



CHRIS PIZZELLO Associated Press

IN CALIFORNIA, where entertainment unions went on strike in 2023, new laws will require permission to use digital replicas or AI of performers' likenesses.

with no deductible, co-payment or other cost-sharing requirement.

Rapid-fire guns and school safe zones

A new Minnesota law prohibits guns with "binary triggers" that allow for more-rapid firing by causing a weapon to fire one round when the trigger is pulled and another when it is released.

In Delaware, a law adds colleges and universities to a list of school zones where guns are prohibited, with exceptions for those working in their official capacity such as law officers and commissioned security guards.

Reach of medical marijuana expands

Kentucky is becoming the latest state to let people use marijuana for medical

purposes. To apply for a state medical cannabis card, people must get written certification from a medical provider of a qualifying condition, such as cancer, multiple sclerosis, chronic pain, epilepsy, chronic nausea or post-traumatic stress disorder. Nearly four-fifths of U.S. states have now legalized medical marijuana.

Minimum wage increases in effect

Minimum wage workers in more than 20 states are due to receive raises in January. The highest minimum wages will be in Washington, California and Connecticut, all of which will top \$16 an hour after modest increases.

The largest increases are in Delaware, where the minimum wage will rise by \$1.75 to \$15 an hour, and in Nebraska, where a measure approved by voters in 2022 will

add \$1.50 to the current minimum of \$12 an hour.

Twenty other states still follow the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour.

Drug and cellphone travel restrictions

In Oregon, using drugs on public transit will be considered a misdemeanor crime of interfering with public transportation. While the measure worked its way through the Legislature, multiple transportation officials said drug use on buses and trains, and at transit stops and stations, was making passengers and drivers feel less safe.

In Missouri, law enforcement officers have spent the last 16 months issuing warnings to motorists that handheld cellphone use is illegal. Starting with the new year, penalties will kick in: a \$150 fine for the first violation,

progressing to \$500 for third and subsequent offenses and up to 15 years in prison if a driver using a cellphone causes an injury or death. But police must notice a primary violation, such as speeding or weaving across lanes, to cite motorists for violating the cellphone law.

Montana is the only state that hasn't banned texting while driving, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Tax breaks for renters and more

Tenants in Arizona will no longer have to pay tax on their monthly rent, thanks to the repeal of a law that had allowed cities and towns to impose such taxes. While a victory for renters, the new law is a financial loss for governments. An analysis by Arizona's nonpartisan Joint Legislative Budget Committee estimated that \$230 million would be lost in municipal tax revenue during the first full fiscal year of implementation.

Meanwhile Alabama will offer tax credits to businesses that help employees with child care costs.

Kansas is eliminating its 2% sales tax on groceries. It also is cutting individual income taxes by dropping the top tax rate, increasing a credit for child-care expenses and exempting all Social Security income from taxes, among other things.

Restoration of voting rights

An Oklahoma law expands voting privileges to people who have been convicted of felonies but had their sentences discharged or commuted, including for crimes that have been reclassified from felonies to misdemeanors.

Lieb writes for the Associated Press. AP staff around the U.S. contributed to this report.

Distrust over Florida schools’ Black history class

Though the subject is required to be taught, the lessons remain inconsistent across the state’s classrooms.

By KATE PAYNE

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Buried among Florida’s manicured golf courses and sprawling suburbs are the artifacts of its slave-holding past: the long-lost cemeteries of enslaved people, the statues of Confederate soldiers that still stand watch over town squares, the old plantations turned into modern subdivisions that bear the same name. But many students aren’t learning that kind of Black history in Florida classrooms.

In an old wooden bungalow in Delray Beach, Charlene Farrington and her staff gather groups of teenagers on Saturday mornings to teach them lessons she worries that public schools won’t provide. They talk about South Florida’s Caribbean roots, the state’s dark history of lynchings, how segregation still shapes the landscape and how grassroots activists mobilized the civil rights movement to upend generations of oppression.

“You need to know how it happened before so you can decide how you want it to happen again,” she told her students as they sat at their desks, the morning light illuminating historic photographs on the walls.

Florida students are giving up their Saturday mornings to learn about African American history at the Spady Cultural Heritage Museum in Delray Beach and in similar programs at community centers across the state. Many are supported by Black churches, which for generations have helped forge the cultural and political identity of their parishioners.

Since Faith in Florida developed its own Black history toolkit last year, more than 400 congregations have



MARTA LAVANDIER Associated Press

MARVIN DUNN leads a tour of Overtown, a historically Black neighborhood near downtown Miami, in February. By state metrics, a dozen Florida school districts have shown excellence at teaching Black history.

pledged to teach the lessons, the advocacy group says.

Florida has required public schools to teach African American history for the last 30 years, but many families no longer trust the state’s education system to adequately address the subject.

By the state’s own metrics, just a dozen Florida school districts have demonstrated excellence at teaching Black history, by providing evidence that they are incorporating the content into lessons throughout the school year and getting buy-in from the school board and community partners.

School district officials across Florida told the Associated Press that they are still following the state mandate to teach about the experience of enslavement, abolition and the “vital contributions of African Americans to build and strengthen American society.”

But a common complaint from students and parents is that the instruction seems limited to heroic figures such as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks and rarely extends beyond

each February’s Black History Month.

When Sulaya Williams’ eldest child started school, she couldn’t find the comprehensive instruction she wanted for him in their area. So in 2016, she launched her own organization to teach Black history in community settings.

“We wanted to make sure that our children knew our stories, to be able to pass down to their children,” Williams said.

Williams now has a contract to teach Saturday school at a public library in Fort Lauderdale, and her 12-year-old daughter, Addah Gordon, invites her classmates to join her.

“It feels like I’m really learning my culture. Like I’m learning what my ancestors did,” Addah said. “And most people don’t know what they did.”

State lawmakers unanimously approved the African American history requirement in 1994 at a time of atonement over Florida’s history.

Historians commissioned by the state had just published an official report

on the deadly attack on the town of Rosewood in 1923, when a white mob razed the majority-Black community and drove out its residents. When the Florida Legislature approved financial compensation for Rosewood’s survivors and descendants in 1994, it was seen as a national model for reparations.

“There was a moment of enlightenment in Florida, those decades ago. There really was,” said Marvin Dunn, who has been the author of multiple books on Black Floridians. “But that was short-lived.”

Three decades later, the teaching of African American history remains inconsistent across Florida classrooms, inadequate in the eyes of some advocates, and is under fire by the administration of Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has championed efforts to restrict how race, history and discrimination can be talked about in the state’s public schools.

DeSantis has led attacks on “wokeness” in education that rallied conservatives nationwide, including Presi-

dent-elect Donald Trump. In 2022, the governor signed a law that restricts certain race-based conversations in schools and businesses and prohibits teaching that members of one ethnic group should feel guilt or bear responsibility for actions taken by previous generations.

Last year, DeSantis’ administration blocked a new Advanced Placement course on African American Studies from being taught in Florida, saying it violates state law and is historically inaccurate.

A spokesperson for the College Board, which oversees Advanced Placement courses, told the AP they are not aware of any public schools in Florida currently offering the African American Studies class. It’s also not listed in the state’s current course directory.

Representatives for the Florida Department of Education and the state’s African American History Task Force did not respond to the AP’s requests for comment.

“People who are interested in advancing African diaspora history can’t rely

on schools to do that,” said Tameka Bradley Hobbs, manager of Broward County’s African-American Research Library and Cultural Center. “I think it’s even more clear now that there needs to be a level of self-reliance and self-determination when it comes to passing on the history and heritage of our ancestors.”

Last year, only 30 of Florida’s 67 traditional school districts offered at least one standalone course on African American history or humanities, according to state data. While not required by state law, having a dedicated Black history class is a measure of how districts are following the state mandate.

Florida’s large urban districts are far more likely to offer the classes, compared with small rural districts, some of which have fewer than 2,000 students.

Even in districts that have staff dedicated to teaching Black history, some teachers are afraid of violating state law, according to Brian Knowles, who oversees African American, Holocaust and Latino studies for the Palm Beach County school district.

“There’s so many other districts and so many kids that we’re missing because we’re tiptoeing around what is essentially American history,” Knowles said.

Frustration over the restrictions that teachers face pushed Renee O’Connor to take a sabbatical last year from her job teaching Black history at Miami Norland Senior High School in the majority-Black city of Miami Gardens. Now, she is back in the classroom, but she also has been helping community groups develop their own Black history programs outside of the public school system.

“I wish, obviously, all kids were able to take an African American history class,” O’Connor said, “but you have to pivot if it’s not happening in schools.”

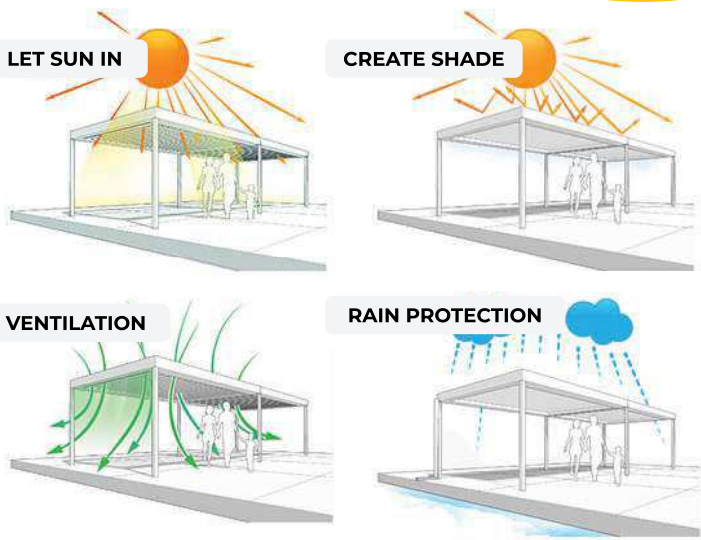
Payne is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative.



OUTDOOR LIVING FOR ALL SEASONS.

The award-winning VERGOLA® is the *original* and best operable louver roof system for residential or commercial application. For over 35 years VERGOLA® has remained the number one choice for enhancing the use of your outdoor space and adding value to your home or business.

- ✓ Total control of light, heat, shade and ventilation
- ✓ Weatherproof with automatic sensor to close during rain
- ✓ Custom design and configuration by in-house specialists
- ✓ Installation by VERGOLA® licensed contractors
- ✓ Engineering and permits all organized by VERGOLA®
- ✓ Full manufacturer's warranty



CALL TODAY FOR YOUR FREE, NO OBLIGATION IN HOME ESTIMATE.

855-WHY-VERGOLA (855-949-8374)

Facebook Instagram vergolausa vergola_usa

Visit our purpose-built showroom
13800 Crenshaw Blvd, Hawthorne 90249
vergola.com

CONTRACTOR'S LICENSE #1022142

Scan to learn more



Piers face impacts of climate change

[**Piers**, from A1] loped the pier, significantly damaging it. The city determined that continuing to repair the current pier as city officials planned for its replacement was no longer feasible. Instead, the pier will remain closed until the city completes the \$8-million-plus, multiyear replacement project.

Meanwhile, the Ventura Pier and Santa Cruz County's Capitola Wharf were damaged in early 2023 storms and reopened earlier this year. Ventura's restoration cost more than \$3 million, and Capitola's around \$8 million.

Santa Cruz initially proposed updates to the Santa Cruz Wharf in 2014, commemorating the pier's 100th anniversary.

Although a primary engineering report for the project found that the pier was "generally in good and serviceable condition," a secondary assessment recommended adding additional support structures to protect the pier against extreme weather.

It wasn't until late 2020 that the City Council approved a plan and environmental impact report. But then a coalition of advocates opposing the plan filed a lawsuit, arguing that the city did not find sufficient evidence to support that recreational activities on the wharf wouldn't significantly impact the environment.

As the city litigated and revised the environmental impact report, two devastating storms in December 2023 and February 2024 — the same series that crippled San Diego's Ocean Beach Pier — substantially damaged the wharf.

So before the city began construction on the long-term expansion and improvement project — focusing primarily on widening the pier, adding boat landings and creating more retail and commerce opportunities — it authorized \$3.5 million in repairs to remedy damages from last winter's storms. The repairs, includ-

ing replacing 60 of the pier's supporting piles, began in the fall of this year.

But it was too late. In December, another series of winter storms formed over the central Pacific and started ramming the coast with 40-foot waves.

While winter storms have been a longtime threat for California's piers, scientists say they're becoming even more destructive.

Recent studies have found that increasing air and water temperatures have warped ocean storm patterns worldwide, including along California's coast. Further research shows that an intensifying low-pressure system off Alaska's coast has become more likely to seed powerful storms and create energetic waves along the West Coast.

Climate change is also generating greater storm variability. Some piers sheltered from the typical north-westward storm now get barraged from all angles.

"In some of the recent storms in Santa Cruz, we're seeing some of these events come a little more from the south or a little more from the west," Barnard said. "A lot of these piers were built in these more sheltered areas ... so even when those waves shift by five or 10 degrees, it can make a huge difference."

The result for old piers sitting on the front lines of California's changing coasts is frequent structural assessments and repairs.

For example, the Santa Monica Pier has undergone two structural assessments since the turn of the century and a handful of smaller repairs. The latest assessment in 2019 cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Larger repairs often cost millions and leave a pier closed for years. If the government falls behind, the buildup of damage from extreme storms can leave officials with no choice but to tear down the whole pier. After half of the Seaclyff State Beach Pier near Santa Cruz broke off into the water during a winter storm in early



STEPHEN LAM San Francisco Chronicle

A SECTION of the Santa Cruz Wharf that collapsed Monday into the Pacific sits in the surf at a nearby beach on Tuesday. It is among several public wharves and piers in California that have been undergoing upgrades.

2023, the state park opted to remove the pier on the advice of a structural engineering report, just a few years shy of its 100th anniversary.

Many of California's wharves and piers are centenarians. The state's first wharves were built in the 1800s, and tended to be modest, private endeavors meant to facilitate shipping minerals and metals such as silver and asphaltum along the coast. But by the turn of the century, local governments were taking on more ambitious public projects.

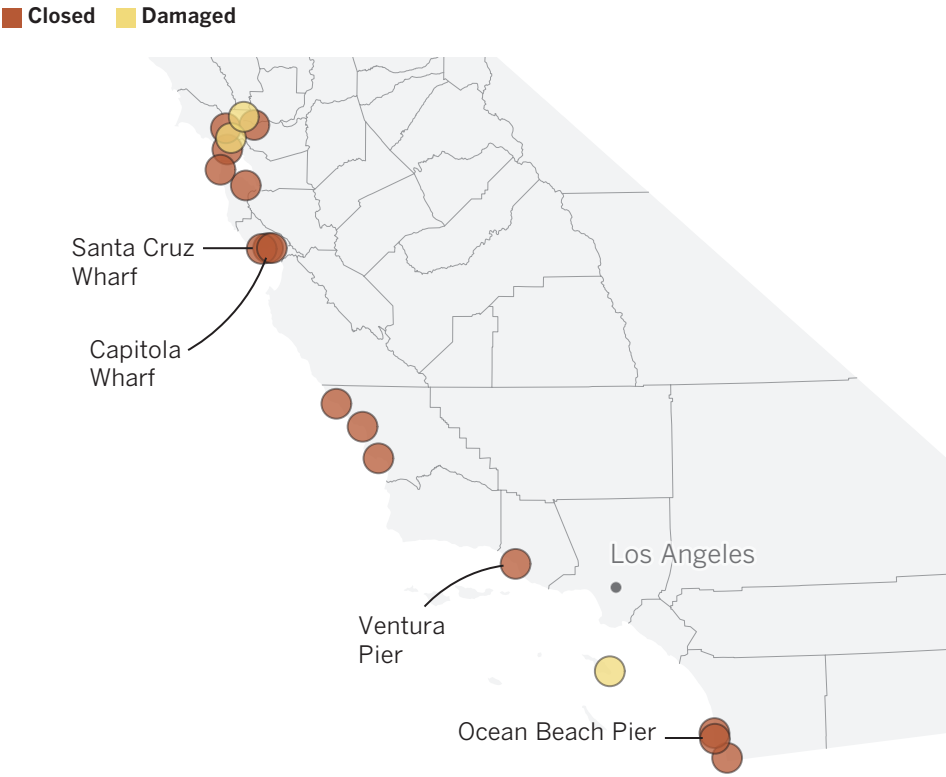
Santa Monica built its nearly 1,700-foot-long pier in 1908; Santa Cruz followed suit with its own in 1914. They became a staple of coastal life, hosting fishing spots, restaurants, education centers and, in Santa Monica, an amusement park.

One hundred and ten years later, Santa Cruz had no choice but to announce that the wharf would remain closed indefinitely.

"There's lots and lots of infrastructure across California that are at risk," Barnard said. "There's going to have to be hard decisions made. ... There's limited resources, and we have to think strategically about what are we going to protect?"

18 California piers were closed for at least part of 2024 or are currently damaged

The three damaged piers in the Bay Area and on Catalina Island are still open.



California Department of Fish and Wildlife

NOAH HAGGERTY AND ELIJAH WOLFSON Los Angeles Times



Title Sponsors


presented by
HONDA
Presenting Sponsor of the Rose Parade


presented by
Prudential
Presenting Sponsor of the Rose Bowl Game

Tune in to the
Rose Parade January 1, 2025 at 8 a.m. PST.
and the Rose Bowl at 2 p.m. PST.

Official Sponsors

**FTD** 1910

**HONDA**

**ON LOCATION**

**Passion Roses™**

**SHARP SEATING COMPANY®**

**TACO BELL**

**ticketmaster®**

**VET TIX**

Presenting Sponsors

**Alaska AIRLINES**

**CITIZENS BUSINESS BANK**
A CITICORP SERVICES COMPANY

**GO BOWLING**

**Hallmark CHANNEL**

**enjoy illinois**

**LOUISIANA**
Food Your Soul

**lululemon**

**MANSION ENTERTAINMENT GROUP**

**REMO**

**Shriners Children's**

**VISIT MISSISSIPPI**

Rose Court Sponsors

**CLINIQUE**

**the school PASADENA**

**macy's**

**MIKIMOTO**

**100 PASADENA CITY COLLEGE CENTENNIAL**

**TADASHI SHOJI**

**ROSE HILLS MEMORIAL PARK & MORTUARY**

**SoCalGas**

**Southwest**

**verizon**

**WIFE OF THE PARTY**

Supporting Sponsors

**AT&T**

**VONS FOOD FOUNDATION**

**Athens Services**

**CALIFORNIA CREDIT UNION FOUNDATION**

**CITIZENS BUSINESS BANK**
A CITICORP SERVICES COMPANY

**Foothill Transit**
Go with Good People

**GMT**
COMMERCIAL VEHICLE PARTS

**100 PASADENA CITY COLLEGE CENTENNIAL**

**ROSE HILLS MEMORIAL PARK & MORTUARY**

**SoCalGas**

**Southwest**

**verizon**

**WIFE OF THE PARTY**

Community Sponsors

**American Red Cross**

**COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF FOUNDATION**

**Keck Medicine of USC**

**Metro**

**METROLINK**

**Sycamores**
a better life

f | @ | x | v Visit [tournamentofroses.com](https://www.tournamentofroses.com)

Suit hints at source of texts in scandal

[Hollywood, from A1] surprised on two fronts: the lengths to which publicists allegedly went to protect Baldoni, and that Lively's team had procured such a potent tranche of text messages before filing their California civil rights complaint. "The biggest battle we face these days is obtaining evidence from the other side."

Lively's attorneys have been circumspect about the provenance of the text messages. Her complaint contains a footnote stating that the messages, including a 22-page compendium of texts submitted as an exhibit with the complaint, came through the "legal process, including a civil subpoena." Some of the messages are redacted or have the senders' and recipients' names omitted.

But Stephanie Jones, the founder of Jonesworks — the publicity firm that has represented Tom Brady, Jeff Bezos and, until recently, Baldoni and his production company, Wayfarer Studios — effectively outed herself as the source of the damaging communications in a lawsuit she filed Dec. 24.

With Jonesworks as the publicity firm for Baldoni and his company, Jones would seemingly have been aware of the alleged smear campaign against Lively. But Jones disavows involvement and contends that a former subordinate, Jennifer Abel, and others close to Baldoni cooked up the plan as part of a broader "conspiracy," which also included starting a rival publicity firm.

In her lawsuit, Jones accused Abel of "conspiring" to attack Jonesworks, steal the firm's clients, coordinate the "media smear campaign" against Lively and then "publicly pin blame for this smear campaign on Jones."

In addition to suing Abel, Jones sued Baldoni and Nathan, the crisis public relations professional whose blunt text messages have rocketed across social media.

The dizzying set of allegations in Jones' 52-page lawsuit made clear that after terminating Abel on Aug. 21, Jones had Abel's company-issued phone "forensically preserved and examined in detail."

"Abel and Nathan's covert take down and smear campaigns were revealed in black and white on Abel's company-issued phone following her termination," Jones said in her lawsuit.

In a statement, a member of Lively's legal team confirmed that the text messages in Lively's complaint were sourced from Abel's phone and that the material came from a subpoena against Jonesworks.

How, when and where that subpoena was issued remains a mystery.

"The additional details about Ms. Lively's investigation, including the lawful subpoena, will be produced during discovery," the statement said.

Experts were at times flummoxed and impressed by how Lively managed to get hold of the text messages in the absence of a lawsuit. The state civil rights complaint she filed, which alleged sexual harassment and retaliation, could be a precursor to a lawsuit.



ACTORS JUSTIN BALDONI and Blake Lively work on the set of "It Ends With Us" in New Jersey on Jan. 12. Lively has accused her co-star of sexual harassment and a smear campaign, claims that Baldoni's team denies.

Some states, including California and New York, allow for discovery, or the gathering of evidence from various parties to learn about the facts of a dispute, before a lawsuit has been filed. But this type of pre-litigation discovery rarely happens in California, attorneys said.

If Lively's lawyers took that route in California, they would have had to know that the evidence existed in the first place, then petition a judge and argue that there was a risk the evidence could be spoiled or not preserved. A spokesperson for the L.A. Superior Court said the court does not maintain records of such petitions.

"I've been doing this for decades and I've never seen it done before, but it can be done," said Johnson, the entertainment lawyer. As an example, he said, lawyers may seek a subpoena to prevent a car involved in a crash from being demolished and request to examine it before filing suit.

James Spertus, a West Los Angeles litigator and former federal prosecutor, said the subpoena was "most likely" issued in another case and "then used in this one."

For example, the subpoena could have been issued during a closed-door arbitration proceeding, attorneys said. Lively's complaint named several firms and PR professionals involved in "It Ends With Us" as well as Baldoni's production company, but Jones and Jonesworks were notably absent. Attorneys for Jones did not respond to an email seeking comment about the subpoena.

Some attorneys speculated that the subpoena had the hallmarks of a so-called "friendly subpoena," where one side is seeking records from another party, who can use the subpoena as legal cover. Put another way, the owner of the records may want to give them up, and the subpoena allows them to say they were forced to comply.

Whatever the origin story, the texts have been curated and released by both Jones and Lively, effectively

torpedoing their adversaries in one fell swoop.

The potency of the texts derives from their moment-to-moment chronicle of how Baldoni and his team discussed Lively. In a strategy document for Baldoni that Lively filed with her complaint, his publicity team identified "several potential scenarios at play here which we should be prepared for, should [Lively] and her team make her grievances public."

"He wants to feel like she can be buried," Abel wrote of Baldoni in a text message.

"We can't write it down to him. We can't write we will destroy her," Nathan replied to Abel. "You know we can bury anyone. But I can't write that to him."

The precise nature of the help that Nathan and his firm, The Agency Group PR, provided to Baldoni and his production company is unclear. The text messages suggest that the publicists pitched negative stories about Lively to friendly media outlets. In her complaint, Lively alleged that Nathan enlisted Jed Wallace, formerly of Southern California and now based in Texas, who in turn "weaponized a digital army ... to create, seed and promote content that appeared to be authentic on social media platforms and internet chat forums."

Then, Baldoni's team supplied the "manufactured content to unwitting reporters," propagating a narrative that was negative toward Lively and her husband, actor Ryan Reynolds.

A Daily Mail piece from this summer was published with the headline, "Is Blake Lively set to be CANCELLED?" and noted "hard to watch" videos of Lively that had surfaced online, triggering "a growing backlash against apparently diva-style behaviour caught on camera."

Abel texted Nathan, "You really outdid yourself with this piece."

"That's why you hired me right? I'm the best," Nathan replied.

According to Lively's complaint, Baldoni's team was trying to keep Lively's

allegations about his improper behavior from leaking. In text messages cited in the complaint, Nathan appears to indicate that news coverage of human resources complaints stemming from "It Ends With Us" was scuttled through the team's efforts.

Lively's complaint asserted that Baldoni criticized her body and weight, was "constantly hugging and touching cast and crew" and inserted "improvised gratuitous sexual content" into the film, which is about a woman overcoming domestic abuse.

Lively also said that Baldoni "pressured" her into adding nudity to a scene where her character was to give birth and that the "chotic" set was open to cast and crew; that Baldoni's production partner, Jamey Heath, had showed Lively a video of his own wife's naked body as she gave birth, which Lively initially thought was pornography; and that Baldoni had his "best friend" play the role of gynecologist, which was "invasive and humiliating."

Before the cast resumed filming after the Hollywood strikes, Lively initiated a meeting about her allegations, according to the complaint. Other female cast and crew members had also reported concerns about the work environment, including sexual harassment. The producers agreed to institute protections.

Baldoni's representatives have denied misconduct and called the allegations against him and his team "completely false, outrageous and intentionally salacious."

Freedman, the attorney, said in a statement that Lively's "negative reputation" derived from "her own remarks and actions during the campaign for the film" along with "interviews and press activities that were observed publicly, in real time and unedited, which allowed for the internet to generate their own views and opinions."

The high-profile case — a decade after the hack and release of Sony Pictures executives' crude and frank

emails — has offered an evergreen reminder: Be careful what you put in writing.

ABC News recently paid \$15 million to settle a case filed by President-elect Donald Trump, who alleged that anchor George Stephanopoulos defamed him. The settlement talks came after the judge ruled that Stephanopoulos and Trump had to sit for depositions and turn over emails and text messages.

In a lawsuit filed against Fox News by Dominion Voting Systems, internal emails and text messages emerged that showed the unvarnished opinions of Tucker Carlson and other Fox personalities around Trump's bogus claims that the 2020 election was stolen. "Do the executives understand how much trust and credibility we've lost with our audience? We're playing with fire, for real," Carlson texted colleagues.

In the dispute between singer Kesha Sebert and the songwriter and producer Lukasz Gottwald, known as Dr. Luke, whom she accused of sexually assaulting her, the producer's harsh comments about the singer's weight became public during litigation.

"Please keep her on her diet. No need to reply further. THANKS!" Gottwald wrote.

The dispute also unearthed the public relations plan that Sebert's team devised to help amplify her case, incite "a deluge of negative media" on Gottwald, fuel the #FreeKesha movement and secure a more favorable contract arrangement.

To Melanie Cherry, the associate director of the Public Relations and Advertising program at USC Annenberg School of Communications and Journalism, the Lively case will further reinforce "why publicists and crisis PR teams must be diligent in keeping communications with clients and internal teams secure and private."

"The role of a publicist should remain in the background," she said, "rather than becoming part of the story."

Number of hacked telecom firms increases

Ninth U.S. company is confirmed breached in Chinese spy effort, White House says.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — A ninth U.S. telecom firm has been confirmed to have been hacked as part of a sprawling Chinese espionage campaign that gave officials in Beijing access to private texts and phone conversations of an unknown number of Americans, a top White House official said Friday.

Biden administration officials said this month that at least eight telecommunications companies, as well as dozens of nations, had been affected by the Chinese hacking blitz known as Salt Typhoon.

But Anne Neuberger, deputy national security advisor for cyber and emerging technologies, told reporters Friday that a ninth victim had been identified after the administration released guidance to companies about how to hunt for Chinese culprits in their networks.

The update from Neuberger is the latest development in a massive hacking that has alarmed national security officials, exposed cybersecurity vulnerabilities in the private sector and laid bare China's hacking sophistication.

The hackers compromised the networks of telecommunications companies to obtain customer call records and gain access to the private communications of "a limited number of individuals." Though the FBI has not publicly identified any of the victims, officials believe senior U.S. government officials and prominent political figures are among those whose communications were accessed.

Neuberger said officials did not yet have a precise sense of how many Americans were affected by Salt Typhoon, in part because the Chinese were careful about their techniques, but a "large number" were in the Washington-Virginia area.

Officials believe the goal of the hackers was to identify who owned the phones and, if they were "government targets of interest," spy on their texts and phone calls, she said.

The FBI said most of the people targeted by the hackers are "primarily involved in government or political activity."

Neuberger said the episode highlighted the need for required cybersecurity practices in the telecommunications industry, a topic the Federal Communications Commission is to take up at a meeting next month.

The Chinese government has denied responsibility for the hacking.

Trump weighs in as Musk and Bannon spar over visas

By JESSICA GARRISON

President-elect Donald Trump on Saturday appeared to step into a raging debate among his supporters over visas for skilled workers on the side of Elon Musk, telling the New York Post he has "always liked the visas."

The comments came as Trump loyalists have been fulminating against each other online for days over the H-1B visas. Immigration hard-liners, including Trump backers like Laura Loomer and Stephen K. Bannon, subscribe to an "America first" agenda focused on creating more jobs for American citizens.

But Musk, who is the world's richest man, and other tech titans have long supported the H-1B visa program, which allows businesses to hire skilled workers from foreign countries. They have argued, as Musk posted last week, that "there is a dire shortage of ex-

tremely talented and motivated engineers in America."

In another post late Saturday night, Musk added: "The reason I'm in America along with so many critical people who built SpaceX, Tesla and hundreds of other companies that made America strong is because of H1B." He added: "Take a big step back and F— YOURSELF in the face. I will go to war on this issue the likes of which you cannot possibly comprehend."

In response, Bannon, who served as Trump's chief strategist, called Musk "a toddler" on the social media platform Gettr, posting: "Someone please notify Child Protective Services—need to do a 'wellness check' on this toddler" and linking to Musk's tweet. Bannon has been back in the political whirl since being released from federal prison in October, where he served four months on contempt charges for refusing to comply with a subpoena about



BRANDON BELL Associated Press

PRESIDENT-ELECT Donald Trump and Elon Musk on a visit to Texas. Born in South Africa, Musk defends the tech industry's need to bring in foreign workers.

the Jan. 6 Capitol riot.

It was shortly after this point that Trump got on the phone with Jon Levine of the New York Post and told him: "I've always been in favor of the visas. That's why we

have them."

Trump added that he has "many H-1B visas on my properties. I've been a believer in H1-B. I have used it many times. It's a great program."

It wasn't immediately clear what properties Trump was referring to that rely on the H-1B program. His golf courses and clubs have long relied on foreign workers coming to the

United States under the H-2B program to work as housekeepers and cooks. The H-2B visa program allows employers to import unskilled workers from abroad for temporary jobs if no qualified U.S. workers want the jobs.

Late Saturday morning, California Gov. Gavin Newsom waded into the debate as well, posting on X that Musk "is right" about needing to recruit top talent. "The same principle should apply to supporting our farmworkers, construction, and trades workers who build and feed our country. Top talent is top talent." The governor tagged Musk, as well as the California Farm Bureau, the California Building Industry Assn. and other groups.

It was not clear whether Newsom was referring to expanded visa programs, a path to legalization, or something else. A spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for clarification.

[Cannabis, from A1] monitoring, a Times analysis of hundreds of product tests and industry surveys suggest.

The cannabis supply chain that underpins these products is so convoluted, and the data collected by the state so unreliable, that it is nearly impossible to pinpoint the origins of contamination.

And there is no systematic procedure, such as with tainted lettuce or ground beef, to identify the scope and severity of contamination and limit public harm.

“If California can’t get this right, it would be a tremendous tragedy,” a Trinity County cannabis consultant, John Brower, complained this fall to the advisory board that guides the state Department of Cannabis Control. “This thing got handed to the state regulators on a silver platter ... and now we find ourselves in a spot where very few consumers have a good reason to choose a regulated market [product].”

Regulators minimized the extent of contamination in the supply chain, saying they believe the majority of legal products meet state standards.

“The spotlight on this issue ultimately reinforces why a regulated marketplace is essential,” the Department of Cannabis Control said in a prepared statement. “What we’re seeing is not unique to cannabis, or to California, but part of the maturation process of a newly regulated sector.”

The agency refused interview requests.

The creation of a legal cannabis market was sold to California voters as a way to protect public health. But by design, California lawmakers limited the role of the state’s Department of Pesticide Regulation, which has well-established programs for tracking and dealing with pesticides in agriculture. Responsibility for regulating pesticides in cannabis instead went to a startup agency, the Department of Cannabis Control. Six years after legalization, the agency says it is pledged to safeguard the public but is still setting up a lab fully capable of testing for those compounds, and creating enforcement mechanisms.

The perceived regulatory void has driven private-sector solutions, including voluntary safety tests that far exceed state standards and a controversial campaign to track down, and report, contaminated products. There is divided opinion on whether consumers will reward, or punish, such revelations.

“With the consumer of cannabis, it doesn’t matter if they care or not,” said grower Raw Garden’s chief executive, Thomas Martin, who provided the backing for sweeping tests of vapes on store shelves in the spring and summer this year, which led to more than a dozen state product recalls.

“We have a responsibility to deliver clean.”

..

The Times’ investigation included the largest analysis of its kind of pesticides in cannabis smoking products. It drew from tests conducted independently for The Times and others that came from a private market survey.

More than 370 legal cannabis products from 86 brands bought from state-licensed stores were tested for pesticides, along with products from tobacco shops and unlicensed stores. The analysis checked for more than 290 pesticides beyond the 66 chemicals already included in California’s mandatory screening requirement for cannabis products, a state list that has remained unchanged since guidelines were created in 2017.

These tests identified the presence of 45 pesticides California does not track in cannabis. All but one are illegal to use on the plant. The tests also found the presence of lab-created cannabis oils prohibited in the legal market, and potentially dangerous chemicals used to dilute products.

The contamination is so widespread there is evidence of insufficient clean-grown weed to supply the state’s \$1-billion cannabis vape market. One brand said it was having difficulty sourcing pesticide-free can-



BRIAN VAN DER BRUG Los Angeles Times
ERIC LeBLANC, left, and Laura Powell, inspectors with the state Department of Cannabis Control, look over logs and manifests from marijuana data vendor Metrc at Huckleberry Hill Farms in Garberville, Calif.

Regulators minimized the level of contamination

nabis concentrates. One of the state’s largest oil manufacturers, Sisu Extracts, said it found 60% of the cannabis crops farms offered for sale contained pesticides not on California’s screening list. It could provide clean oil only to select customers willing to pay a higher price.

These additional prohibited chemicals include insecticides such as pymetrozine, a carcinogen banned in Europe and approved in the United States for a limited number of crops, and a germicide, ortho-phenylphenol, once present in Lysol and today primarily used to disinfect hospitals and dog kennels. They include eight pesticides that federal regulators say pose a risk to people or the environment and that can be bought by licensed applicators only.

By far the most frequent was pymetrozine, appearing in 31% of samples and at levels higher than any other pesticide.

According to emails obtained by The Times under a public records act request, California’s cannabis regulators by 2019 had already heard that growers were using the contraband insecticide.

“I don’t know if this pesticide has been deemed safe for use on cannabis and is not talked about — or if pymetrozine is indeed the ‘dirty secret’ of the California cannabis industry,” a Central Coast farm manager wrote to regulators that November. He said two Humboldt County farms were using the prohibited pesticide and he suspected there were others.

The email chain shows that the report was shared among state agencies responsible for protecting the public from pesticides on cannabis, but that no action was taken.

Toxicologists in the state pesticide department that year had attempted to launch a cannabis surveillance program. Meeting notes show department staff met with a Monterey County analytical lab to discuss testing cannabis seized by law enforcement for 330 pesticides — akin to the scrutiny given to food. The intent was twofold: provide the public a reason to steer clear of the illicit market, and warn regulators what pesticides might show up in the legal market.

Such broad monitoring is critical, “or the whole supply chain suffers,” said Keith Bisogno, the analytics business consultant who took part in the talks. Without surveillance, health threats can catch regulators off guard, he said. For instance, “no one was looking for melamine in baby formula ... and then it showed up in baby formula from China.”

State records show the surveillance program was scuttled and staff told to “halt such activity until further guidance could be provided.” The state agency did not respond to a request for information on who halted the project and why. Budget documents show taxpayers since 2020 have paid \$3.5 million a year for cannabis pesticide enforcement that was supposed to include residue testing.

Toxicologists within the pesticide department sub-

sequently proposed small changes in the levels allowed for pesticides on California’s 66-pesticide cannabis screening list — proposals repeatedly ignored by cannabis regulators.

They would make no suggestion to add pymetrozine or any other pesticide to the testing list.

..

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency controls how pesticides may be used, determining the crops that chemicals can be used on, and the maximum residues safe for human consumption. Because cannabis is not legal under federal law, there are no pesticides approved to use on the crop. And it is a felony to use a pesticide in violation of its EPA-approved label.

California therefore confines cannabis growers to fighting insects and molds with natural predators, bacterial controls, natural oils or products deemed so harmless they have no federal residue limits.

Most of the 66 chemicals on California’s cannabis screening list, however, are not legal to use on the crop. There is little research on the safety of these pesticides when burned and inhaled. To set residue limits, state toxicologists have turned to the only other commonly smoked plant: tobacco.

California toxicologists adopted European tobacco standards where those existed, and for the rest applied the EPA’s trigger for requiring further data when evaluating pesticides for use on tobacco crops.

How to deal with contaminants illegal to use on cannabis, but for which there are no state residue limits, is a point of contention in the industry.

“It’s not for me to find out which of the 17,000 pesticides a farmer is using, because I’m not a chemist,” said Mark Unterbach, CEO of Procan Labs, the oil-manufacturing sister company to

Stiiizy, the state’s top-selling vape brand. “You count on the state to regulate this.”

In The Times’ analysis, pymetrozine was present in 13 out of 14 vaping products by Stiiizy in the greatest concentration of any products tested and analyzed.

Stiiizy executives said that because California does not require testing for pymetrozine, and has set no residue limit for the pesticide, the company is not in violation of state regulation. Nevertheless, the company has now joined other brands in testing for pesticides not on California’s screening list. Those companies said they seek to reduce contaminants in future products even in the absence of new state regulation.

Some brands said they would leave existing stocks of contaminated products on store shelves.

To pull them from sale “would bankrupt every single cannabis company,” said the owner of one major brand, speaking on condition he not be named.

His decision? “We’re gonna sell through.”

..

After a Times investigation in June showed California’s reliance on private labs had failed to keep contaminated cannabis products off store shelves, regulators told lawmakers they had multiple fixes in the works. Among those promises was a program to track down the sources of contamination. The Department of Cannabis Control in a written statement said it conducts source investigations on all recalled products — but was still developing a way to trace pesticides back to the farms they came from.

Contract records show the state’s seed-to-sale cannabis tracking system, operated by vendor Metrc (Marijuana Enforcement Tracking Reporting Compliance), was intended to enable just such investiga-

tions. But a Times review of scores of previously undisclosed supply chain records shows that when it comes to vaping products, Metrc’s computer trails can reveal very little as well as contain erroneous information about products.

Metrc was set up to collect data down to the detail of every plant on every licensed cannabis farm, and from there, its journey to market and sale. But the majority of vapes contain distillate, the cannabis equivalent to hot dog filler. It is a flavorless oil extracted from otherwise unusable plant trimmings, moldy material and poor-quality flow-ers collected from farms across the state. Those homogenized oils are further blended, in some cases to dilute known pesticides.

The Metrc data, for example, showed the insecticide methoxyfenozide lurking in a Raspberry Parfait-flavored BBrand vape could have come from plants grown over a period of four years on any of 986 farms, collected in more than 72,000 “harvests.”

Also according to Metrc records, some products that tested clean were made from the very same plants as products heavily laden with pesticides.

A Calaveras County cannabis grower said it was impossible that her farm was, as Metrc stated, the sole source of cannabis for a Kind Republic vape containing 10 pesticides and recently recalled by the state.

“I know not to spray all this stuff because you know, you can’t sell it,” said Enendina Venegas, owner of Steel Wheel Farms.

The Department of Cannabis Control disputed the notion that Metrc data are unreliable. “The rate of these inaccuracies does not compromise the integrity” of the system, it said.

Meanwhile, the state fails to make use of readily available data from the farms on probable sources of cannabis contamination.

California requires those using controlled pesticides to file monthly use reports, which go both to the state and to county agriculture commissioners.

The Department of Pesticide Regulation screens millions of those reports annually, assisted by a software program that flags cases in which a pesticide is used on an unapproved crop. Error reports are sent to county agriculture commissioners for investigation.

The Times found farms in nine counties had filed hundreds of reports detailing the use of prohibited pesticides on cannabis, without triggering alerts from the state or drawing the notice of local agriculture officials.

Although Santa Cruz County farm inspection records fail to note the use of pymetrozine on Eaton’s farm, he said he stopped using it after a local agriculture official told him it was prohibited. State records show other cannabis growers nearby continued to use the chemical as recently as this summer.

State pesticide regulators did alert Monterey County to a cannabis grower using 2,4-D — a compound in the Vietnam War-era her-

bicide Agent Orange — to highlight a potential misplaced decimal point in the quantity of the chemical being used 23 years after the expiration of its product registration. No mention was made that the product is illegal to use on cannabis.

State pesticide regulators said they modified the software to ignore pesticides used on cannabis and relied on human reviewers to catch abuses. As a partial solution, they released a list of 101 registered products that are allowed.

There needs to be better information sharing and delegation of responsibility between state agencies responsible for protecting the public from pesticides in cannabis, and the county agriculture officials who inspect most farms, said Andrew Smith, Sonoma County’s agriculture commissioner and a member of the state cannabis advisory board.

“We can’t investigate what we don’t know,” Smith said.

..

Department of Cannabis Control director Nicole Elliot declined requests to be interviewed. In September at an advisory board meeting, she emphasized her agency’s “commitment to data-driven science-based policy making.” At the same time, she acknowledged that change can be slow and urged patience “in times when sensationalized narratives may dominate headlines ...”

“The benefits of our work at times unfold gradually, but the positive long-term outcomes will be undeniable,” she said.

Since The Times’ report in June, the Department of Cannabis Control has ordered 266 products off store shelves over suspected pesticide contamination. Nearly all are the subject of whistleblower complaints from 2023 or tied to a Los Angeles manufacturer identified by The Times as the source of multiple contaminated products.

Some of those products were already illegal to sell, such as Phat Panda vapes recalled more than 200 days after their expiration date. Asked what public health benefit comes from belatedly recalling products that would have been on shelves for more than a year, the agency said it believed items remained in the supply chain. It did not provide information on how it reached that conclusion.

New regulations to revise the cannabis pesticide testing list were promised in January but have yet to be adopted. A draft proposal in November by the Department of Pesticide Regulation would add 10 chemicals to the screening, and, in response to lobbying from mosquito control districts, pull two chemicals from the list.

Those recommendations would mean California consumers would still have no protection from 38 pesticides found in testing for The Times, as well as many illegal Chinese pesticides currently showing up on cultivation sites.

The proposed list also did not include a germicide discovered after a Los Angeles-area cannabis industry worker fell ill and sent the pre-rolls he was smoking to a testing lab used by the newspaper. That case underscores the difficulty in both identifying contamination sources and in linking health symptoms to those products.

The worker, who asked to not be named because of concerns with harassment in the industry, said he suffered a burning throat and watering eyes, followed by severe nausea. Fearing he suffered something more than a bout of flu, he sent his pre-rolls to Anresco Laboratories in San Francisco.

Zach Eisenberg, vice president of the analytical lab, said the products contained 26.8 ppm of ortho-phenylphenol, a level so unusually high for any pesticide that he called it “disgusting.”

It is impossible to know whether the chemical caused the worker’s symptoms.

Ortho-phenylphenol, or OPP for short, is a carcinogen and can cause kidney damage. Historically it was used in agriculture as a cor-



PAUL KURODA For The Times
KEVIN DUNN injects a vial of vape to test for pesticides at Anresco Laboratories in San Francisco.



BRIAN VAN DER BRUG Los Angeles Times
A METRC TAG on a wasted cannabis plant at Wendy Kornberg’s Sunnabis Farms in Garberville.

rosive soap to keep mold off stored citrus, but it fell out of favor a decade ago. The chemical today is primarily used as a disinfectant in hospitals, dog kennels and the like. It is not approved for use on cannabis.

The brand carrying this disinfectant was Maven. The Times found OPP present in multiple Maven products it sent to two labs — including the rolling papers used on some of those pre-rolls — as well as in the joints sold by other brands.

When Maven executives in September were told of the test results, they promised to investigate and share their findings.

Chief Operating Officer Mike Corvington in an email referenced “some surprising areas where we may have identified the need for changes in our post-harvest materials.”

After that, Corvington ceased to respond to inquiries. A lawyer for Maven sent a brief statement asserting the products complied with California’s regulations for testing for 66 listed pesticides.

The Times shared its recent pesticide findings with 26 brands, from the state’s biggest sellers to small store brands. Most executives said they would seek cleaner distillate for future products. A few said they would pull tainted products from stores but not publicize that action. All were worried about public disclosure of contaminants that regulators had never warned them to watch for.

“The regulated market is extremely fragile,” said Ron Gershoni, CEO of Jetty Extracts. “I worry that discrediting the regulated market will push consumers to the black market, where products are objectively less safe for consumers.”

In the long wait for state action, factions within the industry are attempting self-regulation.

San Diego-based Infinite Chemical Analysis Labs, which alongside Anresco provided testing services to The Times, raced to expand the number of pesticides it can test for. Cultivator and vape manufacturer Raw Garden and the March and Ash retail store chain helped to fund extensive pesticide testing of the state’s top

brands. Those results were provided both to the newspaper and to state regulators.

Meanwhile, Catalyst retail chain owner Elliot Lewis built a promotional campaign around setting higher testing standards. A small industry consortium in early December launched a non-profit to take up the task of crafting pesticide standards for more than 200 chemicals.

The Environmental & Consumer Compliance Organization, or ECCO, offers to certify cannabis goods that undergo expanded testing. Brands awarded the ECCO label also would be subject to spot tests of their products pulled from stores.

Trent Overholt, president of cannabis oil manufacturer Noble Pacific and an organizing member of ECCO, said it will probably take time to catch on with consumers.

“If all this becomes is a prompt for the [Department of Cannabis Control] to go in and just do some smart pragmatic reform, so that the legal channel means clean again, then great,” Overholt said. “It’s worth the trouble.”

Though going beyond the testing limits of regulators, ECCO’s standards would still permit pesticides at levels higher than others are comfortable with.

An Oakland-area delivery service switched oil suppliers when its owner learned of low levels of pesticides in the company’s house vapes.

“I don’t know enough about this, to risk anybody’s safety by putting something out there that even has ... a small amount of a pesticide,” said Three Trees President Sean Smith.

“I don’t want to be that person.”

LEGAL
WEED

BROKEN
PROMISES



In our series of occasional stories, we explore the fallout of legal pot in California. Scan this code with your phone to click through a chart detailing the dozens of toxic chemicals found in California cannabis products.

With cannabis, there’s a fine line between the legal and the illicit

Regulators argue that licensed products are safer and purer, but some have pesticides.

By PAIGE ST. JOHN

California cannabis regulators and industry defenders argue that despite the proliferation of pesticides found in legal weed, licensed products are still safer and purer than those sold on the underground market.

That isn’t always true, according to an analysis of tests conducted by The Times.

Of 16 cannabis products bought from unlicensed sellers or tobacco shops, half contained no quantifiable levels of pesticides. The pesticide adulteration rate matched that of products from California’s legal market, which mandates screening for 66 pesticides but ignores scores of other compounds, The Times found.

The similarity between legal and illegal products “doesn’t shock me,” said Josh Swider, chief executive and co-founder of Infinite Chemical Analysis Labs, which provides cannabis testing services in California and Michigan. “Normally, the illicit market is just buying from the legal market brokers. It’s not like there really are two different markets ...”

The limited tests offer a narrow glimpse into the world of unlicensed stores and tobacco shops, where there are no testing requirements and little to no information available on the provenance of products. And the prevalence of counterfeit goods — three products bought in illicit shops carried the names of legal brands but were probably fakes — compounds the risk to consumers willing to gamble on what they get.

“The legal market’s oversight and accountability



DANIA MAXWELL Los Angeles Times

A RUNTZ “blueberry razz” vape pen. Another of its pens, sold in East L.A., contained vitamin E acetate.

measures ensure far greater consumer safety than the unregulated alternative,” the California Department of Cannabis Control said in a prepared statement.

Unregulated products were more likely to be pesticide-free because they contained artificial forms of THC — Delta 8, HHC — that result from processing hemp through a number of chemical treatments.

Hemp-derived THC is much cheaper than the naturally grown drug, but it requires chemical reactions and acids that create by-products with unknown health consequences. “It’s not a pesticide problem, but it has other health implications,” Swider said.

Synthetic or converted THC was not confined to the illicit market. The Times found lab-created cannabinoids present in vapes

sold by four legal brands: Phat Panda, Circles, Cloud and Flav.

These artificial compounds are prohibited in California’s legal market, but the state does not screen for them.

Infinite developed a test to detect artificial THC, a tool that could encourage compliance with regulations that prohibit the synthetic compound. Email records reviewed by The Times show that California regulators refused to validate the test, saying resources are focused “on verifying methods that are required by law.”

Michigan regulators, however, approved the tests, with three cannabis labs now offering the service and three others seeking certification.

Other dangers lurk in the marketplace.

A Runtz vape sold at an

unlicensed outlet in East Los Angeles was found to have been cut with vitamin E acetate, the test results showed. Four years ago, vitamin E acetate, used to dilute vape cartridges, was strongly linked to the hospitalization of thousands of vape users and 68 deaths. The chemical was found in an illicit product. California does not screen for it in the regulated market.

Meanwhile, the heaviest pesticide loads were found in legal products. A Backpack Boyz vape bought at a state-licensed store in Atwater, for instance, contained 32 different pesticides. California regulators in October shut down the small, state-licensed Van Nuys operation that had manufactured it and other contaminated products sold on the licensed market.

Backpack Boyz in June claimed its products containing pesticides were counterfeits from the illegal market, even though they had been bought at Backpack Boyz stores. The company has not responded since to requests for comment.


No contact information could be found for Runtz. Packaging for the tainted product carried a state cannabis sticker but bore no state license number or manufacturer name.

Where unregulated and licensed products differed most was in the kinds of pesticides they contained. Illegal products most often carried chemicals on the state’s 66-chemical screening list — supporting a common belief that products that fail the state test are diverted to the illicit market.

Conversely, licensed products more commonly had pesticides for which the state does not screen.

A third of state-legal cannabis products contained pymetrozine, which California does not test for.

The carcinogenic insecticide did not show up in a single unregulated product.




SUN NONG DAN
KOREAN RESTAURANT

KOREAN
FAMILY RESTAURANT


OPEN LATE

We are Often Imitated
NEVER Duplicated



#24 Galbi Jjim w/Cheese, Premium Beef Rib, avail. Spicy

We Specialize in
Sulung Tang
(Ox Bone soup)
and many other hearty
Korean Soups.



Come enjoy our meaty Korean Dishes with friends and family!

NO DELIVERY
FEE

NO SERVICE
FEE

ON ORDERS OVER \$50


Postmates

Los Angeles
3470 W. 6th St., Suite 7
213 365-0303

Los Angeles
710 S. Western Ave.
213 264-3303

Rowland Heights
18902 A East Gale Ave.
626 581-2233

San Gabriel Valley
927 E. Las Tunas Dr. Suite J
626 286-1234



Delivered Exclusively by Uber Eats and Postmates


Visit Our Website

SAVE
SMART,
EARN
MORE!

3.50%
APY¹

ADVANTAGE
MONEY MARKET
ACCOUNT

\$20,000 Minimum to Earn Top Rate



Scan the QR Code to open
your new account, today!

¹APY=Annual Percentage Yield. The minimum opening deposit is \$5.00. There is no minimum balance fee for this account. This is a variable-rate money market account based on your daily balance. 3.50% APY/3.440% Rate applicable on balances of \$20,000.00 and higher. Rate is current as of October 24, 2024. Rate may change without notice at the sole discretion of the Credit Union. Dividends are paid at the rate corresponding to each day's full balance. The APY on the account is reduced to 0.15% APY if on any day the end of day balance falls below \$20,000.00. The minimum required to earn any dividend is \$0.01. An initial deposit of \$1 into a Smart Savings account is required to join Premier America Credit Union. Membership subject to approval. Federally Insured by NCUA.

PREMIER AMERICA
CREDIT UNION

BUSINESS



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

TOURISTS on the Sony lot in Culver City. Like every studio, its business was hurt by the COVID-19 pandemic and last year’s dual strikes.

When Tony Vinciguerra arrived at Sony Pictures Entertainment in 2017, it was far from business as usual. The Culver City studio was still reeling from a 2014 cyberattack that exposed employees’ personal information and revealed internal communications, damaging its reputation and leading to major financial losses. Its film studio was in such a slump that Tokyo parent company Sony Corp. took a nearly \$1-billion write-down just months before Vinciguerra was announced as the new chief executive and chairman.

At the time, he was working at private equity firm TPG after a long career at Fox Networks.

“When people approached me about this job, I really wasn’t looking to go back to work full time, be in the office every day,” said Vinciguerra, 70. “But what was really attractive was the potential.”

Under his leadership, Sony Pictures mounted a comeback.

The film studio revitalized several franchises, including “Jumanji” and “Bad Boys,” churned out its all-important “Spider-Man” movies and started to capitalize on its sister PlayStation video game division by making film and TV series based on that intellectual property. The studio continued to nurture its key shows “Jeopardy!” and “Wheel of Fortune,” weathering host changes for both. And it branched out, making acquisitions in the anime market and in movie theaters.

But the studio also had its share of struggles. Like every studio, Sony’s business was hurt by the pandemic and last year’s dual strikes. The company mounted a failed bid for Paramount Global earlier this year. The film studio’s efforts to expand the “Spider-Man” universe into movies about characters other than the titular superhero have had middling box office results.

On Jan. 2, Vinciguerra will step down from his role and hand control to current Sony Pictures Chief Operating Officer Ravi Ahuja in a planned succession that was signaled for months.

Vinciguerra spoke with The Times ahead of his last day to reflect on his more than seven-year tenure at Sony Pictures and what’s to come for him. This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Describe the state of Sony Pictures when you arrived in 2017.

The environment of the studios and the business was still vibrating from the hack. There was so much damage done by that in terms of invasion of privacy and sharing of emails. It was palpable. You could feel it even in June of ’17 when I joined.

The financials showed a lot of room for improvement. The fact that Sony owned pictures, music, PlayStation and technology ... there’s no other company in the business that had that combination of assets. I

Sony Pictures CEO reflects on his 7 years at the helm

At the time Tony Vinciguerra came aboard, the film and TV studio was reeling. But he saw potential and oversaw quite the comeback.

By Samantha Masunaga

didn’t understand why the company wasn’t trading IP back and forth among its units, and they weren’t really working together. So I saw that as a great opportunity; it’s really why I decided to come here.

What were your main priorities when you started in the job?

All of our competitor companies either had started, or were about to start, general entertainment streaming services, and we were under some pressure to do that as well. But we realized pretty quickly that if everybody else is doing that — all seven or eight of our competitors were doing that — why should we? Knowing that they would be fighting tooth and nail to get subscribers, why wouldn’t we just be the arms dealer to supply the weapons for those streaming services to fight each other and thereby improve our business?

We also, at the time, had 110 cable networks. And it was pretty clear that that business was on the down-slope. So we set a strategy to get out of that business for the most part, except in markets where cable networks are still doing really well, which is Latin America, Spain and India.

Looking back at what’s happened with all the streamers, the arms dealer decision looks pretty prescient now.

It was pretty obvious, and also the cable network decision was pretty obvious. And really, what’s going on in the business today, most of the streaming services will become profitable, but the cable networks are going in the wrong direction, and that’s not going to change. That’s really the issue for our colleague companies.

How do you feel about the future for anime?

We haven’t rolled Crunchyroll out in the entire world yet, so we still have quite a ways to go. The audience for anime is violently passionate — violent in a good way, not violent in a bad way. They are the most passionate audience ever. It’s got a great future. And unfortunately, others have noticed now and are starting to get into the business. Netflix and Hulu are starting to get in the business and raise the cost of product for us. But, you

know, that comes with success.

Part of your tenure included the strikes, and you’ve commented before on how you feel the contract terms from the unions are increasing costs and forcing productions out of the U.S. Do you think the new California film tax credit proposal will change things?

I don’t think the California change will really impact [the situation] because it still doesn’t cover above-the-line actors, it doesn’t cover casting, and it’s still a very difficult process to get done in California.

Not only did the union deals raise costs, but California raises costs as well, just the regulations and the hoops that you have to jump through to get production done here. My suggestion would be, as I’m leaving this job, is that they take a real hard look at the program and the restrictions on the business and try to figure that out.

How do you feel about the performance of the film studio during your tenure?

We’ve had mostly very,

very good results. Unfortunately, [“Kraven the Hunter”] that we launched last weekend, and my last film launch, is probably the worst launch we had in the 7½ years so that didn’t work out very well, which I still don’t understand, because the film is not a bad film.

But we’ve been very successful. We’ve beat our budgets every year I’ve been here, even through strikes and COVID, and max bonuses several of the years for all the employees. It was a good run, and the film studio was a big part of it.

Going back to “Kraven the Hunter,” and Sony had “Madame Web” earlier this year, which also underperformed ...

Let’s just touch on “Madame Web” for a moment. “Madame Web” underperformed in the theaters because the press just crucified it. It was not a bad film, and it did great on Netflix. For some reason, the press decided that they didn’t want us making these films out of “Kraven” and “Madame Web,” and the critics just destroyed them. They also did it with “Venom,” but the audience loved “Venom”

and made “Venom” a massive hit. These are not terrible films. They were just destroyed by the critics in the press, for some reason.

Do you think that the “Spider-Man” universe strategy needs to be rethought?

I do think we need to rethink it, just because it’s snake-bitten. If we put another one out, it’s going to get destroyed, no matter how good or bad it is.

How do you feel about the state of the industry going into 2025?

There’s a period of asset readjustment coming. It’s going to be for the next year and a half to two. I think it’s going to be a little bit chaotic. The one thing we do know for sure is that the demand for entertainment is not going down. It’s becoming slightly different. But once all of these companies get to the point where they’re stable, they’ll have a great run ahead of them.

2026 is going to be a great year in the film business. And the television business is still perking along, and our market share keeps going up, so we’re very con-

tent there. And then we’re looking at other businesses. The film and TV business are probably not going to be great growth businesses, but we’re looking at other things. We have Crunchyroll, we have Alamo Drafthouse and we’re looking at location-based entertainment projects. I’m pretty comfortable with where the company is right now. It’s very stable, relative to the rest of the business.

What made Sony interested in the Alamo Drafthouse deal?

It’s a very different, very unique concept for viewing a film. It’s a very small business. So we have to grow into the markets that are important to domestic box office.

Alamo, even though it only has 41 locations, has 4.5 million loyalty program members, so we have a built-in way to talk to their customers. That’s going to be a very, very big advantage of it for us in the future. And secondly, the customer profile of Alamo Drafthouse is not terribly dissimilar to Crunchyroll. So we’ll use it to promote Crunchyroll, and we’ll also use it in a lot of other ways. It was not a big cash outlay, but the results of what we’re going to gain from this by having a view of our customers’ likes and dislikes will benefit us greatly in the long run.

After you step down, you’ll be moving into an advisor role for 2025. What does that role look like?

I’m here to answer questions, and I’ll be doing some work with Sony Tokyo, but I’ll be in a different office, hidden away so nobody can find me. I don’t know. We’ll see how it works out.

What are your plans for the future?

I don’t know yet. I’ve had a lot of outreach from private equity firms and other investment-oriented companies. I’m not going to think about it until after the holidays. But most likely [it] will involve some return to private equity or investment companies, but not for sure.

How would you describe your legacy at Sony Pictures?

Where I get my psychic reward is helping people to do their jobs better and get better in their careers, and that’s really how I judge how well I do. The second part of that corollary is to leave a place better than I found it. And I think I’ve done that most every place I’ve been at. I like to fix things and that’s really how it all comes together.

I think I’m leaving the place in a better place, but time will tell. It feels like it’s a very stable business, and I think that’s the legacy.



EVAN AGOSTINI Invision/Associated Press

SONY PICTURES Entertainment CEO Tony Vinciguerra attends the premiere of “Anyone But You” in New York in 2023. On Jan. 2, he will step down and hand control to current Chief Operating Officer Ravi Ahuja.

OPINION

EDITORIAL

PRESIDENT-ELECT Donald Trump's transition team is planning to eliminate a \$7,500 electric vehicle tax credit that helps consumers afford clean cars while supporting the U.S. auto industry.

Combined with his pledge to roll back vehicle emissions standards that require automakers to sell more electric vehicles, ending the credit would be a big step backward for clean air, the climate, consumers, manufacturing employment and the U.S. economy.

Here are five reasons why the EV tax credit is worth keeping, and why scrapping it would be a counterproductive mistake.

Ending the EV tax credit will raise consumer costs.

EVs are growing in popularity worldwide, but most Americans need help affording plug-in vehicles because they still cost more, on average, than their gas-fueled counterparts. That's the whole idea behind the tax credit, which allows consumers to claim up to \$7,500 to offset the purchase price.

The policy is working, making EVs more affordable and competitive with gas-fueled models, especially accounting for the many thousands of dollars EV owners save over the lifetime of their vehicles from lower fuel and maintenance costs.

President Biden expanded the program by adding a \$4,000 tax credit for the purchase of a used electric vehicle. Since Jan. 1, buyers have also been able to claim the credit at the time of sale and use it toward their purchase instead of waiting until they file their taxes. Consumers saved over \$600 million in just the first three months of the year, an average of \$6,900 per vehicle, according to the Treasury Department. Electric cars shouldn't be a luxury available only to the wealthy. Keeping the tax credit in place will help these clean, low-



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

PLUG-IN VEHICLES come and go at a Tesla Supercharger location in Santa Monica.

Five reasons to keep the tax credit for electric vehicles

maintenance vehicles get within reach of more American families.

Tax incentives are a bipartisan solution.

Presidents of both parties have for nearly two decades supported federal incentives for cleaner vehicles. The tax credit was established in 2005 under George W. Bush as a \$3,400 incentive to help offset the purchase of a fuel-efficient hybrid vehicle. In 2008 Bush signed legislation that applied it to plug-in vehicles and expanded the credit to up to \$7,500.

The credit continued under President Obama and President Trump's first term, during which it grew in popularity every year, saving consumers and businesses about \$5 billion. The credit got a major expansion with the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022, and continuing it will save consumers mon-

ey while helping support good-paying American auto industry jobs.

The EV credit supports American jobs.

The auto industry is a cornerstone of the U.S. economy, providing more than 1 million jobs, and its strength is increasingly dependent on its success in making the global transition from its gas-fueled past to an electric-powered future.

The U.S. auto industry wants to keep the consumer EV tax credit, and automakers don't want the incoming Trump administration to scrap federal rules requiring them to sell more EVs. They have understandably cited the need for stability and predictability for the industry, as well as a desire to remain competitive and recoup hundreds of billions of investment in the transition to EVs.

Ending the EV tax credit would

also hurt American manufacturing. When the credit was expanded under the Inflation Reduction Act, new rules were also added to restrict eligibility to vehicles that are assembled in North America and meet other restrictions on the sourcing of battery parts and crucial minerals. The aim was to encourage domestic production and reduce the supply chain's dependence on China. This is no time to halt policies that give American workers a shot at a better future.

Ending the credit hurts America's competitiveness.

Electric vehicles are the future, and that is a reality U.S. automakers are planning for and making huge investments in, including more than \$100 billion in new electric vehicle factories and battery plants. But China and other competitors are pouring far more re-

sources into that transition. Automakers, including Ford and General Motors, have set clear goals to phase out gas-fueled cars and transition to all-electric fleets. But ending the policies that support that transition will only cede ground to China, Europe and other rivals.

Trump's richest supporter and associate, Elon Musk, has voiced support for ending the EV tax credits, despite owning Tesla, because while it might hurt his business, it would hurt his competitors more. But our nation's economic future depends on a healthy, robust market for American-made EVs, with diverse offerings at affordable price points. It would be unwise to undermine that.

A less competitive U.S. electric vehicle sector will also make the country more dependent on foreign oil. Oil companies, which supported Trump's reelection (he advanced a pro-fossil-fuel agenda during his first term), would be the primary beneficiaries of rolling back pro-EV policies, keeping consumers tied to Big Oil and captive to their volatile gas prices.

We need EVs to fight global warming.

The most important reason for keeping the tax credit, of course, is that it helps the transition to pollution-free vehicles. Transportation is the nation's largest source of planet-warming pollution, and we can't effectively fight climate change without slashing emissions that are causing storms, wildfires, heat waves and droughts to worsen.

Even Trump — who has dismissed global warming as a "hoax" and attacked EVs by stoking baseless consumer fears during his campaign — should be able to see that the future is electric and that American businesses, consumers and workers can either stake out a place in that future or be left behind.

LETTERS



MEL MELCON Los Angeles Times

A CYCLIST on an electric bike rides in Hermosa Beach. A new state program for e-bike vouchers was overwhelmed minutes after applications became available.

Brace for impact?

Re "Charged-up applicants overwhelm e-bike site," Dec. 24

IT IS CERTAINLY A NOBLE IDEA to have more cyclists on electric bikes out there to reduce car traffic and emissions.

But the growing e-bike population in parts of Los Angeles threatens the safety of pedestrians and cyclists (those using only human pedal power) along our coastal cycling paths.

I've seen e-bikers in multitudes speed 20 mph to 30 mph without care or caution. Get ready for many more accidents and serious injuries unless strict enforcement is put in place, which is severely lacking today.

TED LUX, Playa del Rey

Great photo of the e-bike rider as he "zooms" across the plaza at the Hermosa Beach Pier.

As a regular cyclist on the bike and pedestrian path in this photo, I know that this stretch is clearly marked at both ends with signs and flashing lights clearly stating that everyone must walk their bikes. It is the same at the Manhattan Beach Pier. The Hermosa Beach plaza is full of people of all ages, and riding even traditional bikes is dangerous.

The problem is that there is no enforcement. On one or two weekends a year when there is a special event, there will be a "monitor" who tells riders to walk their bikes, but I've seen most riders just keep pedaling away.

The second photo in your story shows people walking their bikes alongside someone who is ignoring the signs.

Manhattan Beach and Hermosa Beach both have their own police departments, but I never see them

enforce the rules. Isn't safety on their bike paths and piers part of public safety in their jurisdictions? The riders in your photos need to be identified and ticketed.

Becoming an e-bike rider is in my near future, as age and knee surgeries have made riding very difficult. I hope a full ban on e-bikes on the paths from Torrance to Will Rogers State Beach won't keep me off the paths. Then again, there is no enforcement, so riders like me should be fine, just as

the rider in your photo apparently was.

BRAD ORRICO
Los Angeles

::

Have we not learned anything from the widespread fraud during the many government handouts throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?

With enough money available for only 1,500 vouchers of up to \$2,000 apiece, wouldn't it make more sense to work with agencies who currently work with low-income individuals? They can make sure that the vouchers go to the appropriate people.

Without a controlled distribution of these vouchers, I fear that we will soon see e-bikes for sale on every corner.

JODY LISS
Valencia

::

One of your photos shows a section of the bike path in Hermosa Beach. The reason most riders are seen walking their bikes is that this particular section requires people to do so.

One rider is violating the rule and looks mighty proud and arrogant about it. And, he is on the wrong side of the path.

DOUG LEIGHTON
Valley Village

What California businesses want

Re "Where did California's great jobs and boom times go?" Opinion, Dec. 26

I doubt the Chapman University researchers whose gloomy report on the California economy Joel Kotkin writes about in an op-ed article have spent much time on our blue-collar streets or talking to the business owners there.

They might be told if you can't find a job (or start a business like a food truck) in California, you can't do it anywhere.

The small manufacturers for which I worked and sold goods for 40 years in Southern California didn't whine about regulations or social issues. They were more worried about raw material prices and delivery and how to grow their businesses. They didn't have federal subsidies like Tesla, nor did they fret about shareholder battles over fattening quarterly profits as Boeing and others who largely left California have.

The Chapman literati should climb down from their heights and pick up some of their trash as they go.

DREW IRBY
Lincoln, Calif.

::

Did this article really state, "Over the last decade ... the average annual pay for those government jobs was almost double that of private sector jobs"?

This sounds horribly unfair to the average tax-paying private-sector worker. Sounds like something The Times might want to investigate.

CHRIS HORDAN
Hermosa Beach

A message of powerlessness

Re "Why Christmas isn't for kids," Opinion, Dec. 25

Reading Bonnie Kristian's Christmas Day piece about ending war, illness and cruelty, I was struck by the impotence that Christianity instills in some of its followers. The message of Christmas seems to be that God will save us, and yet here we are, more than 2,024 years later, with war, illness and cruelty still plaguing us.

At the other end of this spectrum of belief, for example, is the highest teaching of Buddhism — that all people possess within them infinite potential for good. And, since almost all our problems are created by us, the power to solve them lies within us. We don't need to look to an outside power or force.

That's where Buddhist practice comes in. In contemporary terms, we could call this practice "human revolution." We need to change ourselves on a fundamental level, gain mastery over our more base instincts and cultivate our nobler qualities.

Then, we ordinary humans can bring about a peaceful and compassionate world.

DAVID TEMPEST
Mar Vista

ER treatment for the rest of us

Re "Clinton out of hospital after treatment for flu," Dec. 25

I was happy to read that former President Clinton was released from the hospital recently and is recovering from the flu.

However, on the day this article on Clinton was published — Christmas Day — I found my thoughts turning to the probable thousands of people waiting in fear and pain in emergency rooms throughout the country.

When can all Americans expect the compassion and expertise given to those we elect to represent us?

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER
Ojai

HOW TO WRITE TO US

Please send letters to letters@latimes.com. For submission guidelines, see latimes.com/letters or call 1-800-LA TIMES, ext. 74511.



Los Angeles Times
FOUNDED DECEMBER 4, 1881
A California Times Publication

Executive Chairman Dr. Patrick Soon-Shiong

News: Executive Editor Terry Tang • Managing Editor Hector Becerra • Editor at Large Scott Kraft • Deputy Managing Editors Shelby Grad, Amy King, Maria L. La Ganga • Assistant Managing Editors John Canalis, Steve Clow, Angel Jennings, Iliana Limón Romero, Monte Morin, Craig Nakano, Ruthanne Salido • General Manager, Food Laurie Ochoa • Opinion: Op-Ed Editor Susan Brennenman • Business: President and Chief Operating Officer Chris Argentieri • Chief Human Resources Officer Nancy V. Antoniou • President of L.A. Times Studios Anna Magzanyan • Chief Information Officer Ghalib Kassam • General Counsel Jeff Glasser • V.P., Communications Hillary Manning

OP-ED

The case for killing the tax credit for electric vehicles

It's ineffective at shaping behavior, and it primarily benefits the wealthy while adding to the deficit.

By **Veronique de Rugy**

THE FEDERAL TAX credit for electric vehicle purchases has far outlived its purpose and now stands as a glaring example of government overreach and economic inequity. Originally introduced in 2008 to stimulate a fledgling market, and then renewed and expanded in 2022 as part of the Inflation Reduction Act, this credit remains what it has been from the start: an ineffective subsidy primarily benefiting the wealthy. Congress should end it.

On the fiscal side, we face a \$2-trillion budget deficit, and it's growing. According to the Treasury, the credits for electric vehicles in the Inflation Reduction Act, which can be up to \$7,500 on certain new EVs and up to \$4,000 on certain previously owned EVs, represent \$112 billion in lost revenue. But based on the last few years, there are reasons to believe the cost will be much higher.

In addition, the EV credits are part of an industrial policy package of energy tax credits, mandates and "buy American" requirements under the IRA that will cost more than \$1 trillion over 10 years, deepening the deficit hole we find ourselves in.

Beyond the price tag that burdens taxpayers, the credit is unfair to the vast majority, who — being less well off than EV purchasers — drive relatively affordable gasoline-powered vehicles and do not reap any financial benefit from the credit. Studies repeatedly show that most of these credits go to

higher-income individuals, making the credit a tax cut for the rich. For instance, the Congressional Research Service study noted: "For vehicles purchased in 2021, taxpayers with adjusted gross income (AGI) greater than \$100,000 represented 22% of all filers and received 84% of the credit benefits."

The IRA tax credit's income limit (\$150,000 for single filers, \$300,000 for joint filers) and refundability may tilt some benefits to low-income taxpayers. However, EVs have higher purchase prices than comparable gas vehicles, even with tax credits, and installing home charging equipment is easier for homeowners, who tend to have higher incomes, versus renters. As a result, EV tax credits will probably remain a higher-income taxpayer boondoggle.

In fact, a recent study by five economists finds "that 75% of the EV subsidies claimed under the IRA have gone to consumers who would have bought an electric vehicle anyway." According to their calculation, each car sold due to the incentive (roughly 25% of the total number of vehicles sold) came at a cost to taxpayers of \$32,000.

The credit's inability to attract those who would prefer to purchase a gas vehicle is a clear sign of its failure, which explains the need to impose even more authoritarian measures like EV-related mandates.

Making matters worse is the fact that in recent months, the sales of EVs have stalled. Despite the taxpayers' help, sales remain stuck at 7% of the market, strongly suggesting that while tax credits may change the timing of electric vehicle purchases, they are not increasing the demand.

To those who believe that the cost and disparity in our tax code are worthwhile because we must fight climate change, I have news



BEN MARGOT Associated Press

GOVERNMENT INCENTIVES to buy vehicles like these could be stifling better alternatives.

for you.

First, the environmental benefits of the credit are unclear. EVs are not emission-free when considering the carbon footprint of battery production and electricity generation. Also, EVs primarily replace the purchase of newer gas vehicles, which pollute less than the older vehicles that remain on the road. Combined with the fact that many tax-credit recipients would have purchased an EV anyway, it's unlikely that there's much environmental bang for the buck.

The cost of the government picking winners compounds this problem. There is little reason to believe that the technological path that government officials happen to prefer is the optimum one — and the danger is that tax credits are creating market distortions that crowd out better solutions.

By artificially propping up EV manufacturers and steering consumers toward one specific technology, other — perhaps better — technologies can be thwarted. Hybrids, plug-in hybrids, hydrogen fuel cell cars, alternative fuels or other emerging innovations are penalized despite their important role in addressing environmental and energy challenges. Each deserves equal footing to determine which can deliver more effective environmental benefits, lower costs or both.

Yet, instead of fostering open

competition and letting the best solutions reveal themselves or allowing different technologies to serve different customer needs, the tax credit creates winners and losers based on political priorities.

Finally, the tax credits were initially sold by congressional sponsors as a means "to help get these products over the initial stage of production ... to the mass production stage, where economies of scale will drive costs down and the credit will no longer be necessary." We've already passed that stage.

While still small, the EV market has matured and no longer needs these crutches. Even Elon Musk, the chief executive of Tesla Motors — the leader in U.S. EV sales with 2 out of 3 cars sold and the biggest beneficiary of the credits — says that it should end. Writing in the Wall Street Journal, Toyota's Jack Hollis also called for the end of expensive and inefficient tax credits.

It's high time this policy goes away. The federal EV tax credit is an inefficient, regressive program that benefits the wealthy at the expense of average Americans. Eliminating it would restore fairness, reduce government interference in the market and, through genuine competition, better allow resources to go toward initiatives that enable as many people as possible to purchase cleaner vehicles.

There are far more effective ways to design policies to address climate change. The best is to unleash capital to fund as many green and innovative projects as possible by reducing taxes on capital gains and renewing the ability to immediately deduct 100% of capital investments.

Projects like solar farms, wind turbines and grid infrastructure require massive upfront capital investments. Without full expensing, these costs must be depreciated over many years, reducing the present value of tax benefits. In addition, better cash flows in the early years make it easier to secure financing.

There is also a timing issue. The clean energy transition requires rapid deployment of new technologies. Full expensing encourages companies to accelerate investments rather than delay them.

The federal government also should lift the permitting barriers that bureaucrats have erected that make building and innovating harder than they should be.

Subsidizing high-end car buyers is a poor strategy for achieving meaningful environmental progress. But we know how to do better.

VERONIQUE DE RUGY is a senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University.

WALKING ALONG the Colorado River behind the old factories on the east side of Austin, Texas, you might forget that you are in one of the fastest-growing cities in America. The riparian corridor below downtown is a rare zone of urban biodiversity. Herons and egrets fish the spillway. Owls, coyotes, hawks, deer and even ringtail cats thrive in the surrounding woods, within earshot of the tollway and the airport flight path. As Texas' long hot summers cool into fall, the ospreys begin to arrive, and come winter there are bald eagles.

It's reassuring to witness so much wild nature inside a major city. But it also fills you with a sense of anticipatory loss, if you know how threatened it is by development pressure — from the nearby pecan groves being cleared out to make room for new apartments and offices to the massive Tesla gigafactory recently built downriver. When the choice is between more housing and jobs for humans and space for other species, the humans always win. Maybe that's as it should be. But what if it didn't have to be a zero-sum game?

On a shrinking planet, habitat has become increasingly scarce for us and our nonhuman neighbors. In the U.S., affordable housing has escalated from a local problem to a major national one, as median prices have increased by nearly 50% since 2020, rising twice as fast as wages, and homelessness has reached record levels. Political leaders are talking about opening public lands for new housing. Less airtime is given to the stark tally of the biodiversity crisis: The World Wildlife Fund recently estimated that the wildlife population of the planet has plummeted 73% since 1970. The connections between these two crises are rarely examined.

Increasing the supply of human housing does not always deplete wildlife habitat. Indeed, the concentration of the human population in urban areas is an important strategy to combat habitat loss. But the linkage between our own development and our devouring of the world is inescapable. The appetites of growing and ever-more affluent human populations drive an almost insatiable need to produce more food and essential commodities, and a powerful incentive



CHRISTINA HOUSE Los Angeles Times

BALLONA WETLANDS, north of LAX, is a still-rewilding remnant of California coastal marshes.

Housing and biodiversity can coexist even in a crowded future

In California, Texas and around the globe, habitat is increasingly scarce for humans and nonhumans. It doesn't have to be a zero-sum game

By **Christopher Brown**

to turn more undeveloped territory into cropland, pasture and timberland. The connection between urban consumption and habitat destruction seems evident in the hemispheric distribution of wildlife population loss — 39% in the U.S. and Canada, but an astonishing 95% in Latin America — when you know which way the supply chains go.

Our capacity for myopia when it comes to the trade-offs between our lives and nonhuman life is profound. It's embedded in language, in the way we refer to undeveloped lands as "empty," "vacant" or even "waste." It's also baked into our legal and economic systems, which have few tools to value nature except as something humans own or consume. In part this reflects the more abundant world we evolved in, as bipedal hunters and foragers who walked out of Africa. That history of seemingly unlimited resources, made even more abun-

dant through our control of fire and the reproduction of the plants and animals that feed us, has allowed us to ignore how reliant we are for our health and prosperity on the natural ecology that surrounds us. Living our lives in cities segregated from nature doesn't help.

There are signs we are developing new ways to recognize and address this dangerous imbalance. The emerging field of ecosystem services looks at the contributions of wild nature to human welfare through an economic prism, showing how, for example, the loss of predators, such as wolves, and scavengers, such as vultures, can be directly tied to a corresponding loss of human life and property those animals would have prevented by depleting the population of deer and cattle that might otherwise meet their deaths in automobile accidents or spread disease from their uneaten carcasses.

General awareness of the biodiversity crisis is spreading, in part through the changes we can see around us, especially those of us who have lived long enough to wonder why there are so many fewer bugs in the summer than when we were kids. And in some corners, meaningful action is being taken to link biodiversity health with human development, for the benefit of both.

In early 2024, England rolled out its final rules implementing a national requirement that new development of significant size demonstrate, after completion of the project, a 10% net gain in biodiversity on the site or in off-site projects. That such an encumbrance on property rights could be imposed by the then-Conservative government may reflect a uniquely British yearning for the green country of memory, but it's a promising indicator of the change that's possible.

We have fragments of similar policy in this country, as with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's wetlands programs, and many successful efforts to rewild blighted corners of our cities, from the Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island to the Ballona Wetlands in West L.A. If we coupled our need for new housing with a genuine effort to share our habitat with other life, we would quickly see how much of the natural character of the land where we build could be restored through modest investments and simple strategies. Nature is good at healing itself, when we give it room to do so.

Here in Texas, as in much of the country, the erasure of native life is relatively recent. Agriculture and ranching really only arrived in the 1820s, and while 99% of the blackland prairie that once ran from Dallas to San Antonio has since gone under plow or pavement, every spring its remnants still pop up in the margins.

Texas communities spar constantly over the need to make room for humans and the need to protect wild nature. After the pandemic lockdown's "nature is healing" reawakening, cities like Austin began taking steps to harness economic growth as an engine for rewilding the future. The balance may still be off, as with green urban creeks canyoned by new luxury high-rises that pay for them, or the restored riparian zone tucked behind the monolithic Tesla plant, but it's a promising start that gives us a glimpse of the more profound results mandated biodiversity goals like England's could deliver.

On the global scale, projects like Munich's restoration of the Isar River and Seoul's daylighting of Cheongyecheon creek show the revitalizing potential of rewilding in the heart of great cities. By coupling the development with enhanced standards for its ecological impact, we can address the housing and biodiversity crises at the same time, providing habitat for all. And by experiencing the richness of life in more biodiverse environments ourselves, you can bet we would learn to be better stewards of our planetary future — and happier ones.

CHRISTOPHER BROWN is a novelist, a lawyer and the author of "A Natural History of Empty Lots: Field Notes from Urban Edgelands, Back Alleys, and Other Wild Places."

OPINION

BOOKS & IDEAS

Each of us approaches a new year with a combination of worry and hope. What lies ahead? Might this be when I actually start exercising or cooking or writing a screenplay? If your own resolutions include reading more, we can help. This month's titles range from a bittersweet comedy set in the Italian countryside to an expedition in bitterly cold temperatures, and from a sci-fi novel set inside a murder mystery to a memoir about the most motley collection of four-legged family members you'll ever encounter. Happy reading!

Fiction

Homeseeking: A Novel

By Karissa Chen
Putnam: 512 pages, \$30 (Jan. 7)
Fans of historical fiction will want to pick up this exceptional novel immediately. It's the story of Chinese history from the 1930s to the 21st century told through the lives of Suchi and Haiwen, two Shanghainese students who fall in love early on but whose paths diverge early on too. As national and global events affect them and their families, their "mingyun" connection — a concept of personal fate — keeps them psychically linked despite hardships.

The Heart of Winter: A Novel

By Jonathan Evison
Dutton: 368 pages, \$28 (Jan. 7)
A loose tooth leads to the history of a long marriage, as Abe Winter and Ruth Warneke look at their 70-year union. They live quietly on Bainbridge Island and have three grown children; Ruth's dental troubles reveal cancer, and the family is thrown into uproar. As Abe attempts to care for his wife, their past surfaces and shows how the negotiations involved in partnership provide a foundation for its growth, as well as for facing its final stages.

Death of the Author: A Novel

By Nnedi Okorafor
William Morrow & Co.: 448 pages, \$30 (Jan. 14)
When adjunct professor Zelu, who is paraplegic, hits rock bottom personally and professionally, she unexpectedly writes a mega-bestselling work of Afro-futurism that also addresses the differently abled. Although her large Nigerian

By Bethanne Patrick

American family makes light of her achievement, Zelu falls in with an unusual scientist who fits her with wondrously advanced prosthetic legs — and then reveals his unusual purpose in providing them.

We Lived on the Horizon: A Novel

By Erika Swyler
Atria: 336 pages, \$29 (Jan. 14)
Combining AI, robotics and much more, Swyler's latest world-building novel concerns the Bulwark, a walled desert city whose history, values and economy are based on the sacrifices made by its founders. Known as "the Sainted," those humans now have descendants who make up an elite supported by Parallax, an AI system; there are also AI children and a murder mystery that threatens the entire community. It's unusually elegant dystopian fiction.

Tartufo: A Novel

By Kira Jane Buxton
Grand Central Publishing: 352 pages, \$29 (Jan. 28)
Lazzarini Boscarino, a rural Italian town, might be dying, its population diminishing faster than its budget. But when the grief-stricken Giovanni Scarpazza and his hunting dogs Aria and Fagiolo chance upon an unusual truffle, Mayor Delizia

Micucci allows herself to hope that big-ticket players in the food world will bite at the chance to own it. Will it be a boon or a disappointment? Buxton ("Hollow Creatures") plays for laughs, but never with cruelty.

Nonfiction

Cold Kitchen: A Year of Culinary Travels

By Caroline Eden
Bloomsbury Publishing: 256 pages, \$28 (Jan. 14)
Journalist Eden's kitchen is cold because she spends most of her time traveling around Central Asia and Eastern Europe — but she rarely returns to her Edinburgh home without a souvenir to remind her of the foods of those places that she writes about here. Structured around a dozen recipes, including an Uzbekistani watermelon salad and Russian pirozhki, it's a memoir, travelogue and cookbook in which those facets add up to a delicious whole.

Three Wild Dogs (and the Truth): A Memoir

By Markus Zusak
Harper: 240 pages, \$28 (Jan. 21)
Zusak ("The Book Thief") and his family have had three wild dogs, yes, but each of

those dogs — Reuben, Archer and Frosty — has been so different that they come across as true family members rather than as the accessories that some domestic animals can seem to be. Dogs, the author notes, represent lifelong devotion, as well as our own deep human primal instincts. Anyone you know who has lived with a dog will relish this beautiful memoir.

The Harder I Fight the More I Love You: A Memoir

By Neko Case
Grand Central Publishing: 288 pages, \$30 (Jan. 28)
Alt-rock star Case describes a

painful childhood and worse adolescence, then a tough trail to professional success that included suffering through harsh Chicago winters without enough money for heat or warm clothing. However, the Grammy-nominated musician leavens memories of hardship with great humor and terrific writing (the Chicago wind hits "like a bouquet of cold fists") that should delight her fans and attract some new ones too.

Realm of Ice and Sky: Triumph, Tragedy, and History's Greatest Arctic Rescue

By Buddy Levy
St. Martin's Press: 384 pages, \$32 (Jan. 28)
American Walter Wellman was the first to try to reach the North Pole by airship. After he failed, Roald Amundsen (the same man who was the first to reach the South Pole) tried, in 1926, and flew over the North Pole on May 21. Umberto Nobile, his Italian engineer, decided to win accolades for Mussolini in 1928 by attempting the feat but wound up facing disaster when his airship, Italia, crashed and prompted a high-profile international rescue mission.

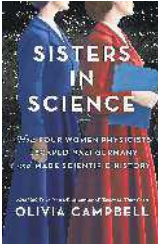
Black in Blues: How a Color Tells the Story of My People

By Imani Perry
Ecco: 256 pages, \$29 (Jan. 28)
Blue skies equal hope, but blue dyes — as Perry ("South to America") shows here — can be a reminder of the era when indigo cloth was traded for human life, during the 16th-century slave trade. From the description of skin as "blue black" to the blues as a musical genre, the color blue and its many shades intertwine with African American heredity, history and heritage. A cultural compendium and also a meditation, "Black in Blues" will inspire other great minds.

A tale worth telling of four women scientists whose names you should know

By Julia M. Klein

YOU MIGHT have heard of Lise Meitner. A native of Austria, she was the first woman to become a full professor of physics in Germany. She also helped discover nuclear fission. Yet the 1944 Nobel Prize for Chemistry for that accomplishment went solely to her long-time collaborator, Otto Hahn. Meitner battled misogyny and sexism at every stage of her illustrious career. But growing anti-semitism and the 1933 Nazi takeover of Germany were an even higher-order problem. Although she was a convert to Lutheranism, her Jewish heritage endangered her. With the help of friends, Meitner was able to flee in 1938 to neutral Sweden, where she was safe but scientifically isolated. "I can never discuss my experiments with anyone who understands them," she wrote to fellow physicist Hedwig Kohn. In "Sisters in Science," Olivia Campbell tells the intertwined stories of Meitner and three other notable, but lesser known, women physicists from Germany: Kohn, Hertha Sponer and Hildegard Stücklen. Only Kohn was Jewish, but the Third Reich's hostility to women academics cost the other two jobs as well. All three eventually made it to the United States, where they pursued their careers and continued to support one another (and Meitner too). Kohn, the last to escape, didn't make it out of Europe until 1940. She endured two months of arduous travel through the Soviet Union and Japan and across the Pacific Ocean, barely surviving the ordeal. Theirs is an inspiring tale, and well worth telling — all the more so because, as Campbell notes in her dedication, so many other women academics were murdered by the Nazis. "Their absence haunts this book; the rippling impact of their



Park Row

Sisters in Science: How Four Women Physicists Escaped Nazi Germany and Made Scientific History by Olivia Campbell

loss affects us all," she writes. But its intrinsic interest notwithstanding, "Sisters in Science" is a sometimes frustrating read. Part of the problem is its ambitious scope. Group biography is a tricky genre. Campbell has to meld four narrative arcs: parallel at times, overlapping at others, but also divergent. A more elegant stylist, or a true adept of narrative nonfiction, might have managed to integrate these stories more seamlessly. It doesn't help that Campbell refers to her protagonists by their first names — and three of the four begin with the letter "H." Explaining the physics to a lay audience is another challenge, perhaps an insuperable one. Campbell attempts it only nominally. The idea of fission, the splitting of atomic nuclei and resulting production of vast amounts of energy, is more or less intelligible. But the accomplishments of the other three physicists, who worked in spectroscopy, optics and astrophysics, are harder to grasp. The book also would have benefited from better copy editing and fact-checking. Whatever her bona fides as a science journalist, Campbell is not at home in Holocaust history. One example: Campbell locates Dachau, the Nazis' first concentration camp, in Oranienburg, a suburb of Berlin. Dachau

opened in 1933 in the town of Dachau, near Munich. Oranienburg was actually the site of another eponymous camp and then, in 1936, Sachsenhausen. There are other errors and infelicities. Campbell continually refers to Kristallnacht, the November 1938 Nazi pogrom, as "the Kristallnacht." A more serious lapse is her anachronistic suggestion that, in 1938, Meitner feared being deported to a "death camp." Camps such as Dachau and Sachsenhausen were brutal, often murderous places, but in the 1930s, they mostly housed Nazi political opponents (some of them Jewish). Jews were not yet being deported from Germany, and the six death camps dedicated to their extermination — places such as Sobibor, Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau, all in Poland — did not become operational until the early 1940s. It is also somewhat crude, and arguably inaccurate, to say that Kristallnacht "exposed the Nazis' true agenda for the Jewish people: they wanted them all dead." Despite the growing virulence of anti-Jewish persecution, that goal was not yet clear, and not yet official policy. In fact, though some were killed, most of the 30,000 or so Jewish men rounded up and taken to concentration camps during Kristallnacht

were released on the condition that they emigrate. Presumably Campbell is on firmer ground elsewhere — in noting, for instance, the difficulties that women scientists faced in Germany, including fights for pay, lab space and recognition; and in emphasizing the ways that they, and a few sympathetic male colleagues, helped one another endure, flourish and eventually escape. When she first became Hahn's assistant in Berlin, for example, Meitner was exiled from the main lab and stuck in a basement workshop with no nearby restroom. She ultimately rose to head the physics department at Berlin's Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Chemistry, a post she retained even after her Nazi-era dismissal from the University of Berlin. Some male scientists were dead set against women. Others, such as Max Planck, welcomed collaboration from only the most exceptional of their female peers. One heroic supporter of women in science was the Nobel laureate James Franck. A German Jew, he resigned his post at the University of Göttingen before he could be fired, emigrated to the United States via Denmark, and was later instrumental in aiding colleagues, including women, who remained behind. Franck and Sponer, his onetime assistant, were especially close — both friends and scientific collaborators. After a stint at the University of Oslo, Sponer accepted a position at North Carolina's Duke University in 1936 and began working with Edward Teller, the eventual creator of the hydrogen bomb, "on the vibrational excitation of polyatomic molecules by electron collisions." Only after Franck's wife died in 1942 did his long-germinating romance with Sponer come to fruition. He remained at the University of Chicago, and she at Duke. But in 1946, he married, and in Campbell's sympathetic telling, experienced true happiness amid the sorrows around them.

JULIA M. KLEIN is a cultural reporter and critic in Philadelphia.

Lise Meitner helped discover nuclear fission. She and her colleagues had to escape the Third Reich's hostility to women academics.

OPINION

BOOKS & IDEAS



CHRIS RATCLIFFE/Bloomberg

American way of work reflects our history and current realities

By Chris Vognar

FACTS AND figures go a long way toward illustrating America’s long-standing obsession with the virtues of hard work, and “99% Perspiration.” Adam Chandler’s mischievous mix of travelogue and social analysis, has plenty of both. For instance: A 2023 economic opportunity poll by Gallup found that 39% of Americans believed that they were failing to get ahead despite working hard. And: According to census data, more than 10% of nonelderly Americans (27.4 million) went through 2020 without health insurance (compared with 0.0% in all other industrialized countries). The numbers are not kind, but they’re not the main thrust of Chandler’s book. That’s a good thing, regardless of whether you subscribe to the old maxim about “lies, damn lies and statistics” (attributed by Mark Twain to British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli). This is a very human book about the roots and consequences of a very American dilemma: the belief that old-fashioned elbow grease will get you anywhere you want to go.



“99% Perspiration,” which takes its title from a quote attributed to Thomas Edison — “Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration” — is more than a mere diagnosis. It’s also a far-reaching study of how and why national myths are propagated and a ground-level account of the way we live and work now. It is, as they say, a good read, wrung from troubling realities. Chandler, a former staff writer at the Atlantic and the author of “Drive-Thru Dreams: A Journey Through the Heart of America’s Fast-Food Kingdom,” ventures into the past and the present, the real and the fictional, seeking insight into why we devote so much time and energy to work, at the expense of everything else, and with ever-decreasing dividends. He dips into the country’s origins, and how foundational American thinkers like Benjamin Franklin saw hard work as a shared trait in a collection of colonies with little else in common. As Chandler writes, “America’s industry-obsessed, kite-in-a-thunderstorm lifestyle was one of the few things that united the various divided factions of America’s founding set.”

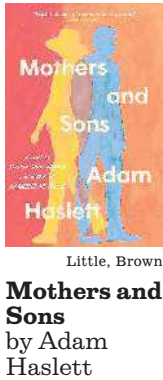
He pokes at the cruel irony of a nation that preaches the rewards of sweat equity but was built largely on the punishing, dehumanizing labor of slaves. And he explores the inherent vagueness and selectivity that define the notion of “American exceptionalism,” a concept that requires more and more cognitive dissonance the more it is pulled apart for analysis. It’s fair to say that Chandler makes digressions and detours, and you may find yourself occasionally asking: Where are we going here? Then he playfully connects the dots, not always cleanly, but definitely with verve, and usually with good humor. A stop in Oklahoma proves especially fruitful. First he visits with Arshad Lasi, who, along with his Indian immigrant parents, established the most successful running cannabis concern in Tulsa, an endeavor that taught him more about how business works than business school ever did. Chandler also visits a community that was rewarded for its bootstrapping grit with death and destruction: Greenwood, Tulsa’s “Black Wall Street,” which was burned to the ground by resentful

white neighbors in the 1921 Tulsa race massacre. Then he ventures to Pawhuska, where “a confederation of villains” cheated and murdered the Osage community out of its oil money, an outrage chronicled in David Grann’s book “Killers of the Flower Moon” and its 2023 movie adaptation. The lesson here is hard to miss. The extent to which hard work is rewarded has often depended on who’s holding the power and the gun. There’s an element of social Darwinism to the work-work-work ethos, a hard-heartedness that Chandler connects to the likes of the eugenicist and longtime president of Stanford University Ray Lyman Wilbur. “It is common talk that every individual is entitled to economic security,” Wilbur once wrote. “The only animals and birds I know that have economic security are those that have been domesticated — and the economic security they have is controlled by the barbed-wire fence, the butcher’s knife, and the desire of others. They are milked, skinned, egged or eaten up by their protectors.” And if figurative dehumanization isn’t enough, there’s always the literal kind. The author has some fun with a chatbot at a Hardee’s drive-through — for Chandler, it all comes back to fast food — setting out to stump it with a fairly simple request that it can’t accommodate. When a human being takes over for the machine, Chandler seems not just happy but palpably relieved. “I actually like it,” the human, named Kristi, says of the chatbot. “It’s very helpful when we’re short-handed.” There are alternatives to the eternal grind, and from an American perspective they seem downright radical. In 2016, the French Parliament passed a law designed to give employees the right to not respond to work-related communication after business hours. This is on top of the longtime legal mandate to take a lunch break. Yes, Chandler journeys to Paris, where he takes a tour dedicated to the popular Netflix series “Emily in Paris.” The show is about a go-go American who brings her can-do spirit to the City of Lights, whose denizens are a bit put off by her lack of chill. “You live to work,” chides Luc, a co-worker. “We work to live!” Touché, Luc. Now if you’ll excuse me, I must check my email. CHRIS VOGNAR is a freelance culture writer.

Noble jobs help a family avoid connection, for a while

By Mary Ann Gwinn

PETER FISCHER buries his personal demons in work, work and more work. An immigration lawyer in Manhattan, his job is one long emergency: He advocates for asylees seeking legal standing and safe harbor in America. Success means a new and far more secure life. Failure means deportation. Peter’s mother, Ann, has taken on another bottomless vocation, though in more serene surroundings: She runs a spiritual retreat in Vermont aimed at helping women — discouraged, alienated or traumatized — achieve a sense of community and self-worth. She has a gift for getting others to connect with their pain, even as she buries her own. Both are deeply invested in a life of service. Both share a secret. And for both mother and son, a reckoning is coming. In “Mothers and Sons,” acclaimed novelist Adam Haslett tells the story of this pair with acute empathy and insight. The author of three previous works of fiction, two of them Pulitzer Prize finalists, (2016’s “Imagine Me Gone” and 2002’s story collection “You Are Not a Stranger Here”), there’s no better writer at chronicling the highs and lows of familial love. In “Mothers and Sons,” Haslett shows a family both torn by past trauma and battered by the social turmoil of the present. For Peter, the demon that drives his workaholicism lies in his past: As a teenager, he wrestled with submerged desires and eventually realized he was gay. Then, in the middle of his father’s and mother’s split over Ann’s love for another woman, Peter’s crush on the enchanting and charismatic Jared went catastrophically bad. Ann’s decision to leave her husband both fractured the



family and ended her vocation as an Episcopal priest. Peter’s job blocks his memories and serves as an excuse both to avoid entangling relationships and to turn down Ann’s invitations to meet. Every case demands a cram course in the politics of his client’s country of origin and the abuse that led him or her to flee. In immigration court, a missed deadline can mean arrest and deportation, and deportation can be fatal for those who are political refugees. There are children whose lives may be wrecked, and clients who despair of their case’s outcome and simply disappear. Peter is the last line of defense for clients from Honduras, Russia, Nepal and Albania. Haslett has a law degree and has done volunteer immigration work, and I have never read a more informed and vividly rendered account of Peter’s daunting profession, a job that in real life seems likely to become more punishing with the incoming presidential administration’s promised crackdown on immigration. Peter endures the pressure, until Vassel, a young Albanian refugee who was almost killed for being gay, pierces his defenses and revives Peter’s long-ago trauma. He begins to make mistakes, and mistakes can have life-altering consequences. Like Peter, Ann is a helper, and like Peter, her idealism tends to blind her to everyday demands. Peter recalls bitterly: “My father could be dying in the other room, yet still it was the printed word that absorbed her. As if this life — our life — were an interruption of the real meaning of things.” The viability of the retreat center depends on Ann and her partner, but their hard-won serenity is threatened when Ann becomes attracted to another woman.

The mother and son seem destined for a permanent estrangement, but six years after their last meeting, Ann’s home is where Peter heads when his vulnerability and isolation turn physical. He slowly moves back toward his family. It’s not an easy passage, as each peels back layers of sadness, guilt and resentment in search of long-buried affection. At times the members of this family interrogate their own and others’ motives so harshly, I longed for a little more gentleness. Peter’s sister Liz, a free spirit with a toddler and a gamer husband, provides comic relief from the knives-out quality of some family encounters. I would have welcomed more of her, and more of the quotidian of both Peter’s and Ann’s lives. A subplot about one of Ann’s Revolutionary War ancestors who is complicit in genocide doesn’t really go anywhere. But Haslett’s portrayal of Ann and Peter is matchless, and other mother-son pairs echo the ferocity of their bond: Vassel’s fiercely protective mother; a Honduran client whose son will do anything to protect her; Liz and her exuberant little boy; Jared and his stylish, enigmatic mother. Despite avoidance, blame and accusations, a spark of longing for reconciliation survives. “Mothers and Sons” documents an emotional odyssey that in the end feels satisfying and real, and Haslett’s account of Peter’s life is unparalleled in its portrayal of a worker on the front lines of our immigration wars buckling under the weight of his burden. He and Ann both vividly portray the costs of selflessness at the expense of the self. In the end, the chronicle of this complex mother-and-son pair satisfies one of the best reasons to read fiction: to understand others and their impossible burdens, to mourn when they stumble and celebrate when they survive. MARY ANN GWINN, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who lives in Seattle, writes about books and authors.

An acclaimed novelist shows a mother and son torn by past trauma and battered by the social turmoil of the present.

Prisoner Homecoming Project expands to L.A.

[**Homecoming**, from A1] anything like this when my brother was in and out of prison.”

Given profiles of three prospects, her choice was easy. A loner who spent most days in his room didn't feel right. A smoker was a hard no.

The third might have seemed the least likely fit. Nicholas Nabors murdered a convenience store clerk during a robbery when he was 16. He was paroled after serving just under 30 years of a 34-years-to-life sentence.

But there was something about him that appealed to Adams. He had earned an AA degree and thrived in his work in prison making vehicle tags. He had met his fiancée through prison correspondence. He had a job on a maintenance crew with the California Department of Transportation.

“His core seems to be good — a person who has dreams and vision and hope to move his life forward,” she said. “He just needs a little assistance to do that.”

::

The Oakland-based Homecoming Project was launched in 2018 by the national nonprofit Impact Justice, whose mission is investing in community-based models of justice reform.

The project has placed 157 former inmates in Bay Area homes. After their six-month stays, none of the 130 who have so far graduated has returned to prison.

With a grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and funds from the California Workforce Development Board, the Homecoming Project branched out to Los Angeles earlier this year. Adams was the fifth volunteer to answer its call. The L.A. program is serving six former inmates; two have graduated and six more are signed up to begin in January.

The project is funded to add more than 80 participants next year, up to half in Los Angeles, to provide a model for addressing the high rate of post-incarceration homelessness.

A study by the Prison Policy Institute found that about 2% of formerly incarcerated people were homeless. That's about three times the rate for the general population in Los Angeles County and 10 times the national rate, and means that the prison system could be adding hundreds of people a year to the state's homeless population.

Homecoming Project director Bernadette Butler acknowledges that the scale of the effort to date is not going to provide a significant alternative to the system of group homes contracted by the state to support the reentry of 35,000 to 40,000 inmates released from California prisons annually.

Butler sees the project as a demonstration: “We are showing the world what is possible.”

::

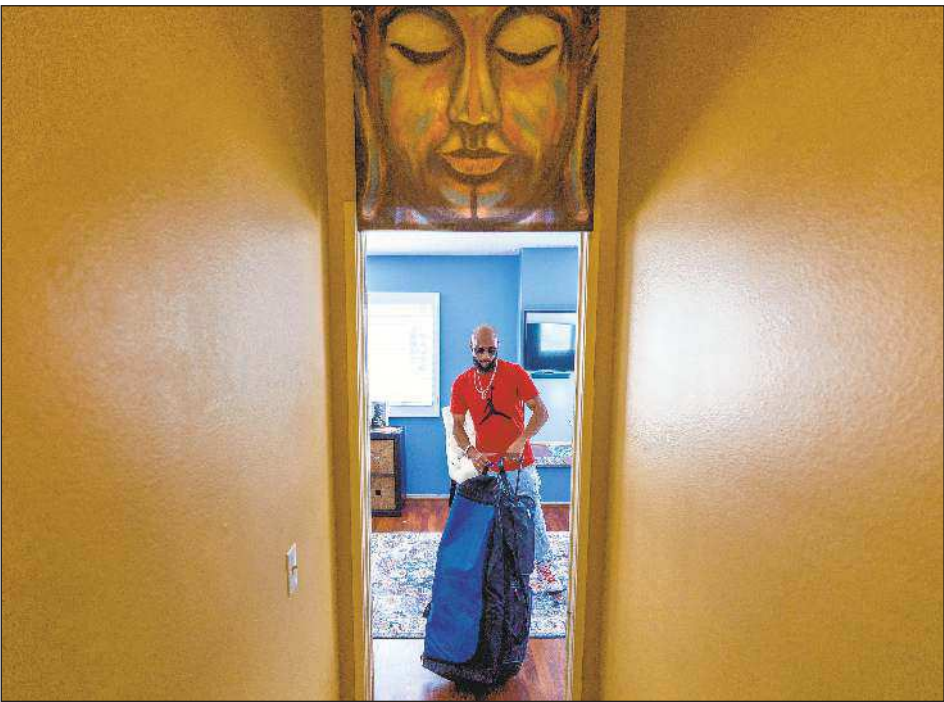
Nabors had no immediate family to turn to when he was released. He was prohibited from contacting his younger brother, who had joined him in the fatal robbery; and was strongly advised by the parole board to stay away from his mother, who had given him the gun used in the robbery and then made national news by testifying against him in his trial.

Paroled to Los Angeles, Nabors spent 90 days in a drug rehabilitation program near MacArthur Park. Even though he said addiction was not a problem, he completed the program as required and then moved to a transitional home in South Los Angeles.

After six months, his funding from the state STOP program expired, and he had to start paying \$750 in rent for a shared room.

At a low point, he turned to the Los Angeles office of the Center for Employment Opportunities, one of four organizations that partner with the Homecoming Project. They got him the Caltrans job, and a staffer saw his potential and referred him to the Homecoming Project.

Three months later, Nabors moved into the four-



NICHOLAS NABORS, who served 29 years for killing a store clerk when he was 16, has thrived since he moved into Nancy Adams' Compton home in October.

bedroom home in a gated community just east of Compton City Hall. On move-in day, he and Adams exchanged thoughts on what had brought them together and what might come of it.

“I don't have to live in a house by myself anymore,” Adams said. “That's a good thing.”

Her own experience with redemption also surfaced.

“The part of my life of being a Christian, a practicing Christian — you got to step out of your comfort zone and do something differently,” she said.

She did when her brother showed up and asked for forgiveness.

“You know sincerity when you see it,” she said. “He apologized for all the things he did to us as a family.”

She let him in and cared for him the last four and a half years of his life as he died of renal disease.

“That freed me up tremendously. I don't think I would be doing this if my brother hadn't done that.”

Nabors articulated his hope for the program as if he had already experienced it.

“It put me in normal envi-

ronment,” he said. “It allowed me to live with someone who wasn't system-orientated; they weren't going to look at me necessarily as an inmate ... I was going to be treated as a normal person. I was going to have freedom and have the space to grow and figure out exactly who I was outside of prison. Traditional programs don't necessarily do that.”

A month later, both described an evolving relationship that was closer to roommates than landlord-tenant. They don't spend a lot of time together. He leaves for work in the morning; she leaves for her job before he returns.

“The thing with Nick is he's just such a cool guy and he's easy to talk to,” Adams said.

More reflective than he was on Day One, Nabors delved into his own journey.

“I did something horrible at 16, and for the next 30 years, whenever I tried to identify myself, the picture that they had was at 16. It's a fistfight, it's a brawl, to get anyone to see you as anything other than that.”

“And for me, I mean, it's been a struggle, but at this point, I feel like it's empower-

ing for me just to embrace it.”

::

Nabors' self-awareness is not the exception for Homecoming Project clients, Butler said. All must have served at least 10 years, giving them time to reflect and to complete three required rehabilitation programs. Many have had life sentences reduced — a subgroup that has a recidivism rate under 3%, the lowest of all released prisoners.

The parole process, in which only 14% of petitions are granted, is “an incredible first layer of screening,” Butler said. Candidates are further screened informally by parole officers and staff at partner organizations such as the Center for Employment Opportunities who make referrals.

In the balance between clients and hosts, there are always more clients, Butler said: “There's never going to be a shortage of people leaving prison. Our growth is contingent on recruiting hosts.”

The Homecoming Project provides hosts a stipend of \$8,600 for the six months.

To make the best matches, it also preps hosts with details of their future guest's past, including psychological assessments of their potential future criminal behavior.

Nabors' profile had one complication: that he was engaged. But that was also a strong point. He credits much of his character development to his nine years of correspondence with his fiancée, whose privacy he asked to be respected.

“People kind of discredit the idea that you have a relationship in prison,” he said. “Well, the truth is that you communicate more when you're in prison, because that's all that you have. I challenge any guy to tell me that he's written his wife a 37-page letter ... and that you've read her 35-page letter in return, and took time to literally go line by line and understand what she was saying and then respond to what she was saying, not necessarily how you felt.”

He said writing through his emotions, and reading through hers, caused him to reflect in a much deeper way:

“What am I angry about? So I have to go back. I have to read her letter. OK, what did you say to make me feel so mad? But in that, what we're doing is that we're practicing active listening.”

Now, she and her teenage daughter are welcome guests on weekends. Once the six-month program ends, Nabors plans to build a business with her to operate transitional housing for ex-prisoners.

The couple married Nov. 11 in a ceremony attended by his former supervisor at the Prison Industry Authority, but not his mother.

“I've atoned for those things. I've done my time. I've explored my life,” he said. “I've gained insight and all those things that we need to do in order to become a better person. My mother hasn't done that.”

Adams took a longer view of Nabors' relationship with his mother:

“I know it's not a good thing right now. ... But at some point before he leaves this earth, he gonna want to see that woman.”

HOME
IMPROVEMENT
ENERGY
PROGRAM

Clean energy programs provides energy efficient upgrades, Earthquake protection and necessities protection to your home.

0 upfront costs.
Save up to 65% on your annual energy bills,
Federal Taxes & Improvement Rebates for qualified upgrades,
Limited time offer: Up to 18 months, 0% APR for qualified upgrade,
No pre payment penalty,

Roofing

Double pane windows

Earthquake retrofitting

Foundation repairs

Heating and cooling systems (HVAC)

Artificial turf, pavers, concrete

Attic and wall insulation

Solar panels

Exterior paint

Rewiring

Repipe and much more

Renewable energy law Sb-100 now requires utility companies to help California Residents lower their electric, gas, and water bills. With the federal government, ITC extended through 2033; homeowners can be eligible for a rate reduction program to lower their utility bills and appreciate their property value.

ASSESSED CLEAN ENERGY

CALL US NOW FOR
PRE-QUALIFICATION
+1(888)-373-5960

Limited
Available
Funds

CALIFORNIA

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2024 :: LATIMES.COM/CALIFORNIA



Cities warned against shielding migrants

Trump advisor's letters tell officials they must let federal agents enforce laws.

By RUBEN VIVES

California officials, along with dozens of others across the country, received letters last week from Stephen Miller's nonprofit, America First Legal, warning them of consequences for interfering with or impeding immigration enforcement.

Miller has been named President-elect Donald Trump's deputy chief of staff for policy. In a written statement, the nonprofit said it had sent 249 letters to elected officials in states and cities with sanctuary policies.

The officials who received the letters include Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass, Los Angeles Police Department Chief Jim McDonnell, San Diego County Supervisor Nora Vargas and California Atty. Gen. Rob Bonta, among others.

The letters, all dated Dec. 23, state that people living in the country illegally are subject to removal and that it is a crime to conceal, harbor or shield them.

California has emerged as a major opponent as Trump vows mass deportations of people who are here illegally. During the last Trump presidency, numerous cities declared themselves sanctuaries for immigrants. The letters, while not directly connected to the Trump transition team, underscore the coming clash over immigration.

"As Attorney General, on December 4, 2024, you stated that the State of California will not enforce federal immigration laws, encouraging defiance by all California jurisdictions," the letter to Bonta reads in part. "... This rhetoric illustrates the State's intent to blatantly violate federal law. Such lawlessness subjects you and your subordinates to significant risk of criminal and civil liability. Accordingly, we are sending this letter to put you on notice of this risk and insist that you comply with our nation's laws."

"The fact of the matter is that you and the other officials who support or enforce sanctuary laws, policies, and regulations have a very personal stake in the matter — you each could face criminal prosecution and civil liability for your illegal acts," the letter concludes.

The notices come as Trump's incoming "border czar," Tom Homan, the former acting director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, suggested on Fox News that city officials who don't help the administration deport people living in the country illegally could face criminal charges.

"If you knowingly conceal or harbor an illegal alien from a police officer, it is a felony," he said. "To impede a federal law enforcement officer is a felony, so don't cross that line. We've got a strong [attorney general] coming in, Pam Bondi, and we will present these prosecutions, so you know, don't test us."

Bonta issued a statement Friday calling the threats "a scare tactic, plain and simple. The statement goes on to say that California lawmakers adopted Senate Bill 54 in 2017 to ensure that no state and local resources are used to assist with federal immigration enforcement."

"While we are unable to comment on the specifics of the letter, we want to be clear: SB 54 was upheld by the courts during the first Trump administration, and it prevents the use of state [See Immigration, B6]

It's all in the details

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN VAN DER BRUG

Susie Fundter, above, glues dried flowers on a tiger depiction Thursday at the Rosemont Pavilion in Pasadena. The tiger is part of the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance's float for the Rose Parade, which will be held in Pasadena on New Year's Day. At right, Val Peacock and Heath Swan work on details of the Lunar New Year-themed Love 2 Yeu float, "Journey of Dreams."



Lives improved by LGBTQ+ influences

Readers share personal vignettes in response to Our Queerest Century, a special project

By KEVIN RECTOR

For Dakota, a 17-year-old transgender high schooler from the San Gabriel Valley, it was an older trans girl at school who made the difference — who helped ease Dakota's loneliness and give her hope.

"It really just let me know that, OK, I'm not alone in this. There are other trans people. They exist," Dakota said. "If she's real, maybe I can be real, too."

Judith Webb, an 89-year-old grandmother raised in a progressive Hollywood film family, said she inherited her parents' acceptance of LGBTQ+ people early in

life. "I was 'woke' when I was 10 years old," she said.

Today, she cherishes visits at her San Pedro mobile home with her gay grandson and his husband. During one, he played the piano for her for an hour. During another, they went for an early-morning walk in the rain as his husband slept in.

"We had my little dog with us. It was the first time I'd really had a chance to chat with him since they were married," she said. "He's just an absolutely great kid."

In the past year, LGBTQ+ people have become a favorite punching bag of the political right — including President-elect



TONY VALENZUELA speaks with Times staff in October on their project Our Queerest Century.

Donald Trump, whose campaign spent millions on anti-transgender ads and who has promised to roll back transgender rights during his second term.

Misinformation about queer people — and especially queer youth and their healthcare — has spread, thanks in part to Trump, his followers and some of his recent picks for administration posts.

But across the country, Americans are also interacting with, getting to know and learning to love LGBTQ+ people like never before. Queer communities are growing and thriving, the average American knows more [See Retrospective, B4]

High-speed rail project trains workers and provides jobs

The Central Valley Training Center offers a pathway to a trade for regional residents.

By MELISSA GOMEZ

SELMA, Calif. — When Teresa Bynum first heard the high-speed rail was coming to California, her family blasted the project and was staunchly against it.

Bynum, 30, of Riverdale

said her father remained opposed to the project as it took over farmland and pushed out agricultural companies. Over the years as the future of a high-speed rail wavered with decades-long delays and soaring costs, it was lampooned as a "boondoggle" and the "train to nowhere."

But after losing her husband of 10 years, Bynum struggled to find seasonal jobs to pay her bills. She wanted stability, and the Central Valley Training Center, which offered a 12-week

pre-apprenticeship program funded by the High-Speed Rail Authority, offered a pathway to a trade that could lead to one day working on the rail.

"The minute I said I want to do high-speed rail, I mean, they lost their s—," she recalled. "And it was like, the jobs are there. It's happening. Whether you like it or not, you might as well capitalize on it."

Bynum graduated from the 12-week program — the only woman in her class — earlier this year with six cer-

tificates and landed a job with a prefabricated housing company after attending a job fair hosted by the center.

Although she doesn't work for the rail today, Bynum said the training she received at the Central Valley Training Center paved the way for her to radically alter her life: Her income tripled, and she was able to move out of her parents' home with her three children and buy a car.

Even as the financial crisis and the Trump adminis-

tration have added to the uncertainty of the project's future, the state and federal governments have invested more than \$11 billion in the project, and it has generated \$18 billion in economic output that has gone toward the Central Valley and state, authority officials have said.

Although it might be seen as a debacle elsewhere, the high-speed rail has become a symbol of economic promise for the Central Valley, which would be the first region served by the rail if the [See Center, B8]

CITY & STATE



CHRISTIAN PONDELLA Associated Press

SKIERS head upslope at Mammoth Mountain this month. Sunday's winds could hit 70 mph at the summit.

Mammoth Mountain geared up for heavy winds this weekend

BY SANDRA McDONALD

It's always a good idea to bundle up at Mammoth Mountain, but anyone hoping to get in some holiday ski runs may want to consider some additional layers.

A storm forecast to hit this weekend is expected to bring strong winds with gusts of up to 70 mph at the mountain's summit, according to the National Weather Service.

A high-wind watch has been issued for most of Sunday, with sustained winds of 40 to 45 mph expected along with the more powerful

gusts. A new snow layer of 1 to 2 inches is also possible — welcome news for those looking to hit the slopes before ringing in the new year.

But while conditions are likely to be blustery, visitors shouldn't expect the same sort of scene depicted in a viral video that's been making the rounds on social media. That video, which was posted on X on Christmas Day, showed hundreds of skiers lining up for a ski lift while being pelted by snow and wind.

However, the video was originally posted on Instagram more than a week earlier — and was taken at a

time when most lifts had been closed due to wind gusts up to 100 mph at the mountain's summit, Mammoth Mountain spokesperson Emily van Greuning told SFGate.

Jake Baisley, who took the original video, said it was on the fourth day of his first trip to Mammoth Mountain.

"The conditions were pretty crummy," he said, "lots of rocks showing and the lines were long on the weekends."

Despite the wind and lines, he'll likely head back to Mammoth, he said, adding that the area is good for van life.

Other than that now-viral moment, Van Greuning said, the busy holiday season has been going as expected.

The Eastern Sierra ski resort has seen a good turnout so far this season, which usually starts in November and ends in May. With 3,500 acres available for skiing, there's not much concern for crowding on a typical day, Van Greuning told The Times in an email Thursday.

Last year's season extended into August for only the third time in the resort's seven-decade history, when the main lodge saw a record 60 feet of snow.

Connecting more girls with STEM

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

High school senior Katie Kee didn't always enjoy studying STEM coursework, although she puts it a little more bluntly.

"I basically hated STEM," said Kee, referring to the acronym for science, technology, engineering and math.

Today, she feels different. She sits in a space at the Girls Inc. of Orange County headquarters in Santa Ana, where staff members are busy putting up red and silver decorations.

Kee and other graduates of the organization's Grad Lab college readiness program will celebrate later in the evening with an awards ceremony. With help from Girls Inc., Kee has made it her mission to break down the barriers that prevented her from enjoying STEM earlier in her educational journey.

"The middle school that I went to only let kids in the gifted and talented program that had these really high test scores take STEM classes like programming and engineering," Kee said. "I wasn't ever identified as one of those students and it gave me the mentality that you have to be really good at standardized testing to succeed in STEM."

There is also a notable gender gap in STEM. According to the American Assn. of University Women, men outnumber women in most STEM fields in college, and women make up 34% of the workforce in that set of related industries. Engineering and computer science are two of STEM's most lucrative fields, but they remain heavily male dominated.

Gender stereotypes that insist boys are better at math and science than girls persist, and such thinking can deter girls from even considering exploring a career path in the STEM industries, according to researchers.

"It wasn't until my freshman year AP Computer Science Principles class that I saw I was actually not bad at this subject," Kee said.

Kee is enrolled in the computer science program called Global Information Technology Academy at



DON LEACH Times Community News

JESSICA CUNIFFE, center, welcomes students in the Grad Lab college readiness program at the Girls Inc. of Orange County headquarters in Santa Ana.

Brea Olinda High School and is a member of the first graduating class of the AP Capstone program.

She also completed an eight-week internship with Boeing in Huntington Beach.

Girls Inc. is a nonprofit organization dedicated to equipping girls like Kee with the skills and resources to reach their full potential. Part of that mission means working to close the gender gap in STEM by introducing it to girls at an early age.

"A lot of the work that we do and the time that we spend is providing opportunities for exposure to STEM. It is really important," said Lucy Santana-Ornelas, chief executive officer at Girls Inc. of Orange County.

"Girls might not have many people around them that are in those STEM fields or careers," Kee said.

Kee said participating in the Girls Inc. Grad Lab program helped empower her to take on the challenge of STEM.

"Girls Inc. really helped me realize the power of females bonding together and the importance of the female voice; in STEM in general it is predominately male influenced," Kee said.

She said there are few young women in her Global Information Technology Academy class.

"There are only five girls, including me, out of a class of 35 students," Kee said. "Girls Inc. really helped me realize the power of that community."

Girls Inc. of Orange

County also offers STEM-focused programming itself such as Imagine Science Fun-gineering, STEM Success and a Robotics program that teaches coding and allows students the chance to program an NAO humanoid robot using Choreographer software.

"We also have our Eureka! program, which is a four-week summer camp for middle school girls that has different aspects of science and technology every summer," Santana-Ornelas said.

During the Eureka! program, hands-on activities include themes such as robotics, biomedical engineering, theme park design and a CSI (crime scene investigation) week, with girls using evidence to solve a camp "crime."

"The opportunity to experience [STEM activities] without fear in a girl-only environment that is supportive — that is important," Santana-Ornelas said. "What we hear from parents is about how their daughter used to be very quiet and shy but [after being in a STEM program] she is talking up a storm about things she is learning."

Kee was inspired to make change herself by launching Stem Stitch, a nonprofit organization promoting social justice in STEM education.

"I started it sophomore year because I wanted to bridge the gap that I had in STEM education when I was younger," she said. "We are a completely remote organi-

zation, but we have had such an impact on younger students."

Kee's nonprofit helps connects young girls with STEM opportunities such as fellowships and high school STEM internships. It also connects with undergraduates from MIT and Columbia to mentor them.

"I have had alumni come back and say, 'The community that I have met here has been so amazing, and I have started my own initiatives in my area,'" Kee said.

She is now preparing for the next phase of her education, with Grad Lab helping her with the college application process. She hopes to get accepted to UCLA, where she plans to pursue a degree in a STEM-related field.

"I am currently looking at a career in cybersecurity, which combines law and ethics with computer science," Kee said.

Creating a safe space for young girls to test out STEM activities helps them feel more at home in industries that typically count them out, leading to young women like Kee finding their true passion, according to Santana-Ornelas.

Kee hopes her work will inspire other girls.

"When I was in middle school, I was afraid to try STEM because I was told I couldn't do it, but if you try you might find out you are really interested in it or you are really good at it," she said.

"Maybe like me, you won't ever look back."

Scammers send phishing texts to motorists

Fraudulent messages warn ExpressLanes users of a legal threat, financial penalties.

BY ANDREW J. CAMPA

A phishing text message warning of a legal threat and financial penalties has been hitting users and even non-drivers of Los Angeles County's Metro ExpressLanes.

The spam has led to a flood of complaints from Metro ExpressLanes users, who have been calling the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority seeking verification and advice, Metro authorities have noted.

Metro officials said they posted a warning about the fraudulent text messages on their homepage as soon as they became aware of the scam.

"The ExpressLanes system has not been hacked, and no customer information has been compromised," the message said.

Metro ExpressLanes are restricted lanes on the 10 and 110 freeways that motorists can use to speed past traffic on regular lanes. Users pay tolls that are based on dynamic pricing that adjusts according to the level of traffic. The tolls are collected through a FasTrak transponder mounted on a vehicle's dashboard.

Metro could not confirm how many messages have been sent out, the number of complaints they received or when they believed messages were first sent.

"Metro ExpressLanes reminds customers that we never send text messages asking for sensitive information or requesting payment," a statement from Metro read. "If a text message claims to be from Metro ExpressLanes regarding tolls or violations, do not respond to the message, do not use any links in the message, and do not use any contact information provided in the message."

The Federal Trade

Commission classifies phishing as a type of scam in which targeted users receive a communication such as an email or text message that appears to be from a well-known source, such as a company or agency.

The message asks the user to enter personal information that the scammer will use to open a bank account, for instance, or cause some other financial harm to the individual scammed.

The FTC also asks consumers to avoid responding to the messages.

The scam messages in question have been telling receivers to pay their FasTrak bill by a specific date in order to "avoid excessive late fees and potential legal action on the bill."

A phishing link is provided that should not be clicked on. In several cases, the phone number from which the text message originates is multiple digits longer than a U.S.-based 10-digit number.

Metro officials have said they believe the scammers have been targeting individuals through various area codes and have been hitting FasTrak drivers and non-users alike.

There are 25 miles of ExpressLanes throughout the 10 and 110 freeways, according to Metro, with 1.6 million transponders assigned to county drivers and 342.1 million trips made this year as of early November.

The FasTrak pass can also be used outside of Los Angeles, such as on the 405 Freeway in Orange County, the 10 Freeway in San Bernardino County, the 15 Freeway, which cuts through San Bernardino and Riverside counties, and several other express lanes.

As for the scams, they've hit motorists in various areas from San Francisco in March to Sonoma County in April and San Diego in July.

State Atty. Gen. Rob Bonta issued a statement on July 1, urging Californians not to click on the link in the texts. "Scammers are often quite literally in our pockets, just a text away," he said.



LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times

METRO officials say they believe the scammers have been targeting FasTrak drivers and non-users alike.

Mega Millions player hits \$1-billion jackpot in year of few winners

BY CLARA HARTER

A Mega Millions lottery ticket sold at a Shasta County gas station hit the estimated \$1.22-billion jackpot on Friday, officials said.

The ticket was sold at Sunshine Food and Gas, at 3505 Rhonda Road in Cottonwood, the California Lottery announced.

The winning numbers were 3, 7, 37, 49, 55 and the Mega number 6, with a 3x "MegaPlier."

The identity of the winner was not immediately known. They will have the option to receive their winnings in a series of payments over 30 years or as a lump sum cash payout of roughly \$549.7 million. Winners typically take the cash option, according to lottery officials.

The jackpot is the fifth-largest prize in Mega Millions history and comes at the tail end of a year with unusually few jackpot wins, according to the the lottery.

Prior to Friday night, the jackpot had been won only three times in 2024, the fewest wins in any single year since the game began in 2002.

"Congratulations to our \$1.22-billion jackpot winner from California," Joshua Johnston, lead director for the Mega Millions Consortium, said in a statement. "What an amazing present this holiday season!"

The jackpot had been growing since Sept. 10, when a player won an \$810-million prize from a ticket sold at a gas station in Sugar Land, Texas. It marks the seventh time the Mega Millions jackpot has surpassed the \$1-billion mark.

The prior 6 billion-plus jackpots have all been won in different states — South Carolina in 2018, Michigan in 2021, Illinois in 2022, Maine and Florida in 2023 and New Jersey in March, according to the lottery. The game's record \$1.6-billion jackpot was won in Florida in 2023.

LGBTQ+ readers join a reflection on 100 years

[Retrospective, from B1] about transgender people, and queer kids are coming out earlier and to wider acceptance.

Young people identify as LGBTQ+ today at the highest rates in history — dwarfing the number in prior generations.

The hyperpoliticization of LGBTQ+ issues is part of a broader backlash to that expansion of LGBTQ+ knowledge, understanding and community. In some parts of the country, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment is robust and getting stronger. But such retrenchment of queer rights is not the only LGBTQ+ trend at work.

LGBTQ+ Americans are also having daily positive influence in the lives of those around them — strengthening America's acceptance of LGBTQ+ folks along the way.

Readers respond

In June, The Times ran “Our Queerest Century,” a retrospective look at the vast and indelible contributions of LGBTQ+ Americans from 1924 to 2024.

Queer issues had swept to the center of the nation's political discourse, and a slew of anti-LGBTQ+ laws had been proposed nationwide. Efforts to erase queer people — to ban LGBTQ+ books, drag queen performances, gender-affirming healthcare and the mere mention of LGBTQ+ identities in schools — were cropping up all over.

The project placed those shifts within the broader context of our shared LGBTQ+ history. It included essays by queer writers on the contributions of LGBTQ+ people since the 1924 founding of the nation's first known gay rights organization, and a news analysis of a national poll on LGBTQ+ issues today — which showed that people who know someone queer are less likely to hold anti-LGBTQ+ views.

The project also asked readers to tell us how queer people had positively influenced their lives, and dozens wrote in, mostly about their own loved ones — their LGBTQ+ uncles and aunts, cousins and siblings, children and grandchildren and friends.

“You couldn’t find more kind, loving and fun relatives if you searched the whole



CRAIG LOFTIN asks a question during an October discussion with Times staff on Our Queerest Century, a special project published this summer to chart LGBTQ+ progress in America. Queer communities are thriving, despite political attacks from the incoming president.

earth,” one respondent wrote.

Another wrote that her LGBTQ+ family had “normalized the issue” for her simply by being “who they are, real people, with real lives, real emotions, real feelings, just like the rest of us.”

A third wrote that her queer loved ones had taught her “to be less judgmental and more curious, not just about sexuality, but about many other human differences, such as race, family structure, faith, etc., and to put myself in other people's shoes.”

‘Hope for the future’

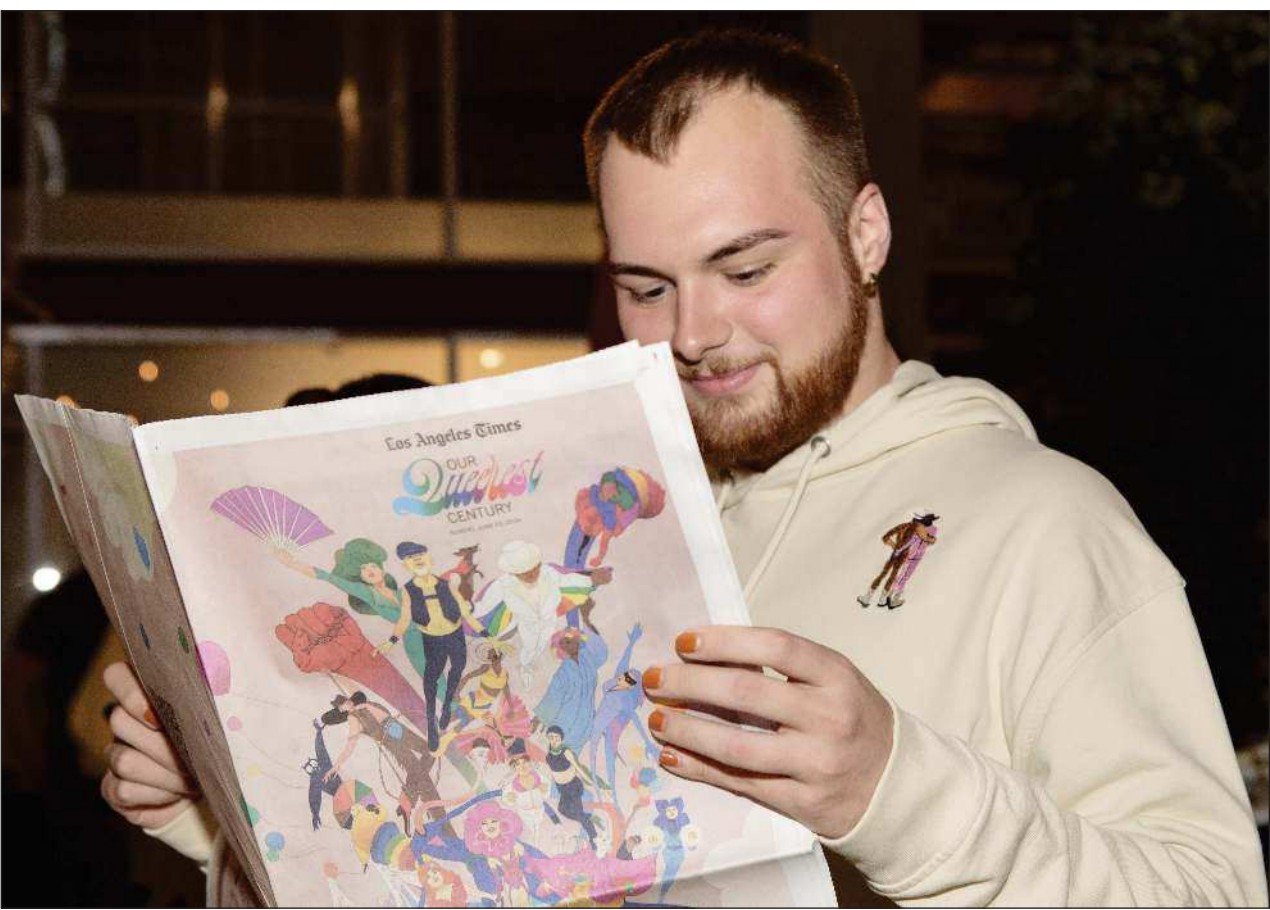
Dakota — whose full name is being withheld to protect her safety — was the youngest respondent. She wrote about the “out-and-proud trans girl” at her school — who was also popular and nice — becoming “an instant role model” for her.

In a recent interview, Dakota said this election cycle has been “absolutely crazy” and “very frightening” given Trump's use of “a lot of anti-trans rhetoric.”

Her mother said it's been “terrifying as a mom of a trans kid,” too. “I try to have reassurance with the California wall we basically have — the metaphorical safety wall for all marginalized groups — and I just don't know how strong that's going to be two, four years from now after Trump unleashes whatever tsunami of hate he's going to release.”

Dakota said she is especially scared for her fellow trans Americans in red states, but doesn't want to be hung up on feeling down — because there's too much else to life.

She's been accepted so-



TREVOR LADNER reads the project in print. The special section included essays by queer writers on the contributions of LGBTQ+ people since the 1924 founding of the nation's first known gay rights organization.

cially at school, where peers have no problem with her pronouns. She's applied to colleges — all in California — and is excited about starting a new and more independent chapter. She plans to major in political science after loving a high school course and seeing the importance of this election.

“I wish people understood that being trans doesn't define who we are as people,” she said, “because we're still normal people and there's so much else going on in our lives.”

Webb was the oldest respondent. She wrote to The Times that she was grateful for her “long exposure” to the queer community, which began with a gay friend of her parents who visited often during her childhood.

Webb wrote of being a homemaker before working at USC for decades, where she became friends with gay graduate students, and now being “the grandmother of a talented, delightful, successful grandson” who is “married to an equally delightful young man.”

In an interview, Webb recalled the morning walk and the impromptu piano concert. She also noted a post-election visit, where they had a “really good conversation about what's going on in the world” and her grandson reassured her he is happy.

“He's just the most positive person,” she said.

A strong foundation

Jennifer Moore, a transgender woman in her late 60s, called Trump's victory and the anti-queer rhetoric being espoused by him, some of his nominees and other Republicans “crushing” and “a nightmare.”

Queer support groups are advising transgender members to make sure their driver's license and passport are up to date, and to consult their doctors about stocking up on transition medica-

tions, she said.

She feels lucky to live in California, but has friends who are considering fleeing less progressive states or the country overall — or already have.

Against that backdrop, Moore said it has been helpful to reflect on the country's long history of queer progress — which she said was captured by “Our Queerest Century,” but also exemplified by The Times' decision to publish it.

Moore said she first started reading The Times as a kid in 1968 and was “always searching for information” about queer people like her in its pages, but only ever found negative things.

That The Times today would publish a lengthy celebration of queer accomplishments “was just incredible,” she said.

Moore wrote to the paper that three LGBTQ+ people had greatly helped her in her journey to transitioning in the last decade: a lesbian former Catholic nun who told her she would be “miserable” until she was authentic, a fellow trans woman who talked her through the first steps of transitioning and a gay co-worker who welcomed her on an AIDS charity bike ride and showed her that there is a whole world full of out, happy queer people.

“The bravery and normality of these three LGBTQ folks taught me it was OK to live freely and authentically,” Moore wrote.

Owen Renert, 24, an associate marriage and family therapist who works mostly with queer clients, said they decided to write in after their grandmother, a longtime LGBTQ+ ally who marched for AIDS awareness in the 1980s, gave them the “Our Queerest Century” section.

“She brought it to lunch, and was like, ‘Here, it's gay, you should look at it,’” Renert said with a laugh.

Renert, who is nonbinary, wrote that having queer friends and mentors “dramatically shifted” how they view the world and helped tremendously in understanding their own queer identity — from “learning how I wanted to dress as a teen to finding safe places to enter life as an adult.”

In an interview, they said many of their clients have voiced a similar need to be “surrounded by queer people” since the election, and “Our Queerest Century” was a good reminder that there is a strong foundation for such community to build on.

“It's going to be work, [but] that has always been the case,” Renert said. “We've been able to do that.”

The century ahead

Tony Valenzuela, executive director of the One Institute — one of the nation's oldest LGBTQ+ organizations and a partner with The Times in hosting an “Our Queerest Century” event in October — said highlighting queer history is “incredibly important” today, given the stakes.

“Our work will be even more urgent and necessary, to remind people that it is at times where we're embattled, when we're attacked, that both our creativity comes out, but also when we organize, when [we] understand the importance of coalition,” he said.

Valenzuela said queer leaders are eager to use this moment to build out queer networks, including by using the tactics of queer activists at the start of the AIDS epidemic.

“There were activists on the streets. There were folks who were working at the policy level. There were folks who were [in] science and public health. There was this huge growth in the way we fundraise for our nonprofits. There was a call to rich peo-

ple, frankly, to step up,” Valenzuela said.

Craig Loftin, an LGBTQ+ scholar and history lecturer at Cal State Fullerton, agreed that queer history “provides all of the responses to the right wing politics and the Trump rhetoric” that are needed today — which is why it must be taught.

It is full of hope and triumph.

Years ago, Loftin uncovered and published for the first time a collection of letters that readers had submitted in the 1950s and '60s to One Magazine, an early gay rights publication founded in Los Angeles in 1952.

As with the responses to “Our Queerest Century,” they came from all over the country, he said. Somewhat to his surprise, they were filled with as much hope and love as sadness and fear.

“I was braced for gloom and doom, and I found myself riveted and inspired by how these people were existing in that environment and, despite it all, finding happiness, finding love, finding meaning,” Loftin said. “There was still a sense of humor. There was still a sense of hope. There was still a kind of affirmative spirit that taught me as a queer person that, no matter what we're facing now with Trump and all this rhetoric, we faced much worse in the past.”

“Our Queerest Century” provided a similar reminder “of the sheer abundance of LGBTQ history” that queer people and their allies can draw on as they chart a path forward today, he said.

“In the wake of Trump's election, in the wake of the storm that is brewing and already starting to rain on us, we need to do a lot more [to] get this history out there,” he said. “For me, knowledge of the past is the path forward.”

NYE EXCLUSIVE
RED CARPET VIP EXPERIENCE

PREMIUM NEW YEAR'S EVE

CLUB TAKE OVER
BOTTLE SERVICE
VIP STAGE ACCESS
SUPERCAR MEET
WIN BIG PRIZES
FINE DINING
VIP EXOTIC CAR RALLY

PREMIUM EVENTS
949-217-3517
premiumevents.co

BUSINESS & PROFESSIONAL SERVICES DIRECTORY

Los Angeles Times
MARKETPLACE

To advertise in this directory, go to
www.latimes.com/placebpsdad,
or call 1.800.528.4637, ext.72769

LEGAL SERVICES

WORKPLACE RIGHTS

- Discrimination
- Harassment
- Wrongful Termination
- Retaliation
- Disability
- Pregnancy Leave

NO RECOVERY = NO FEE

Call for FREE Consultation
310-273-3180

KSJM
Kesluk, Silverstein,
Jacob & Morrison
ATTORNEYS AT LAW
9255 Sunset Blvd., #411, L.A., CA 90069
www.californialaborlawattorney.com

THE LATINX FILES

OUR CULTURE. OUR VOICES.

A newsletter about being Latinx in the U.S.

Reflections on culture, news, sports and politics from members of The Times' Latinx community.

Sign up now.
latimes.com/latinxfiles

Los Angeles Times

PHOTOGRAPH BY NICOLETTE JACKSON-POWNALL

Family sues over fatal shooting by sheriff's deputy

Officer is accused of failing to de-escalate in 2023 confrontation with mentally ill man.

By SALVADOR HERNANDEZ

The family of a 50-year-old man with mental health issues who was shot and killed by a Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy at a Valencia mall last year is suing the department, alleging the deputy failed to de-escalate the situation and call for backup before the deadly shooting.

Relatives of Christopher Mercurio allege in the lawsuit filed Wednesday that sheriff's officials failed to recognize that Mercurio was having mental health issues at the time of the Jan. 11, 2023, confrontation at Westfield Valencia Town Center.

"Instead of deploying a team that could de-escalate the situation, or calling for the Mental Evaluation Team, they sent one single officer to handle the situation," the lawsuit states.

Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department officials did not immediately respond to a request by The Times for comment.

Body camera video of the incident shows Deputy Lorena Gonzalez responding to the mall that night after authorities received a call about a transient sleeping there, according to the lawsuit.

Video previously released by the Sheriff's Department shows the incident quickly escalated, with Mercurio threatening Gonzalez after she approaches him near a parking lot.

"I'm going to sleep right here, so you can do what you want to do," Mercurio said. "Either protecting the fan or I'm going to f—destroy your f—human being, understand?"



L.A. County Sheriff's Department

CHRISTOPHER MERCURIO was killed at a mall in Valencia.

Mercurio makes comments about Iran and China, and describes himself as "security for the whole country" before appearing to reach for Gonzalez.

In the lawsuit, Mercurio's family asserts that it was clear he was having mental health issues.

In the video, Mercurio walks toward Gonzalez while the deputy points her handgun directly at him and tells dispatchers she is in a fight. Mercurio appears to continue walking and then reaches toward Gonzalez, despite being told to stop.

"Get off me," she is heard saying in the video. "I'm going to shoot you, dude."

"Shoot!" Mercurio is heard saying, before Gonzalez fires her weapon twice.

Video shows that Mercurio continued walking toward Gonzalez after the first shot.

Mercurio was later pronounced dead at a hospital. Gonzalez was treated at a hospital and released.

The lawsuit asserts that Mercurio was not armed at the time and did not threaten she approaches him near a parking lot.

"There was no possible way ... [for Mercurio] to cause any harm to Defendant [Gonzalez]," the suit alleges.

Mercurio's family is seeking an undisclosed amount in damages.

Santa Clara County child welfare chief says he will resign

The agency had faced scrutiny over the fentanyl-related death of a child.

By RUBEN VIVES

The director of Santa Clara County's child welfare agency, which drew intense scrutiny after the fentanyl-related death of a 3-month-old infant that brought to light the agency's troubling practice of keeping children in unsafe homes, announced recently that he is resigning.

Damon Wright, who became director of the Department of Family and Children's Services several months after the infant's death in May 2023, said in a letter to his staff that the recent death of his father prompted his decision to accept another position in Southern California, the Mercury News reported.

Wright, who previously served as assistant director of the agency, which is responsible for investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect throughout the county, said he believed it had made significant strides over the last year toward "enhancing workplace practices that prioritize child safety."

"I firmly believe that by adhering to the pathway forward we have laid out for safe children and safe communities, we can continue to uphold the safety of our vulnerable populations during this transition and beyond," Wright's letter read in part.

Santa Clara County Supervisor Sylvia Arenas issued a brief statement after Wright's announcement, saying she wished him well in his new job and that she remains "committed to continue working with the County's Administration and the Department of Fam-

ily and Children's Services on the reforms we started together."

Wright's resignation comes roughly a year after the agency came under the eye of Bay Area News Group, which launched an investigation into the agency following the death of Phoenix Castro, a 3-month-old infant who died from ingesting a lethal dose of fentanyl and methamphetamine in San José.

The newspaper found that hospital officials notified the child welfare agency amid health concerns for Phoenix.

The baby had been experiencing withdrawal symptoms related to her mother's drug use during pregnancy, the news group reported.

Despite a warning from a social worker who was already overseeing the case of the couple's two older children, the welfare agency allowed the infant to be sent home.

Phoenix's father, David Castro, 38, is currently facing a felony child endangerment charge in connection with the case.

The infant's mother, Emily De La Cerda, 39, died four months after her daughter's death, from a fentanyl overdose.

As part of its investigation, the news group found other drug-related deaths of infants.

It also learned that a state investigation of the local welfare agency found that Santa Clara County's legal team was often overriding recommendations from social workers and supervisors to remove children from unsafe homes.

The legal team's influence, the news group reported, was part of the county's shift to keep children with their families but also placed children in harm's way.

Wright said in his letter that his resignation will be effective Jan. 17.

Obituaries

Rostyslav Balah

Rusty was born on April 19, 1942, in Berdyansk, Ukraine, and died July 1, 2024 after a short illness. He was preceded in death by his parents, Anna and Vadim Balah, and is survived by his son Nikolai Balah and his daughter Tania Balah.

He grew up and perfected his English in Monterey, CA, and after serving in the Artillery in Vietnam he graduated from UC Berkeley, worked for the State of California for several years, and then received his master's degree at USC.

He worked as a reference librarian at Los Angeles Public Library for most of the next 30 years, where his exceptional senses of humor, whimsy, and inclusiveness consistently raised both morale and alertness to the jobs at hand and the world in general among staff one and all. His knowledge of and interest in the depths and potential of the Central Library research collection was more than thorough, yet he carried it lightly. Rusty was a casual poet both at work and at home, and many a library event was celebrated with his doggerel verses and other flights of imagination.

In his personal world as well he was protective of life in all its forms. His humans found themselves poised in tender and often humorous hands, while they came to perceive that he was much more shy than he seemed. He loved to play tennis, and his reflexes were such that he could catch in mid flutter the most apparently erratic moth or gnat who had strayed indoors toward a hot light bulb and carefully deliver it back to safety. He attracted and cared for stray animals, and among the many plants he collected his heart was most with those in need of revival. He, too, could have used more time to blossom .. true of us all?

G. Patterson

Cramer

December 22, 1946 - November 30, 2024

Pat Cramer was a born and bred Santa Monican. He made his way through Santa Monica schools and retained many friends from then until he died in Santa Monica.

Pat grew up riding his bike to deliver newspapers, body surfing, playing tennis and baseball.

Known in his youth as the "home run king," he once hit 3 home runs in a game, one being hit out of the park, across Olympic Blvd., and into the wall of a bar. His after-game treats were at the (former) Sweet 16, or Foster's Freeze.

Pat's first departure was for college at UC Santa Barbara. Next was NYC to teach a year of 6th grade in East Harlem in the Teacher Corps program. Back in Santa Monica, he began his career with the Los Angeles County Real Estate Dept. He spent 11 years working in most of that department's dealings, becoming adroit in the negotiating of buying, selling and leasing county buildings.

Early in his career, Pat was in the single young adults' group at Bel Air Presbyterian Church which had weekly volleyball games. Also there was Peggy McDowell, just finished with her M.S. from UCLA. That connection grew and resulted in their marriage at that church 6/10/1972. They raised their family there and remain members.

Pat briefly worked with a private apartment management company but went into solo buying and selling of apartment buildings soon after. As an adult, Pat was the go-to expert in the SM apartment business. He championed apartment-to-condo conversions, which allowed many renters to become first time owners.

Pat is survived by his wife Peggy, children Chris (Irene) and Hillary, two grandchildren, and brother William (Cherry). There will be a formal, adults only memorial service on Sat., Jan. 11, 2025, at 11 AM, at Bel Air Presbyterian Church, 16221 Mulholland Drive, LA 90049, with a reception immediately following.

To place an obituary ad please go online to: latimes.com/placeobituary or call Ms. Phillips 1-800-528-4637 Ext. 77242



Frank Long DEMOND

April 3, 1933 - November 21, 2024

Frank Demond, beloved husband, father, and jazz musician, passed away peacefully at his Newport Beach home at age 91. He began playing New Orleans jazz in high school and formed jazz combos at Pomona College. After Army service, he built homes as a small owner-builder.

In the late 1960s, he performed at Preservation Hall and joined the Preservation Hall Jazz Band in 1971, launching a global career as its trombonist. Frank shared the soul of New Orleans jazz with audiences worldwide.

He enjoyed tennis, sailing, swimming, chess, backgammon, and card games and was a devoted Dodgers fan.

Frank's humor, kindness, and love for family and friends were unmatched. He is survived by his wife, Christy; children Ted, Bailey Slater (Michael), Kevin McNulty, Ryan McNulty (Kelly); and grandchildren Morgan (Max), Conrad, Samantha, and Mason. He was preceded in death by his son Jackson, former wife Dorothy, parents, and siblings.

Frank's music, joy, and love remain his enduring legacy.



Stories live on. Tell theirs.

placeanad.latimes.com/obituaries

Los Angeles Times

In partnership with Legacy.com



Don't let the story go untold.

Share your loved one's story.

placeanad.latimes.com/obituaries

Los Angeles Times

In partnership with Legacy.com



David Allan Duke

With great sadness we announce the passing of David Allan Duke on April 30, 2024 at the age of 85. Born December 4, 1938, he was a life-long resident of Los Angeles, the son of Fannie and Joe Duke and the brother of Jerome Duke, all of whom predeceased him. He is survived by his cherished wife Julia, son Lawrence, daughter Andrea (Eric), and the loves of his life, his grandchildren Sophie, Meili, Tristan, Bryce, Scarlett, and Rini, as well as by his beloved brother-in-law and sister-in-law (George and Nancy) and much loved nephews and nieces, Brian, Courtney, Emily, and Jacob.

David attended 54th Street Elementary and later Dorsey High School. Beginning piano studies as a toddler, he began studying the French horn at the age of eleven. He graduated with a B.A. in Music from UCLA where he enjoyed participating in many musical endeavors including the marching band. Some of his most cherished memories of those years were of the great times he shared with his Alpha Tau Omega fraternity brothers, traveling with the band, and enjoying life in the vibrant city.

David's prolific career as a respected and sought-after French hornist in the Los Angeles recording industry spanned over five decades beginning in the late 1950s. His distinguished career saw him performing across a multitude of genres on hundreds of recordings with such performers as Frank Sinatra, the Carpenters, John Denver, Sony and Cher, Quiet Riot, Prince, and many others. His motion picture work added to his enduring legacy, and included working with composers such as Bill Conti, John Williams, and Jerry Goldsmith. He especially enjoyed his 23 years performing in the Academy Awards orchestra, which was also enjoyed by his wife as she loved seeing him in his tuxedo. He was a great advocate for his fellow musicians, a steadfast friend in the recording studio and out, and was most proud of the music they all created together.

David was a fun soul who took on many passions. He was an avid golfer, achieved Master status as a bridge player, loved hiking and fishing in the Sierra Nevada, cheering on the Bruins and the Dodgers, and more than all other pursuits, loved being a private pilot who flew dozens of missions for Angel Flight West during his retirement years.

A loving father and grandfather, David will be remembered for his sense-of-humor, inquisitive mind, and above all, his faithfulness and loyalty to those he loved. No discussion about David would be complete with noting that food was his love language, reminding us that people who share food give you their heart.

His family wishes to thank his oncology team at Cedars Sinai for their kindness, compassion, and concern and his final team at Providence St. John's for their care during his last days.

His departure comes as a great wound, and is deeply felt by his entire family and so many others who loved him in his communities. David's private burial took place at Hillside Memorial. In the words of Rabbis Jack Reimer and Sylvan Kamens, "For as long as we live they too will live; for now they are a part of us, as we remember them."



Beverly Beyette Graber

Beverly Beyette Graber, age 91, passed away on December 20, 2024. Beverly is survived by her son, Brett Bennett, stepson David Graber, and David's two children Emma and Nicolas Graber. In addition to being a loving and supportive member of her family, Beverly was also a distinguished journalist and author who, over many decades, interviewed luminaries such as Rosa Parks, the Beatles, Ronald and Nancy Reagan, Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter, and many others. Beverly Graber began her long journalistic career with The San Diego Union and then became a staff writer for over 30 years at The Los Angeles Times. Beverly wrote a column called "Around Town" and journeyed all around the world while writing for the Times' travel section. She co-wrote the best-selling book "Brain Lock" with Dr. Jeffrey M. Schwartz for people who suffer from obsessive compulsive disorder. The book, first published in 1996 and updated in 2016, is still in print and has helped thousands.

Beverly loved to help others and contribute to her community. After retiring from the Times, she worked as a volunteer at the Getty Center, St. John's Hospital, The Skirball Center, Los Angeles International Airport, and the Annenberg Community Beach House. Her family and friends will remember Beverly fondly as a classy, intelligent, and warm individual who touched the lives of many.



Marianne Karibian

Marianne Karibian (née Bauer) passed away peacefully in her home in Sherman Oaks in the early hours of Dec. 16. She was 90 years old.

Marianne was born in the small town of Pirmasens, Germany, in 1934, where she lived with her parents and three brothers. Her early childhood was marked by wartime deprivation and hiding in the dark as bombs dropped on Pirmasens. After WWII, she had a son, Norbert, at the age of 19 and began an apprenticeship at a hair salon, which would be the foundation of a longtime career as a hair stylist in Toronto and later in Los Angeles. While living in Toronto, she gave birth to her daughter, Lisa. The family moved to Sherman Oaks in 1967 and shortly afterward bought a house with a splendid view of the San Fernando Valley where she would live until her death.

Marianne worked for 60+ years at the prestigious Gene Shacove and Louis Michael hair salons in Beverly Hills. A devout Catholic, she regularly attended St. Francis de Sales church in Sherman Oaks and, after retiring, would attend mass there daily.

She loved to garden — her landscaping was widely admired in the hillside community — and spend time with her family. She was kind and generous to all, and strived to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ throughout her life.

Marianne is succeeded by her son and daughter; her brother, Roland; her grandchildren, Lauren and Melissa; great grandchildren, Jackson and Julia; and "adopted" sister, Carol.

Marianne was laid to rest in Holy Cross Cemetery in Culver City, where she rejoined her husband, John, on Dec. 23.



Robert Stephen Roth

Robert Stephen Roth, a Los Angeles businessman and philanthropist with a characteristically broad smile, an unbounded sense of optimism, and an unwavering strength, died on December 19 at Hoag hospital in Newport Beach, California, at the age of 80 years old.

Bob grew up in Los Angeles, attending University High School and the University of California, Berkeley for undergraduate education before attending its school of law. After practicing law, Bob joined his father to help lead World Oil Corporation, a company founded in 1937 with the purchase of a single gas station on the corner of Florence and Normandie in South Central Los Angeles. Through the leadership of Bob and his brother Steve, the company grew beyond gas stations to incorporate recycling, oil refining and transportation businesses. In 1987, well ahead of his time, Bob transformed World Oil into a leader in environmental sustainability through the acquisition of Demenno Kerdoon, now the largest recycling business of its kind in the western United States. Over the past several decades, Bob and Steve steadily grew World Oil Company into one of the largest privately held companies in California.

Bob similarly devoted himself to his philanthropic efforts through his family's foundation. In part inspired by his successful heart transplant surgery in Los Angeles in 2007, Bob dedicated himself to heart health initiatives, serving as a long-time member of the board of Hoag Hospital and making transformational gifts to support Hoag's Advanced Heart Failure Program, its endowed chair program, and the Georgia & Robert Roth Pavilion. He similarly endowed a wing at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles for research and treatment using advanced heart technologies. Bob was committed to supporting a variety of other causes, including Wilshire Boulevard Temple, the Hoag Hospital Foundation, and the University of Southern California where he served on the Gould School of Law Board.

Despite his business success, Bob is perhaps best remembered for his warmth and kindness. From an early age, growing up as the middle son among three boys, Bob exuded a unique charm. His mother recognized this, so before approaching her intimidating mother-in-law's home, she would send young Bob ahead to the doorstep where he would perform a tap dance and a song. He was irresistible, and he never failed to soften his usually stern grandmother, making it safe for the rest of the family to enter. Bob's off-tempo dancing and singing would continue until the very end of his life, and so would his natural ability to connect with others.

Bob's grace, charm and unyielding optimism never faded. Even in the most challenging moments, he would beam his signature smile and declare with conviction that he would live to be 120—just as old as Moses. With all his strength and determination, it was hard not to help but believe he just might defy expectations, before ascending to his proverbial "gas station in the sky."

Bob is survived by his wife Georgia, brothers Steve and Richard, children Melissa (Triedman), Jennifer (Kaufman) and Andrew, stepsons Chris and Bill (Deuchar), and grandchildren who cherish and find solace in all the wonderful moments they shared with him.

Memorial services will be held on Sunday, January 12th at 10:30 am at Wilshire Boulevard Temple, located at 3663 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90010. In lieu of flowers the family asks that donations be made to the Hoag Hospital Foundation in the name of Robert "Bob" Roth, www.hoaghospital-foundation.org.

To place an obituary ad please go online to: latimes.com/placeobituary

Honor a life

To place an obituary ad please go to latimes.com/placeobituary

or call 1-800-234-4444

Los Angeles Times

Stories live on. Tell theirs.

Share your loved one's story. placeanad.latimes.com/obituaries

Los Angeles Times

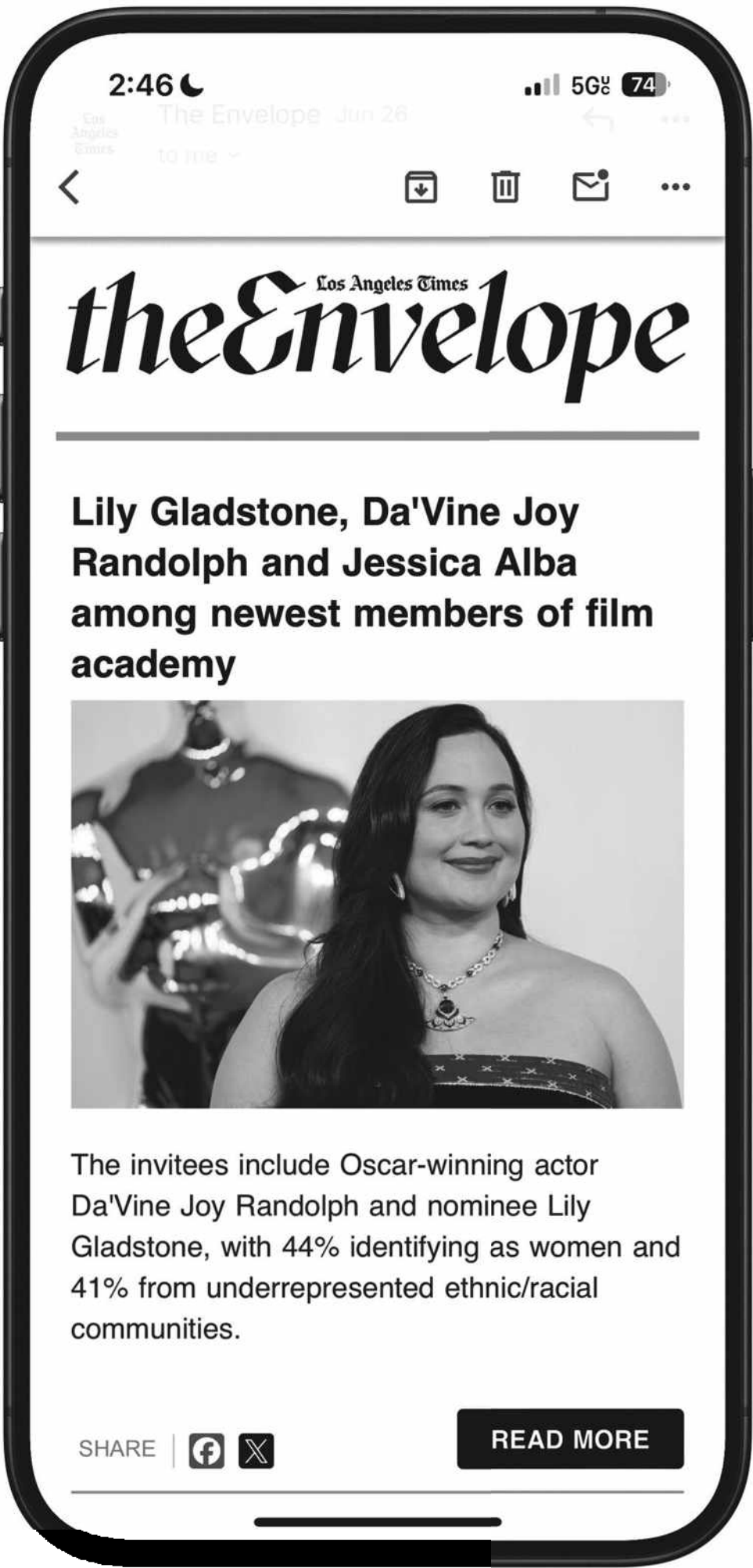
In partnership with Legacy.com



Los Angeles Times

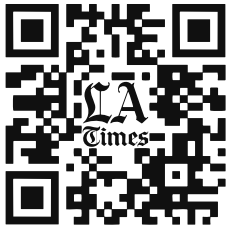
theEnvelope

■ NEWSLETTER



All things awards. All year long.

Stay on top of awards season year-round with **The Envelope Newsletter** — a weekly digest of curated articles and “best bets” for everything from the year’s most talked-about TV to the most groundbreaking films. Plus, each week during awards season, get commentary, predictions and behind-the-scenes insights from columnist Glenn Whipp.



Sign up FREE. Scan the code or visit latimes.com/the-envelope

Today in Southern California

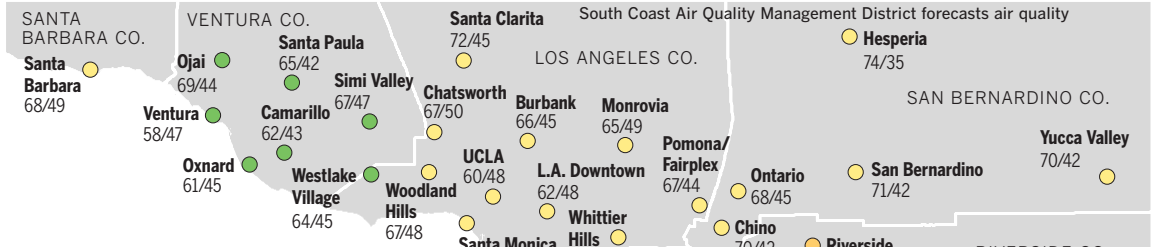
Partly sunny after clouds and fog: Aside from low clouds and patchy fog to start, there will be sunshine Sunday, but a weakening front coming south could bring a little rain as far south as Santa Barbara County in the late afternoon. Building high pressure aloft and at the surface to the north will start to produce some gustier north and northeast winds the first half of the new week, with the fire risk rising.

5-day forecasts

High/low temperatures are average forecasts for entire zone.

	L.A. Basin	Valleys	Beaches	Mountains	Deserts
Today	62 48 Partly sunny; cool	66 50 Mostly sunny	58 48 Partly sunny; cool	62 28 Mostly sunny; warm	76 51 Mostly sunny
Monday	Mostly cloudy 64/47	Breezy 66/49	Clouds, sun 60/46	Mostly sunny 55/26	Mostly sunny 78/51
Tuesday	High clouds 70/50	High clouds 69/49	Some sun 67/48	High clouds 54/21	High clouds 74/49
Wednesday	Sunny 75/49	Mostly sunny 72/50	Sunny 70/49	Mostly sunny 60/25	Mostly sunny 74/50
Thursday	High clouds 75/53	Mostly cloudy 76/48	High clouds 70/49	Clouding up 59/26	Some sun 78/52

Air quality



Surf and sea

POINT CONCEPTION TO MEXICO
Inner waters: Wind northwest 5-10 knots, becoming west at 10-20 knots. Seas 5-10 feet. Swell west 6 feet at 15 seconds.

Surf zone: The risk for strong and dangerous rip currents is high at all area beaches.

County	Height	Period	Direction	Temp
Santa Barbara	3-6'	15 sec	W	56
Ventura	6-10'	15 sec	W	56
Los Angeles	4-8'	15 sec	W	59
Orange	2-4'	14 sec	SW	59
San Diego	4-7'	15 sec	W	61

Tides

L.A. Outer Harbor, in feet.

Today	7:23a	6.1 Hi	12:59a	2.5 Lo
	9:34p	3.5 Hi	2:54p	-0.8 Lo
Mon.	7:59a	6.3 Hi	1:36a	2.5 Lo
	10:09p	3.6 Hi	3:29p	-1.0 Lo

UV index

Minutes to burn for sensitive people

Las Vegas, 45	Phoenix, 45
Los Angeles, 45	San Francisco, 60

California cities*

City	Sat.*			Today		Mon.	
	Hi	Lo	Prcp.	Hi	Lo	Hi	Lo
Anaheim	64	46	--	64	46	69	46
Avalon/Catalina	62	48	--	60	51	58	52
Bakersfield	64	46	--	66	48	54	42
Barstow	65	39	--	74	44	67	38
Big Bear Lake	55	28	--	62	28	56	21
Bishop	66	28	--	62	25	56	21
Burbank	64	43	--	66	45	68	46
Camarillo	61	44	--	62	43	66	42
Chatsworth	67	45	.01	67	50	66	46
China	68	41	--	70	42	72	40
Compton	61	51	Tr	61	50	65	47
Dana Point	63	51	--	59	49	61	50
Death Valley	69	45	--	72	55	71	47
Del Mar	62	49	--	58	48	61	47
Escondido	67	41	--	66	40	67	39
Eureka	58	50	.19	54	37	54	36
Fallbrook	64	43	--	67	41	69	41
Fresno	62	47	--	61	44	52	40
Fullerton	64	49	--	64	49	68	48
Hemet	71	36	--	72	35	73	37
Hesperia	66	40	--	72	36	61	29
Huntington Beach	63	51	--	58	51	62	53
Idyllwild	60	44	--	62	44	62	41
Irvine	64	49	--	63	49	67	49

Sun and moon

Today's rise/set

Los Angeles Co.	Orange Co.	Ventura Co.
Sun 6:58a/4:53p	6:56a/4:52p	7:03a/4:56p
Moon 6:09a/3:39p	6:07a/3:38p	6:14a/3:42p



Almanac

Saturday Downtown readings

Temperature	Los Angeles	Fullerton	Ventura*
High/low	64/52	64/53	55/49
Normal high/low	67/48	68/45	66/44
High/low a year ago	67/51	69/52	64/50
Record high/date	87/1919	82/2017	85/1956
Record low/date	34/2020	33/2003	33/1966

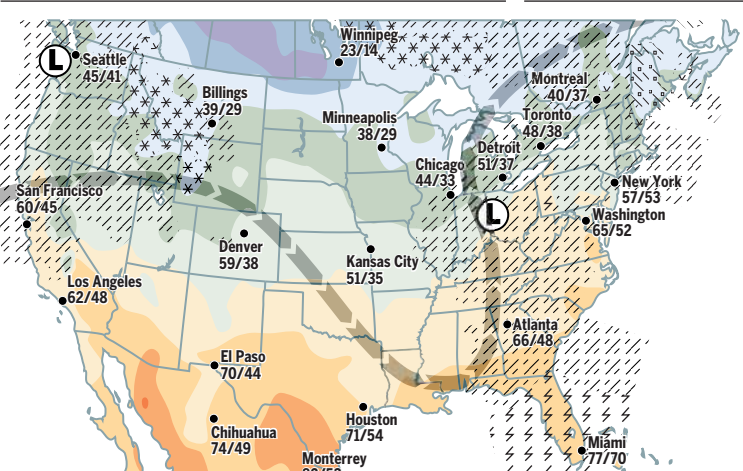
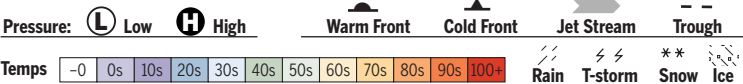
Precipitation	Los Angeles	Fullerton	Ventura*
24-hour total (as of 2 p.m.)	0.00	0.00	0.00
Season total (since Oct. 1)	0.16	0.03	0.44
Last season (Oct. 1 to date)	2.45	1.86	5.05
Season norm (Oct. 1 to date)	3.50	2.87	4.14
Humidity (high/low)	93/77	39/28	100/77

City	Sat.*			Today		Mon.	
	Hi	Lo	Prcp.	Hi	Lo	Hi	Lo
L.A. D'town/USC	63	48	--	62	48	64	47
L.A. Int'l. Airport	59	50	--	58	49	61	49
Laguna Beach	58	52	--	58	51	62	53
Lancaster	72	38	--	73	40	64	33
Long Beach	65	52	--	62	50	66	50
Mammoth Lakes	50	27	--	42	13	44	10
Mission Viejo	63	47	--	64	46	68	48
Monrovia	66	48	--	65	49	68	50
Monterey	62	51	--	60	43	56	40
Mr. Wilson	61	51	--	53	48	53	45
Needles	65	43	--	73	47	73	45
Newport Beach	62	52	--	59	52	63	53
Northridge	69	45	.01	67	49	68	48
Oakland	63	56	.02	60	42	59	39
Oceanside	70	44	--	65	43	66	41
Ojai	67	46	--	69	44	67	45
Ontario	68	44	--	68	45	70	47
Palm Springs	74	50	--	76	51	78	51
Pasadena	63	48	--	64	47	65	49
Paso Robles	64	47	--	61	40	59	32
Redding	57	55	.62	62	37	62	36
Riverside	67	35	--	70	37	73	38
Sacramento	65	53	.01	62	41	59	35
San Bernardino	70	41	--	71	42	73	44

City	Sat.*			Today		Mon.	
	Hi	Lo	Prcp.	Hi	Lo	Hi	Lo
San Diego	63	50	--	61	49	62	47
San Francisco	65	56	.01	60	45	59	43
San Gabriel	64	48	--	65	48	67	51
San Jose	67	55	--	64	43	61	37
San Luis Obispo	68	51	--	65	49	67	46
Santa Ana	64	52	--	61	50	65	49
Santa Barbara	60	45	--	68	49	65	42
Santa Clarita	74	42	--	72	45	68	44
Santa Monica Pier	58	49	--	58	48	60	46
Santa Rosa	63	43	Tr	65	42	69	43
Simi Valley	60	55	.14	61	35	59	33
Tahoe Valley	66	43	--	67	47	70	41
Temecula	47	33	Tr	40	14	38	11
Thousand Oaks	68	41	--	70	39	72	40
Torrance	63	44	.03	64	46	71	44
UCLA	62	53	.01	57	52	57	51
Van Nuys	57	48	.02	60	48	64	48
Ventura	68	44	--	69	47	73	47
Whittier Hills	56	48	Tr	58	47	61	46
Woodland Hills	61	49	--	63	47	67	47
Wrightwood	67	45	.01	67	48	69	47
Yorba Linda	63	46	--	62	44	56	35
Yosemite Valley	64	43	Tr	65	43	70	45
	54	37	--	49	26	52	21

Today in North America

Severe thunderstorms: Severe thunderstorms will roll across the Southeast with a significant risk of tornadoes, damaging wind gusts and hail. Rain, some heavy, and gusty winds will stretch northward from the southern Appalachians.




U.S. cities

SATURDAY'S EXTREMES AS OF 2 P.M. FOR THE 48 CONTIGUOUS STATES

High 91 in McAllen, Texas

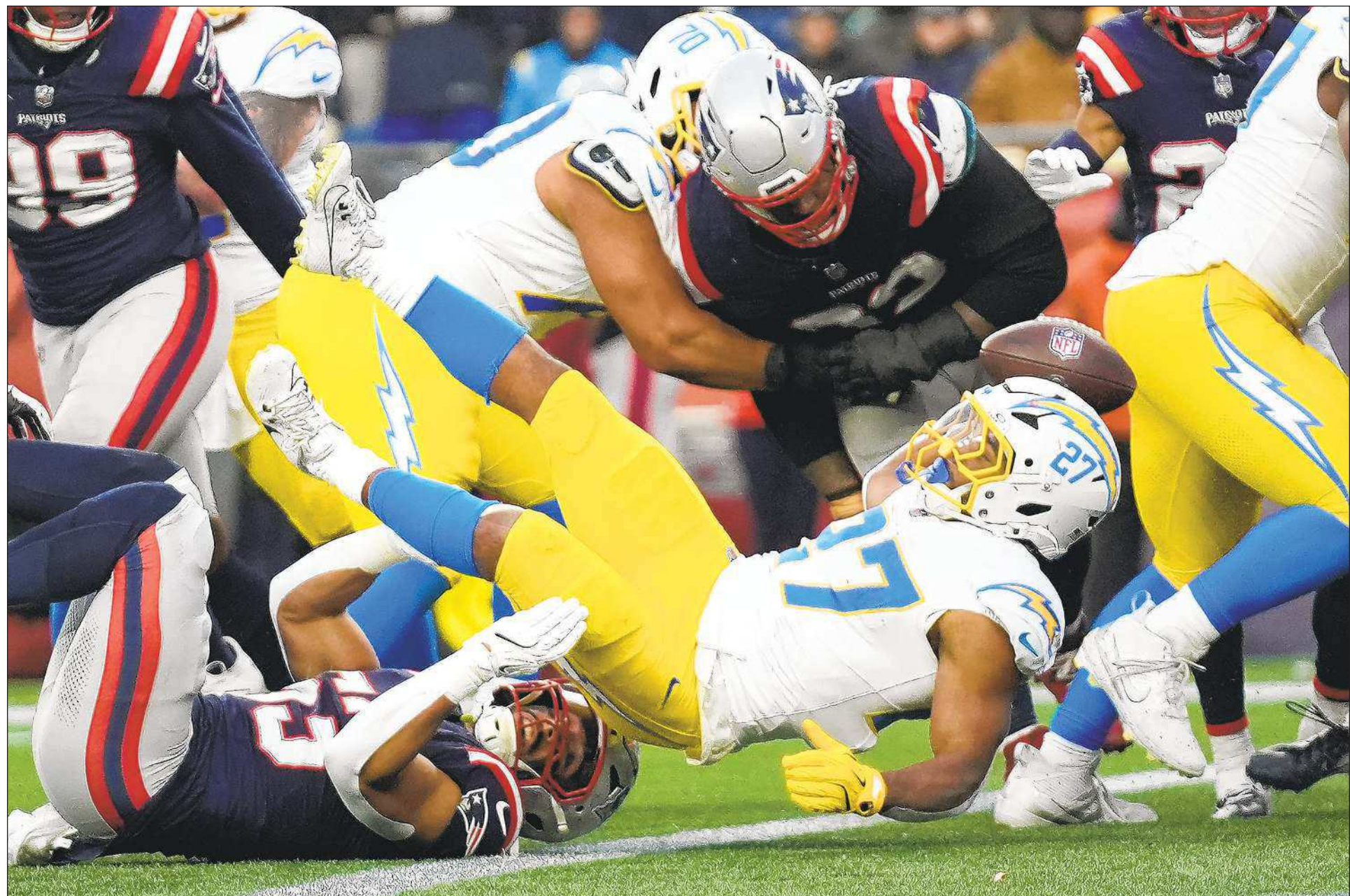
Low 2 in Daniel, Wyo.

City	Saturday*			Today			City	Saturday*			Today		
	Hi	Lo	Prcp.	Hi	Lo	Sky		Hi	Lo	Prcp.	Hi	Lo	Sky
Albany	36	20	.04	49	46	R	Seattle	49	44	.37	45	41	R
Albuquerque	55	32	--	59	37	Su	Tampa	79	67	.08	74	66	Ts
Anchorage	25	21	--	16	13	Su	Tucson	70	39	--	79	44	Pc
Aspen	35	23	.08	44	24	Sn	Tulsa	56	46	.01	63	43	Pc
Atlanta	58	47	.55	66	48	R	Washington, D.C.	51	42	.55	65	52	R
Austin	82	62	.25	74	49	Su	Wichita	58	37	--	61	38	Pc
Baltimore	49	39	.65	62	49	R	World						
Boise	45	39	.42	48	29	R	Acapulco	84	67	--	85	67	Su
Boston	43	33	.14	49	45	R	Amsterdam	47	34	.12	47	44	Cy
Buffalo	57	40	.03	58	40	R	Athens	50	41	.17	52	43	Pc
Burlington, Vt.	43	15	.02	48	42	R	Bangkok	88	76	--	88	70	Su
Charleston, S.C.	73	49	.02	70	53	R	Barcelona	57	39	--	58	40	Su
Charlotte	50	41	.37	65	46	R	Berlin	48	27	--	37	33	Cy
Chicago	51	47	.16	44	33	R	Cabo San Lucas	77	54	--	82	55	Su
Cincinnati	60	51	Tr	60	41	R	Cairo	64	52	--	67	52	Su
Cleveland	60	48	.02	62	39	R	Dubai	82	65	--	80	66	Hz
Columbia, S.C.	60	47	.29	67	48	R	Dublin	48	45	Tr	50	46	Cy
Columbus	61	47	.01	62	41	R	Havana	81	71	.02	80	68	Ts
Dallas/Ft.Worth	62	56	.22	69	52	Pc	Ho Chi Minh City	90	75	.13	90	71	Pc
Denver	51	25	.01	59	38	Pc	Hong Kong	62	57	--	66	57	Hz
Detroit	57	44	.03	51	37	R	Istanbul	48	41	.36	48	43	Sh
El Paso	67	48	--	70	44	Pc	Jerusalem	51	45	--	57	43	Pc
Eugene	54	47	.52	51	41	R	Johannesburg	76	64	.17	78	60	Ts
Fort Myers	81	67	.17	76	67	Ts	Kuala Lumpur	90	76	.21	91	75	Ts
Hartford	45	28	.08	47	42	R	Lima	76	66	--	75	66	Cy
Honolulu	82	67	.09	82	71	Sh	London	43	39	Tr	49	43	Sh
Houston	80	67	.54	71	54	Su	Madrid	52	30	--	54	27	Su
Indianapolis	59	49	.07	55	39	R	Mecca	84	63	--	84	64	Su
Jacksonville, Fla.	78	60	.04	73	58	R	Mexico City	74	44	--	72	42	Su
Kansas City	52	35	.01	51	35	Pc	Montreal	28	16	.03	40	37	R
Knoxville	57	50	.53	63	47	R	Moscow	31	28	.09	35	32	Cy
Las Vegas	62	44	--	66	46	Su	Mumbai	86	75	--	88	75	Hz
Louisville	61	55	--	64	45	R	New Delhi	61	56	.01	64	48	Hz
Medford	49	46	.38	51	34	R	Paris	43	30	--	40	35	Oy
Memphis	66	50	2.63	61	46	Pc	Prague	41	21	--	37	27	Hz
Miami	81	73	.12	77	70	Ts	Rome	58	36	--	58	36	Su
Milwaukee	53	45	.10	44	34	R	Seoul	34	19	--	43	31	Pc
Minneapolis	46	34	.41	38	29	Pc	Singapore	87	78	--	89	77	Ts
Nashville	65	55	.07	62	47	Sh	Taipei City	60	55	--	66	52	W
New Orleans	74	67	.27	71	53	Su	Tokyo	48	37	.05	55	38	Su
New York	53	40	.49	57	53	R	Vancouver	52	43	.35	45	41	R
Norfolk	74	45	--	70	55	Cy	Vienna	46	28	--	41	27	Su
Oklahoma City	59	43	Tr	64	43	Pc	Key: Su sunny; Pc partly cloudy; Cy cloudy; Fg foggy; Prcp precipitation; Dr drizzle; Hhazy Sh showers; Ts thunderstorms; R rain; Sn snow; Sf snow flurries; I ice; Rs rain/snow; W windy; Tr trace. Notes: National extremes exclude Alaska and Hawaii. * - data estimated.						
Omaha	53	30	--	49	31	Pc	Saturday's readings as of 2 p.m.						
Orlando	75	64	.02	76	64	Ts	Forecasts by AccuWeather, Inc. ©2024						
Philadelphia	49	35	.51	63	51	Cy	 AccuWeather Visit AccuWeather.com						
Phoenix	71	45	--	75	48	R							
Pittsburgh	64	46	.03	62	42	R							
Portland, Ore.	55	48	.21	50	42	R							
Providence	47	26	.05	51	48	R							
Raleigh/Durham	66	45	.02	69	50	R							
Reno	59	43	.03	52	27	Sh							
Richmond	53	43	.07	69	52	R							
St. Louis	59	42	.04	57	41	R							
Salt Lake City	48	39	.15	54	30	Sh							

SPORTS

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2024 :: LATIMES.COM/SPORTS

CHARGERS 40, NEW ENGLAND 7



J.K. DOBBINS (27) drops into the end zone for a fourth-quarter touchdown in a blowout win Saturday that secures the Chargers' first postseason spot since 2022. Photographs by Robert F. Bukaty Associated Press

ALL-IN WITH HERBERT

Chargers' evolution continues under watch of coach Harbaugh

SAM FARMER ON THE NFL

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — Jim Harbaugh loves a high-five, calls it one of mankind's great inventions. But sometimes, even that hearty gesture is insufficient.

So when the Chargers coach spotted the team's general manager slipping out of the visitors' locker room Saturday — in the wake of the club's most lopsided win in five years — he summoned him for a bear hug.

The Chargers clinched a playoff berth with their 40-7 drubbing of the New England Patriots, and Harbaugh felt the urge to wrap his arms around first-year general manager Joe Hortiz. Such is the delirium of an NFL team starting to hit its stride at the right time.

"I needed a hug from Joe," said the coach, who lured Hortiz from the Baltimore Ravens. "He's the same brilliant guy every single day. He takes no deep, long bows. But he [See NFL, D3]



LADD McCONKEY was flying high after scoring one of his two touchdowns on a day he set two Chargers rookie receiving records.

RAMS EXTRA

Saturday night's game between the Rams and Arizona concluded after this edition of The Times was printed. Visit latimes.com/enewspaper for the result of the game and latimes.com/rams for in-depth reporting, commentary and photography.



Led by 'near flawless' game by QB, Chargers clinch a playoff berth

BY THUC NHI NGUYEN

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — Late in the fourth quarter, with almost all the Chargers' starters standing on the sideline waiting out a 40-7 rout over the New England Patriots, Derwin James Jr. leaned in close to Justin Herbert. The safety had watched the way the Chargers' star quarterback stayed late at the practice facility. How he watched film immediately after getting off the team plane after road games. How he gritted his teeth through injuries to hobble around on sprained ankles this season.

James wanted to make sure Herbert knew it was all appreciated.

"I wouldn't rather have no other quarterback," James, the two-time first-team All-Pro safety, said.

Herbert played what coach Jim Harbaugh called a "near flawless" game to help the Chargers clinch their first playoff berth since 2022, blowing out the hapless Patriots (3-13) at Gillette Stadium on Saturday. [See Chargers, D3]

Seeds of Dodgers' repeat sown with Hernández

BILL PLASCHKE

If you have a bag of sunflower seeds, throw it to the sky.

Teo is back. Break out three giant claps, a dazzling smile and a deafening scream.

Teo is back. The Dodgers' heartbeat still pumps. The Dodgers' soul still stirs. The Dodgers



are still the Dodgers.

A front office that respects the team culture while listening to its fans made certain of this Friday when the Dodgers agreed to re-sign Teoscar Hernández to a three-year, \$66-million contract, keeping last season's championship hero where he belongs.

In the dugout, showering fellow home-run hitters with sunflower seeds. In the clubhouse, smoothing the path for Shohei Ohtani. And, of course, at the plate, delivering huge hits all

summer capped by season-tilting drives in the National League Division Series and World Series.

Teo is back, and your sigh is as big as his personality, and your relief is as palpable as one of his late-inning swings.

Because, admit it, you were worried. You were even worse than worried.

After the final bus had sped past, the final inspirational speech had been delivered, and the last of the hoarse cheers had been [See Plaschke, D5]



THE DODGERS listened to their fans and kept Teoscar Hernández (37), a welcome clubhouse presence and an important part of their championship core. WALLY SKALI Los Angeles Times

UCLA finally shakes off its Gonzaga jinx, beating No. 14 Bulldogs 65-62. [SEE THE BACK PAGE >>>](#)



The latest on the field and off.

Download the app for instant highlights, recaps and more.



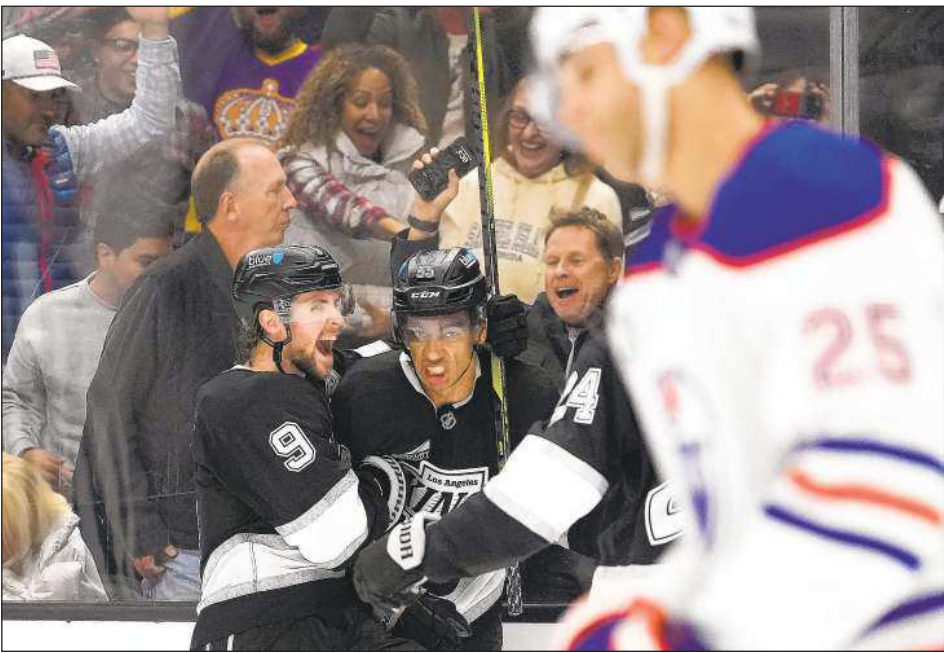
PRO CALENDAR

	SUN 29	MON 30	TUE 31	WED 1	THU 2
 RAMS	NEXT: VS. SEATTLE, TBD				
 CHARGERS	NEXT: AT LAS VEGAS, TBD				
 LAKERS			CLEVELAND 6 SpecSN		PORTLAND 7:30 SpecSN
 CLIPPERS		at New Orleans 5 FDSC	at San Antonio 4 FDSC		at Oklahoma City 5 FDSC
 KINGS	PHILA. 6 FDW			NEW JERSEY 3 FDW	
 DUCKS	EDMONTON 1 Ch. 13, Victory+		NEW JERSEY 5 Victory+		at Winnipeg 5 Ch. 13, Victory+

Shade denotes home game

TODAY ON THE AIR

TIME	EVENT	ON THE AIR
COLLEGE BASKETBALL: MEN		
9 a.m.	Indiana State at Ohio State	TV: Big Ten
11 a.m.	Chicago State at Illinois	TV: Big Ten
Noon	Buffalo at Temple	TV: ESPN
1 p.m.	Winthrop at Indiana	TV: Big Ten
2 p.m.	St. Thomas (Minn.) at UC Riverside	TV: ESPN+
3 p.m.	Toledo at Purdue	TV: Big Ten
5 p.m.	Western Kentucky at Michigan	TV: Big Ten
5 p.m.	Campbell at North Carolina	TV: ACC
COLLEGE BASKETBALL: WOMEN		
9 a.m.	Virginia at Notre Dame	TV: ACC
9 a.m.	Alabama A&M at Vanderbilt	TV: SEC
10 a.m.	South Florida at Rice	TV: ESPN2
11 a.m.	Wofford at South Carolina	TV: SEC
11 a.m.	Louisville at Boston College	TV: ACC
1 p.m.	North Carolina at Miami	TV: ACC
2 p.m.	Nebraska at UCLA	TV: Big Ten+
3 p.m.	Clemson at North Carolina State	TV: ACC
7 p.m.	Michigan at USC	TV: Big Ten
HOCKEY: IIHF WORLD JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIPS		
9 a.m.	Switzerland vs. Sweden	TV: NHL
11:30 a.m.	U.S. vs. Finland	TV: NHL
2 p.m.	Czech Republic vs. Slovakia	TV: NHL
4:30 p.m.	Canada vs. Germany	TV: NHL
HOCKEY: NHL		
1 p.m.	Edmonton at Ducks	TV: 13, Victory+ R: Ducks stream
5:30 p.m.	Dallas at Chicago	TV: ESPN, ESPN2
6 p.m.	Philadelphia at Kings	TV: FDW R: ESPNLA stream
HORSE RACING		
Noon	America's Day at the Races	TV: FS1
PRO FOOTBALL		
10 a.m.	New York Jets at Buffalo	TV: 2, Paramount+
10 a.m.	Dallas at Philadelphia	TV: 11
1:15 p.m.	Green Bay at Minnesota	TV: 11, FOXD
5:15 p.m.	Atlanta at Washington	TV: 4, Peacock, Universo
SOCCER		
7 a.m.	England, Everton vs. Nottingham	TV: USA, Peacock
7 a.m.	England, Crystal Palace vs. Southampton	TV: Peacock
7 a.m.	England, Fulham vs. Bournemouth	TV: Peacock
7 a.m.	England, Tottenham vs. Wolverhampton	TV: Peacock
9 a.m.	Italy, Juventus vs. Fiorentina	TV: Paramount+, FOXD
9:15 a.m.	England, West Ham vs. Liverpool	TV: USA, Peacock, Telemundo
9:45 a.m.	England, Derby County vs. Leeds	TV: CBSN, Paramount+
11:45 a.m.	Italy, AC Milan vs. Rome	TV: Paramount+
TENNIS		
6 a.m.	ATP/WTB Brisbane, early rounds	TV: Tennis
3:30 p.m.	United Cup, Britain vs. Argentina; ATP/WTB Brisbane; ATP Hong Kong; WTA Auckland, early rounds	TV: Tennis



MARK J. TERRILL Associated Press

THE KINGS' Quinton Byfield, center, is congratulated by teammates Adrian Kempe, left, and Phillip Danault after his overtime goal beat the Oilers.

Byfield's overtime goal sends Kings past Oilers

KINGS 4 EDMONTON 3 (OT)

By KEVIN BAXTER

The Kings have seen each of the last three seasons end in first-round playoff losses to the Edmonton Oilers. And if the current NHL season had ended Saturday, guess who the Kings would face in the first round of the playoffs?

That made Saturday's matinee at Crypto.com Arena, the first meeting of the season between the teams, an important measuring stick for the Kings and a chance to put down a marker against the Oilers, who could once again determine their fate next spring in Edmonton, right?

"I don't know," Kings forward Phillip Danault shrugged before the game. "No matter what you do during the regular season, I don't know if they affect anything. When we get to the playoffs, it's totally another game."

Kings coach Jim Hiller agreed. If anyone thought the Kings were hoping to stare across the ice, look the Oilers in the eyes and throw down the gauntlet, he wasn't among them.

"We're not going to get that far ahead," he said. "It's a team in our division that we've had problems with, that we want to beat. I wouldn't make it a bigger deal."

Which isn't to say the Kings' 4-3 overtime win, one in which they rallied from deficits twice, was meaningless. Far from it. Because the victory, on Quinton Byfield's second goal of the game, not only tied the teams for second in the Pacific Division standings, it also confirmed the gap between the two teams on the ice may be closing as well.

The Oilers have clearly

become the Kings' white whale, the foe who must be vanquished. As a result, every faceoff, every forecheck, every shot on goal was imbued with extra meaning — whether the players and coach wanted to admit it or not.

"Everyone knows it's our rivalry," Danault said.

The Kings and Oilers have met 10 times in the playoffs, with Edmonton winning the series eight times. In NHL history only one team — the Pittsburgh Penguins, who have beaten the Washington Capitals nine times in 11 tries — has faced the same opponent in at least seven playoff series and had more success.

The last time the Kings beat Edmonton in the post-season, Wayne Gretzky led the team in points. That was 1989.

And the regular-season meetings have been almost as one-sided in recent years, with the Oilers winning three of four games last season and 10 of the last 15 dating to 2019. That changed Saturday, just as the teams have changed.

The Kings, who have switched the way they play in the neutral zone and on the penalty kill since last season's postseason debacle, also added seven players since their last meeting with the Oilers at the Crypt eight months ago. Edmonton has parted with 10 players over the same period.

Winger Warren Foegele is on both those lists, having spent three seasons in Edmonton before signing a three-year free-agent contract with the Kings last summer. "They've got new pieces, we've gotten new pieces," he said.

Some of those new pieces played a part in the outcome Saturday with Foegele getting a goal and two assists for the Kings, who also got a goal from newcomer Tanner

Jeannot. Kasper Kapanen, claimed by the Oilers on waivers a month ago, and former King Viktor Arvidsson accounted for two of Edmonton's three goals.

Kapanen got the scoring started, banging home the rebound of a long Connor Brown wrister midway through the first period. Byfield matched that less than three minutes later, digging the puck out from the end boards and scoring on a wrister from the edge of the right faceoff circle. Foegele, credited with an assist on that goal, then put the Kings ahead just before the first intermission with some unintentional help from Brown, who got his skate in the way of a centering pass, deflecting the puck to Foegele, who swept it by goalie Stuart Skinner.

The Oilers needed less than four minutes of the second period to erase that deficit with Ryan Nugent-Hopkins scoring on a power play just 12 seconds after Alex Laferrriere went off for tripping. In last spring's playoffs, nine of the Oilers' 22 goals against the Kings came with the man advantage.

Arvidsson gave Edmonton the lead again on a wrister from between the circles after Leon Draisaitl stripped defenseman Vladislav Gavrikov of the puck deep in the Kings' end with eight minutes left in the second period. But the Kings would not quit, with Jeannot evening the game again by redirecting in a Jordan Spence pass from the edge of the crease 2½ minutes into the third, setting the stage for Byfield's winner 3:19 into the extra period.

Seconds before Byfield's shot, Skinner asked the officials for a stoppage in play because of a problem with his mask. He didn't get it, with the Kings getting their first win in six overtime games instead.

Frost's late goal beats Ducks

PHILADELPHIA 3 DUCKS 1

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Noah Cates extended his goal-scoring streak to five games, Morgan Frost scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period, and the Philadelphia Flyers beat the Ducks 3-1 on Saturday at Honda Center.

Joel Farabee also scored for the Flyers, who had lost four of five. Samuel Ersson stopped 31 shots.

Troy Terry scored for the Ducks, and Lukas Dostal made 22 saves.

Farabee put it out of reach with 2:20 remaining on an empty-net goal. The Ducks pulled Dostal for an extra skater during a power play but could not convert.

Frost had no angle but ended up banking a shot in off the inside of Dostal's stick on a backhand 5:57 into the third period for his seventh goal of the season.

Cates tied Nashville's Jonathan Marchessault for the longest active goal streak in the league at 4:03 of the second period off a snap shot in front of the goal to give the Flyers a 1-0 lead.

Ducks defenseman Radko Gudas suffered a lower-body injury in the third period and did not return. Left wing Cutter Gauthier played Philadelphia for the first time after the No. 5 pick in the 2022 draft refused to sign after the Flyers drafted him and forced a trade to the Ducks last year.

FLYERS 3, DUCKS 1				
PHILADELPHIA	0	1	2	3
DUCKS	0	1	0	1
FIRST PERIOD: Scoring—None. Penalties—Gauthier, DUCKS (Hooking), 7:30. Michkov, PHI (High Sticking), 10:25.				
SECOND PERIOD: 1. PHI., Cates 7 (York, Brink), 4:03. 2. DUCKS, Terry 10 (Gudas, LaCombe), 15:38. Penalties—Hathaway, PHI (Tripping), 1:45. Terry, DUCKS (Tripping), 1:50. Gudas, DUCKS (Holding), 7:07. Foerster, PHI (Slashing), 15:55.				
THIRD PERIOD: 3. PHI., Frost 7 (Laughton), 5:57. 4. PHI., Farabee 5, 17:40 (en). Penalties—Helleeson, DUCKS (High Sticking), 13:38. PHI. bench, served by Farabee (Too Many Men on the Ice), 15:30. Vatrano, DUCKS (Roughing), 18:57.				
SHOTS ON GOAL: PHI. 7-12 6-25. DUCKS 10-12. 10-32. Power-play Conversions—Phi. 0 of 5. DUCKS 0 of 4.				
GOALS: PHI., Ersson 8-6-2 (33 shots-32 saves). DUCKS, Dostal 8-10-3 (24-22). Att—16,472 (17,174). T—2:24. R—Jordan Samuels-Thomas, Chris Schlenker. L—Mitch Hunt, Kiel Murchison.				

KINGS 4, OILERS 3				
EDMONTON	1	2	0	0
KINGS	2	0	1	1
FIRST PERIOD: 1. Edm., Kapanen 5 (Brown, Emberson), 9:43. 2. KINGS, Byfield 7 (Clarke, Foegele), 12:32. 3. KINGS, Foegele 10 (Byfield, Spence), 17:35. Penalties—None.				
SECOND PERIOD: 4. Edm., Nugent-Hopkins 3 (McDavid, Hyman), 3:20 (pp). 5. Edm., Arvidsson 4 (Draisaitl, Podkolzin), 11:59. Penalties—Laferrriere, KINGS (Tripping), 3:08.				
THIRD PERIOD: 6. KINGS, Jeannot 5 (Spence, Foegele), 2:32. Penalties—Jeannot, KINGS (Hooking), 3:16. Arvidsson, EDM (High Sticking), 6:22.				
OVERTIME: 7. KINGS, Byfield 8 (Danault), 3:19. Penalties—None.				
SHOTS ON GOAL: Edm. 10-9 8-1-28. KINGS 9-9-5-6-29. Power-play Conversions—Edm. 1 of 2. KINGS 0 of 1.				
GOALS: Edm., Skinner 13-8-3 (29 shots-25 saves). KINGS, Kuemper 9-2-5 (28-25). Att—18,145 (18,230). T—2:31. R—Morgan MacPhee, Garrett Rank. L—Caleb Apperson, Jesse Marquis.				

LETTERS

Buehler's gone but memory of his swan song lingers

Given Walker Buehler's injury history, it is understandable why the Dodgers did not extend him a qualifying offer, particularly in the \$21-million range. However, the gamer should be celebrated for his Dodger career, notably Buehler's regular-season winning percentage of .681, and his postseason performances — often on short rest — highlighted by being on the mound to save Game 5 of the 2024 World Series.

KEN FELDMAN
Tarzana

::

Dave Roberts states, "the biggest thing we've done so far is signing Blake Snell." Before leaping onto the Snell bandwagon, Dodger fans need to be reminded that Snell is the guy who refused to pitch his last start for the Giants, and whose contractual pursuits resulted in a loss of spring training readiness that produced an injury-riddled first half of the season. Roberts may be singing a different tune if the Dodgers find themselves out of contention and Snell once again refuses to pitch.

BILL WAXMAN
Simi Valley

::

The Dodgers gave

Walker Buehler his day off by not offering him a new contract, and he walked with it all the way to Boston and a new one-year deal. In doing so, the Red Sox may have now added the number one Yankees killer to their roster. Smart move vs. their hated rivals, but whatever Boston does, they'll never get over giving Mookie away to the Dodgers!

MARTY ZWEBEN
Palos Verdes Estates

::

This is not to take away from Max Muncy because he has been a great Dodger player. But we have the opportunity to get a HOF third baseman who is a year younger than Max and a trade would shore up our infield tremendously. I'm sure he would also be an asset to Mookie at short-stop. Think about it.

STEVE TROCINO
Simi Valley

Lakers' help defense

To be fair to the Lakers, their rebounding, defense and physicality have been seriously damaged by the injuries to Christian Wood and Jarred Vanderbilt, and exacerbated by injury to Jaxson Hayes. If that were not enough, the team used its 15th roster position on a



WALLY SKALIS Los Angeles Times

WALKER BUEHLER (21) celebrates with Dodgers teammates after saving Game 5 of the World Series.

short developmental guard instead of on another backup center or big forward. I'm not implying that they are of championship caliber, but at full strength they could have been challenging for playoff seeding. Let's not panic, at least not until the trading deadline, by which time two or three of the injured players could return and we can see how the full team competes.

RICHARD RAFFALOW
Valley Glen

::

Excuses, excuses, excuses, the current Lakers roster is like taking a Model

T to a NASCAR race. The team has a bunch of talented new players. I say, out with the old, in with the new, let's give the new talent a chance.

PATRICK KELLEY
Los Angeles

Maybe Chip wasn't the problem

Ohio State leads the nation in scoring with Chip Kelly as offensive coordinator; OSU head coach Ryan Day states, "Kelly has a great understanding of offensive football." Kelly built Oregon into a dominant, explosive offensive team, but we ran him out of

UCLA for various reasons. Now we have a novice UCLA coach who just fired his offensive coordinator, but everybody loves him. All's well that ends well!

DAVID WALDOWSKI
Laguna Woods

Perfecting the playoff

If the CFP will continue to include 12 schools, some rule and format changes may be needed after this inaugural season.

Boise State and Arizona State received first-round byes, being two of the four highest-ranked conference champions. Penn State, the worst seed, will now play Boise State, but is a 10½-point favorite over the Mountain West Conference champion. Arizona State, the Big 12 champion, is a 13½-point underdog to Texas.

The Rose Bowl will feature a rematch of Oregon and Ohio State, who played in possibly the best game this college season with Oregon winning 32-31. Unfortunately, this will be a quarterfinal game as well.

WAYNE MURAMATSU
Cerritos

Cardinal-and-gold standard

UConn has been the gold standard in women's

basketball for more than two decades. USC's thrilling win on the road is a signature win for the program and a passing of the torch from Paige Bueckers to JuJu Watkins. The best part is, unlike men's basketball one-and-done culture, JuJu Watkins fans will be able to witness her greatness for the next three years. Fight On!

MARK S. ROTH
Playa Vista

So watch the NBA

As compared to the three great NFL games on Thanksgiving, the NFL gave us fans TWO lumps of coal instead on Christmas. The two games were so noncompetitive that I think that neither team had a need to call a timeout in the second half in BOTH games! Thanks for nothing.

WAYNE KAMIYA
El Segundo

::

The Los Angeles Times welcomes expressions of all views. Letters should be brief and become the property of The Times. They may be edited and republished in any format. Each must include a valid mailing address and telephone number. Pseudonyms will not be used.

Email: sports@la-times.com

NFL STANDINGS

NATIONAL CONFERENCE							
West	W	L	T	Pct.	PF	PA	
RAMS	9	6	0	.600	329	347	
Seattle	9	7	0	.563	345	343	
e-Arizona	7	8	0	.467	344	342	
e-San Francisco	6	9	0	.400	331	349	
North	W	L	T	Pct.	PF	PA	
x-Detroit	13	2	0	.867	493	299	
x-Minnesota	13	2	0	.867	396	276	
x-Green Bay	11	4	0	.733	413	287	
e-Chicago	4	12	0	.250	286	348	
South	W	L	T	Pct.	PF	PA	
Atlanta	8	7	0	.533	327	349	
Tampa Bay	8	7	0	.533	427	352	
e-New Orleans	5	10	0	.333	309	346	
e-Carolina	4	11	0	.267	283	448	
East	W	L	T	Pct.	PF	PA	
x-Philadelphia	12	3	0	.800	402	283	
Washington	10	5	0	.667	432	348	
e-Dallas	7	8	0	.467	324	404	
e-N.Y. Giants	2	13	0	.133	215	362	

AMERICAN CONFERENCE							
West	W	L	T	Pct.	PF	PA	
y-Kansas City	15	1	0	.938	385	288	
x-CHARGERS	10	6	0	.625	368	281	
Denver	9	6	0	.600	363	281	
e-Las Vegas	3	12	0	.200	264	390	
North	W	L	T	Pct.	PF	PA	
x-Baltimore	11	5	0	.688	483	351	
x-Pittsburgh	10	6	0	.625	363	328	
Cincinnati	7	8	0	.467	423	393	
e-Cleveland	3	12	0	.200	245	380	
South	W	L	T	Pct.	PF	PA	
y-Houston	9	7	0	.563	349	358	
Indianapolis	7	8	0	.467	318	359	
e-Jacksonville	3	12	0	.200	277	396	
e-Tennessee	3	12	0	.200	284	417	
East	W	L	T	Pct.	PF	PA	
y-Buffalo	12	3	0	.800	469	331	
Miami	7	8	0	.467	305	329	
e-N.Y. Jets	4	11	0	.267	292	344	
e-New England	3	13	0	.188	266	401	

x-clinched playoff spot; y-clinched division
e-eliminated

WEDNESDAY'S RESULTS

Kansas City 29, Pittsburgh 10
Baltimore 31, Houston 2

THURSDAY'S RESULT

Seattle 6, Chicago 3

SATURDAY'S RESULTS

CHARGERS 40, New England 7
Denver at Cincinnati, late
Arizona at RAMS, late

TODAY'S GAMES

Carolina at Tampa Bay, 10 a.m.
Dallas at Philadelphia, 10 a.m.
Indianapolis at N.Y. Giants, 10 a.m.
Las Vegas at New Orleans, 10 a.m.
N.Y. Jets at Buffalo, 10 a.m.
Tennessee at Jacksonville, 10 a.m.
Miami at Cleveland, 1 p.m.
Green Bay at Minnesota, 1:25 p.m.
Atlanta at Washington, 5:20 p.m.

MONDAY'S GAME

Detroit at San Francisco, 5:15 p.m.

CHARGERS 40, PATRIOTS 7
CHARGERS7 13 10 10 - 40
NEW ENGLAND0 7 0 0 - 7

First Quarter		
CHARGERS — Davis 23 pass from Herbert (Dicker kick), 3:28.		
Second Quarter		
CHARGERS — FG Dicker 27, 10:15.		
CHARGERS — McConkey 6 pass from Herbert (Dicker kick), 3:03.		
NE — Douglas 36 pass from D.Maye (Slye kick), 1:24.		
CHARGERS — FG Dicker 38, :02.		
Third Quarter		
CHARGERS — McConkey 40 pass from Herbert (Dicker kick), 7:43.		
CHARGERS — FG Dicker 41, 5:43.		
Fourth Quarter		
CHARGERS — Dobbins 2 run (Dicker kick), 12:03.		
CHARGERS — FG Dicker 35, 3:47.		
TEAM STATISTICS		
	LAC	NE
FIRST DOWNS.....	29	11
Rushing.....	10	4
Passing.....	16	4
Penalty.....	3	3
THIRD DOWN EFF.....	10-17	2-10
FOURTH DOWN EFF.....	2-2	0-3
TOTAL NET YARDS.....	428	181
Total Plays.....	77	48
Avg Gain.....	5.6	3.8
NET YARDS RUSHING.....	147	96
Rushes.....	37	20
Avg per rush.....	3.973	4.8
NET YARDS PASSING.....	281	85
Sacked-Yds lost.....	0-0	4-30
Gross-Yds passing.....	281	115
Completed-Att.....	26-40	13-24
Had Intercepted.....	0	0
Yards-Pass Play.....	7,025	3,036
KICKOFFS-End Zone-Touchback.....	9-7.5	2-2.1
PUNTS-Avg.....	2-46.0	4-55.0
Punts blocked.....	0	0
FGs-PTS blocked.....	0-0	0-0
TOTAL RETURN YARDAGE.....	35	122
Punt Returns.....	2-18	1-15
Kickoff Returns.....	1-17	4-107
Interceptions.....	0-0	0-0
PENALTIES-Yds.....	6-54	7-60
FUMBLES-Lost.....	0-0	1-1
TIME OF POSSESSION.....	40:26	18:34
INDIVIDUAL LEADERS		
RUSHING: CHARGERS, Dobbins 19-76, Haskins 8-30, Vidal 5-24, Herbert 3-12, Heinicke 1-8, Davis 1-(minus 3). NEW ENGLAND, Gibson 12-63, Maye 6-32, Stevenson 2-1.		
PASSING: CHARGERS, Herbert 26-38-0-281, Heinicke 0-2-0-0. NEW ENGLAND, Maye 12-22-0-117, Brissett 1-2-0-(minus 2).		
RECEIVING: CHARGERS, McConkey 8-94, Johnston 5-48, Palmer 4-41, Davis 2-29, Smartt 2-23, Dissly 2-21, Haskins 1-10, Fisk 1-8, Dobbins 1-7. NEW ENGLAND, Douglas 4-46, Boutte 4-28, Hooper 3-19, Bourne 2-22.		
PUNT RETURNS: CHARGERS, Davis 2-18. NEW ENGLAND, Erickson 1-15.		
KICKOFF RETURNS: CHARGERS, Davis 1-17. NEW ENGLAND, Erickson 3-30, Gibson 1-17.		
TACKLES-ASSISTS-SACKS: CHARGERS, Fulton 5-0-0, Dye 4-1-0, Still 4-0-0, Jefferson 3-1-0, Colson 2-2-0, Molden 2-2-0, James 2-0-2, Tuipulotu 2-0-1, Dupree 1-1-0, Mack 1-0-1, Bosa 1-0-0, Ford 1-0-0, Leonard 1-0-0, Matlock 1-0-0, Ogbornia 0-3-0, Tart 0-2-0. NEW ENGLAND, Dugger 6-3-0, Mapu 6-1-0, Tavai 5-0-0, Jones 4-2-0, Godchaux 3-5-0, Bolden 3-1-0, Tatekale 2-6-0, Eusele 2-3-0, Elliot 2-3-0, Austin 2-1-0, Pharms 1-5-0, A.Jennings 1-1-0, White 1-1-0, Gonzalez 1-0-0, Johnson 0-2-0, Ngakoue 0-2-0, Hawkins 0-1-0, Pettus 0-1-0.		
INTERCEPTIONS: CHARGERS, None. NEW ENGLAND, None.		
FIELD GOALS MISSED: None.		
Officials—Referee John Hussey, Ump Tony Michalek, HL Max Causey, LI Carl Johnson, PJ Anthony Flemming, SJ Allen Baynes, BJ Matt Edwards, Replay Andrew Lamb-ert.		



Photographs by ROBERT F. BUKATY Associated Press

CHARGERS TEAMMATES were awed by Justin Herbert, who led his team to a season-high 40 points while throwing for 281 yards.

Herbert helps land playoff spot

[Chargers, from D1]

Herbert completed 26 of 38 passes for 281 yards and three touchdowns as the Chargers (10-6) scored a season high in points. Even while watching the end of the game from the sideline after leaving with a 30-point lead and 10:54 remaining, Herbert was still among the first players onto the field to high-five and encourage teammates after each drive.

“I can’t think of one play or one throw or one check or one ball placed where it shouldn’t have been,” Harbaugh said. “Just an incredible performance by an incredible player.”

It felt like business as usual for Herbert.

A first-quarter highlight-reel catch from receiver Derius Davis — who laid out in a full Superman position to reel in his second touchdown in as many games — elicited calm high-fives from Herbert.

When he laced a ball through four defenders to Ladd McConkey for a six-yard touchdown in the second quarter, Herbert gave the rookie receiver a formal handshake. The Chargers had jumped ahead 17-0, a lead that felt insurmountable for a Patriots team that was vying for draft positioning instead of playoff hopes.

“It’s a testament to all the hard work that we’ve put in this offseason,” Herbert said of returning to the playoffs. “The way things have gone, it’s been an honor to play alongside this team. We had a huge opportunity tonight and we went out and took it.”

McConkey, who finished with eight catches for 94 yards and two touchdowns, has claimed Chargers rookie



THE PRIMARY TARGET for Herbert was Ladd McConkey. The rookie receiver finished with eight catches for 94 yards, including this first-half reception.

receiving records with 77 catches and 1,054 yards this season.

Herbert became the third quarterback in NFL history to pass for 3,000 yards and 20 touchdowns in each of his first five seasons, joining Peyton Manning and Russell Wilson. Herbert also surpassed Manning for the most yards passing in his

first five seasons, but is fixated on a more important achievement.

The Chargers have not won a playoff game since 2018.

“We know a new season is just beginning,” said James, who had two sacks, both on fourth down, for his first game with multiple sacks. “We’re not settled just get-

ting in the playoffs. We know where we want to be, we know what type of team we want to be, so, man, we just want to keep going.”

The Chargers, who spent much of the season jockeying between the sixth and seventh seeds, could move into the fifth seed next week. To get in position for a favorable postseason matchup at

No. 4 seed Houston (9-7), the Chargers would have to win in Las Vegas (3-12) and get a Steelers loss to the Bengals in Week 18.

Pittsburgh (10-6) owns the head-to-head tiebreaker against the Chargers with a Week 3 victory but has lost three consecutive games to fall from the top of the AFC North.

Herbert left the game against the Steelers in the third quarter because of a sprained ankle. The Chargers struggled to find rhythm on offense all season with their quarterback playing sometimes at 20% health in a new system with unfamiliar receivers.

With back-to-back games of season-high point totals, however, Herbert has the Chargers rolling into the postseason. His teammates are ready to follow him.

“The guy has battled his ass off all year,” center Bradley Bozeman said. “Just truly, the definition of grit.”

Herbert lauded the organization’s unity during his postgame news conference, during which he wore a hat with a picture of an elevator crossed out on the front. It was an homage from receiver Simi Fehoko to the team’s preseason incident in a broken elevator.

“Everyone plays for each other,” Herbert said. “They play for the coaches, and they obviously play for the Chargers fan base as well.”

Before escaping the cold and wet afternoon and ducking into the locker room, Herbert made one final play for that loyal fan base. He greeted the group of soggy fans gathered behind the Chargers bench, posing for pictures and signing autographs.

Chargers’ evolution continues under Harbaugh

[NFL, from D1]

should.”

This is no finish line, of course, but Harbaugh’s Chargers have checked a big box on their to-do list. The franchise has secured a spot in the postseason for just the third time in 11 seasons and, with a finale at Las Vegas remaining, it has a chance to lock up the AFC’s fifth seed with a win and a Pittsburgh Steelers loss in Week 18. That would mean a more favorable wild-card game at Houston, as opposed to a frigid opener at Buffalo or Baltimore.

There’s also meaning to bolting down a spot in the playoffs by winning at New England, even though these Patriots are a shadow of the version led by Tom Brady and Bill Belichick. This is a franchise that tormented the Chargers in years past, delivering a divisional-round knockout to Marty Schottenheimer’s 14-2 San Diego Chargers in the 2006 season, and beating the broken-down Chargers the following year in the AFC championship game.

There’s no one remaining

from that era in that Chargers locker room. Most of the players were probably in grade school at the time. Still, there was significance to these players emerging from the fog that had settled on Gillette Stadium to forge a clear path to the postseason. This is precisely what Chargers ownership had in mind when it hired Harbaugh, an undeniable turnaround artist. Just check his history. The San Francisco 49ers were 6-10 the year before they hired Harbaugh, and 13-3 in his first season. The Michigan Wolverines went from 5-7 before Harbaugh to 10-3 in his debut season.

“Coach Harbaugh’s a winner, that says it all,” cornerback Kristian Fulton said. “He’s won his whole life, won each team he’s coached. He told us at the beginning, there’s just one way to get to where he wants to go and that’s hard work. We’ve been working hard.”

When asked at the podium about the common threads among those teams that reversed course, Harbaugh immediately pointed



ROBERT F. BUKATY Associated Press

LINEBACKER Junior Colson takes down Patriots quarterback Drake Maye in the Chargers’ victory.

to his players, “stalwarts” as he calls them, including quarterback Justin Herbert and safety Derwin James Jr.

Later, after most of the team had left the locker room for the bus, Harbaugh reiterated that with, “There are no good coaches without good players. There’s no great coaches with bad players.”

One of those outstanding players Saturday was rookie receiver Ladd McConkey, who had eight

catches for 94 yards and two touchdowns. That pushed his numbers to 77 receptions for 1,046 yards, six more grabs than previous Chargers rookie record-holder Keenan Allen. The Chargers traded up to the second pick in the second round to draft McConkey, a standout from the University of Georgia. Their trade partner in that deal? The Patriots, who used the fifth pick in that round to draft Washington receiver

Ja’Lynn Polk. McConkey had seven more yards on Saturday, and the same number of touchdowns, that Polk has had all season.

Asked if there was a little piece of him that wanted to show the Patriots what they missed, McConkey said: “That’s not me. If they want to think about it that way, like, ‘Oh, we should have done this,’ it’s shoulda, coulda, woulda.”

Historically, it’s important for teams to be able to run the ball in the postseason, especially when the weather can turn foul in so many NFL cities. Only more reason for the Chargers to feel good about the return of running back J.K. Dobbins, who missed four games because of a knee sprain. He ran for 76 yards in 19 carries against the Patriots with a two-yard touchdown.

He was part of the Baltimore brigade who came west to the Chargers from the Ravens, coached by Harbaugh’s older brother, John.

Unlike a lot of his teammates, Dobbins has playoff experience. He’s played in

postseason road games at Cincinnati, Tennessee and Buffalo. He understands the importance of a team finding another gear in December, as it seems the Chargers have, and fostering a belief that it can compete at the highest level.

“We can beat you a lot of ways, and in the playoffs that’s what you’ve got to do,” Dobbins said. “In the playoffs, they’re going to try to take away the thing that you do best.”

He said Harbaugh has “changed the culture” of a team that won five games last season.

“He’s brought in guys that are winners,” Dobbins said. “That’s how you change the culture. You draft guys who win [championships] or win all throughout college. You bring in guys who have won all across the league. You start to see the benefits.”

Harbaugh delivered his hugs Saturday and he’s hoping there are many more. One box checked. The way he sees it, his team has only earned a spot at the starting gate.

DODGERS DEBATE

The boys are back to lead the holiday cheers

In a special Christmas episode of “The Dodgers Debate,” Dodgers beat reporter **Jack Harris** and columnists **Bill Plaschke** and **Dylan Hernández** discussed Roki Sasaki, Dave Roberts’ offseason, and more.

Below is a transcript of some of that conversation, edited for length and clarity. You can find all episodes of “The Dodgers Debate” video podcast at latimes.com/dodgers or on The Times’ YouTube channel.

Where is Roki Sasaki going to sign?

Hernández: To me, this is what’s going to decide the offseason, right? Because whoever gets him is going to basically be getting potentially a top-15, top-10 pitcher in baseball at minimum salary. This is a game changer for anybody. Obviously, he would help the Dodgers. But just as important, they want to keep him away from the Padres. How much of a gap do we think there is? I think they could have easily lost that series.

Plaschke: They [the Padres] are the second-best team in baseball.

Harris: Sasaki feels almost like a superfluous piece when you look at the [Dodgers’] pitching options now. Now, there’s obviously the long-term benefits of getting somebody who could be a legitimate MLB ace if he puts everything together in the right way. So where does he end up? A lot of people still think it’s going to be with the Dodgers. But if it isn’t, I think the bad outcome for them is if he ends up with the Padres. It suddenly evens that playing field a little bit more, especially if he ends up being as good as advertised right away.

Hernández: It’s interesting: In Japan, people don’t really talk about their trauma very much, and he lost his father in the tsunami in 2011. And I think because of that, he’s kept a very low profile with the media. As much as we complain about [Shohei] Ohtani not talking here, he was as accessible as any other player when he was in Japan. This kid hasn’t been like that, and they’ve kind of left him alone out of respect to his past. And so this is a kid that we don’t really know. When his agent, Joel Wolfe, talked about him at winter meetings, he gave us an insight into him that even people in Japan really didn’t know. When he talked about the ambition, that to me sounds a lot like Ohtani. Sasaki said he wanted to be the best pitcher in the world, but we didn’t know how to take that because it came like in a written statement. When Ohtani said he wanted to be the best player in the world, we knew enough about Ohtani at that point to take his words seriously. With Sasaki, you’re kind of not sure. Is he saying this because they’re letting him go early and he feels obligated to have those

kind of lofty goals?

But it does sound like, at least the way Wolfe described it, that he has that ambition. And I just think that if he really wants to be that guy, he can’t go to the Dodgers because he’s going to get swallowed up.

Do people in Japan want him to go to the Dodgers? Is there pressure to play with Ohtani?

Hernández: I do think that it’s hard to say no to Ohtani right now. You can’t really overstate how big Ohtani is over there. He’s not just the best athlete Japan has ever produced, but he also kind of exemplifies, I think, a lot of the way the culture views itself. But again, the flip side of that is if Sasaki is one of these guys who says: ‘Hey, I’ve got a mind of my own.’ Another thing that was interesting to hear from Wolfe was that Sasaki knew he was going to take a lot of flak for leaving early. Because in Japan too, there’s a sense of order. When you leave, you need to have won a championship, you need to have won major individual awards. The way Yoshinobu Yamamoto did it was perfect: three MVP awards, won a championship, runner-up another year. You’ve done everything there is to do here, now move on to the next step. This kid hasn’t really done too much. We’ve seen the talent, but it hasn’t actually led to actual achievement in many cases.

So from that standpoint, I wouldn’t be shocked if he goes somewhere else.

Do the Dodgers need to trade Gavin Lux?

Harris: This gets to a larger conversation about the infield. So the Dodgers are planning to not only move [Mookie] Betts back to the infield full time next year, but put him at shortstop. On the surface, it makes some sense. If the Dodgers give Betts a full offseason to learn how to play this position — to figure out the stuff that he struggled at last year, to figure out how to get in better positions to make more accurate throws — the Dodgers think he can be an MLB-caliber shortstop and Betts thinks he can too. Related to this is that they have a second baseman at the moment. And Lux, who showed some life at the end of the year, looked pretty good in the playoffs overall. He might’ve made sense in a



ASHLEY LANDIS Associated Press

DODGERS MANAGER DAVE ROBERTS and Teoscar Hernández celebrate their win over the New York Yankees in Game 5 to win the World Series. With Hernández returning, Roberts will have a strong team again.

trade if you’re looking to shake up the roster and the fact that they haven’t really gone all the way on any deals, it suggests to me that there’s a level of trust in Lux.

Hernández: Betts might be one of the five best right fielders ever defensively, and that’s where this totally doesn’t make sense. At the same time, the Dodgers put themselves in this position. They had this hole last year at shortstop because they gambled on Lux, so Betts stepped in. They’ve kind of let this situation present itself and that’s why they’re going to have to pay Dave Roberts, speaking of things to do this offseason. This becomes Roberts’ job. One thing that went unnoticed because it wasn’t an issue was getting Betts back to right field. We’ve covered different sports; you mess with the superstar, things can go south really quickly. The fact this transition happened with us barely noticing, that’s a huge credit not only to Betts but also to Roberts.

Plaschke: And Roberts, he’s had the best offseason of anybody. He’s taking the victory tour. He’s been at the UCLA games, he’s at Laker games.

Harris: He was in Japan as a national hero.

Plaschke: That’s unbelievable. Finally, he’s getting his due from the same fans that wanted him fired.

Hernández: It’s a different smile that he’s got on now too. Before, he could read the room. There were times he’d go out in public and you feel like he was kind of forcing the smile a little. Now we see that Dave Roberts smile that we see around the park some days.

And he’s in Japan waving to everybody like he’s a big celebrity, which I guess he is now. I mean, he went to Japan to shoot a commercial.

Harris: He said he’s more famous over there than he is in L.A.

Plaschke: He’s really famous here now too. He’s really beloved. I think this shows how much he thought people didn’t like him before now. He’s so relieved. We’re seeing now that it really affected him, the fact that the fans booed him and wanted him fired for all these years. And now he’s got this huge weight off his shoulders and it’s so fun to watch.

Will Roberts get his contract extension?

Hernández: He’s on more stable ground than he’s ever been. I mean, he’s going to the Hall of Fame now. When he gets his next contract extension, he’s going to be able to pad those win numbers and at that point, he’s in. And just dealing with stuff every day, he’s figured out how to deal with all this.

Harris: This year exemplified all of the things he’s really good at, starting with the Ohtani situation, trying to manage the team through the postseason, trying to keep belief up, like we’re talking about the clubhouse culture. That’s a huge part of it. What he was able to do with this team this year, the team meeting in Atlanta, the ability to figure out how to punt games in the postseason with everybody being on board with it and feeling confident about that kind of plan. So I think that’s a big

credit to him.

Who are some other players that the Dodgers should look at?

Harris: Tanner Scott’s the interesting one. I think the back end of the bullpen is a place the Dodgers do feel like they could upgrade a little bit. Brusdar Graterol is going to miss the first half of next year after he had shoulder surgery. They brought back Blake Treinen, but he’s also somebody who has his own injury history and is on the back side of his career. So I think they probably would like to add somebody else back there. Scott can make sense, especially if he’s somebody who’s open to taking these deferred contract structures that the Dodgers really seem to prefer.

Plaschke: But what’s Scott’s leading strength?

Harris: Getting Ohtani out?

Plaschke: So if you bring him here, you lose that strength.

Harris: I mean, he’s a good pitcher outside of that. Had the Dodgers lost in the division series, the Scott-Ohtani thing would have been one of the big reasons. So to me, I look at it as another reason to get him, so that another contender can’t.

Hernández: Where are you on Nolan Arenado?

Plaschke: I don’t like him, I think he’s done.

Hernández: Defensively, though? I mean, as much as I was complimenting Max Muncy’s improvement at third base... can he go back to second?

Harris: It’s tougher now than when he did it before since you have the shift

restrictions and you need to have more range there. To me, this is where somebody like Willy Adames would have been interesting for him because he could have played shortstop this year and then been your long-term answer at third. But he ends up getting a lot of money from the Giants. So yeah, I think the Arenado thing is not a great roster fit right now and for as good as the glove is, I don’t know if it’s an upgrade enough with the bat to take on the money and the risk and the other things.

What would a six-man rotation look like?

Harris: At what point of the year? It’s a good question because Ohtani almost certainly will not be pitching in Japan on opening day. I think once Ohtani’s ready to rejoin the rotation, that’s when you’re probably going to see it become a true six-man rotation, which works because you don’t really lose a roster spot because he’s a two-way guy. That’s a big part of his value. So in the meantime, Tyler Glasnow should be healthy, Yamamoto should be healthy, Blake Snell should be healthy, along with Tony Gonsolin and Dustin May coming back. That’s probably your most likely five to start the year with Ohtani coming in at some point.

One interesting tidbit from the winter meetings: They’re not planning to send Ohtani on a rehab assignment to build him up as a pitcher once the season begins since they don’t want to lose his bat in the lineup every day. They’ll probably just keep him around, throw simulated games.

THE DAY IN SPORTS

Gates among finalists for the 2025 Hall of Fame class

WIRE REPORTS

Two-time Super Bowl most valuable player **Eli Manning**, former defensive players of the year **Luke Kuechly** and **Terrell Suggs**, and Chargers great **Antonio Gates** are among the finalists for the 2025 Pro Football Hall of Fame class.

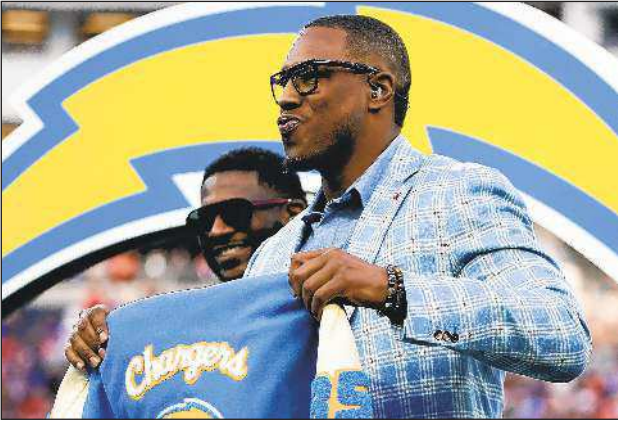
The Hall on Saturday announced the 15 modern-era finalists who advanced from a group of 25 to the final stage of voting. The group includes five players in their first year of eligibility, nine who were finalists last year and receiver **Steve Smith Sr.**, a former University High standout who made it this far for the first time in his fourth year of eligibility.

The selection committee will vote next month to pick the class of between three and five modern-era players that will be announced the week of the Super Bowl. Gates was a first-time finalist for this year’s class and is back with defensive end **Jared Allen**; receivers **Torrey Holt** and **Reggie Wayne**; offensive linemen **Willie Anderson** and **Jahri Evans**; defensive backs **Darren Wood-**

son, **Eric Allen** and **Rodney Harrison**; and running back **Fred Taylor**. Manning, Kuechly and Suggs are finalists in their first year of eligibility, along with postseason kicking star **Adam Vinatieri** and former Baltimore guard **Marshal Yanda**.

Gates played basketball in college before turning into one of the NFL’s top tight ends after being drafted by the Chargers. He became an All-Pro in just his second season in 2004. He was an All-Pro again the next two seasons and went on to have a 16-year career with the team. He finished with 955 catches for 11,841 yards and an NFL record for tight ends with 116 touchdown catches.

Indianapolis quarterback **Anthony Richardson** (foot) was ruled out for Sunday’s game at the New York Giants, and the Colts likely will turn again to veteran Joe Flacco to keep their slim playoff hopes alive. ... Two-time Pro Bowl linebacker **Shaquil Barrett** is rejoining Tampa Bay, while safety **Jordan Whitehead** was activated from injured reserve. ... Carolina put 1,000-yard rusher **Chuba Hubbard**



RYAN SUN Associated Press

ANTONIO GATES holds up a jacket as he is inducted into the Chargers Hall of Fame in 2023.

(calf) on IR, ending his season. ... A California appeals court overturned the rape conviction of former San Francisco 49er **Dana Stubblefield** after determining prosecutors made racially discriminatory statements during his trial.

ETC.

Diamondbacks adding Burnes

Right-hander **Corbin**

Burnes and the Arizona Diamondbacks agreed to a \$210-million, six-year contract, the Associated Press reported late Friday night.

The 30-year-old Burnes was one of the top pitchers in free agency after going 15-9 with a 2.92 earned-run average for Baltimore last season, starting the All-Star Game and finishing fifth in Cy Young Award voting in his first year in the American League. He won the award in the National League with Milwaukee in 2021 and becomes the ace of the Di-

amondbacks, who barely missed the playoffs this year after reaching the World Series in 2023 and losing to Texas in five games.

The Diamondbacks now have a starting rotation that includes **Burnes**, **Zac Gallen**, **Merrill Kelly**, **Eduardo Rodriguez** and **Brandon Pfaadt**, which on paper is among baseball’s best.

It’s no shock Burnes landed a big contract, but the destination is a surprise. Arizona’s payroll usually ranks in the middle of the pack, and this would be the largest contract in franchise history. Among active pitchers with contracts, Burnes’ \$35-million average salary would rank fifth behind **Zack Wheeler**, **Jacob deGrom**, **Blake Snell** and **Gerit Cole**.

Arizona is spending to compete with the World Series champion Dodgers in the NL West. The deal comes after Snell went to the Dodgers on a \$182-million, five-year contract in November. Burnes is two years younger and has been more durable than Snell, who pitched 216⅓ fewer innings over the last four seasons.

Burnes set a career high

with 22 quality starts. His strikeout rate of 8.38 per nine innings was his lowest since he became a starter, but his walk rate (2.22) was his best since 2021. He’s made at least 28 starts in each of the last four seasons.

The NBA suspended Dallas forward **Naji Marshall** for four games and Phoenix center **Jusuf Nurkic** for three after their on-court fight Friday night. ... Chicago guard **Ayo Dosunmu** has a strained right calf and will be reevaluated in 10 days. ... Former Sacramento guard **Doug Christie** was named interim coach after the Kings fired **Mike Brown** on Friday. Christie’s debut as coach was Saturday night against the Lakers.

The defending champion United States beat Latvia 5-1 to improve to 2-0 in the world junior hockey championship.

March of Time, a 3-year-old colt owned by former Dodger **Walker Buehler** and former Houston Astro **Alex Bregman** and trained by **Bob Baffert**, won for the first time Friday at Santa Anita.



ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

THE DODGERS agreed to re-sign outfielder Teoscar Hernández, part of \$45 million in new financial commitments for next season.

They’re doubling down in title town

Bringing back Hernández shows Dodgers’ commitment to excellence in star-driven L.A.

BILL SHAIKIN
ON BASEBALL

Just how valuable is Teoscar Hernández to the Dodgers? Shohei Ohtani is baseball’s most valuable player. Mookie Betts and Freddie Freeman are superstars too. Yoshinobu Yamamoto, Tyler Glasnow and Blake Snell are among baseball’s top pitchers. Roki Sasaki will be too, and the Dodgers might sign him too. Hernández would rank behind all of them, joining Max Muncy and Will Smith atop the supporting cast. It’s a star-studded supporting cast, of course. Hernández hit 33 home runs last season, the most of any National League outfielder. He batted cleanup in the clinching game of the World Series, driving in the final two runs of that fateful five-run fifth inning at Yankee Stadium. But think about this: With Friday’s agreement to bring back Hernández, the Dodgers are liable for more than \$45 million in new financial commitments next

year, all to secure the services of someone who might be no better than their eighth-best player. Talk about commitment to excellence. The Dodgers live that slogan every day. The Raiders, the team that claims that slogan as its own? They have not won a playoff game in 21 years. They have not won a Super Bowl in 40 years. Vision without execution is just happy talk. Critics scoffed when Mark Walter and the Dodgers’ ownership group paid \$2 billion to buy the team — Forbes estimated the franchise value at less than half that — but Walter and Co. bet they could find gold in local broadcast rights. They did, for \$8.35 billion. Critics denounced the Dodgers when Walter and Co. committed \$700 million to Ohtani last year. They might net a profit on the contract. They already netted a championship. The Dodgers already had passed the most punitive luxury tax threshold for next season, so they are liable for a 110% penalty on the average annual value of

Hernández’s three-year, \$66-million contract. After a modest discount to account for deferrals, that’s about \$22 million next year. The signing bonus is \$23 million — all payable next year, according to a source familiar with the contract. Add it up, and that’s a \$45-million commitment before paying Hernández a single dollar in salary. (Of the \$66 million total, the deferrals and the signing bonus account for all but \$19.5 million.) The typical reaction about how much more fans will pay for hot dogs is hopelessly quaint. To be sure, a six pack of Dodger Dogs at the grocery store (\$5.99) costs less than a single Dodger Dog at the ballpark (\$7.99). The Dodgers also charged \$75 for parking at the World Series. They charge \$77.25 for a photo opportunity with the World Series championship trophy, with a press box tour included. To borrow another slogan the Raiders no longer need: Just win, baby. Not all teams can spend

like the Dodgers, but expanded playoffs mean teams do not have to keep up with the Dodgers all season. Those teams just have to sneak into the playoffs with 80-some wins — no owner can say with a straight face he cannot afford a team that can do that — and get hot in October. The Dodgers won the World Series this year, but they were eliminated in the division series by an 89-win team in 2022 and an 84-win team in 2023. That 84-win team, the Arizona Diamondbacks, on Friday agreed to a \$210-million contract with star pitcher Corbin Burnes. The Diamondbacks are one of the teams most severely influenced by the implosion of regional sports networks, but the drop in television revenue did not stop them from playing to win. The Dodgers play in the second-largest market in the major leagues. In Chicago, the third-largest market in the majors and the only major market represented in either of the Central divisions, the Cubs and White Sox need better man-

agement. In each of the past six full seasons, the Milwaukee Brewers — playing in the smallest market in the majors — have posted a better record than the Cubs. The White Sox this year lost 121 games, a modern major league record, and attracted fewer fans than any American League team besides the Tampa Bay Rays and the on-our-way-out-of-Oakland Athletics. In two other major markets, it is notable that teams that posted mostly losing records for years and now are run by former major leaguers — Buster Posey in San Francisco and Craig Breslow in Boston — are spending to win. It also is notable that the most punitive luxury tax threshold has a nickname, in recognition of the owner his peers considered most likely to spend beyond it. The nickname is not the Mark Walter tax. The nickname is the Steve Cohen tax, in honor of the owner of the New York Mets. The richest contract in baseball history — Juan Soto for \$765 million — is his.

Ohtani’s newest spot in lineup: a father

BY JACK HARRIS

Shohei Ohtani announced Saturday that he and his wife, Mamiko Tanaka, are expecting their first child. “Can’t wait for the little rookie to join our family soon!” Ohtani, 30, wrote in a post on Instagram, along with a picture of baby clothes, an ultrasound and the couple’s dog, Dekopin. The announcement comes about 10 months after Ohtani revealed he and Tanaka, a former professional basketball player in Japan, were married last offseason. It also bookends a year of change for the two-way star, who switched teams for the first time in his MLB career after signing a \$700-million contract with the Dodgers last offseason. Despite being unable to pitch while recovering from surgery, Ohtani helped lead the Dodgers’ run to a World Series title, winning his third most valuable player award after orchestrating the first 50-homer, 50-steal season in history. Ohtani is expected to resume two-way duties next season, though his return to the mound likely will be delayed following surgery last month to repair a torn labrum he sustained in the World Series. Now, he will be taking on fatherhood duties as well.



CHRIS PIZZELLO Invision

THE DODGERS’ Shohei Ohtani, left, and wife Mamiko Tanaka announced they are expecting their first child.

Dodgers can run it back with affable Hernández

[Plaschke, from D1] uttered, you barely had time to savor November’s title celebration before you began waiting for the other blue shoe to drop. Teo was a free agent, and that meant this band of ring bearers could be broken up, and, oh no! The Dodgers couldn’t let such a giant presence walk, could they? They weren’t really going to be blinded by analytics and age and contract length and fail to sign everybody’s newest favorite player, were they? In the past, they might have. In the past, there was actually little chance they would have rewarded a 32-year-old playing for his fourth team with a lucrative three-year deal based partially on intangibles. You knew all this, and you were scared, and it shaded your every perception of what had been an otherwise wildly successful offseason. Signing two-time Cy Young winner Blake Snell was nice, but what about Teo? Extending October hero Tommy Edman was a boss move, but hey, where’s Teo? Adding smart-swinging left-handed outfielder Michael Conforto was cool, but what does this mean for Teo? Blake Treinen was brought back, and Japanese star pitcher Roki Sasaki could be coming but...hello? Teo? All those fears were erased Friday afternoon in what is usually a time for sports teams to dump their bad news in hopes that it gets lost in the weekend. This was the opposite of



ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

BY AGREEING TO RE-SIGN Teoscar Hernández, the Dodgers retain not only an All-Star who hit 33 homers with 99 RBIs, but also a heart-and-soul player who developed a friendship with Shohei Ohtani.

that. Teo is back, and the New Year’s party starts now. It turns out, while negotiations were painfully protracted, the end result was always obvious in what is pretty close to a perfect relationship between a star and a team. Hernández wanted to stay, something he had been expressing openly by the end of the championship parade. And the Dodgers, in valuing him as not only an

All-Star player but also a standout leader, wanted him to stay. It was all pretty simple, really, and now, for the rest of baseball, it’s downright suffocating. The Dodgers don’t need

to do anything else this winter and already they’re better than last season. By keeping their title core together while essentially adding two ace pitchers — Snell and the mound return of Ohtani — the

Dodgers are a lock to win the National League West for the 12th time in 13 seasons and should be heavy favorites to become the first team to win consecutive World Series since the New York Yankees from 25 years ago. Andrew Friedman and the Dodgers ownership group understands this team and this market as well as any front office in franchise history. In bringing back a guy who had 33 homers and 99 RBIs and arguably the team’s exciting personality, they have continued to maintain a monster. Look at their lineup, rich with regular-season most valuable players, NL Championship Series MVPs, World Series MVPs and, oh yeah, a home-run derby champion. Check out their rotation, led by four aces in Ohtani, Snell, Tyler Glasnow and Yoshinobu Yamamoto. Then there’s the bullpen, which could be anchored by the veteran who shut down the Yankees for 2½ innings in the World Series clincher, the retention of Treinen being a sneaky good move. If possible, Friedman has had a winter that rivaled Hernández’s Game 5 division series homer for excitement. As crazy as it sounds, Friedman has worked an offseason that could come close to matching Hernández’s World Series Game 5 two-run double for impact. It all became clear Friday afternoon with two words that appeared on Hernández’s Instagram story. “I’m Back,” he wrote. Run it back, you shouted.



THE CLIPPERS' Ivica Zubac, center, tangles with the Warriors' Moses Moody (4) and Trayce Jackson-Davis as they battle for a rebound. Zubac had 17 points and 11 rebounds in the 102-92 triumph over Golden State.

Powell, Clippers turn back Warriors in a chippy fourth

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Norman Powell scored 24 points and the Clippers held on to beat the slumping Golden State Warriors for the third time this season, 102-92 on Friday night at the Intuit Dome.

James Harden added 18 points and seven assists and Ivica Zubac had 17 points and 11 rebounds.

Jonathan Kuminga scored a career-high 34 points off the bench to lead the Warriors, who played without stars Stephen Curry (knee) and Draymond Green (back).

The Clippers (18-13) still are waiting for Kawhi Leonard (knee) to make his season debut. Kevin Porter Jr. sat out because of illness.

Things got chippy in the fourth quarter when the Warriors cut a 19-point deficit to three. Harden fouled Brandin Podziemski, who fell hard to the court. Soon after, Podziemski fouled Amir Coffey when they collided near the Warriors bench. Tempers flared on both sides and Harden and



THE CLIPPERS' Derrick Jones Jr. celebrates his dunk against the Warriors during the second half.

Lindy Waters III were assessed technical fouls. Fans booed Podziemski whenever he touched the ball.

The Warriors fell to 3-12 in their last 15 games after their third loss in a row. They fell to 4-2 without Curry in the lineup and 1-1 without Curry and Green. The Clippers are 4-4 in their last eight games.

After a close first half in which neither team led by more than six points, the

Clippers dominated the third. Their first three baskets were dunks, including two by Derrick Jones Jr., who later had a one-handed jam. They also went on a three-point binge, rattling off four in a row by different players for a 79-60 lead.

The Warriors shot 37% from the floor but out-rebounded the Clippers, 47-39, including 19 on the offensive glass.

FRIDAY'S LATE BOX												
CLIPPERS 102, WARRIORS 92												
GOLDEN STATE												
	Min	FG-A	FFA	ORT	A	P	T					
Anderson	14	2-4	0-0	4-6	1	0	5					
Wiggins	23	2-11	0-0	1-2	2	0	5					
Jackson-Davis	30	7-12	1-2	6-9	2	1	15					
Hield	21	2-8	0-0	2-9	0	2	5					
Schroder	23	3-11	1-2	0-1	5	0	7					
Kuminga	36	11-19	11-14	4-10	5	1	34					
Podziemski	30	4-9	0-0	0-2	5	2	10					
Moody	24	4-11	2-2	0-2	1	4	11					
Waters III	16	0-6	0-0	0-1	1	1	0					
Looney	12	0-2	0-0	0-4	0	3	0					
Santos	4	0-1	0-0	0-1	1	2	0					
Post	0	0-1	0-0	0-0	1	0	0					
Totals	35-55	15-20	19-47	24	16	92						
Shooting: Field goals, 36.8%; free throws, 75.0%												
Three-point goals: 7-38 (Podziemski 2-5, Anderson 1-2, Kuminga 1-3, Wiggins 1-3, Moody 1-5, Hield 1-6, Post 0-1, Santos 0-1, Schroder 0-6, Waters III 0-6).												
Team Rebounds: 8. Team Turnovers: None. Blocked Shots: 2 (Kuminga, Wiggins). Turnovers: 14 (Kuminga 3, Schroder 3, Jackson-Davis 2, Anderson, Hield, Looney, Moody, Santos, Wiggins). Steals: 14 (Moody 3, Podziemski 3, Anderson 2, Jackson-Davis 2, Kuminga 2, Waters III 2). Technical Fouls: Waters III, 6:37 fourth.												
CLIPPERS												
	Min	FG-A	FFA	ORT	A	P	T					
Jones Jr.	29	7-12	0-0	2-6	2	1	14					
Powell	40	10-20	4-4	0-3	1	4	26					
Zubac	35	8-9	1-3	1-11	2	2	17					
Dunn	38	6-14	4-4	1-7	4	3	13					
Harden	38	6-14	4-4	1-7	4	3	18					
Coffey	25	3-7	2-2	0-2	0	3	11					
Batum	20	1-3	0-0	1-5	3	1	3					
Bamba	12	0-0	0-0	0-2	0	1	0					
Miller	3	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	1	0					
Totals	40-75	12-15	6-39	19	19	102						
Shooting: Field goals, 53.3%; free throws, 80.0%												
Three-point goals: 10-32 (Coffey 3-5, Dunn 2-5, Powell 2-7, Harden 2-8, Batum 1-3, Jones Jr. 0-2, Miller 0-2). Team Rebounds: 9. Team Turnovers: 2. Blocked Shots: 10 (Zubac 5, Bamba, Batum, Coffey, Harden, Powell). Turnovers: 21 (Harden 6, Dunn 5, Powell 4, Batum 2, Zubac 2, Jones Jr., Miller). Steals: 6 (Jones Jr. 2, Powell 2, Dunn, Harden). Technical Fouls: Harden, 6:37 fourth.												
GOLDEN STATE	21	22	19	30	92							
CLIPPERS	19	30	32	21	102							
A-17,927. T-2:17.												

Bruins finally beat the Bulldogs

[UCLA, from D8] Tar Heels because he absorbed a shot to the face, UCLA forward Eric Dailey Jr. was fitted with a mask and scored 18 points to lead four players in double figures for the Bruins (11-2), who made 12 of 24 threes.

Gonzaga (9-4) had multiple chances to forge another late win. Bulldogs guard Dusty Stromer rose for a three-pointer that could have given his team the lead with 17 seconds left, but the shot was off the mark and Clark grabbed the rebound before getting fouled.

Clark got both of his free throws to roll in, using a new shooting technique to provide the Bruins with a 63-60 lead after he had missed the front end of two one-and-one situations in the second half against North Carolina.

"He's been teaching us to hit the front of the rim when you're shooting a free throw," Clark said of Cronin, "so I was really trying to focus on that. He said 95% of those shots go in."

Even with a three-point lead, UCLA was the team that needed a little luck this time given the breakdown in its strategy. Cronin said the plan was to foul Gonzaga if it took its time to try to get a three-pointer or let the Bulldogs lay it in if they went for a quick basket.

The Bruins did neither when Mack hacked Nemhard on his layup, sending a player who entered the game making 86.7% of his free throws to the line.

"Bas knows he made a mistake," Cronin said. "It happens, and I can coach him about it and talk to him about it."

The previous moments had been a redemption story for Mack. After having missed two free throws, he made a floater as he was fouled and sank the free throw to give the Bruins a 61-60 lead with 33 seconds left.

Kobe Johnson contrib-



ERIC DAILEY JR. (3) is fouled hard by Gonzaga's Khalif Battle, who was ejected from Saturday's game.

uted all four of his three-pointers in the second half for UCLA, which finished making 12 of 24 shots from long range. That helped the Bruins prevail on a day in which Gonzaga's Graham Ike met little resistance while scoring 24 points on 11-for-16 shooting.

Meanwhile, the Bulldogs unleashed the sort of harassing defense normally associated with the Bruins, making every UCLA possession a slog. With point guard Dylan Andrews' slump deepening, the Bruins often struggled to produce good shots — or, in a few cases, any shot while committing a shot-clock violation. Andrews, who went

scoreless with one assist, was benched down the stretch in favor of Mack.

The halftime score — UCLA 27, Gonzaga 25 — looked like a misprint given the Bruins shot only 29% and committed nine turnovers. The advantage came thanks mostly to UCLA making five of 12 three-pointers (compared to Gonzaga's two of 11), forcing the Bulldogs into 11 turnovers and grabbing two more rebounds than their counterparts.

The Bruins looked like they were headed to a much larger cushion after Clark used a crossover move to free himself for a jumper that capped an 11-0 run, giving

UCLA a 24-13 lead.

Tensions momentarily rose late in the first half when Gonzaga guard Khalif Battle was assessed a flagrant-2 foul and ejected for clobbering Dailey, the contact prompting Cronin to shed his suit jacket before conversing with officials about the play.

The loss of their third-leading scorer seemed to galvanize the Bulldogs the rest of the first half. They went on to hold UCLA scoreless for more than four minutes while rolling off a 9-0 push that wiped out most of the Bruins' big lead.

UCLA played without center William Kyle III, who was sidelined by an unspecified medical issue, according to a team spokesperson.

In the end, the Bruins had just enough to break through against the team that had tormented them so much.

NO. 22 UCLA 65, NO. 14 GONZAGA 62												
GONZAGA												
	Min	FG-A	FFA	ORT	A	P	T					
Ike	31	11-16	1-1	1-8	2	3	24					
Ajai	20	0-2	0-0	2-5	1	1	0					
Battle	13	2-4	0-0	0-1	0	2	5					
Nemhard	40	7-12	0-1	1-4	8	2	16					
Stromer	30	5-10	0-0	0-2	1	3	0					
Hickman	31	2-6	0-0	1-3	4	1	6					
Gregg	20	1-5	4-6	1-4	1	2	6					
Huff	9	1-6	0-0	2-3	0	2	2					
Innocenti	5	1-2	0-0	0-0	0	1	3					
Totals	25-55	5-9	8-30	17	15	62						
Shooting: Field goals, 45.5%; free throws, 62.5%												
Three-point goals: 7-24 (Nemhard 2-4, Hickman 2-6, Ike 1-1, Innocenti 1-2, Battle 1-3, Ajai 0-1, Huff 0-1, Stromer 0-2, Gregg 0-4). Team Rebounds: 2. Team Turnovers: None. Blocked Shots: 2 (Gregg, Huff). Turnovers: 15 (Ike 4, Ajai 3, Hickman 3, Huff 2, Nemhard 2, Gregg). Steals: 3 (Ajai 2, Stromer). Technical Fouls: Nemhard, 15:38 second.												
UCLA												
	Min	FG-A	FFA	ORT	A	P	T					
Blondeau	38	2-10	2-2	0-5	2	2	7					
Andrews	17	0-5	0-0	1-2	1	0	0					
Clark	34	3-5	4-4	2-9	7	3	11					
Johnson	27	4-6	0-0	1-8	1	2	12					
Dailey	26	5-10	4-6	4-6	4	2	18					
Mack	22	1-7	2-5	2-3	2	3	4					
Stefanovic	22	4-8	0-0	0-0	0	0	10					
Mara	8	0-3	0-0	1-2	1	0	0					
Perry	5	1-1	1-1	0-0	1	1	3					
Totals	20-55	13-18	11-35	16	15	65						
Shooting: Field goals, 36.4%; free throws, 72.2%												
Three-point goals: 12-24 (Dailey 4-5, Johnson 4-6, Stefanovic 2-4, Clark 1-1, Blondeau 1-4, Mack 0-1, Andrews 0-3). Team Rebounds: 2. Team Turnovers: 3. Blocked Shots: 3 (Mara 2, Johnson). Turnovers: 11 (Blondeau 3, Clark 2, Johnson 2, Dailey, Mack, Mara, Stefanovic). Steals: 9 (Dailey 4, Blondeau 2, Clark, Johnson, Perry). Technical Fouls: Dailey, 15:38 second.												
GONZAGA	25	37	32	62								
UCLA	27	38	35	65								

ROSE BOWL NOTEBOOK

Ohio State's defense eager to avenge loss

BY ANTHONY DE LEON AND ANDRÉS SOTO

The main thing every member of the Ohio State defense that stepped up to the podium on Friday morning emphasized was execution.

The players didn't execute their defensive game plan during a 32-31 loss at Oregon on Oct. 12.

Now, the Buckeyes, who field one of the top defenses in the nation, have a chance at redemption in the Rose Bowl, with a spot in the College Football Playoff semifinals at stake.

"You always hope for a second shot when you don't do well, and that's life," Ohio State defensive coordinator **Jim Knowles** said. "A lot of times, you don't get them. So we have a chance to do better and be better."

By most metrics, that first game against Oregon was an anomaly for Ohio State's defense. The Buckeyes have given up an average of 242.2 yards per game — the fewest in the nation — but gave up 496 to Oregon. Their vaunted pass rush, featuring some of the best defensive linemen in the country in **J.T. Tuimoloau**, **Jack Sawyer** and **Ty Hamilton**, has compiled 39 sacks. Ohio State didn't touch Ducks quarterback **Dillon Gabriel**, or even pressure him.

"We have so much trust in the coaches that they're going to make the right changes for us to be in the best position possible," Tuimoloau said. "And I think they did just that. One thing we've been preaching is 'Execution is really the motive.' Anything can be called but as long as everybody's mindset is one mentality — which is just, 'Go get it, and make sure there's no yard gain' — I think that changes the mindset of everybody on the silver bullet defense."

Veteran leadership

Knowles credited key players on defense for Ohio State's consistent success.

"When you have a team that's together with veteran leadership, the week-to-week process stays the same," he said. "No matter who we're playing, the point has always been for us to be at our best, to get better from the week before, get better from earlier in the season, and keep improving."

Fifth-year senior linebacker **Cody Simon** leads the team with 86 tackles. Twelve came against Tennessee in the first round of the playoff, many of which were on Volunteers quarterback **Nico Iamaleava** in the open field, a feat Ohio State will need to replicate against Gabriel.

"He's a really smart quarterback, really experienced player. He's able to move around the pocket pretty well," Simon said of Gabriel. "It's going to be our job to really give him different looks and really give him a tough time in the pocket. We can't make him comfortable."

The Buckeyes also feature a deep secondary, a staple of Ohio State teams over the years, led by **Denzel Burke**, **Caleb Downs**, **Lathan Ransom** and **Jordan Hancock**. They thrive on their versatility and communication, which Hancock says has only grown since their first time facing Oregon.

"Caleb makes a lot of checks, Lathan makes a lot of checks. I listen to them," Hancock said about his role with the safeties. "Whatever they need. If I need to cover somebody, I'll go cover any-

body. If they need me to do run support, I'll do run support. And it's really what Caleb does, what we do and Lathan, it just goes back to [safeties coach **Matt Guerrieri's**] preparation and everyone's preparation to give us more flexibility. It doesn't matter who's in those positions, and we can all play every position."

Rose Bowl memories

The last time Ohio State and Oregon met in the Rose Bowl, it was a traditional matchup of the Big Ten and Pac-10, Ohio State offensive coordinator **Chip Kelly** roamed the sidelines as the Ducks' coach and 7-year-old **Bryce Boettcher** watched from the stands.

A native of Eugene, Ore., and now the Ducks' leading tackler, Boettcher made the 859-mile trip with his parents to root for Oregon.

"It was the only Rose Bowl game I've ever been to," Boettcher said of the 2010 game. "I was little, so I don't remember a whole lot of it."

While he doesn't remember much, other than the taunting and his seats that "felt like we were a mile away," Boettcher recalls how it ended for the Ducks — a 26-17 Ohio State victory — creating a core memory that still leaves a bad taste in his mouth.

Years later, Boettcher returns to the Rose Bowl in a Ducks uniform, leading his hometown team onto the field against the squad that once tormented him as a child in storybook fashion.

"You dream of this game," he said. "I'm pumped to get to do it with this team in this circumstance, especially getting to play Ohio State again. I was hoping we were going to get them again."

The senior and former walk-on now has the chance to write a new chapter against a team that Oregon never has defeated in the Rose Bowl.

"We're planning on ending this one a little bit differently," he said.

Defensive disrespect

Oregon rightfully earns praise as one of the most explosive offenses in the country. Meanwhile, the Ducks' defense quietly has become the forgotten component of this well-balanced team.

Oregon is ranked 12th nationally in scoring defense (17.8 points per game) and total defense (301.8 yards per game). It has consistently delivered crucial performances, including a standout, last-minute effort in the previous matchup against Ohio State, which helped propel Oregon to the No. 1 ranking.

Despite its rankings, the unit was omitted from the All-Big Ten first-team voting by conference coaches.

"It is disrespectful," defensive end **Matayo Uia-galelei** said. "I feel like every guy in our defense is a baller. I feel like they should be recognized for it."

Uiagalelei, the team's sack leader and second in the Big Ten with 10½ sacks, was a surprising snub. He said the team's focus is on collective success, not personal achievements — especially those beyond their control.

"That for sure bothered me a lot when I first saw it," linebacker **Jeffrey Bassa** said of Uiagalelei's snub. "That's all external factors. It's people that don't see the grind that we put in every day."

Bassa, a senior and the team's designated on-field play-caller, said the defense's lack of accolades doesn't define it.



JORDAN JAMES of Oregon carries the ball during the Ducks' 32-31 win over Ohio State on Oct. 12.



DAVID BECKER Getty Images

JAYDEN MAIAVA looks to pass under pressure from Cashius Howell of Texas A&M. Maiava got past a poor start and completed 22 of 39 passes for 295 yards and four touchdowns with help from USC’s top two receivers.

Trojans pull out a dramatic win to finish on a high note

[**USC**, from D8] at least, to the form they found that night in September, coming from behind to beat Texas A&M 35-31 in the Las Vegas Bowl.

After the year they’d been through, with five fourth-quarter leads blown during six losses, the fact that they were able to battle back Friday to finish 7-6 was progress enough for Riley. Even if his record this season will go down as the worst in his coaching career.

“There’s a toughness and a hardness that’s developing within this program,” Riley said. “We didn’t flinch. We’re a pretty battle-tested group. We’ve been through a lot this year. We’ve been in a lot of big games.”

The Las Vegas Bowl bore a striking resemblance to its bookend back in September, down to the breathtaking finish, as USC once again fought through a fourth-quarter deficit to earn a statement-making win. Even if this statement didn’t ring in the same way as the one in September.

“The mentality has been on display all year,” Riley said, “and it was important to finish that way.”

The finish, Riley noted, felt especially “poetic,” considering the journey USC took to get there. It required timely stops from a defense that had a reputation for giving up big plays last season. It required a heroic showcase from a receiver whose playing time was cut in the final month, and a final touchdown from another receiver in his swan song, who spoke openly of his frustration this season.

But first, it required

USC’s quarterback to dig his way out of a deep hole.

Where Miller Moss put on a show throughout the season opener, his replacement, Jayden Maiava, struggled to move USC’s offense at all at the start of a mistake-filled finale. The Trojans’ first three drives moved just 16 total yards, while Maiava completed only three of his first nine passes.

Worse yet, he committed three head-scratching interceptions, each of which threatened to derail an offense that seemed to be hanging by a thread. After the second pick, a discouraged Maiava came back to the sideline and apologized to his receivers. They told him to brush it off.

“He’s just so hard on himself,” receiver Kyle Ford said. “That’s why he’s so great. But sometimes, he needs a pick-me-up here and there.”

Help arrived just before the questions about USC’s future at quarterback could be posed, as Maiava regained his confidence late in the third quarter, moving the Trojans down the field on one scoring drive ... then another ... then another. He hit Makai Lemon for two big plays downfield, then found Ja’Kobi Lane for his second and third touchdowns of the evening. In quick succession, USC erased a 17-point deficit behind its quarterback’s cannon right arm.

But when Texas A&M scored to regain the lead, 31-28, with 1:49 left, the Trojans appeared in danger of another devastating defeat.

Maiava wouldn’t allow it. He drove the Trojans 75 yards for the winning touchdown pass, his fourth of the

game, with eight seconds left.

“He didn’t play his best there for a while, missed a few things he doesn’t normally miss,” Riley said of Maiava, “but he stuck with it. That’s what you’ve got to do. You’ve got to keep fighting.”

The redshirt sophomore finished 22 for 39 for 295 yards. The Trojans’ top two receivers did their part too, as Lane caught seven passes for 127 yards and three touchdowns, while Lemon had six catches for 99 yards. But Ford delivered the most important moment of all.

Texas A&M had just stolen back the lead as quarterback Marcel Reed darted through USC’s defense to score on a 19-yard scamper. On the ensuing drive, only 27 seconds remained when Maiava dropped back on third and 13 near midfield. He spotted Lane and fired a dart downfield, finding his top receiver for a 33-yard gain. Then he hit Lane again for 11 yards to A&M’s two-yard line, leaving just 12 ticks on the clock.

Ford knew that the next pass was coming to him.

“I was like, ‘Jayden better throw this damn ball,’ ” Ford said with a smile.

As he cut inward on a slant route, Ford could feel it coming. As he reeled in the winning score, all the emotions from his up-and-down tenure as a Trojan came rushing to the surface. The knee injuries. The frustration with his role. His transfer to UCLA, then return home to USC. As the crowd roared, Ford fell to his knees, overwhelmed by the moment.

“My journey hasn’t been exactly easy,” he said. “This is just a testament to just how hard I worked and persevered through it. It all hit me at once.”

It was, for USC, a fitting picture on which to end a season marked by frustration, a high note from which hope for the future could grow.

“You just kind of feel it within the locker room right now,” Riley said. “A confidence that we’re going to be in every fight, that we’re not going to go away.”

FRIDAY’S LATE SUMMARY			
USC 35, TEXAS A&M 31			
Texas A&M.....	7	0	17 7-31
USC.....	0	7	7 21-35
First Quarter			
TXAM—N.Thomas 7 pass from Reed (Bond kick), 6:37.			
Second Quarter			
USC—Lane 30 pass from Maiava (Lantz kick), 10:16.			
Third Quarter			
TXAM—N.Thomas 5 pass from Reed (Bond kick), 11:03.			
TXAM—FG Bond 27, 6:12.			
TXAM—Barber 5 pass from Reed (Bond kick), 5:12.			
USC—Lane 17 pass from Maiava (Lantz kick), 3:42.			
Fourth Quarter			
USC—B.Jackson 1 run (Lantz kick), 14:24.			
USC—Lane 15 pass from Maiava (Lantz kick), 4:30.			
TXAM—Reed 19 run (Bond kick), 1:49.			
USC—Ford 7 pass from Maiava (Lantz kick), :08.			
Attendance—26,671.			
STATISTICS			
TEAM	TXAM	USC	
First downs.....	24	25	
Total Net Yards.....	443	400	
Rushes-yards.....	30-151	31-105	
Passing.....	292	295	
Punt Returns.....	0-0	0-0	
Kickoff Returns.....	2-42	3-72	
Interceptions Ret.....	3-15	2-26	
Comp-Att-Int.....	26-42-2	22-39-3	
Sacked-Yards Lost.....	1-6	1-13	
Punts.....	4-42.25	4-44.0	
Fumbles-Lost.....	0-0	0-0	
Penalties-Yards.....	8-73	6-70	
Time of Possession.....	31:53	28:07	
Individual Leaders			
RUSHING: Texas A&M, Owens 13-56, Reed 9-46, Smith 5-36, Barber 1-8, Bussey 2-5. USC, Jackson 16-66, Peterson 12-43, Maiava 3-(minus 4).			
PASSING: Texas A&M, Reed 26-42-2-292. USC, Maiava 22-39-3-295.			
RECEIVING: Texas A&M, Barber 7-48, N.Thomas 5-29, Bussey 4-37, Walker 3-49, I.Watson 3-42, Smith 2-18, Calhoun 1-36, Owens 1-6. USC, Lane 7-127, Lemon 6-99, Ford 6-59, Peterson 2-13, Maiava 1-(minus 3).			
MISSED FIELD GOALS—Texas A&M, Bond 38. USC, Lantz 39.			

BOWL ROUNDUP

Ward gets mark, but Iowa State rallies as he sits

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Rocco Becht scored from a yard out on fourth and goal with 56 seconds left, and No. 18 Iowa State capped the best season in school history by rallying past No. 15 Miami 42-41 in the Pop-Tarts Bowl on Saturday.

Becht threw for 270 yards and three touchdowns for Iowa State (11-2), a program that entered its 133rd season having never won more than nine games.

The Cyclones rallied from a 10-point deficit in the second half — with Miami quarterback Cam Ward watching after a record-setting first half. Carson Hansen rushed for a pair of touchdowns.

Ward passed for three touchdowns in his final college game, while Damien Martinez rushed for a career-high 179 yards for Miami (10-3), which dropped its sixth straight bowl game and lost three of four games to end the season.

Martinez and Mark Fletcher Jr. rushed for scores for Miami. Elijah Arroyo, Jojo Trader and Jacoby George had touchdown catches for the Hurricanes.

A 15-play, 84-yard drive by Iowa State delivered the winning score.

The first half was wild. Miami fumbled the ball away on the game’s first snap. And the next eight drives all ended with touchdowns, neither team able to stop the other.

The teams combined for 625 yards — 358 for Miami, 267 for Iowa State — and 59 points by halftime, which Miami ended holding a 31-28 lead.

Ward was 12 for 19 for 190 yards and three touchdowns before Emory Williams took over to start the second half. Ward threw a record-setting 156th touchdown pass of his college career by connecting with George for a four-yard score with 4:12 left in the first quarter. That broke the Division I record, one more than Houston’s Case Keenum threw for from 2007 through 2011.

Fletcher’s one-yard touchdown run midway through the third quarter put Miami up 38-28, but the Hurricanes managed only three points on their final three drives.

BOWL SCHEDULE

BOWL	WHEN (PST), TV
Music City: Iowa vs. Missouri	Today, 11:30 a.m., ESPN
ReliaQuest: Alabama vs. Michigan	Tuesday, 9 a.m., ESPN
Sun: Louisville vs. Washington	Tuesday, 11 a.m., Ch. 2
Citrus: South Carolina vs. Illinois	Tuesday, noon, Ch. 7
Texas: Baylor vs. Louisiana State	Tuesday, 12:30 p.m., ESPN
Fiesta: Boise State vs. Penn State (CFP quarterfinal)	Tuesday, 4:30 p.m., ESPN
Peach: Arizona State vs. Texas (CFP quarterfinal)	Wednesday, 10 a.m., ESPN
Rose: Oregon vs. Ohio State (CFP quarterfinal)	Wednesday, 2 p.m., ESPN
Sugar: Georgia vs. Notre Dame (CFP quarterfinal)	Wednesday, 5:45 p.m., ESPN
Gator: Duke vs. Mississippi	Thursday, 4:30 p.m., ESPN
First Responder: North Texas vs. Texas State	Friday, 1 p.m., ESPN
Duke’s Mayo: Minnesota vs. Virginia Tech	Friday, 4:30 p.m., ESPN
Bahamas: Buffalo vs. Liberty	Saturday, 8 a.m., ESPN/ESPN2
Orange: TBD (CFP semifinal)	Jan. 9, 4:30 p.m., ESPN
Cotton: TBD (CFP semifinal)	Jan. 10, 4:30 p.m., ESPN
CFP Championship: TBD	Jan. 20, 4:30 p.m., ESPN

Results

Celebration: Jackson State 28, South Carolina State 7 (Dec. 14)
Salute to Veterans: South Alabama 30, Western Michigan 23 (Dec. 14)
Frisco: Memphis 42, West Virginia 37 (Dec. 17)
Boca Raton: James Madison 27, Western Kentucky 17 (Dec. 18)
LA: Nevada Las Vegas 24, California 13 (Dec. 18)
New Orleans: Sam Houston State 31, Georgia Southern 26 (Dec. 19)
Cure: Ohio 30, Jacksonville State 27 (Dec. 20)
Gasparilla: Florida 33, Tulane 8 (Dec. 20)
CFP first round: Notre Dame 27, Indiana 17 (Dec. 20)
CFP first round: Penn State 38, Southern Methodist 10 (Dec. 21)
CFP first round: Texas 38, Clemson 24 (Dec. 21)
CFP first round: Ohio State 42, Tennessee 17 (Dec. 21)
Myrtle Beach: Texas San Antonio 44, Coastal Carolina 15 (Dec. 23)
Famous Idaho Potato: Northern Illinois 28, Fresno State 20 (2OT) (Dec. 23)
Hawaii: South Florida 41, San José State 39 (5OT) (Dec. 24)
GameAbove Sports: Toledo 48, Pittsburgh 46 (6OT) (Dec. 26)
Rate Bowl: Kansas State 44, Rutgers 41 (Dec. 26)
68 Ventures: Arkansas State 38, Bowling Green 31 (Dec. 26)
Armed Forces: Navy 21, Oklahoma 20 (Dec. 27)
Birmingham: Vanderbilt 35, Georgia Tech 27 (Dec. 27)
Liberty: Arkansas 39, Texas Tech 26 (Dec. 27)
Holiday: Syracuse 52, Washington State 35 (Dec. 27)
Las Vegas: USC 35, Texas A&M 31 (Dec. 27)
Fenway: Connecticut 27, North Carolina 14 (Dec. 28)
Pinstripe: Nebraska 20, Boston College 15 (Dec. 28)
New Mexico: Texas Christian 34, Louisiana 3 (Dec. 28)
Pop-Tarts: Iowa State 42, Miami 41 (Dec. 28)
Arizona: Miami (Ohio) vs. Colorado State, late (Dec. 28)
Military: East Carolina vs. North Carolina State, late (Dec. 28)
Alamo: Brigham Young vs. Colorado, late (Dec. 28)
Independence: Louisiana Tech vs. Army, late (Dec. 28)

It’s time for Riley to step up

[**Hernández**, from D8]

On the offensive line. On the defensive line. In the secondary. At quarterback.

Sophomore receivers Ja’Kobi Lane and Makai Lemon had showcase games against Texas A&M, but don’t forget that Miller Moss threw six touchdown passes in the Holiday Bowl last year. Moss was supplanted as USC’s starting quarterback last month and has since transferred to Louisville.

Moss’ replacement, Jayden Maiava, was inconsistent in his three regular-season starts, and he was inconsistent again on Friday night, as three of his passes were intercepted before he led the Trojans’ comeback.

Riley can be applauded for his developing a never-give-up culture, but he doesn’t have many believers outside of his own locker room.

The 400 sections, which are made up of the uppermost seats at Allegiant Stadium, were totally empty on Friday night. The 300 sections were too.

There were rows and rows of vacant seats elsewhere in the 65,000-seat venue, serving as a visual representation of what happened to USC in its third season under Riley.

The fans lost hope.

At this point, Riley remaining on this downward



DAVID BECKER Getty Images

LINCOLN RILEY needs to get the USC fans believing in him again. Friday’s victory was a step forward.

trajectory feels considerably more likely than him guiding the Trojans back to national prominence — or even respectability.

They were 8-5 last year and 11-2 before that, and why would anyone believe their slide won’t continue?

The Trojans are 20 years removed from their since-vacated national championship in 2004. With every passing season, the more the Pete Carroll era looks like an aberration instead of a realistic standard to which the program should be held.

Redshirt sophomore safety Kamari Ramsey said

he decided to return to USC next season rather than declare for the NFL draft, in part, because he believed in the direction the Trojans are headed.

“Obviously, this season didn’t go the way we wanted, but the fight we showed every game, in the wins and the losses, just showed me the type of program we are,” Ramsey said.

Ramsey isn’t necessarily an outlier, but his view isn’t shared by everyone either. USC just lost 19 players to the transfer portal.

Riley’s first two recruiting classes included a dozen top-100 players. Nine of them

are gone.

Riley has done what he could to characterize this season as a step forward, and he argued the Las Vegas Bowl victory was evidence of that.

“We didn’t flinch,” he said. “We’re a pretty battle-tested group. We’ve been through a lot this year. We’ve been in a lot of big games.”

To his point, five of the Trojans’ six losses were by a touchdown or less.

“There wasn’t anything in this game that could happen where I thought we would totally flinch,” Riley said.

Rather than lament the erratic play of Maiava during the first three quarters, Riley praised him for how he performed in the fourth.

“He stuck with it,” said Riley, who added that he was “very confident” with Maiava as his quarterback moving forward.

Riley will have to practice what he is teaching.

The excitement that was produced by his first season at USC feels like something from the distant past. Anticipation has been gradually replaced by dread.

The Trojans can’t sustain any momentum. They’re losing players in the transfer portal. They’re lacking in talent compared to the top teams in their new conference.

Riley can’t waver.

SPORTS

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2024 :: LATIMES.COM/SPORTS

LAS VEGAS BOWL :: USC 35, TEXAS A&M 31



MASON COBB (13) and his Trojans teammates could smile Friday night at Allegiant Stadium after they came back from 17 points down to finish the season 7-6.

Photographs by DAVID BECKER Getty Images

Right back where they partied

Players stepped up for USC fans, and now it's Riley's turn

DYLAN HERNÁNDEZ



Lincoln Riley was beaming. The USC coach said he saw *it* when his team came back from an 17-point deficit against Texas A&M to claim a 35-31 victory in the Las Vegas Bowl. He said he could feel *it* in the locker room. “There’s a toughness and a hardness that’s developing within this program right now,” Riley said. But how much should be made of this? As much as Riley raved about the resilience of the Trojans, the reality is they were a 7-6 team this season. Mental fortitude is important, but so is physical talent and USC looks as if it could be short on that in various parts of the field again next year.

[See Hernández, D7]



KYLE FORD falls to his knees as he is overwhelmed by his up-and-down journey that ended with his game-winning score. Said Ford, “It all hit me at once.”

Trojans prevail in thriller to bookend season-opening win

BY RYAN KARTJE

LAS VEGAS — It was less than four months ago, at the start of his third and most consequential season yet as USC’s coach, that Lincoln Riley walked off this same field at Allegiant Stadium, brimming with belief. His new quarterback had come through. His rebuilt defense had delivered. The statement he’d been searching for finally seemed to arrive in a season-opening win over Louisiana State. “We know what we’ve been building,” Riley said that night. “I know we’re making progress.” By late December, any signs of that progress had disappeared and confidence in Riley had faded along with it, lost during a frustrating season that ended Friday night right back where it began. But after a campaign filled with painful fourth-quarter collapses, the Trojans were able to return, for one night

[See USC, D7]

Smiles abound as Bruins break Bulldogs’ spell

Cronin gets first win over NCAA nemesis after Clark seals it in the final seconds.

NO. 22 UCLA 65
NO. 14 GONZAGA 62

BY BEN BOLCH

No crazy buzzer-beater. No last-minute miracle. After so much heartache over so many years, UCLA finally shook off its Gonzaga jinx under coach Mick Cronin on Saturday afternoon. It looked like the Bruins might be in store for more misfortune when Sebastian Mack fouled Gonzaga’s Ryan Nembhard on a driving layup with 8.1 seconds left, sending Nembhard to the line for the free throw that could tie the score. But the basketball gods finally smiled upon the Bruins. Nembhard missed the free throw and UCLA’s Skyy Clark chased down the rebound before getting fouled. He made both free throws to



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

KOBE JOHNSON, left, and Lazar Stefanovic roared over a clutch win against Gonzaga in the West Coast Hoops Showdown at the Intuit Dome. Johnson was a key contributor late with four threes after halftime.

give the No. 22 Bruins a breathless 65-62 victory over the No. 14 Bulldogs in the West Coast Hoops Showdown at the Intuit Dome. Another wild finish for Gonzaga was not in store after Nembhard’s heave beyond halfcourt was well off the mark at the buzzer. It was the first victory over Gonzaga for Cronin at UCLA after he’d dropped his first four meetings, including a pair of heartbreakers on game-winning shots in the NCAA tournament. A heavily pro-Bruins crowd of 12,272 cheered the team on its way off the court after it shook off its 16-point collapse against North Carolina last weekend. “We knew we let a big one slip away in New York and we’re still feeling that,” said Clark, who was strong across the board with 11 points, nine rebounds and seven assists, “but we’ve got to learn from it and move on, so we just came into this game hungry, we did not want to lose.” After barely playing in the second half against the

[See UCLA, D6]

Los Angeles Times

SPORTS EXTRA

A TIMES E-NEWSPAPER EXCLUSIVE :: SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2024



WALLY SKALIJ Los Angeles Times

KAMREN KINCHENS makes an interception over Cardinals receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. in the Rams' 13-9 win Saturday that avenged a Week 2 loss to Arizona.

Rams grab win, close in on division title

By GARY KLEIN

Hold on a minute. Actually, make that at least 24 hours. Maybe even 48. After 16 games it's now hurry-up-and-wait for the Rams, who moved closer to clinching the NFC West title on Saturday with a 13-9 victory over the Arizona Cardinals in front of 73,051 at SoFi Stadium. Kyren Williams rushed for a touchdown, Puka Nacua amassed 129 yards receiving and safety Kamren Kinchens and veteran cornerback Ahkello Witherspoon had fourth-quarter interceptions as the Rams extended their winning streak to five games and improved to 10-6. On a night when the 1990s band Sublime performed at halftime, the Rams' performance was any-

thing but sublime. Still, it was enough to set up a long weekend of watching and waiting to determine whether the season finale against the Seattle Seahawks (9-7) will mean anything for either team's playoff hopes. The victory over the Cardinals positioned the Rams to clinch the division before that game at SoFi Stadium is played on Saturday or Sunday. The NFL will announce the Week 18 schedule after Week 17. The Rams, seeking a playoff berth for the sixth time in coach Sean McVay's eight seasons, need help from other teams to secure the NFL's "strength of victory" tiebreaker that would make next weekend's result against the Seahawks moot. On Saturday, the Cincinnati Bengals did their part by defeating the Denver Broncos in overtime.

Now the Rams must wait to see if three of five teams — the Cleveland Browns, Washington Commanders, Buffalo Bills and Minnesota Vikings on Sunday, and if need be the San Francisco 49ers on Monday — can win and enable McVay to rest starters for the playoffs. The Rams went into Saturday's game aiming to avenge their 41-10 loss in Arizona in Week 2. After the Rams failed to score a touchdown in the rain during a victory over the 49ers in Santa Clara, and did just enough to defeat the New York Jets in frigid New Jersey, the conditions seemed perfect for a breakout performance. In the first game against the Cardinals, the Rams were missing several starters because of injuries and lost more during the loss. This time they were near full strength. Plus, for once they even had a

home stadium devoid of boisterous opposing fans. Yet it was still a struggle to win for the ninth time in 11 games. Quarterback Matthew Stafford completed 17 of 32 passes for 189 yards. Nacua caught 10 of them. Braden Fiske sacked Cardinals quarterback Kyler Murray twice, and Kobie Turner and Byron Young each sacked him once. Murray completed 33 of 48 passes for 321 yards and a touchdown. He rushed for 32 yards in four carries. Tight end Trey McBride caught 12 passes for 123 yards and a touchdown. The Rams led 10-0 at halftime on Williams' one-yard touchdown run and Joshua Karty's 53-yard field goal. Murray's short touchdown pass to McBride midway through the

third quarter cut the margin, but Rams linebacker Michael Hoecht blocked the extra-point attempt. The Cardinals pulled to within a point with a field goal early in the fourth quarter, but Karty's 25-yard field goal with less than seven minutes remaining increased the lead to 13-9. The Rams seemed to have stopped the Cardinals' last threat with about three minutes left when Kinchens intercepted a long pass intended for Marvin Harrison Jr. However the Rams were forced to punt, and the Cardinals got the ball with just more than two minutes left. Murray directed a drive to the Rams' five-yard line. But his pass to McBride tipped off the tight end's helmet and was intercepted by Witherspoon with 42 seconds left to seal the win.

Minus James, Lakers find enough offense behind Davis, Reaves

STAFF REPORTS

The hit was going to come, the Lakers and JJ Redick sure of it. Sacramento had been thrown into complete chaos, the Lakers taking two straight from the Kings in their building last week — links in the chain of events that led to the Kings firing coach Mike Brown on his way to board the flight for L.A. Beating the Kings for the fourth time this season already was going to be hard; a shakeup like a coaching change was sure to have Sacramento flying around the court like the turbo button was stuck. The Lakers would have to respond, meet force with force and speed with speed — and do it without LeBron James, who was home sick. But just like they found a way on Christmas with Anthony Davis out because of an ankle injury, the Lakers did it again Saturday in a 132-122 win, spoiling former Laker (and rival) Doug Christie's first game as the Kings' interim coach. Austin Reaves, who hit the winning shot against Golden State on Christmas, orchestrated the offense with James out, scoring 26 and dishing out a career-high 16 assists. Davis, back on the floor after playing only seven minutes Wednesday, dominated his matchup with Domantas Sabonis,

scoring 36 (on only 16 shots) to go with 15 rebounds and eight assists. And Rui Hachimura needed only 11 shots to score 21 points while giving the Lakers the kind of physicality and activity on the wing they need on both ends of the court. Sabonis scored 14 points before fouling out in 26 minutes. De'Aaron Fox had 29 points and 12 assists and DeMar DeRozan finished with 25 points for the Kings (13-19). The Lakers (18-13) led by as many as 20 after a dominant third quarter in which they outscored the Kings 42-24. The Lakers' 59.7% shooting from the field and their 53.8% three-point shooting were season highs. In addition to the Lakers having no real concern about James and his illness, more help is incoming. Jaxson Hayes, who has missed the last 14 games because of a sprained ankle, is set to return Tuesday against first-place Cleveland. —DAN WOIKE

UCLA FOOTBALL Bruins land Aguilar, successor to Garbers

UCLA has landed its likely successor to quarterback Ethan Garbers.



MARK J. TERRILL Associated Press

THE LAKERS' Anthony Davis shoots for two of his game-high 36 points as the Kings' Trey Lyles (41) and Keon Ellis (23) defend. Austin Reaves added 26 points to bolster the Lakers offense.

His name is Joey Aguilar, and he's put up prolific numbers the last two seasons at Appalachian State while leading the Mountaineers to a bowl victory, not to mention a triumph over the coach who will be his offensive coordinator with the Bruins. Aguilar, who announced his commitment to UCLA on social media Saturday evening, threw the winning touchdown pass in overtime to lift Appalachian State to a victory over then-unbeaten James Madison late in 2023 when the Dukes staff included Tino Sunseri, who will become the Bruins' offensive coordinator next year after one season at Indiana.

During his two seasons at Appalachian State, Aguilar completed 60% of his passes for 6,760 yards and 56 touchdowns with 24 interceptions. The native of Antioch, Calif., who spent two seasons at Diablo Valley Community College in central California, also showed an ability to generate yardage on the ground, rushing for 456 yards and five touchdowns in two seasons with the Mountaineers. In 2023, Aguilar was selected the Sun Belt Conference's newcomer of the year after leading Appalachian State to a 9-5 record that included a victory over Miami (Ohio) in the Cure Bowl. The Mountaineers backslid to a 5-6

record this past season, when Aguilar's production dipped and he completed 56% of his passes for 3,003 yards with 23 touchdowns and 14 interceptions. Aguilar gained one final season of eligibility after quarterback Diego Pavia won a court challenge to grant additional eligibility for players who had competed at the junior college level. With Garbers having exhausted his eligibility and top backup Justyn Martin having transferred to Maryland, Aguilar is the clear front-runner to start UCLA's season opener against Utah on Aug. 30 at the Rose Bowl. —BEN BOLCH

latimes.com/sports

BONUS COVERAGE
Go to our website for takeaways from The Times' staff on your favorite home teams at latimes.com/sports.



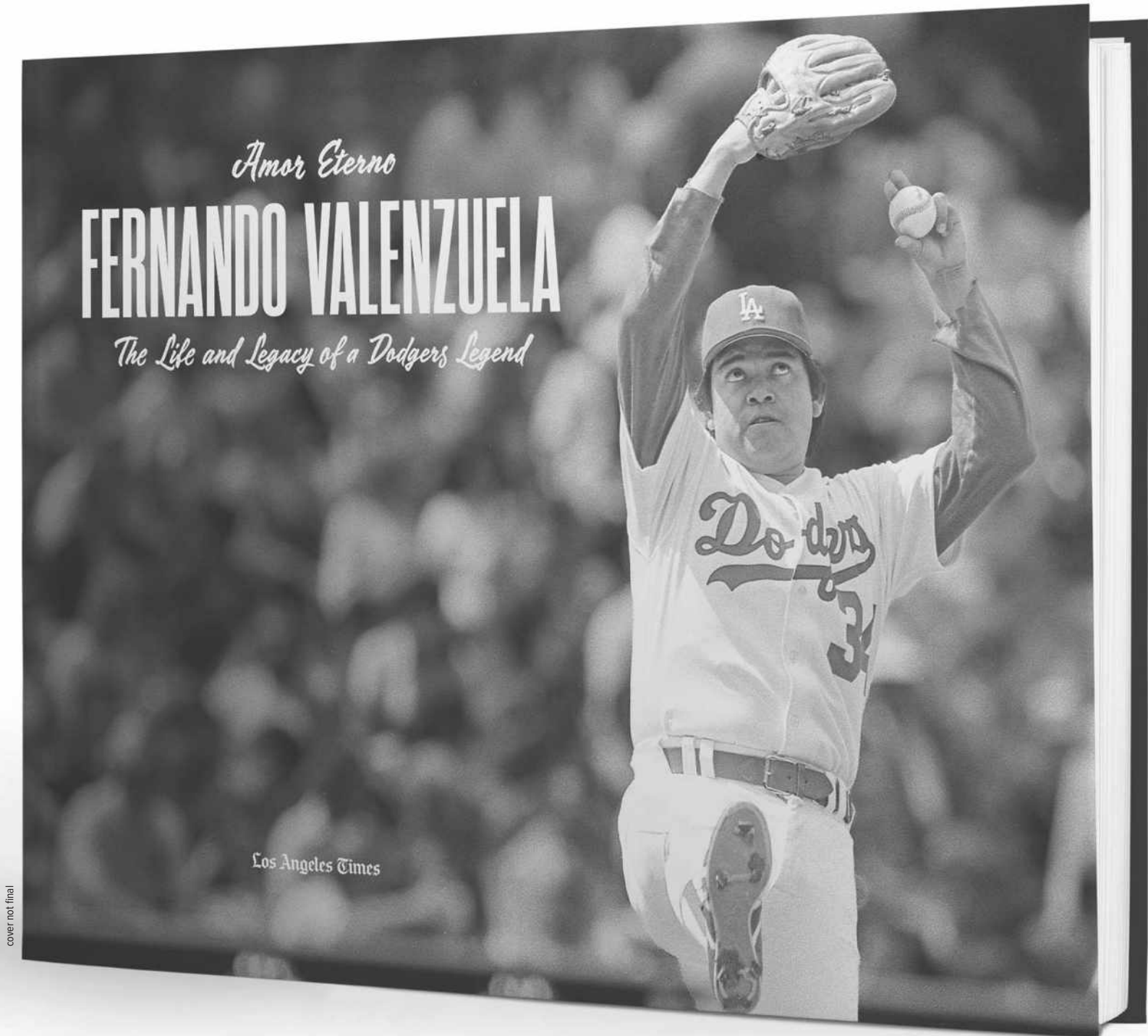
THE SPORTS REPORT
Sign up for our daily sports newsletter at latimes.com/newsletters/sports-report.

STAY CONNECTED
■ On Instagram [@latimes_sports](https://www.instagram.com/latimes_sports)
■ On X [@latimesports](https://twitter.com/latimesports)

The career of a legend

MEMORIALIZED

Celebrate the legacy of
Fernando Valenzuela
in a hardcover collector’s book



\$38.00 ~~\$45.00~~ • plus tax & shipping • offer expires Feb. 21, 2025 • books ship March 21, 2025

In the wake of the passing of the incomparable Fernando Valenzuela, we invite you to celebrate the life and legacy of this Dodgers icon with this hardcover commemorative book. This beautifully crafted, 160-page coffee-table book, brought to you by the Los Angeles Times, is a heartfelt tribute to the man who forever changed the fabric of the Dodgers and Major League Baseball. With captivating stories and stunning photographs, this book showcases the remarkable journey of a 20-year-old from a small town in Mexico who became MLB’s only Cy Young Award-winning rookie pitcher, igniting “Fernandomania” and inspiring generations of fans. It’s more than a collection of memories; it’s a testament to the quiet pride and dignity that defined Valenzuela’s career and life. Let “Amor Eterno: Fernando Valenzuela: The Life and Legacy of a Dodgers Legend” be your way to honor an icon and cherish the enduring impact he had on the game and its fans. Order your copy today and keep the spirit of Fernando Valenzuela alive.



Save 15%
for a limited time

Pre-order online and save now at

shoplatimes.com/FernandoBook

Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2024



CLARENCE MACLIN BY THE TYLER TWINS

Photographers take us behind the lens of some of the year's most striking portraits in a showcase of Hollywood and arts figures at play in their element.

FACES OF 2024



AARON MOTEN, WALTON GOGGINS AND ELLA PURNELL

BY SHAYAN ASGHARNIA IN LOS ANGELES

The three stars of “Fallout” flew in from different parts of the globe to talk with The Envelope in May, comparing notes about the challenging weather during production of the Amazon Prime Video series.

**GARCELLE
BEAUVAIS**

BY JASON ARMOND
IN LOS ANGELES

Typically, I don't get star-struck, but I must admit I was a bit more excited than usual when I got the assignment to photograph Beauvais. I've been a fan of hers since I first saw her as Fancy on "The Jamie Foxx Show" when I was a kid. As I walked into the shoot, I almost yelled, "What's up, Fancy?" — a nod to her iconic role from the 1990s.



NAVA MAU

BY RAUL ROMO
IN LOS ANGELES

This quick 20-minute session was such a fun moment. We shot in a small studio at Netflix headquarters, and a fun fact is that this image was shot through a small handheld mirror. I love to play with mirrors, and try to get a variety of shots however I can, and this was a moment captured candidly in between setups. Nava's smile really encapsulates the energy and joy we all felt on set that day.

LAEMMLE
Info Line **310.478.3836**

NOT A FRAID OF SUBTITLES
www.LAEMMLE.com

ROYAL 11523 Santa Monica Blvd. West LA THE ROOM NEXT DOOR <small>PG-13</small> 1:20 4:10 7:20 THE COUNT OF MONTE-CRISTO 1:00 3:40 7:00 FLOW <small>PG</small> 1:10 4:40 7:30 MONICA 1392 Second Street Santa Monica A COMPLETE UNKNOWN <small>R</small> 1:00 3:00 4:00 6:00 7:00 BABYGIRL <small>R</small> 1:20 4:20 7:20 DAY OF THE FIGHT <small>R</small> 1:20 4:10 7:00 THE SEED OF THE SACRED FIG <small>PG-13</small> 1:00 6:50 PORCELAIN WAR <small>R</small> 11:10 1:00 ALL WE IMAGINE AS LIGHT 4:20 PM A REAL PAIN <small>R</small> 11:00 1:30 4:30 7:30 QUEENDOM 11:00 AM	TOWN CENTER 17200 Ventura Blvd. Encino A COMPLETE UNKNOWN <small>R</small> 12:50 4:00 7:10 BABYGIRL <small>R</small> 1:20 4:20 7:20 THE SEED OF THE SACRED FIG <small>PG-13</small> 1:00 6:50 A REAL PAIN <small>R</small> 1:30 4:30 7:30 ANORA <small>R</small> 4:10 PM NEWHALL 22500 Lyons Ave. Santa Clarita A COMPLETE UNKNOWN <small>R</small> 9:50 12:50 4:00 7:10 BABYGIRL <small>R</small> 10:20 1:30 4:30 7:30 NOSFERATU <small>R</small> 1:00 4:00 7:00 MUFASA: THE LION KING <small>PG</small> 10:10 1:10 4:20 7:20 SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3 <small>PG</small> 10:00 10:30 1:20 4:10 7:00 MOANA 2 <small>PG</small> 10:00 1:20 4:10 7:30 WICKED <small>PG</small> 10:00 12:45 4:10 7:20	GLENDALE 207 N. Maryland Ave Glendale A COMPLETE UNKNOWN <small>R</small> 12:50 3:55 7:00 BABYGIRL <small>R</small> 1:30 4:30 7:30 NOSFERATU <small>R</small> 1:10 4:10 7:10 FLOW <small>PG</small> 11:00 AM THE GIRL WITH THE NEEDLE 4:15 PM THE SEED OF THE SACRED FIG <small>PG-13</small> 12:45 6:50 BLACK BOX DIARIES 11:00 AM ANORA <small>R</small> 12:55 7:00 QUEENDOM 11:00 AM HUNDREDS OF BEAVERS 4:15 PM	NoHo 7 5240 Lankershim Blvd. No. Hollywood A COMPLETE UNKNOWN <small>R</small> 12:50 3:55 7:00 BABYGIRL <small>R</small> 1:30 4:30 7:30 NOSFERATU <small>R</small> 1:10 4:10 7:10 THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM <small>PG-13</small> 3:55 PM QUEER <small>R</small> 1:00 7:10 WICKED <small>PG</small> 12:45 3:50 6:55 CONCLAVE <small>PG</small> 4:10 PM ANORA <small>R</small> 12:50 7:00 CLAREMONT 450 W. 2nd Street Claremont A COMPLETE UNKNOWN <small>R</small> 10:00 1:00 4:00 7:00 BABYGIRL <small>R</small> 10:30 1:30 4:30 7:30 NOSFERATU <small>R</small> 1:10 4:00 7:10 MUFASA: THE LION KING <small>PG</small> 10:10 1:10 4:10 7:10 SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3 <small>PG</small> 10:20 1:20 4:20 7:20
--	---	---	---

BARGAIN IN ()

 CLOSED CAPTION

 NON-STANDARD PRICING

FOR 12/29/2024 ONLY

EGYPTIAN
6712 HOLLYWOOD BLVD • (323) 306-4302
EGYPTIANTHEATRE.COM

THIS WEEK
DIVAS & DESPOTS:
TEN PORTRAITS BY PABLO LARRAÍN
 A TEN-FILM RETROSPECTIVE OF THE MARIA DIRECTOR
 DEC 30 - JAN 7
 TONY MANERO NC-17 • POST MORTEM NC-17
 NO • THE CLUB • JACKIE • NERUDA
 EMA • SPENCER • EL CONDE • MARIA*
 SKIPPED A BEAT: EMILIA PÉREZ AND
 MUSICALS ON THE EDGE
 VELVET GOLDMINE NC-17 MON 7:00 PM
 LA LA LAND WED 12:00 PM
 PLUS MORE SHOWS OF EMILIA PÉREZ NC-17
*ALL SHOWS AVAILABLE WITH AUDIO DESCRIPTION AND CLOSED CAPTIONING.
NETFLIX

BAYTHEATER.LA.COM
310-230-1457
1035 N SWARTHMORE AVE
PALISADES VILLAGE MALL

NOW PLAYING
WALLACE & GROMIT: VENGEANCE MOST FOWL*
 ALSO PLAYING
 MARIA* • EMILIA PÉREZ NC-17
 THE PIANO LESSON* • WILL & HARPER*
 HIS THREE DAUGHTERS* • DAUGHTERS*
 THE REMARKABLE LIFE OF IBELEIN NC-17 • CARRY-ON*
 MASTERS OF MEMORY:
 THE FILMS OF TAKAHATA & MOMOSE
 THIS WEEK: THE IMAGINARY* (IN ENGLISH)
 PRE-RECORDED INTRO FROM DIRECTOR YOSHIYUKI MOMOSE!
MILESTONE MOVIES: 2004
 THE INCREDIBLES
*SHOWS AVAILABLE WITH AUDIO DESCRIPTION AND AUDIO DESCRIPTION.
NETFLIX

THE LATINOX FILES

Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles Times

The Wild
An outdoors newsletter.

Sign up now.
latimes.com/the-wild

ON THE COVER(S)

From up-and-comers to wickedly skilled pros, the actors spotlighted individually on the cover of each of our five Greater Los Angeles editions turned in some of the year’s most compelling performances.

KALI REIS

BY ANNIE NOELKER
IN LOS ANGELES

For this shoot, I remember Kali being so down to earth and relaxed. She was just so effortlessly cool and up for whatever to get the perfect shot. We made an office building look like a fashion shoot.



MIKEY MADISON

BY ETHAN BENAVIDEZ
IN WEST HOLLYWOOD

Upon receiving this assignment, I immediately went to see “Anora” at the AMC theater in Burbank. I decided on two lighting scenarios; this one is based on the club scenes from the movie.



CYNTHIA ERIVO

BY VICTORIA WILL
IN NEW YORK CITY

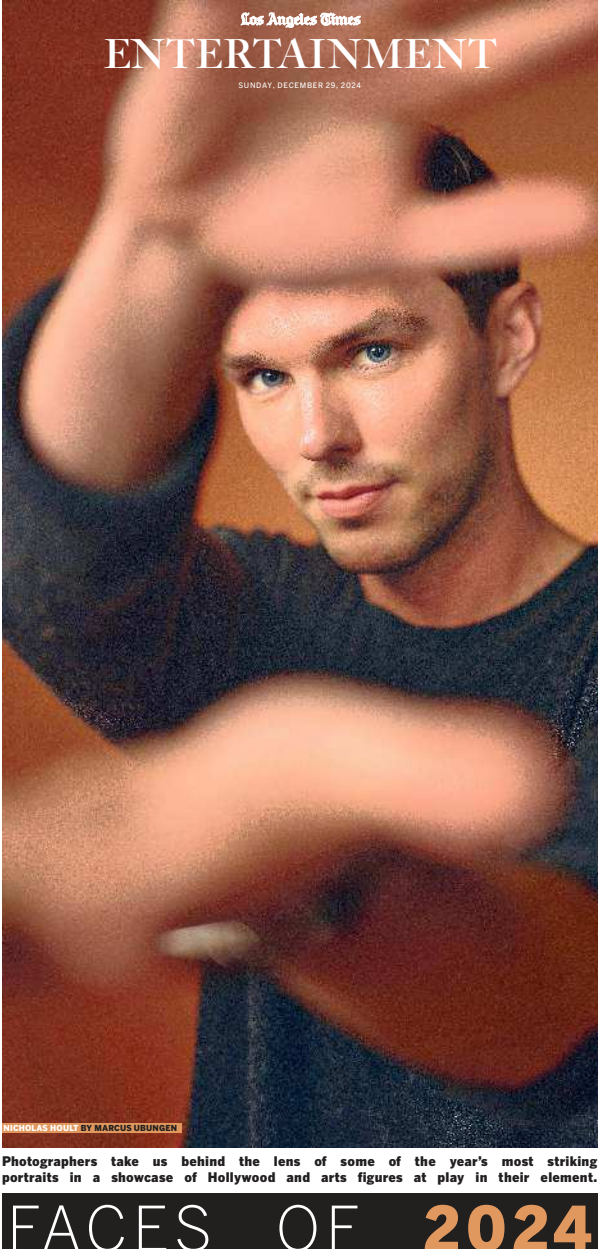
Though petite in stature, Cynthia has an undeniably powerful presence. Before the shoot, we connected to brainstorm and align our ideas. She arrived with a vision, trust and impeccable style. I could have spent hours more, playing and experimenting with the outfits and ideas we had, but this Golden Globe nominee’s schedule is as packed as her closet.



CLARENCE MACLIN

BY THE TYLER TWINS
IN NEW YORK CITY

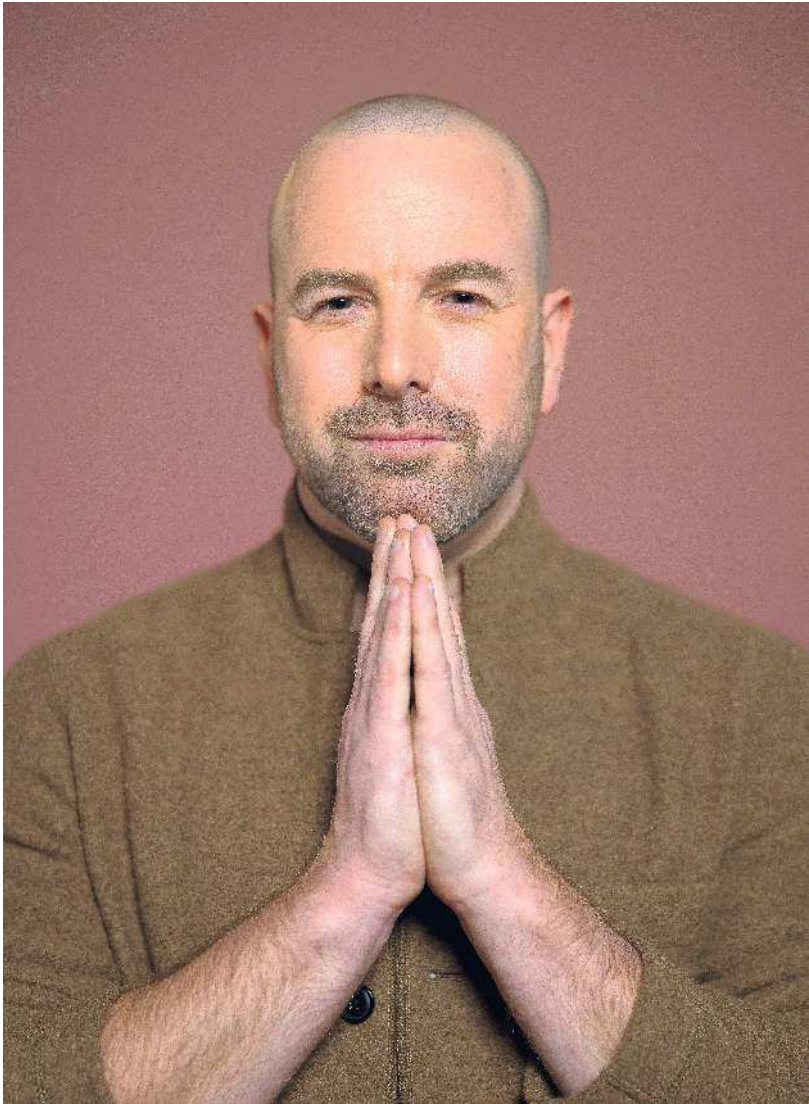
The day after photographing Kamala Harris’ concession speech — a moment that left us, as Black women, feeling both proud and yet unseen and undervalued — humanization was on our minds. It is always an element in this type of portraiture, and after seeing “Sing Sing” we really wanted to capture Clarence in a happy and gentle way, aspects that you can see develop in his character throughout the film. DMX played in the background, and a flower picked from the A24 terrace was the perfect addition.



NICHOLAS HOULT

BY MARCUS UBUNGEN
IN EL SEGUNDO

We started with some stool poses, then moved to standing. At one point, I noticed his watch and thought it would be cool to highlight it. I gave him some prompts to incorporate more hand gestures as I moved in closer. Eventually, I asked him to go big — reaching out toward the camera while still being able to see the lens. We had fun experimenting, and this final shot ended up perfectly framing his face within his hands.



DANNY FELDMAN
BY CHRISTINA HOUSE IN EL SEGUNDO

This portrait was part of L.A. Influential, a project highlighting people who are making a difference in Los Angeles. Danny’s career and contributions to L.A. theater landed him on this year’s list. One thing I enjoy during my portrait sessions is asking the person on the other side of my lens what kind of music they would like to hear. It’s a good conversation starter and that becomes the soundtrack of our shoot. It was no surprise that Danny selected theater music, and it was delightful to see him light up when a song he enjoyed filled the room.



CHRIS PERFETTI
BY CHRISTINA HOUSE
IN LOS ANGELES

Oftentimes the celebrity portraits I do are in hotel rooms or event spaces. I find it deeply personal to photograph someone in their own home: There is a level of comfort and intimacy that comes through that you can’t always capture at a press junket in a ballroom. Chris was open and willing to play. He selected the playlist, climbed his tree, sat in his garden and laid across his couch. No hard stop pressure, no one else around. And he wouldn’t take no for an answer when he offered to help carry equipment to my car.



ANDREW SCOTT
BY RYAN PFLUGER
IN LOS ANGELES

Andrew is willing to let his guard down and directly connects it with the act of being photographed, especially with his gaze. Having photographed in this hotel room many times, I always try to neutralize the hotel feel, with close crops and shallow focus.



RICKY MARTIN BY RYAN PFLUGER IN LOS ANGELES

There was an immediate engagement when Ricky stepped on set, which led to creating images with a sense of intimacy and relaxation in the short time we had with each other.



YUVAL SHARON

BY ERIN BAIANO IN NEW YORK CITY

We were able to grab Yuval out of his rehearsal for the groundbreaking opera he was directing, “The Comet/Poppea,” in a studio next door at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in NYC. I had my assistant Helen Ho black out the room, and we used these fun LED light wands that resemble lightsabers to give him a colorful edge light. I took some photos of him engaging with the camera, but I loved this unguarded moment where he was deep in thought.



MEGAN MORONEY

BY EVELYN FREJA IN NEW YORK CITY

That day we had planned to photograph outside in beautiful Bryant Park, but instead it ended up pouring. I remember waking up to a text at 5:40 a.m. from Megan’s PR team saying we needed to pivot to shooting outdoors at the ABC “Good Morning America” set. ABC didn’t have any rooms reserved for us, so instead we wandered around the halls of ABC looking for interesting rooms to shoot in and stumbled upon this full-length mirror.



ANNA SAWAI
BY CHRISTINA HOUSE
IN PASADENA

Anna is an absolute pleasure to work with. Her confident and calm demeanor allowed me to connect with her easily.



GEORGE AND MAYAN LOPEZ BY ALDO CHACON AT THE UNIVERSAL LOT

They had a great dynamic between each other, with George striking funny poses and making hilarious faces, which were effortless for me to capture.



BILLIE EILISH AND FINNEAS O'CONNELL
BY MARCUS UBUNGEN IN LOS ANGELES

The challenge for this shoot was capturing the close relationship between Billie and Finneas without it appearing as though they were a couple. The pose that worked best was sitting them back-to-back and encouraging them to talk to each other. As they chatted, I snapped away, and when there was a natural pause in their conversation, I asked them to look directly at the camera. That's how we landed on this shot.



JANELLE JAMES
BY DANIA MAXWELL IN LOS ANGELES

It's hard to imagine that this picture was taken in an office, but behind that canvas backdrop is office furniture. Janelle was fun to work with, as she had a clear idea of how she wanted to look but was open to my creative ideas as well.



ELIM CHAN
BY GINA FERAZZI IN LOS ANGELES

At the Hollywood Bowl, there is a peephole backstage. It's behind the orchestra. By climbing a small wooden ladder to a platform and removing the trap door, I was able to photograph the conductor straight on and capture her expressions. I was using a mirrorless camera, which is completely silent.

Los Angeles Times

theEnvelope

PODCAST

Hear top talent at their most candid.

Listen as actors, directors, screenwriters and more share intimate stories about their personal lives and creative processes — and how it all fuels their art — on The Envelope Podcast. Join our hosts as they guide you through open conversations with the year's top awards contenders.

To follow along all season, listen and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts or watch The Envelope Podcast on YouTube.

Dive in. Scan the code or visit latimes.com/envelopepodcast



SEBASTIAN STAN, MIKE MARINO AND ADAM PEARSON

BY SEAN DOUGHERTY IN NEW YORK CITY

The trio from “A Different Man” hadn’t seen each other in a while, so the room was filled with excitement as they reunited during the shoot. We worked in a pop-up set in the A24 office kitchen, with just under 20 minutes for both group and solo portraits; their connection made it seamless. Between takes, Mike recognized my Mamiya RZ67 and we hit it off talking about medium format, the Phase One buyout and film versus digital.

PAUL W. DOWNS

BY JENNIFER McCORD
IN LOS ANGELES

This was a super fun shoot as I’d just binge-watched “Hacks” a few days before this assignment came in. Paul was super wonderful to work with — funny, lovely and up for going wherever the good light was.



DOJA CAT

BY DANIA MAXWELL IN INDIO

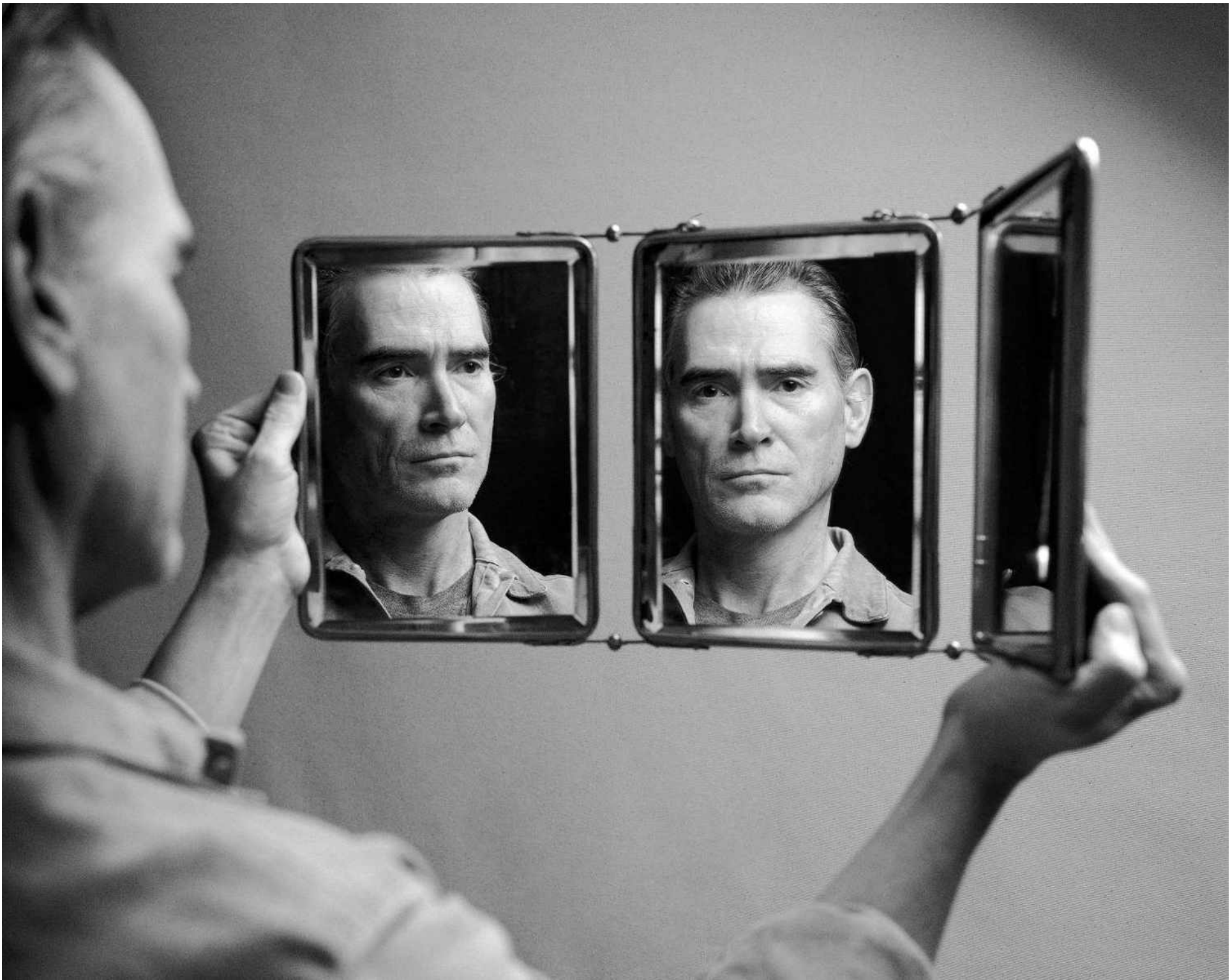
This is my fourth consecutive year photographing Coachella, and it’s always fun when the artists are as expressive as Doja Cat was in her performance. We only get to photograph the first three songs, which can be a challenge sometimes, but luckily Doja Cat had a lot of variation in her set from the beginning.



ANDREW GARFIELD

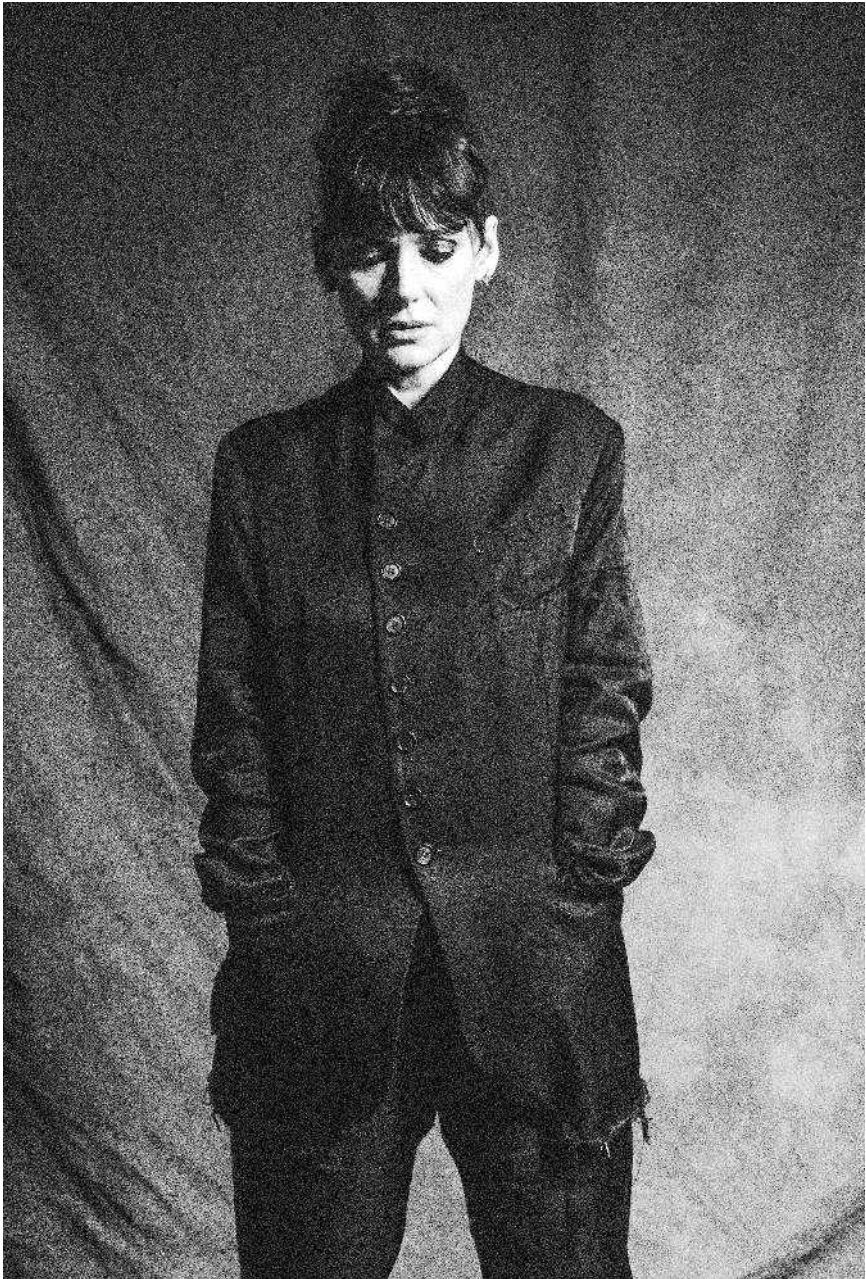
BY EMIL RAVELO
IN LOS ANGELES

I was scheduled for 30 minutes with Andrew, but with jumbled adrenaline rushing we got through a very optimistic six-setup shoot in under 13 minutes or so. This photo in particular was created near the end of our session when his stylist, Warren Alfie Baker, laid out a generous spread of options — and I was immediately drawn to the trench coat by fashion house Lanvin.



BILLY CRUDUP BY OLIVER MAYHALL IN LONDON

Billy had an undeniable presence and energy when he walked into the room. He was in London at the time, performing in the West End production of “Harry Clarke,” where he brought 19 different characters to life. For this sitting, I rented a tri-fold mirror from a prop house, aiming to capture a unique perspective by showcasing him from multiple angles. While working with mirrors can be challenging, as composition becomes key, the mirror served as a symbolic nod not only to his portrayal in “Harry Clarke” but also his multifaceted role as Cory Ellison in “The Morning Show.”



WINONA RYDER
BY JENNIFER McCORD IN NEW YORK CITY

This shot was taken in New York while Winona was on a press tour for the new “Beetlejuice,” and as with a lot of these shoots, we didn’t have much time or space. She had on this incredible jacket with “Gena” stitched on the lapel in memory of Gena Rowlands, so I asked her to push her hands deep into the pockets. For me, the posing feels classic and cool — things that are both so Winona Ryder — but it also has some sort of pensive weirdness to it, especially because she’s not looking at the camera. I love that.



HARVEY GUILLÉN
BY VICTORIA WILL IN NEW YORK CITY

I had the pleasure of photographing most of the cast of “What We Do in the Shadows” to mark the beginning of its final season. Each cast member brought their unique flair to the shoot, but Harvey stood out, arriving in a cape paired with an impeccably styled shirt and collar — a photographer’s dream. He was eager to experiment with reflections, movement and anything that could elevate the shoot beyond the ordinary. What a gift!



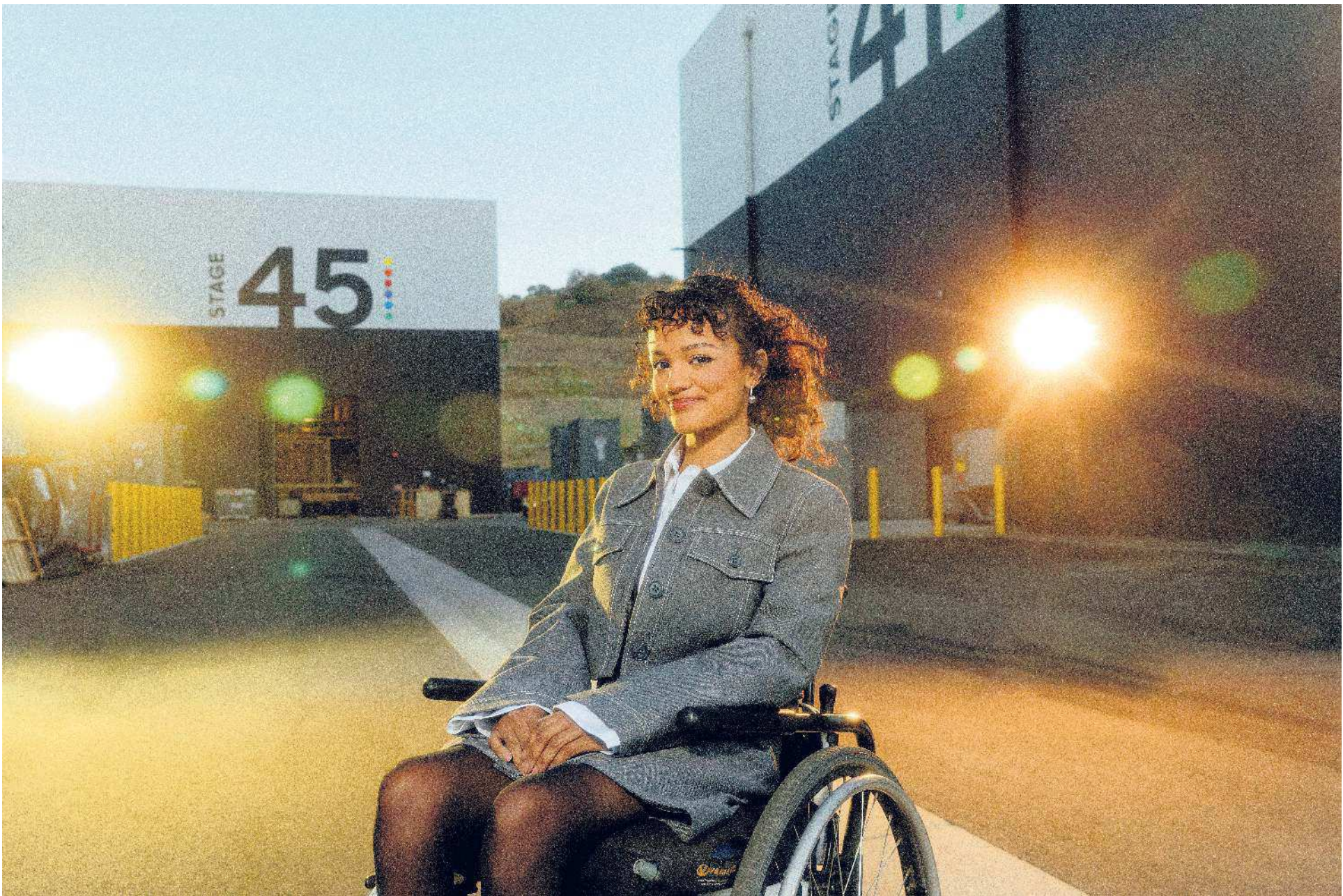
LIZA COLÓN-ZAYAS
BY CHRISTINA HOUSE
IN EL SEGUNDO

This shoot took place in the Test Kitchen at the Los Angeles Times. As a nod to her role as a cook on “The Bear,” I thought it would be cool to shoot her in the walk-in fridge, and it took no convincing to get her on board. This frame in particular was caught while she was dancing to salsa music before we headed to the fridge. Liza has a smile that can kill you.



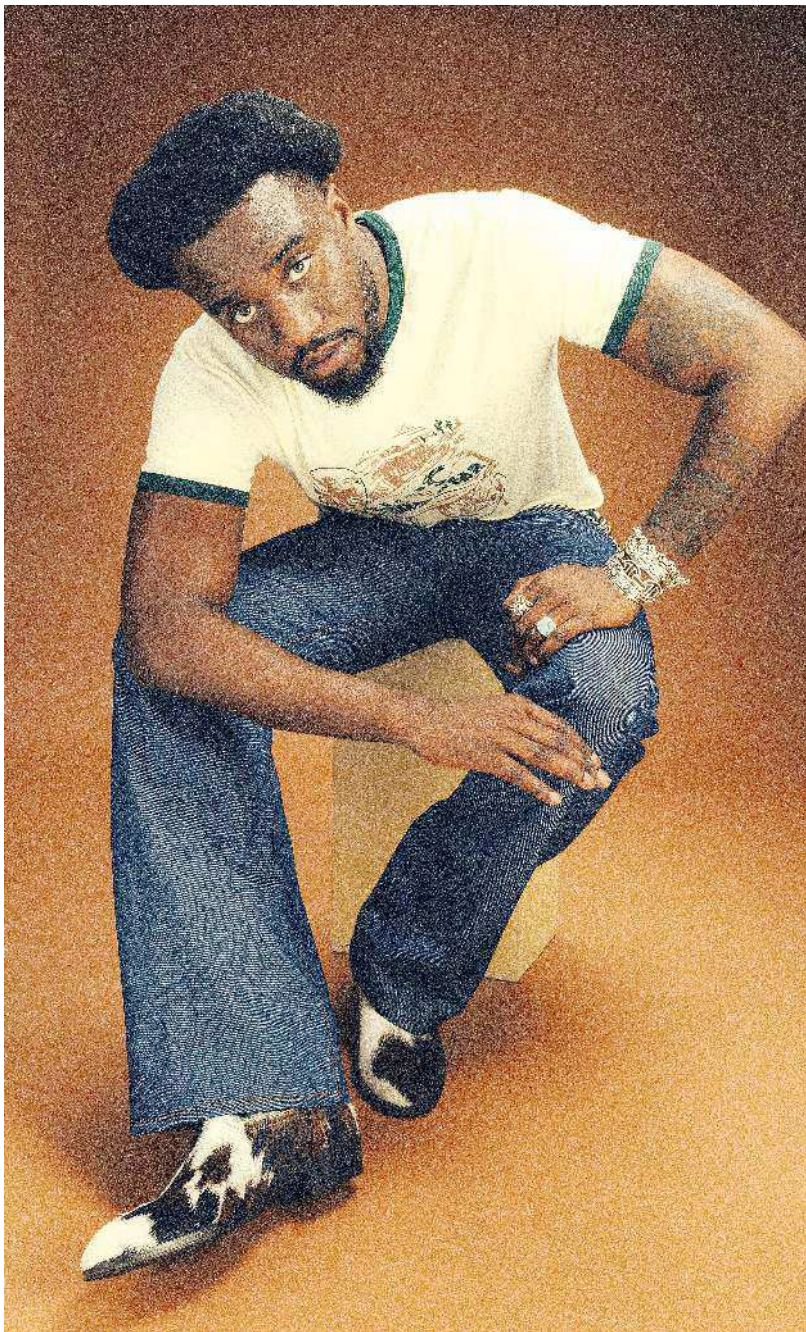
CAROL BURNETT
BY LINUS JOHNSON
IN SANTA BARBARA

All of the images were shot on a camera from the 1960s called the Mamiya RB67. Carol expressed some excitement to see some cool older film cameras. We only took photos for about 15 minutes, and she was so bubbly, polite and easy to photograph.



MARISSA BODE BY ETHAN BENAVIDEZ IN UNIVERSAL CITY

This photo shoot took place in the Universal Studios backlot during the “Wicked” press day. There was so much going on behind the scenes, including Cynthia Erivo zooming around driving the cast and teams around on the golf cart.



MAGDALENA SUAREZ FRIMKESS
BY ALLEN J. SCHABEN IN LOS ANGELES

The 95-year-old artist, who was born in Venezuela, brought her own disposable camera to document her first museum survey exhibition at LACMA in August.



SHABOOZEY
BY ETHAN BENAVIDEZ IN LOS ANGELES

I remember playing country music super loud the whole shoot. The color of the backdrop is inspired by Shaboozey’s love for warm tones throughout his imagery.

Los Angeles Times

WEEKEND

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2024

BUBBLES ARE BETTER THAN EVER

California sparkling wines (and Champagnes) shine in their 'golden era.' L6-8





Photographs by AL SEIB For The Times

Their medical mystery led to a new skincare line

CURIOUS ABOUT A FUNGAL INFECTION, VIOLINIST ANN MARIE SIMPSON-EINZIGER AND HER GUITARIST HUSBAND WENT DOWN A RESEARCH RABBIT HOLE. **BY LINDZI SCHARF**

THE LOVE STORY of musicians Ann Marie Simpson-Einziger and Mike Einziger was fortified in a lab. ¶ After meeting through a mutual colleague in 2010, the Santa Monica-based couple's courtship began the following year, as they were collaborating with Oscar-winning composer Hans Zimmer on a series of film scores. Einziger is best known as the founding guitarist of California-based rock band Incubus. His wife is a renowned composer and violinist for artists including Jethro Tull, Ringo Starr, Dave Matthews Band and Stevie Nicks. ¶ The couple had been seeing one another for only about a year when together they stumbled upon a medical mystery. It resulted in a thrilling scientific discovery, the founding of a biotech beauty company called Mother Science — and their own unique happily-ever-after. ¶ “It was an unexpected journey,” said Simpson-Einziger. ¶ “We were simply trying to answer a series of unanswered scientific questions,” her husband added.

It all began in 2012 when Simpson-Einziger developed a fungal infection while traveling abroad. A classically trained violinist by trade, she was performing with composer A.R. Rahman in India when she noticed lightened patches of skin on her back and under her bra line. They resembled “loosely drawn flower blooms, with rounded edges,” she said. After consulting her dermatologist, Simpson-Einziger was diagnosed with a temporary fungal infection called Tinea versicolor, which can lighten or darken skin pigmentation as a result of humidity. “It’s an imbalance of the microbiome,” Simpson-Einziger said. “The condition was harmless, it resolves on its own and [I was told] that the lightened patches of skin would all go back to normal. But I got so curious.”

Armed with an undergraduate degree in biology from the University of Virginia, the former physics and chemistry teacher pored through science journals like Pigment International and Chembiochem to find articles that better explained the science behind her skin condition. She then began to wonder if whatever had caused it could also be used as a skincare aid that reduced dark spots. She enlisted the help of her then-fiancé, Einziger, who also happened to have a background in science. He had recently completed the two-year Special Student program at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, where he studied cosmology and evolutionary biology. He still had access to the university’s considerable research databases, which meant he could help her look up articles on Tinea versicolor. Soon, he joined her obsession.

“There was tons of literature to research, but nothing coming at it from our perspective,” said Einziger. “We learned pretty quickly that there were no real hypotheses about how this was happening.” Though they still couldn’t prove it, Simpson-Einziger’s theory that her skin condition could be of use in the beauty world kept them both up at night. “I actually had a nightmare that somebody took her idea,” he said. It was then, in 2015, that he called Dr. Jonathan Sackier, a family friend and biotech and medical entrepreneur, who

co-invented robotic surgery. “I taught his daughter violin lessons when I was a recent college graduate living in Virginia,” Simpson-Einziger said. “We went to [him] fully prepared that we were going to get laughed out of the room,” Einziger added. Sackier remembers the couple’s uncertainty during the phone call. “Ann-Marie was in the background, whispering, ‘He’s going to think we’re idiots,’” he said. “[Mike] asked if I could identify what it was about the fungal infection that was causing depigmentation and having identified it, could I synthesize or somehow isolate the chemical so that we could do something to impact pigmentation disorders.” A surgeon by specialty, Sackier connected them with his colleague, Timothy Macdonald, a scientist and professor emeritus of chemistry and pharmacology at the University of Virginia. “I have taken many projects to him over the years,” Sackier said. “I call him ‘Dr. No,’ because he always says, ‘No, that doesn’t make sense. No, that won’t work.’ When I told him this, he went, ‘Holy moly, that’s impressive.’” Macdonald began advising the couple and helped connect them with a North Carolina-based research organization called PharmaDirections. The drug development company helped design a scientific program to explore various compounds that had caught the Einzigers’ attention while researching. After countless studies, they discovered that a naturally occurring molecule that had co-evolved with the human microbiome, Malassezin (pronounced mal-uh-say-zin), could be beneficial for sun spots. While the molecule was identified and named in 2001, the Einzigers were the first to recognize that Malassezin could be valuable in the context of skincare. “Malassezin is made from a yeast,” said New York-based dermatologist Dr. Amy Wechsler. “When someone has the yeast infection on their skin, the skin often bleaches temporarily.” The couple filed an application to patent the discovery in 2016. (It was officially granted in 2018.) They then worked with a team of scientists including cosmetic chemist Susan Goldsberry and beauty innovation entrepreneur Tim McCraw to



THE COUPLE’S Mother Science brand treats hyperpigmentation with the naturally occurring molecule Malassezin.

develop Malassezin into a topical serum after previously manufacturing it through a separate process called chemical synthesis. They began testing to see if it could benefit melanocytes, the skin cells that produce melanin, the dark pigment in question. The couple used their personal savings to fund the initial research. “I justified it as, ‘How much would I pay for an education where experts in the field teach me how to characterize a molecule and then commercialize it?’” Simpson-Einziger said. “That one-on-one education was worth what we put into investigating this molecule.” They brought on beauty industry veteran Edna Coryell, McCraw’s daughter, as co-founder and CEO of Mother Science in August 2017 to oversee further research and development, which involved in vitro studies, 3D cell cultures, ex vivo skin testing and genetic analysis.

Coryell had never brought a new ingredient to the market until Malassezin. “It is very rare,” said Coryell. “Truly, as we were going through [the process], it was writing the playbook for this.” The Einzigers also collaborated with Dr. Pearl Grimes, director of the Vitiligo & Pigmentation Institute of Southern California, who specializes in vitiligo and pigmentation disorders. “This is somebody who’s been looking at Tinea versicolor for decades,” Einziger said. “Her first reaction was, ‘How did you guys figure this out?’” “I was 100% fascinated,” Grimes said of reviewing their initial in vitro studies. “The science [and] the concept was disruptive.” Grimes assembled a clinical program, which led to proof-of-concept data that’s since been published in peer-reviewed journals including the American Academy of Dermatology and Journal of Drugs in Dermatology. She went so far as to take a skin biopsy from her own elbow for lab testing. Using VISIA skin analysis technology, she found that the serum helped fade hyperpigmentation on the sample. “That’s when I really knew



MIKE EINZIGER, guitarist for rock band Incubus, and violinist Ann Marie Simpson-Einziger, at their Malibu home, both have science backgrounds.

that it worked,” Grimes said. “I used it in a stubborn area, and I could clearly see via photographic documentation that it was responding.” Einziger also biopsied a patch on his arm for Grimes to analyze. “We felt responsible,” he said. “Mine was done before we even did the human clinical study.” Simpson-Einziger joked that she too “put real skin in the game” after she said she had her face punch-biopsied — a procedure in which an instrument is used to remove a deeper skin sample — three times.

“Having holes punched in my face was an ultimate act of belief in what we’ve made,” Simpson-Einziger said. Once the Einzigers confirmed that the data supported their initial hypothesis in a human clinical study, they moved forward with a business plan for what eventually became Mother Science. (It joins the couple’s two other co-founded businesses, including Mixhalo, a networking technology company for live events.)

Mother Science — named as a nod to French physicist and chemist Marie Curie — was born as a result of raising an initial round of approximately \$3.2 million in seed funding from a small group of venture capitalists and angel investors, including Hawktail’s Michael Polansky and Drew Houston, the co-founder of Dropbox. After more than six years of research, Malassezin became the DNA of Mother Science, which officially launched in 2023 with its first product, Molecular Hero Serum (\$89). The product is meant to reduce hyperpigmentation and brighten skin.

“It’s a powerful antioxidant,” Simpson-Einziger said. “When we started testing, we learned that Malassezin happens to offer superior protection against hydroxyl and peroxy free radicals, which are [some of] the most damaging. We had this molecule that was going to do something marvelous in protecting the skin.” A second product, Retinol Synergist (\$96), was released earlier this year. And Molecular Genesis Barrier Repair Moisturizer (\$68), featuring Malassezin, will be released on Jan. 7.

“Malassezin is really versatile, as it’s able to target hyperpigmentation, improve the skin’s moisture barrier and provide potent antioxidant protection without any irritation,” said Connecticut-based dermatologist Dr. Mona Gohara, who is also an associate clinical professor at Yale University. “The beauty of it is it’s gentle but also highly efficacious.” In 2016, the same year the Einzigers filed a patent for their scientific discovery, the couple married. They are now parents to four children including a nearly 1-year-old son. Because their courtship intersected with their scientific passion project, they consider Mother Science their fifth child. “We had a lot of people who said, ‘You don’t want to do this. This is too hard. It’s going to take years,’” Simpson-Einziger said, pausing. “I remember thinking, ‘Years don’t scare me. I have a baby. I’m going to have to take care of a human for 18 years.’ There are no guarantees when you have a child how they’re going to turn out, but you do it out of love, out of passion, and it makes your life richer.”

While the couple continues to grow Mother Science’s product lineup, Simpson-Einziger is most proud of their process of discovery itself. “We’re excited about contributing to science, and having that legacy as part of our brand,” she said. She hopes Malassezin will one day be as universally known as Vitamin C and hyaluronic acid. “I want people talking about Malassezin, not even about our brand, just about Malassezin,” she said. In other words, she and her husband hope the ingredients of their products will be front and center — not themselves. “Nobody is excited about coming to me for their skincare needs,” Einziger, who still regularly sells out stadiums with Incubus, said with a laugh. “I’m just a person who plays music who happens to be curious about the skin microbiome.”



Photographs by MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

A STUNNING BRUTALIST CONCRETE HOME TAKES OVER A HILLSIDE LOT

ARCHITECT YO-ICHIRO HAKOMORI HELPED A DESIGN-MINDED COUPLE CREATE A SHOWCASE FOR ARTFUL LIVING ON STEEP SITE

BY LISA BOONE

RISING STEEPLY above a ravine in the Hollywood Hills, Nina and Andreas Grueter's concrete home conjures a villain's lair in a James Bond thriller — John Lautner's Brutalist Elrod House in "Diamonds Are Forever" comes to mind — with the nearby Hollywood sign adding to its cinematic allure. ¶ For some, a narrow hillside lot might seem a risky location to build a home, especially at the end of a dirt road. But for the globetrotting European developers, it was an exciting challenge they were willing to take on. ¶ "Are you afraid of heights?" Andreas asked as we ascended one of the home's many staircases to the rooftop deck. "We are working on a zipline from the beach to here," he said jokingly when he reached the top floor, which has been featured in the "Forever Sunday" music video by Kesh'You and Snoop Dogg and a commercial for the World Series featuring Saweetie.

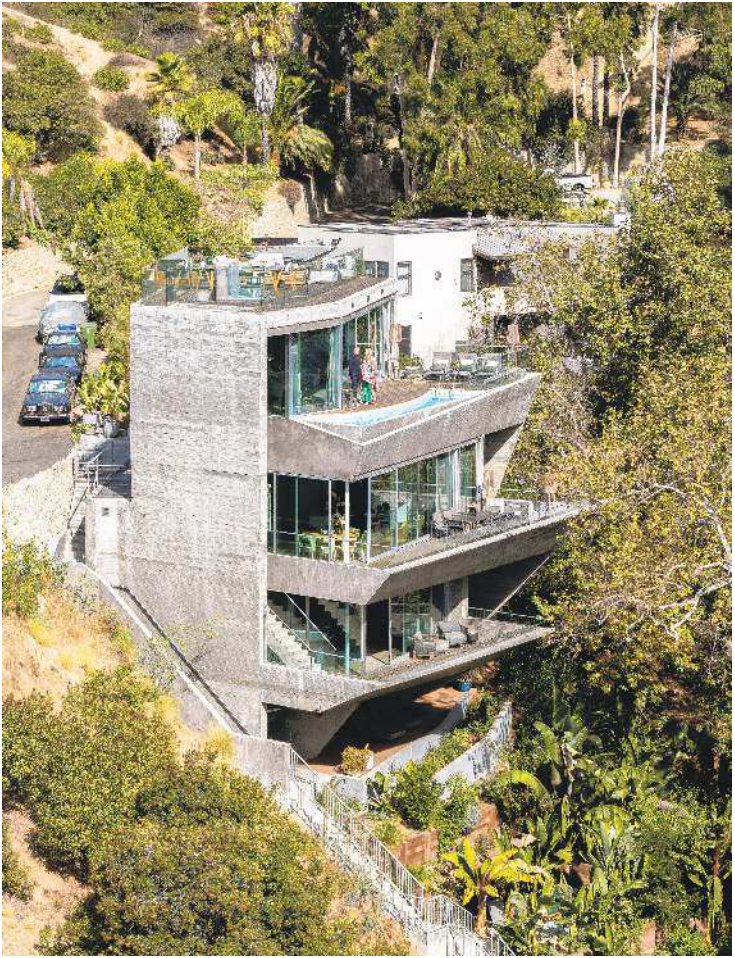
As developers of visionary projects for Snow Hill Development, including an art hotel in the North Atlantic off Canada and a sustainable home in Yucca Valley, the couple was immediately interested when they saw the for-sale sign on the empty lot while hiking in Griffith Park. "We do everything from buying the land to designing the interiors," Andreas said of their projects. After contacting the owner, who had several properties around the country, the couple purchased the 10,500-square-foot lot for \$40,000 in 2012. Little did they know that it would take more than a decade to build a home on the challenging site. "It was meant to be," said Andreas. "The land was looking for us, not the opposite." This sense of destiny is palpable in the Grueters' connection to the land, which is shrouded in a canopy of mature sycamores. The property offers sweeping views of Beachwood Canyon, and "on a clear day, you can see Catalina," Nina said as hikers stopped nearby to gape at the house like it was an attraction. "Yesterday, we saw the ocean and the islands." With a desire for a contemporary, iconic building, the couple sought out WHY Architecture, where architects Yo-ichiro Hakomori and Kulapat Yantrasast, known for their work on the Grand Rapids Art Museum in Michigan, were commissioned to bring the Grueters' vision to life. "We wanted our home to be as sleek and clean as possible," said Andreas, who grew up in Switzerland in a green-lined Bauhaus home. After Hakomori left the firm, he continued to help WHY to secure the building permit and planning approval. Once the

Grueters received a building permit, they continued construction with StudioHau, which Hakomori founded. Hakomori never thought the site was impossible to build on, based on other hillside homes such as Rudolph Schindler's Wolfe House on Catalina Island, but the lot's unique topography presented numerous challenges during construction, from ensuring the structure's stability (with more than 35 caissons) to managing the permitting process and meeting with multiple neighborhood planning committees. Andreas discussed some of the challenges faced during construction. "When we started building, everyone underestimated how hard it would be to get the concrete trucks up to the site," he said. "The roads were narrow, and the trucks couldn't be too long or too big. One company even refused to drive up there. For a long time, it looked like it would not happen." For Hakomori, who has worked with architect Tadao Ando and his mentor, Frank Israel, the project was unlike

anything he had created before. But after contemplating several stacked forms, he ultimately designed a home made of sustainable board-form concrete with three L-shaped frames — with the living areas sandwiched in between them — that extend over the steep hillside to take advantage of the views. Adhering to strict hillside height regulations, Hakomori designed each level of the four-bedroom, four-bath house to be directly connected to the outdoors. "We tried to create outdoor spaces even though they hover above the ground," he said. "The house is literally hovering above the landscape." Composed of four floors, the 4,455-square-foot home offers a different experience at every level. There is a car elevator that can house two vehicles (because of the city's parking requirements for their street). Also, there's a sauna, an office and a walk-in wine cellar. A dramatic wading pool, which cantilevers off the living room, has specially designed windows built into its side that open to the kitchen, imbuing the room with a soft glow when the pool changes color with the sunlight. At the bottom of the multi-level design sits a separate guest house, where a deer the couple have fondly named Hugo is a frequent visitor. And then, there is the Holly-



ANDREAS and Nina Grueter, top, with architect Yo-ichiro Hakomori on the top floor of their four-level concrete house, which sits right under the Hollywood sign. The guest room, below, features a portrait of Humphrey Bogart and an outdoor patio.



wood sign. Los Angeles has many inspiring hillside homes, from Lautner's Chemosphere to Frank Lloyd Wright's George Sturges House, but none has the Hollywood sign in its backyard like the Grueters' home does. "It's larger than life," Hakomori said of the familiar icon. "It's so much bigger than you realize — just like in the Ed Ruscha paintings. It almost overpowered the site." But from the bottom, he said, the views make you "feel like you're in a cave. While at the top, you feel like you're in the air." Balancing the natural world is integral to Hakomori's architectural practice. Born in Japan before his family moved to Boston, the USC professor said, "I'm very influenced by the indoor-outdoor movement and California Modernism. It stems from attending school in Japan, seeing all the Japanese architecture, living in California and experiencing the integration of nature." The Grueters appreciate Brutalist architecture, especially when it is embedded in nature. Still, as intriguing as the house is from the outside, it's their home. "We wanted to give the construction soul by filling it with beauty, joy and art," Andreas said. For the couple, the home's design was a collaborative effort, a labor of love that they infused with their unique style. "We do this together," Andreas said. "It's like magic. It's fun, like turning a black-and-white movie into color." The couple decorated the interiors with bold, saturated colors, including velvet drapes and wallpaper from Paris in tiger and botanical prints. Their style, which Nina described as "contemporary, cool design mixed with a warm and inspiring ambience," reflects the Grueters' love for art and beauty. Given the limited wall space due to the surplus of glass, the couple's extensive art collection

is installed in surprising places, such as over windows and inside the car elevator, which has been featured in a Lamborghini commercial. "We had to add the elevator per city regulations because parking is tight, so we turned it into something beautiful," Andreas said. The interiors are often whimsical, including a photograph of the notorious obsessive-compulsive Howard Hughes displayed in a closet and a portrait of Hollywood legend Humphrey Bogart in one of the guest rooms. "Everyone loves this room," Nina said with a laugh as she stepped onto the guest room's shady outdoor patio. "It feels like you're embedded in the trees." However, for the couple, the most fascinating aspect of their new home is that they live amid nature, just 10 minutes from Hollywood Boulevard. "In the evening, it's so quiet here," Nina said of living near Griffith Park. "You can see the stars and hear the owls." "Every hour is different," added Andreas, "and after 6 or 7 o'clock, it's a little spooky." Contrary to noted Los Angeles architect John Lautner, who once said that Los Angeles was "so ugly it made me physically sick," the couple have fallen in love with their adopted city. "L.A. has such beautiful energy," said Nina, who is German. "No one in Europe can believe the combination of nature and city life here. We have the Hollywood Bowl, museums, mountains, culture, fantastic food and diversity." Despite being one of the Grueters' most challenging projects (the couple declined to share the project's cost other than the fact that it was more expensive than they had anticipated), that L.A. spirit infuses their home. "Every single phase was difficult," Andreas said. "But at sunset, the house turns into something special. The whole property has an incredible energy. It was worth it."

Linda Hsiao’s ceramics are a flight of fancy, caught in clay

EVERYTHING FROM BIRDS TO VENUS OF WILLENDORF EXHIBIT HER DISTINCTIVE PLAYFUL STYLE



Photographs by ROBERT HANASHIRO For The Times

BY LISA BOONE

LINDA HSIAO was standing at a weathered work table inside her ceramics studio in Altadena. It was the day after Halloween, and her two children, Saben Taylor, 5, and Wawona Hsiao, 3, worked alongside her, hand-sculpting clay vessels as wild as a child’s imagination. Like Saben’s handprints in the concrete patio outside the studio, Hsiao’s own wildly creative imprint is clear in the whimsical vessels that line the shelves of the former two-car garage, from long-beaked toucan pitchers and owl juicers to Japanese daruma wishing dolls and Venus of Willendorf lady tiki cups. “I’ve always had a weird imagination,” Hsiao said as she continued to work on an emerging large-scale vase. “I like the idea of creating mythical creatures that are a hybrid. They are ambiguous and not quite what you would assume. I wish they existed.”

LA

CRAFTED

In this series, we highlight independent makers and artists, from glassblowers to fiber artists, who are creating and producing original products in Los Angeles.



migrants, ran a farm specializing in Chinese fruits and vegetables such as bok choy and bamboo shoots. Her proximity to the ocean and their farm inspired her love of nature, which she describes as “a leading force” in her life. Looking back, she laughs as she recalls explaining to her elementary school teacher that “watermelons were not just red but yellow too.” This love for nature is evident in her ceramics, which often feature elements of the natural world.

From a young age, Hsiao, now 42, was drawn to working with her hands and taking art and sculpting classes. Her parents wanted to support her and sent her to a summer program at Parsons School of Design in New York City as a teenager. “My parents thought, ‘That’ll get New York out of her system,’” she said with a chuckle. But it only fueled her passion further.

After high school, Hsiao attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where she studied industrial design. Following her graduation in 2004, she dedicated nearly a decade to designing eyewear, often spending 12 hours a day in front of a computer. This intense focus left her feeling “dizzy” and craving a more hands-on creative outlet.

So she joined a few community studios in Brooklyn and started doing ceramics. However, living in New York was hard, and she missed gardening and the easy access to nature in California.

After nine years, she moved back to California, where she took ceramics classes at Saddleback College and Glendale Community College at night while freelancing — designing everything from eyewear to jewelry for big brands to snowboarding gear — during

the day.

A hand-building class with ceramics artist and teacher Biliana Popova at Glendale Community College changed her career path. “I didn’t take to wheel throwing because I didn’t want things to be perfectly symmetrical,” Hsiao said. “I always wanted to manipulate my forms and change them. My hands always wanted to sculpt. After I took a hand-building class, I never looked back.”

Later, after she met her husband — and before they had children — the couple collaborated on a series of handmade wooden baby rattles they sold as part of Knotwork LA, and she began to do ceramics out of their home in Highland Park. (They have temporarily stopped making the rattles but hope to restock them again as the kids get older.)

“Knotwork LA was created as an outlet to identify the work we do in our spare time,” she said. “Precious pieces of wood saved from other projects or found while hiking, ideas that came to us in the middle of the night and a desire to create beautiful, useful things.” After juggling freelance work and producing ceramics in the evenings and on weekends for 10 years, she decided to take a leap of faith and do ceramics full-time in 2016.

She started with an order of more than 800 plates and dishes for Curtis Stone’s restaurant Gwen in Hollywood.

Since then, her studio has evolved as her work has become more sculptural, and her inventory has broadened.

Hsiao’s handmade ceramics and figurines, many of which she cuts out using a cardboard template after rolling the clay flat with a slab roller, exhibit a playful style that is thoroughly her own. “It’s kind of like sewing,” she said of using patterns. “I cut them out

CERAMIST Linda Hsiao hand-builds all of Knotwork LA’s pieces in her studio, formerly the two-car garage of her Altadena home. “I always had a weird imagination,” she says.

with a knife and mold and sculpt them afterward.”

Her works are filled with whimsy and joy, including a collection of platters and plates featuring inlaid porcelain flowers, vaguely defined creatures that hold birthday candles, penguin pitchers and Buddhas. Although she has made lamps, she prefers to focus on affordable goods that can go straight into someone’s home for them to enjoy. “I like having a price point that is somewhat attainable for most people,” she said. “Lamps are expensive.”

Her dream was always to have a studio at home, invest in a kiln and save money on studio ex-

penses. After purchasing their first home in 2020, the couple spent eight months redoing the garage, which had a collapsed roof, last year. The studio is now an artist’s dream, with two kilns, ample space to work, storage and a dedicated area where Hsiao can pack her orders.

“I was using our bedroom as our showroom before,” she said. “It was rough.”

But even though Hsiao is working from home most days, meeting people in person has always been a highlight of having a small business. In order to do even more of that, she, Heather Praun of Plant Material and designer Bianca D’Amico of Chaparral Studio launched a semi-annual craft show at Plant Material’s Altadena location. They’ve held about half a dozen so far (more information at plant-material.com).

“The whole community shows up,” she said, smiling. “I’ve been lucky enough to participate in some of the most vibrant collections of makers throughout the years and made friends with many. It was a delight after moving to Altadena to find that so many of the makers have found themselves here raising families, going to the same schools and parks.”

“How she prioritizes creativity in all aspects of her life has always inspired me,” D’Amico said. “There is endless thought and time poured into her work, but she exercises that part of herself in every aspect of her life. Even dinner [at] home has a crafty element: food tossed colorfully into various homemade bowls, the kids always helping make the food and nothing needs to match; it’s all about the time spent together. There is a sense that life is happening NOW, and she is engrossed in the moment.”

Hsiao said that balancing a small business in the backyard can be challenging while raising two young children, but she appreciates that she can return to the studio after she has put the kids to bed. “I’ve learned to love the quiet of working in the evenings, [and I] try to take breaks on the weekends and fully spend time with the kids,” she said. “The balance is tough, but my kids see me trying to sneak in work since my studio is at home and always ask to help. They know I enjoy what I do, and I have no doubt they will spend more time with me in my studio as they get older.”

Despite feeling like an empty vessel sometimes — “Much of it feels like there are never enough hours in the day,” she said — Hsiao knows time spent with her kids is fleeting. As she figures out what work/life balance means for her family, she often goes back to something artist and mother Megan Whitmarsh shared with her: “You will never regret all the work you didn’t make while your children were little because you decided to be a present and loving parent.”



sunbrella

Outdoor All Weather Fabrics

Exclusive Designs

Largest Selection Anywhere!

Est. 1956

F&S

Fabrics

10654 W. Pico Bl. West Los Angeles

310-441-2477

fsfabricslosangeles.com

50+
Crack open the books with free college classes

Whether you want to learn a new skill or just challenge yourself, community college classes are some of the best free resources for older Angelenos. Santa Monica College has been offering a free noncredit Emeritus program for 50 years, and Pierce College in Woodland Hills has a similar program called Encore. Both are set up for adults over 50 to audit a variety of classes, from art and concert music to political science and occupational training. Los Angeles City College also offers free noncredit courses for all adults.

UCLA's Senior Scholars Program at Longevity Center isn't free, but it offers the ability to audit one class for \$175 and up to four classes for \$625. UC Irvine has a similar program called the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute that costs \$25 in the summer, \$160 per semester during the spring and fall, and \$235 for the whole year and allows older adults to take unlimited classes.

Most of these programs also offer online classes, if that suits you best.

55+
Enjoy a free drink or cheap(er) food

A lot of fast food spots have discounts for seniors, but Dairy Queen and KFC go one step further, offering a free drink for adults 55 and up. Restaurants are a classic spot to find "senior discounts." TheSeniorList, a website resource for older people, has a regularly updated list of restaurants that offer discounts and freebies, but perks may differ from location to location, so call before you go. There are a ton of places that offer discounts for people over 55 — the best thing to do is ask.

60+
Come down with a case of senior-center-itis

Los Angeles County has a senior center geared for adults age 60-plus in nearly every neighborhood, and each of them has a slate of activities where older Angelenos can participate in everything from line dancing and jewelry-making classes to nutrition courses and pickleball. A full list of activities at L.A.'s senior centers can be found on the Department of Parks and Recreation's website.

"In Los Angeles County, we have over 140 of them, so you're not that far away from one of them," says Dr. Laura Trejo, who calls senior centers a "focal point" of the communities they serve.

62+
Reconnect with nature at our national and state parks

The United States Geological Survey offers a Lifetime Senior Pass that covers all of the national parks. This one isn't technically free — it's \$80 plus about \$10 in fees — but it's a lifetime pass for the cost of a regular yearly pass. By that logic, after a year, it's free. There are nine national parks in California, four of which — Joshua Tree, the Channel Islands, Sequoia and Death Valley — are within a four-hour drive from Los Angeles.

What is free is the Golden Bear pass issued by California State Parks. For Californians over 62 and earning a monthly income below \$1,677 (or \$2,269 for the household), the pass allows for car access to most of the state's 280 parks. This is the largest parks system in the country, so there's plenty to explore. If you don't meet the income threshold, there is a Limited Use Golden Bear pass that costs \$20 and is only active during the offseason between Labor Day and the Friday before Memorial Day, but it beats



Photo illustration by Los Angeles Times; photo via Getty Images

The best freebies and discounts for L.A.'s 50-plus crowd

IT ALMOST MAKES UP FOR THE PAIN OF GROWING OLDER

BY MAXWELL WILLIAMS

ACCORDING TO THE U.S. CENSUS, nearly a third of Los Angeles residents are over 50. And we're aging collectively — according to a Times report, L.A. County's median age rose 2.6 years between 2012 and 2022. ¶ Thankfully, L.A. is an enticing place to grow older, and not just because of the temperate climate. The city is one of the few municipalities in the world with a "purposeful aging" initiative (though the budget for senior programs will be reduced in 2025). It's a place that understands that older Angelenos are our cultural core. ¶ "Older people tend to be the holders of culture, of language, of sharing [these things], and so they're always at the forefront of creating that experience for all of us," says Dr. Laura Trejo, director of Los Angeles County's Aging and Disabilities Department. ¶ Which is why it's so important for older Angelenos to have resources — and bounties — as they age. Here are some free (and almost free) services and experiences that older people have access to — and younger generations can look forward to.

the \$195 that younger Angelenos have to shell out for an annual pass.

Catch a flick

There aren't any completely free movie screenings at the major cinema chains, but older adults can find discounts at most of them, including Cinemark theaters, where "senior day" tickets can be as low as \$5 for people 62 and older. There are also plenty of film screenings at senior centers and, of course, since this is the city of cinema, there are free screenings all over the city at any given time.

Get around in style

Driving around L.A. can be terrible for people of any age. Great news: This isn't the L.A. Metro you grew up with. The public transit system has had a serious makeover and is getting even more upgrades to cover more areas in the future. Lucky for Angelenos 62 and older because the city offers deep discounts and fare-capping, which means you'll never pay more than \$5 a week. Regular

fares are discounted too, with single rides costing older Angelenos 75 cents during peak hours and only 35 cents per ride during off-peak hours.

"Plus, Metro has a program that helps older adults learn how to use it more effectively," Trejo says. "So that's another opportunity if people want to consider giving up their cars."

65+
This sporting life

Golfing is a long-standing tradition for older people. Maybe it's the slow pace of the game, or maybe it's just an excuse to get outside with a group of friends. It's rarely free, but if you're savvy, you can play on one of the L.A. city golf courses for almost free. For Angelenos 65 and up, there's a yearly fee of \$28, and then you'll pay green fees as low as \$4.50 for a weekday round. Make sure to reserve a tee time, and get out there on the links.

Beyond golf, strength training also has been linked to longevity. You might be eligible for SilverSneakers, a program

that has workouts like tai chi, Zumba and outdoor walking groups, as well as scores of live online classes. It's free for older people on most health plans in California, and for people on Medicare Advantage.

And we've all heard about the rise of pickleball. It can be a great, free workout for older Angelenos who might not be up for a tennis match. Most of L.A.'s city courts are free to all.

Become a cultural maven by visiting L.A. museums for free

Many museums in the region offer free admission for everyone — the Getty Villa and the Getty Center, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the California Science Center's permanent galleries, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Broad and the Hammer Museum — but some offer additional perks for older adults.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Natural History Museum are both free for L.A. County residents after

3 p.m. on weekdays, and both offer a discount for adults 65 and up with an ID during all open hours. Mid-Wilshire's Academy Museum and Craft Contemporary, Pasadena's Norton Simon Museum and the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens in San Marino also offer discounts to older Angelenos.

Perks with no specific age requirement
Your library card holds many secrets for seniors

Libraries are one of the most powerful resources for anyone, let alone older Angelenos, but they remain a vital hub of our communities, particularly for our aging residents. I stopped by my local library recently — the Lincoln Heights branch, housed in the beautiful Italian Renaissance Revival building funded by Andrew Carnegie in 1916 — which was filled with older Angelenos quietly reading or on the computer.

It's no surprise, as the library is a friendly place for older people. For those with limited vision, the library is packed with large-print books. Looking to catch up to technology so you can keep in touch with loved ones? The library has tutorials on basic computer skills from Gmail to Instagram. And the library caters to homebound patrons with a program linking them with neighbors who can pick up and drop off materials.

Not only that, but your library card comes with a bevy of perks through the library's Discover & Go program (find it as Explore L.A. under the Services & Programs tab at lapl.org — and have your library card handy). On offer right now are four complimentary passes to the L.A. Zoo and Botanical Gardens, free tickets to select screenings at the Academy Museum (normally \$10) and deeply discounted tickets to select L.A. Kings ice hockey games.

"Your library card is worth its weight in gold these days because of the tremendous resources available at our libraries," says Trejo.

What's the 211?

211 LA is the city's hub of resources for nonprofit services, connecting Angelenos with everything from suicide hotlines to nonprofits that will help them quit smoking. There's a whole page called the Aging and Disability Resource Connection that helps older Angelenos find a caregiver, navigate health insurance and even obtain legal services.

"When in doubt, reach out to 211," Trejo says. "They are my partners. They are my information and referral provider for all of L.A. County. And they are actually there. They work with us. We train them, we share resources with them so that they're always up to date on services and support available for older adults and their families."

Stay connected

As we get older, keeping in touch with friends and loved ones seems to get more important, but it can come at a high cost. If you're low-income, that can be a burden. The state has a program called California LifeLine that offers low-income older people discounts on cellphones or home phones of up to \$19 per month. That may or may not cover the whole bill, but it'll help keep you in touch.

FIND discount offers at the library, left. The USGS Lifetime Senior Pass covers all national parks, including Joshua Tree, below. And L.A. city golf courses encourage exercise with discounted green fees.



GARY CORONADO Los Angeles Times



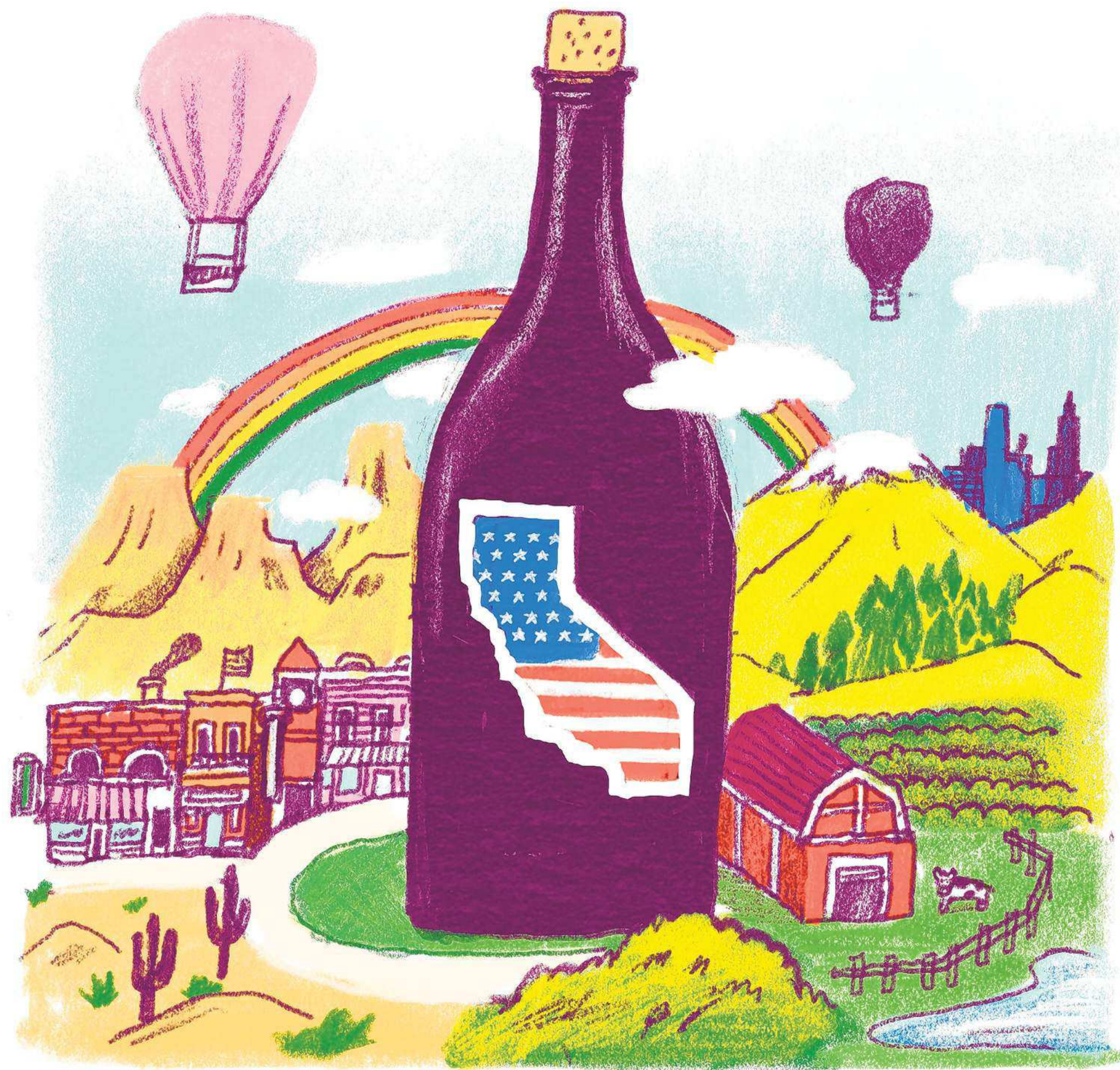
CARLIN STIEHL For The Times



CHRISTOPHER REYNOLDS Los Angeles Times

California’s sparkling wines are bubbling to the top

NEW-WAVE BOTTLES SUCCEED NOT BECAUSE THEY TASTE LIKE CHAMPAGNE — BUT PRECISELY BECAUSE THEY DON’T



DAVID HUANG For The Times

BY PATRICK COMISKEY

IN 2012, DAN PERSON JOINED SCHRAMSBERG WINERY, the esteemed sparkling-wine house in the Napa Valley, with the desire to learn about bubbles. Not just to learn but to be part of the whole bubbles zeitgeist. “Like everyone else,” he says, “when I heard the pop of a cork, I had to turn my head and see what was happening.” ¶ Schramsberg’s reputation had been built on wines meant to approximate Champagne in California. But before long, Person began to wonder what a true California sparkling wine, not a stand-in for Champagne, would taste like. “I wanted to work out whether I could make something not because it tasted like Champagne but because it didn’t,” he says. ¶ In 2017, with his wife, Jacqueline, Person founded Carboniste Winery in Sonoma and embarked upon a minor riot of sparkling wine bottlings, everything from pétillant Albariño to sparkling Merlot to long-aged prestige cuvées made in the traditional methode champenoise — all to see just what sort of sparkling wines California was capable of. ¶ They’ve joined a growing cadre of California producers — wineries like Cruse, Under the Wire, Sandhi, Melville, Blackbird, Patz & Hall, Forlorn Hope and Racines — in the movement to make sparkling wines in California that aren’t wannabes. ¶ For years, domestic sparkling wines would have been lumped into an ice bucket of “lesser-thans.” But no longer. Adjustments in the vineyard and modest tweaks in the cellar have rendered a new style of California bubbles. ¶ At their best they can express a sense of place as well as or better than many of their French counterparts.

yard sites that met the requirements of sparkling wine — where cool is the rule.

Sparkling wine at first glance is an unlikely vector by which to pursue a sense of place. Most are the product of at least two fermentations as well as the addition of sugar and yeast — a whole host of manipulation and handling, in other words. For centuries Champagne producers set large crops, harvested unripe fruit and bolstered their lackadaisical vineyard efforts by adding copious amounts of sugar (dosage), with uniformity and consistency being the goal. To maintain a global product, the industry, in effect, had ignored terroir at every turn.

Grape growing has improved dramatically in Champagne — the grower-producers have seen to that — but climate change has thrown all manner of obstacles at the region, from excessive heat to rain and even hailstorms.

California is obviously no stranger to global warming’s exigencies, but for now, says winemaker Cruse, “The Pacific Ocean is being a hell of a moderating influence.”

The source of grapes for Cruse’s top wine is a western Sonoma vineyard called Charles Heintz, which experiences such extreme coastal conditions it inspired him to name the wine Ultramarine.

“Charlie is one of those places that’s very strong in its climate expression,” says Cruse. Indeed the wine has so much natural acidity that it can start out quite austere in its youth, needing some years in the bottle



The rise of American bubbles

American sparkling wine has been around almost as long as there’s been American wine. The son of one of California’s early wine pioneers, Arpad Haraszthy, studied in Champagne as a youth and debuted a sparkling Zinfandel called Eclipse in the 1870s, which was one of the most popular wines of its era. Post-Prohibition, a small number of reputable producers debuted, including Schramsberg in 1965 and Iron Horse in 1976.

But during the late 1970s and ’80s the category exploded as a host of French companies invested in U.S. satellites, like Mumm, Moët-Chandon, Piper-Heidsieck, Taittinger and Roederer, along with the Spanish Cava producers Cordoniu and Freixenet. Much beyond these, however, the domestic sparkling market didn’t stray.

That is until after the recession of 2008, when wine tourism boomed and direct sales became vital to the bottom line: Offering a glass of bubbles was an essential icebreaker in a

memorable tasting-room experience. Custom winemaking facilities like Healdsburg’s Rack and Riddle were able to help meet that demand with a number of sparkling wine options for needy brands.

Others started taking matters into their own hands. Inspired by dramatic new developments in Champagne, where small producers like Jacques Selosse and Ulysse Collin debuted thrilling new sparkling wines made from their own grapes (choosing not to sell to the big houses, or grandes marques).

These not only broke with the style of the grandes marques but also expressed something that few expected from Champagne — a crystalline sense of place, that fabled French concept, terroir.

California terroir

California winemakers took notice. Producers like Michael Cruse, Morgan Twain-Peterson and Chris Cottrell, Sashi Moorman and Rajat Parr started drinking and loving these new Champagnes, eventually creating their own, seeking vine-



to mature and settle before it can be released.

Cruse has since released methode champenoise wines, which are more expressive, under the Cruse Tradition label. It was, he admits, a process to get them there. Drawn from sites less extreme than Charlie, the sense of place sometimes came off as merely fruity, too simple for him.

“Sometimes you have to veer away from that kind of like lemon water, berry spritzer thing, you know?” He found he needed to tamp down their natural exuberance. And so he might adjust the time the wine spends on lees, or expose the wine, in a controlled way, to oxygen. “I think it ends up tasting more California ... more cowboy, more sunshine-y,” he says.

Sunshine in a bottle

Sunshine is something California sparkling wine producers have in abundance, and often must work against; new viticultural techniques have made that prospect easier.

“It’s much easier to grow fruit for sparkling wines than it was,” says Under the Wire’s Twain-Peterson. Shading the fruit with a leaf canopy, adjusting the croploads per vine and being very precise with picking decisions all contribute to a more detailed base wine, the juice that precedes the secondary fermentation — the one that produces bubbles.

That has always been the goal at Under the Wire. Cottrell, Twain-Peterson’s partner, says the brand is devoted to two things: single-vineyard and single-vintage wines that would capture California in sparkling wines. This means they’re unabashed about ripeness. “We’re always looking for intensity of flavor, density of flavor, even at low sugars,” says Cottrell, “and each site usually as a signature for that.”

They’ve found several vineyards, including Alder Springs in Mendocino County, Brosseau Vineyard near Pinnacles National Park in San Benito County and their own Bedrock Vineyard in Sonoma County, that can fully express place when the fruit is less than fully ripe. You could say the sparkling wines are like taut, electrified versions of still wines from these places. But both Cottrell and Twain-Peterson believe that with a little dosage as a kind of corrective lens, it’s how they get their best site differentiation.

Post-Schramsberg, Person’s first out-of-the-box wine was a sparkling Albariño from the San Joaquin Delta — a lowly

piece of ground that doesn’t exactly scream terroir. While not exactly profound, the wine is delicious and true to the variety: salty, apple-y and apricot-y — crushable, in the parlance of our time.

His California Brut, V.20, however, has serious methode champenoise gravitas, including a mouthful of nutty lees notes, built off a resolutely Californian core of fruit. “I can capture some elegance and finesse, but I want my wines to have a sunniness and warmth, which is the terroir, after all.”

Uncommon grapes

Mara Ambrose of Forlorn Hope worked at Schramsberg with Person, motivating her to continue making sparkling wine ... just not the sort Schramsberg was making. Ambrose experimented with bubbles bottlings made from a half-dozen oddball varieties sourced from her and partner Matthew Rorick’s Sierra Foothills vineyard, Rorick Heritage. She’s settled on two, a Chenin Blanc and a Mondeuse, a grape variety from the mountainous Savoie in France; it struggles to ripen at Rorick, making it ideal for bubbles.

“Making sparkling wine from nontraditional varieties has pushed me to try and capture grape typicity in sparkling form,” Ambrose says. “I can’t tell you how happy it’s made me when other winemakers say, ‘Wow! This really tastes like Mondeuse!’ ”

Winemakers from the French wineries haven’t been left out of this effort. In the Anderson Valley, Roederer Estate, arguably the most qualitatively successful of all the expatriate houses, has been run for many years by Frenchman Arnaud Weyrich, who couldn’t help but notice the success of Cruse and others.

“I have to say, those small wineries, Ultramarine, they kicked my butt a little,” Weyrich says.

But among Roederer’s vast vineyard holdings (some 340 planted acres in the Anderson Valley) a number of parcels kept rising to the top as standouts; this year, Weyrich bottled two.

The first, on Clark Road, is a Pinot Noir vineyard, among the coolest they own, producing a racy, structured wine. A slightly warmer block, Apple Alley, is ideal for Chardonnay. In France such parcels would be called Grand Cru. Weyrich simply calls them his “top dogs.” Each is dramatically different from the other, and from the winery’s top wine, L’Ermitage.

Racines is another remarkable French venture started by Étienne de Montille, scion of the esteemed Domaine de Montille in Burgundy, and his winemaker Brian Sieve. In 2016 they established a winery in the Sta. Rita Hills (hiring Oregon veteran Ryan Hannaford as their viticulturist and on-site winemaker). In 2018, when it became clear that this windswept region would be amenable to good sparkling wine fruit, De Montille called in his friend Rodolphe Péters, who represents the sixth generation of the Péters family in Champagne’s Côte de Blancs.

The Racines Grande Reserve performs the feat of tasting like a California wine and like a Péters wine but not, necessarily, a Champagne wine. Its generous, golden rich middle palate and precise finish is the very signature I associate with Péters, though its California-ness — expressed as it is through the Sta. Rita Hills fog — I’d never take for Champagne. That is precisely the sort of synergy the best domestic sparkling wines are pulling off right now.



Photographs via their vineyards



10 BOTTLES OF CALIFORNIA BUBBLY TO POP YOUR TOP

WHO NEEDS CHAMPAGNE? WELCOME 2025 WITH HOMEGROWN SPARKLING WINES

BY PATRICK COMISKEY



IT’S NEARLY THE NEW YEAR and our wine fixations inevitably turn effervescent. Traditionally, that would mean Champagne, the world’s sparkling wine par excellence, synonymous with celebration, luxury, extravagance, etc. ♣ Champagne, both the wine and the region, has had few rivals in style and grandeur for generations. It has had market competitors, like Prosecco and Cava, but those don’t come close to matching it in quality. Until recently, neither could California sparkling wines compete, by and large, except as poor stand-ins for Champagne. ♣ But no longer. In the last decade a new breed of California sparkling wine has surfaced, and the energy and quality are palpable. Here’s a rundown of California’s sparkling New Wave, producers who are giving Champagne a run for its money.

NV Racines Sta. Rita Hills Grand Reserve
Multivintage, mostly from 2020, made entirely of Chardonnay in the traditional methode champenoise. This is supple and elegant, with a precise mineral edge and scents of hazelnuts and pear beneath green citrus flavors.
● At Wine Country in Signal Hill and Wine House in Los Angeles, about \$65.

2017 Caraccioli Santa Lucia Highlands Escolle Vineyard Brut Rosé
A single-vineyard rosé of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from Monterey County. After 50 months on lees, this is toasty and lush, with an aroma of candied pecans and pale cherry.
● At Wine House, about \$70.

2017 Patz & Hall North Coast Brut
All Chardonnay from James Hall, a master of the variety. This is creamy with toasted lees and toffee notes overlaying a core of Meyer lemon. That citrusy finish gives the wine nerve and tension.
● At Wally’s in L.A., about \$65.

NV Blackbird Vineyards Starling Sonoma County Blanc des Blanc
Yellow apple flesh and a juicy, creamy caramel note gives way to a dusty, zinc-like edge, finishing dry and a touch zesty, plenty of nerve for oysters.
● At Wally’s, about \$50.

2020 Under the Wire Mendocino Alder Springs Vineyard
This wine shows a strong sense of place: a very cool, meticulously farmed vineyard in Mendo. It’s tense and earthy, with scents of lees, soil and stones, pale berry flavors and a sea-air salinity.
● At K&L Wines, Lou Wine Shop and Lincoln Fine Wine in L.A., about \$70.

NV Carboniste California Modern Sparkling Wine V.20
Shaded slightly amber, this wine walks the line between sunny red apple scents and exotic, toasted lees accents. Its flavors are at once juicy and extravagant, with a nutty caramel finish.
● At Total Wine & More (multiple locations), Wine Country in Signal Hill and Mission Wine in Pasadena, about \$35.

2016 Sandhi Sta. Rita Hills Blanc de Noirs
This wine is a live wire of tension and freshness, with faint scents of brioche and Fuji apple, the mid-palate flavors juicy and mouthwatering.
● At Kogod Wine Merchants (online) and at the winery in Lompoc, about \$75.

NV Cruse Tradition California Rosé
The color of a fading rose petal, this has a dusty, chaparral scent that hints at summer days. The flavors are generous with red berries and pomegranate, slightly briny, with a taut texture and lean finish.
● At Hi-Time Wine Cellars in Costa Mesa, Wine Exchange in Santa Ana and K&L Wines, about \$50.

2020 Roederer Estate Anderson Valley Clark Road Sparkling Wine
This starts out toasty and bright, with a crisp apple tartness. Its flavors are more round, with good middle-palate sweetness and just a hint of Pinot Noir depth and grip.
● At K&L Wines, about \$55.

2020 Forlorn Hope Rorick Heritage Vineyard Sierra Foothills Sparkling Mondeuse
Woody and savory, this smells of herbs and leaf litter, with a seductively creamy middle palate and a grip mildly reminiscent of Italian bitters. Drink this with game or lamb.
● At Buvons in Long Beach, about \$50.

“Sometimes you have to veer away from that kind of like lemon water, berry spritzer thing, you know? I think it ends up tasting more California ... more cowboy, more sunshine-y.”

MICHAEL CRUSE,
on fine-tuning his California wines

5 OF THE BEST CHAMPAGNES OF THIS GOLDEN ERA

GROWER-PRODUCERS ARE SPARKING A REVOLUTION IN THE CATEGORY

BY DAVID ROSOFF

|||||

TERRIFIC sparkling wine is produced across the globe, especially right here in California. But it wouldn't be a stretch to say that we are in the midst of a golden era for Champagne.

A movement that began a few decades ago, when droves of small grape farmers stopped selling their precious bounty to the big brands and started making the wine themselves, has reached a crescendo, with more ultra-high-quality, site-specific and responsibly farmed wine being produced now than ever before. This deviates somewhat from the traditional Champagne model of blending grapes, vintages and vineyards to produce a consistent "house" style that may be reliable but lacks the intrigue and artistry of this newer movement.

Importer Paul Wasserman says, "It is a very energetic time for Champagne, which is exploding with new talent. ... The new generation is free to explore all manners of winemaking, including adding little or no sulfur, using ambient yeast for fermentation, oxidative aging and more."

Sommelier Courtney Kaplan has made an impressive commitment to, and investment in, this new wave of boutique Champagne at her Arts District bistro Camélia. "It feels like the conversation has shifted when we talk about Champagne with guests in the restaurant. It has been more about Champagne as a wine with bubbles, and how it will pair with their food, just like we would talk about any other type of wine. As opposed to it being for the first toast before moving into some 'real' wine."

Aficionados have begun feverishly hunting the best of this new bunch, turning some of the rarer offerings into virtual unicorns. Importer Keven Clancy represents several such "cult" producers. "People don't want what they can actually have. You would be shocked. The quantity that we get is like 60 or 120 bottles. We have a lot of good customers that we have to say no to because there really is just that little," he says.

Tempting as it would be to mention those names here, we have chosen instead to feature wines that, while limited in production, might conceivably be found on a retail shelf or wine list near you.

Laherte Frères Ultradition Extra Brut

It would be hard to find a better example of serious Champagne at a more affordable price than this blend of Pinot Meunier, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. While bracing and mineral, the austerity is buffered by ample notes of peach and pear, facilitated by a small "dosage" of sugar and the use of some wood barrels for fermentation. Aurélien Laherte took over the family domaine in 2005, and his biodynamic and organic practices are a prime example of the progressive work being done by this new generation of hands-on winemakers. **● At Domaine LA and Psychic Wines in L.A., Hi-Time Wine Cellars in Costa Mesa and Stanley's Wet Goods in Culver City, about \$56.**

Champagne Marguet Yuman 21

The "21" in the name refers to the year the grapes were harvested, though this cannot be designated as a "vintage" wine because it was not aged for the required period of time before release. This crowd-pleasing barrel-fermented Chardonnay is a richer, more seductive wine than the Laherte despite the

fact that no sugar is added. Bottled under lower pressure, this drinks like a great white Burgundy that also happens to sparkle. A mouthful of lightly toasted almonds, brioche and baked apples. Marguet takes a very natural approach, working biodynamically, treating the vineyards with herbal preparations, adding no sulfur and using two draft horses for plowing.

● Available at Melody and Silver Lake Wine in L.A. and Buvons Natural Wine Bar & Shop in Long Beach, about \$90.

Champagne Tarlant Brut Zero

This is a wonderful counterpoint to the opulence of the Marguet above. Clancy describes Brut Zero as "electric, exciting and stimulating. It

bites and draws you in."

This almost Chablis-like laser beam is made from equal doses of the big three grapes: Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay. As the name implies, no "dosage" (sugar) is added. Depth is provided by the use of barrels for fermentation, the addition of older base wines and holding the wines back longer before release. Tarlant was one of the first to swear off selling grapes to the big-name houses in the early 20th century, becoming an independent producer and setting the table for the movement we see today.

● At the Wine House and Vinovore in L.A., Domaine LA, Silver Lake Wine and Buvons, about \$80.

Champagne Pierre Gerbais La Loge

Gerbais is located in the southernmost point of Champagne known as the Aube (or Côte des Bar), which has emerged as a hotbed for this new wave of winemaking. Many of the producers here look just south to Burgundy for inspiration. For this bottling, Aurélien Gerbais used 80-year-old Pinot Blanc vines, a grape rarely found in Champagne, which yields a different sort of Blanc de Blancs than Chardonnay would. Kaplan, who features the wine at Camélia, describes it as "walking a tightrope of balance with zippy acidity and crunchy, saline minerality. A little bit of brioche-y richness but incredibly precise and focused."

Gerbais blends a "base" vintage with a "solera" of reserve wine going back to 2011 for this unique bottling.

● At Helen's in Brentwood and Lou Wine Shop in L.A., about \$110.

Famille Moussé Eugène Rosé Brut

This family has been growing grapes since 1750. Here, the "other" red grape in Champagne, Pinot Meunier, plays the starring role, supported by a smaller percentage of Pinot Noir. Meunier holds its acidity in warmer temperatures and is less susceptible to frost, which is becoming a greater threat to grape growers. The village of Cuisles has a high content of the clay illite in its soil. Used in cosmetics, it gives Meunier unique vibrancy and texture. The wine is composed of a perpetual "assemblage" (or blend) of wines going back to the 2003 vintage. The addition of some still (not sparkling) Pinot Meunier gives the wine deep color and a savory, vinous quality, showing loads of sour cherry and rose petals. Moussé is a very eco-conscious producer, utilizing solar panels, well water, geothermal energy, an electric tractor and animal integration. It even produces its own natural sulfur to avoid the use of petroleum-based sulfur.

● Available at the Wine House, Hi-Time Wine Cellars and Mission Liquor in South Pasadena, about \$72.



Photographs by STEPHANIE BREIJO Los Angeles Times

Zabala's ambitious dream comes true

AT LONG-AWAITED REVIVAL OF SOMNI IN WEHO, THE DISHES ARE STILL LIGHT AND PLAYFUL, BUT THE MENU IS ENTIRELY NEW

BY STEPHANIE BREIJO

FOR TWO BRIEF YEARS, in-the-know L.A. diners gathered around a small U-shaped counter hidden within José Andrés' now-closed restaurant the Bazaar to witness chef Aitor Zabala craft whimsical, avant-garde creations at Somni, one of the country's most notable fine-dining experiences. Caviar bumps came served on mannequin hands. "Tunahawk" fastened the fish to the edge of a tomahawk-like cleaver. Deconstructed ingredients were shaped into cows and beets and flowers. **■** L.A. Times Food critic Bill Addison called Zabala's 20-plus courses "the headiest heights of luxury dining" and Somni appeared on the L.A. Times 101 list in 2018 and 2019. It achieved two Michelin stars and a "discovery" accolade from the World's 50 Best Restaurants. **■** Then, almost as quickly as it rose to prominence, the restaurant within a restaurant closed in 2020 after the SLS Hotel terminated its contract with Andrés' ThinkFoodGroup.

The city thought it had lost Somni forever. Then, in 2022, Zabala returned with news: He would reopen the lauded tasting-menu restaurant, this time as the sole chef-proprietor, in a new home in West Hollywood. After years of renovations and delays, the reborn Somni debuted late last month.

Demand was so high that roughly five minutes after reservations opened all spots were booked, and they remain filled through January. Although a number of new customers nabbed these reservations, Zabala says many of the first diners to appear were guests of his previous Somni.

"It's been beautiful that they were waiting for us to come back," the chef says. "We put in so much effort to be back and we are really, really proud to be in the city."

Andrés, the renowned chef and humanitarian, first persuaded a young Zabala to leave Spain's famed El Bulli in 2007 and help develop the Bazaar in the SLS Hotel just outside Beverly Hills. Zabala returned to El Bulli after Bazaar was up and running, but moved back to L.A. in 2010 to help Andrés open Saam, the tasting-menu predecessor to Somni, which appeared in the same space in 2018.

At the new Somni, which means "dream" in Catalan, the dishes are still light and playful, but the menu is entirely new.

Savory meringues, for instance, made an appearance at the previous Somni, but at Somni 2.0, Zabala and his team are fully leaning into them. They're emulsifying, drying and shaping them into more whimsical figures, such as a seaweed meringue resembling a fish, which serves as a vessel for smoked butter and caviar.

"We were not looking [to make] a new technique or something like that," Zabala says of the new Somni menu. "I will call it an evolution from the past and the techniques we know and the techniques we use and the techniques we learn, but we were never looking to try to find the new thing."

Still, he can't stop innovating. Although Zabala previously used steamed egg yolks, here at Somni the chefs make pasta from nothing but yolks, eschewing flour and water by simply but precisely steaming the eggs spread into a thin layer for bouncy pasta-like sheets. There's more technology being employed in the whimsy too, such as 3-D printing, where tomatoes that appear as a kind of paper are fully edible.

Another thing that has changed is the feel of the restaurant. Where the old Somni was



CHEF Aitor Zabala, top, works in Somni's kitchen. Above, the dining room at the new West Hollywood site.

|||||

closeted away inside the SLS Hotel, the new Somni almost feels as though it's hidden through a secret garden. Behind a gate that opens onto a long walkway, you'll find a trio of buildings and a softly lighted patio. Cloud-like sculptures hang from the trees. Immediately to your left is a private dining room and the wine cellar. Ahead and to the right is a welcome reception with canapés such as thinly sliced imported Spanish ham, and the patio for easing into the meal. Beyond is the kitchen and production building. Finally, between the two structures is the dining room: an amber-glowing rectangular space where the restaurant's mascot-like rainbow prismatic bust of a bull overlooks guests from the corner.

Whereas the original Somni boasted 10 seats around a fairly open kitchen, now 14 seats rim the edges of long, curved tables that overlook a counter where chefs place the finishing touches on their ornate food shapes, the main kitchen now just out of view.

Zabala toured more than 60 locations before finding the former Donna Karan retail storefront and flower shop that is now Somni. But the space lacked the infrastructure for a restaurant and required lengthy buildouts, new plumbing and other operational necessities such as oven hoods and new air conditioners. The final multibuilding layout, Zabala says, was essentially constructed "from zero, from ground." Most days, he says, he watched over the construction site with the architects and contractors as tractors razed structures and brought the patio to life.

As the assembly wore on, the chef popped up with a dinner series in Korea and began planning the details: What napkins would the new Somni use? At what intervals would they send in staff to clean?

"We took the time to build it better, and think it better in the space," he says. "I will say the year was challenging. Exciting, but challenging at the same time."

In one of the three structures, a new wine cellar harbors more than 300 bottles primarily overseen by wine director Caroline Costarella (formerly of San Francisco's Lazy Bear) and general manager Daniel Gorlas, a Per Se alum. They worked with Zabala to build a program inspired by the chef's history: Roughly 80% of the wine list is sourced from Spain and California, marrying his old roots and the new.

"Great wine cellars are everywhere in the world," Zabala says. "You can be in Tokyo, you can be in L.A., you can be in New York, you can be anywhere but it doesn't mean nothing if it's not a meaningful situation."

The wine pairings are now offered in two tracks: the Arrels, translating to "roots" in Catalan, especially highlights the ties between Spain and California and is priced at \$225. The Calafia, named for the fictional warrior queen, pours wines that focus on vintages and the nuances of their terroir, sourcing from beyond Spain and California, at a cost of \$415.

The cost for the tasting menu increased from Somni's original iteration as well. Once \$280, the price is currently set at \$495 without pairings. Larger parties can book the private dining room for \$995 per person, which includes beverage pairings and books the space for the entire evening. In a 2022 interview with The Times, Zabala said he expected the new Somni's price to increase; since then, local and statewide legislation raised the minimum wage and inflation jumped, boosting costs even further.

"Prices increased everywhere, the cost has increased everywhere," he recently said. "We are located in the second city with the highest wages in the United States — West Hollywood — and everything is more expensive. ... I am sure people can be surprised with \$495, but I still believe gastronomy at a higher level is a cheap luxury compared with other luxuries. With clothing, I don't know if [it] give[s] you the same emotions [as] to eat."

High-end tasting menus are increasingly appearing in Los Angeles across price points. In early December Seline debuted from Pasjoli and former Dialogue chef David Beran. This summer Vespertine reopened after years of closure and next year, Daniel Patterson — lately of Alta Adams and Local but formerly of San Francisco's Coi — is set to return to fine dining and open a new tasting-menu restaurant with business partner Keith Corbin.

Someday, Zabala says, he might offer a second Somni format, possibly a shorter menu at a lower price for those who want to experience the restaurant. Fine dining is seeing a resurgence and, if possible, he'd like his to be accessible — but still a luxury.

Somni is at 9045 Nemo St., West Hollywood. Open Wednesday to Sunday with seatings at 5:30 and, in the private dining room, 7 p.m.

THE BEST DISHES OF 2024

THESE FOOD MEMORIES WILL STAY WITH OUR WRITERS WELL INTO THE NEW YEAR

BY L.A. TIMES FOOD STAFF



STEPHANIE BREIJO Los Angeles Times

THE YEAR 2024 HAS flown by, and in retrospect, individual weeks and months can blend together. But the region's remarkable dining scene helps us keep time, with shared meals and notable openings representing some of our core memories from the past year. ¶ This year kept us busy. Our writers spent months researching our inaugural guide to the 101 Best Tacos in Los Angeles. We shared lists with our favorite sandwiches and cookies, as well as a comprehensive dining and drinking guide to Koreatown. We tracked restaurant openings and closings, with insight from chefs and restaurateurs on the current challenges in their industry. ¶ We celebrated local culinary talent with our annual guide to the 101 Best Restaurants in L.A., this year co-written by restaurant critic Bill Addison and columnist Jenn Harris. We also explored beyond the city, providing destination dining guides to Palm Springs, San Diego, San Francisco and Las Vegas. ¶ As we reflect on the past 12 months, countless meals stand out as worthy of celebration. Whether it's an oxtail smashburger from a fast-casual spot in Redlands, a prized Peking duck at a Las Vegas resort or al pastor street tacos shaved directly from the spit, these are the best dishes our writers ate this year, and ones we're eager to revisit in 2025.

LAMB NECK KORESHT AT AZIZAM

In her 640-page masterwork “Food of Life: Ancient Persian and Modern Iranian Cooking and Ceremonies,” Najmieh Batmanglij describes the class of dishes called khoresht as “delicate and refined braises” and “a combination of meat, poultry or fish with vegetables, herbs, fruits, beans, grains and sometimes nuts.” The words don't quite capture their mingled fragrances and elaborate harmonies, but the possibilities necessitate a broad definition. In Persian restaurants, one usually finds only a few examples of khoresht, including fesenjoon, a recipe that can be traced back at least 2,500 years in which pomegranate juice and pomegranate molasses simmer for hours with ground walnuts; chicken or duck are classic pairings. At their Silver Lake cafe Azizam, which opened in March, Cody Ma and Misha Sesar brilliantly blur the line between Persian home and restaurant cooking. An occasional standout special over the restaurant's first year is a khoresht of lamb-neck meat, cooked to collapsing tenderness and paired with the season's fruits: apricots in early summer, quinces and prunes at the onset of fall. Even better, they've recently served the braise with tahchin, its golden exterior giving way to soft, saffron-stained rice tangled with yogurt. — *Bill Addison*
● 2943 W. Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, [azizamla.com](#)

STEAK TARTARE AT BAR ETOILE

In a citywide sea of steak tartares, there's one I think about with frequency. It began in Virgil Village, where chef Travis Hayden first cubed thick slices of bread, smeared them with a rich, anchovy-heavy Caesar dressing and piled them with a small mountain of beef

tartare. He's since left Voodoo Vin, where the dish made its debut (and which continues on as a stellar wine bar now serving Persian cuisine), and when he departed it wasn't clear if his tartare toast would ever return. But in his latest project, Bar Etoile — a wine bar in Melrose Hill from the team that brought us bottle shop Domaine LA — thankfully it graced the opening menu, and long may it reign.

This is a deeply savory rendition of raw hand-chopped steak, which currently tosses the meat with shallots, parsley and pear-and-persimmon vinegar. Sometimes the Caesar dressing might involve vinegars and brines from the kitchen's house ferments, or it might involve buttermilk; whatever the day's ingredients, it's creamy and unctuous and slides down the sides of the thick slice of Bub and Grandma's country loaf, and it all gets buried in shaved sheep's milk cheese and cured egg yolk. The dish is filling enough as its own meal, though the cubed toast beneath it all certainly makes for easy sharing. Enjoy this with a batched martini or one of Julian Kurland and Jill Bernheimer's myriad suggestions for wine. — *Stephanie Breijo*
● 632 N. Western Ave., Los Angeles, [instagram.com/bar.etoile](#)

CABBAGE AT DUNSMOOR

There are platter-sized planks of tender steaks, shells brimming with succulent creamy oysters and scene-stealing cast irons of sour-milk cornbread coated in melting butter and honey, but in Brian Dunsmoor's hearth-powered Glassell Park restaurant dedicated to American cookery, the most humble of dishes felt the most captivating. A side of simple cabbage, simmered long and flecked with fresh dill, a dollop of yogurt and a sprinkle of toasted caraway seeds, hasn't left my mind since spring. I've tried to re-create it at home. I dream of Dunsmoor's cabbage, all silken but still textured, a stewy side dish that's almost a meal in its own right.

Often it's cooked vegetarian — boiled in water — but occasionally it's made with bacon lardons, which caramelize before they're added to the cabbage and water, and which punctuate the little bowl with chewy, salty pops. The dish is nostalgic for Dunsmoor, whose mother cooked cabbage in this fashion but without the cheffy adornments of yogurt, dill and

caraway. He likes to serve it both in spring and in late autumn/winter, and once it's on the menu it remains there for months due simply to its popularity with guests. Look for its return in January, when a hearty, comforting bowl of buttery cabbage goes best with a romantic wintry dining room that's lit by candlelight. — *S.B.*
● 3501 Eagle Rock Blvd., Los Angeles, [dunsmoor.la](#)

LATIN AMERICAN SASHIMI AT HACIENDA GUADALUPE

Hacienda Guadalupe is a Valle de Guadalupe destination for its luxury accommodations and on-site winery, but the kitchen on the premises is equally formidable. Arturo Huerta, chef de cuisine, and Gabby Melchum, executive chef and the winery's co-owner, prepare an impressive Latin American sashimi made from seasonal white fish dressed in a serrano chile, olive oil and lemon sauce. When I dined there in November, Melchum made the dish with jurel — yellow tail — caught off the coast of Baja California. The buttery fish played beautifully with the acid from the sauce, which is ground together with a mortar and pestle. The dish paired exceptionally well with Gigi — a crisp Sauvignon Blanc named after Melchum's Pomeranian, the winery's official pet. The entire three-course meal — each paired with a Hacienda Guadalupe wine — hit the mark, including the incredibly tender partridge and the addictive pavlova with berries and mint. But the most memorable bite was the delightful jurel. — *Cindy Carcamo*
● Mexico Highway 3, KM 81.5, Francisco Zarco, Valle de Guadalupe, (+52) 646-1552860, [haciendaguadalupe.com](#)

'K.F.C.' HAMACHI COLLAR AT HIBI

You can't get too attached to the food at Hibi, a restaurant where the dishes and also the chefs change with the seasons. The current chef, Ricky Hwang, is serving an intriguing tasting menu with things like ankimo-uni toast or caviar blue prawn doughnuts. But earlier this year, when the kitchen was headed by Daniel Kim — the former sous chef of the Michelin three-star Restaurant at Meadowood before it was destroyed in the 2020 Glass fire — I fell for a dish that stood out for its charm, crunch and inventiveness: the

“K.F.C.” or Korean fried hamachi collar.

I've had fried hamachi collar before and liked it — a lot. But in Kim's version, taking a cue from Korean fried chicken, the collar was coated in a batter that fried up crisp and golden in an even layer but left the fish tender and luscious. If Hibi kept its chefs around longer — or even had a greatest-hits menu — I could imagine the “K.F.C.” becoming a citywide obsession. — *Laurie Ochoa*
● 3121 W. Olympic Blvd., #103, Los Angeles, [madebyhibi.com](#)

SQUASH BLOSSOM QUESADILLA AT KOMAL

I marvel at Fátima Juárez's tortillas, each one tasting of the sun and soil and bursting with the sweetness of summer corn. Juárez nixtamalizes and grinds heirloom Mexican corn varieties at Komal, her restaurant and molino in the Mercado La Paloma. She tucks squash blossoms into a fresh tortilla with Oaxacan cheese and a corn sofrito. The salty cheese manages to heighten the sweetness of the sofrito and dial up the earthiness of the masa. Unadorned, it's a joy to eat. A close second to the quesadilla is a warm stack of tortillas eaten on the drive home. — *Jenn Harris*
● 3655 S. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, (213) 275-1062, [instagram.com/komal.molino](#)

TACO DE CABRITO Y CONSOMÉ AT EL LAGUNERO

There's a taco stand in Muscoy, a little-known semi-rural community on the byway between the 15 Freeway and San Bernardino, that sits in a class by itself at the regional level: El Lagunero. This unassuming taco vendor tucked off the street in a body shop offers what may be the only known local version of a regional specialty from Mexico's Laguna region, or metropolitan Torreón: split-roasted baby goat, known as cabrito, a fragrant and satisfying delicacy. Francisco Salinas and Vanessa Sánchez serve it in multiple forms: soft taco, grilled flauta with green sauce, or in consomé laden with strings of beautiful meat. The stand also offers an offal sausage of soft baby goat organs called machitos that is roasted on a spike. The machitos and the meat on the split kid here roast over wood before your eyes. We came upon this taco during our research for the 101 Best Tacos list but it ultimately proved too elusive, for now, to justify inclusion: Muscoy is at least 90 minutes from L.A. and El Lagunero sells out of the baby goat usually by 10 a.m. That said, for Angelenos who strive to always expand their taco boundaries, El Lagunero should be one of your destination taqueros in 2025. — *Daniel Hernandez*
● 2598 N. State St., Muscoy, (909) 254-1843, [instagram.com/el_lagunero](#)

CHICKEN SHAWARMA AT MIYA MIYA

Yazeed “Yaz” Soudani's signature dish keeps drawing me back to his shawarma stand, and I'm not alone. The Amman-trained chef has proven one of the most exciting new vendors at Smorgasburg this year, with throngs of weekly guests queuing in an almost constant line for chicken shawarma that's made using spices and equipment imported from Jordan. Miya Miya's debut has been so successful, in fact, that Soudani is planning a bricks-and-mortar for 2025; it also can be found popping up in Sherman Oaks every Friday night. His chicken browns to a glorious crisp as it spins, and the thinly shaved slices pile onto fries or, as I prefer, into fresh warmed saj bread. The exterior of the long, thin shawarma wrap gets brushed along the tower of rotating meat for extra flavor, then held against the grill for a delicious — and aesthetic — browning. Order this “the Yaz way,” where long strands of tangy pickles, a runny and potent garlic sauce and tart

pomegranate molasses all add to the symphony. Just be sure to grab extra napkins to catch the sauces running down your wrists. — *S.B.*
● 777 S. Alameda St., Los Angeles, [la.smorgasburg.com](#)

MALA LAMB SAUSAGE PIZZA AT PIZZERIA SEI

A special so popular it stuck around permanently, Pizzeria Sei's mala lamb sausage pizza blends multiple cultures to represent L.A. — just as the pie's creator intended. Chef-owner William Joo conceived the toppings as a nod to Koreatown restaurant Feng Mao, which is known for its grilled lamb skewers, but the lamb, when combined with creamy crème fraîche and the herbaceous bite of fresh cilantro flowers, also is reminiscent of shawarma. The mala chile adds a tingling Sichuan element, while the smoked provola, tomato pulp, Parmesan and pecorino pull these cross-cultural nods firmly into pizza territory. Rich, bright, complex and spicy, the first bite blew me away. I tried this slice during Pizzeria Sei's ambitious new pizza omakase, a dinner event that's more than worthy of staking out the blink-and-you'll-miss-it ticket drops, but this “special” is so good it's almost always available during regular service too. — *S.B.*
● 8781 W. Pico Blvd., Los Angeles, (424) 279-9800, [pizzeria.sei.com](#)

'SUMMER' AT VESPERTINE

One July evening just as the sun is setting and its rays shoot through the windows of Vespertine — the fine-dining restaurant from Jordan Kahn that feels very much like a spaceship headed for a more habitable planet — a course called “Summer” arrives as if on cue. Like the sentient Mima computer in the epic Swedish sci-fi poem “Aniara,” its purpose is to soothe while you're hurtling through deep space and might be missing Earth. Fascinatingly beautiful, “Summer” is served in a deep ceramic bowl whose interior is lined with layers of almond cream and pea puree. The creamy surface is covered completely in a blanket of diminutive multicolored wildflowers, sprinkled with tiny pearls of rice crackers. The dish says, “Remember when fields of flowers bloomed across California in June?” Yes, I do, to the last spoonful. — *Betty Hallock*
● 3599 Hayden Ave., Los Angeles, [vespertine.la](#)

BBQ LAMB TACO AT WORLDWIDE TACOS

The experience (and eventual reward) of ordering from Worldwide Tacos is as satisfying as the food itself. You will not find Frederick Sennie's brick-red taco stand on any delivery apps and it may take hours before your order is ready. But it's worth strategizing for tacos inspired by the ones that Sennie ate at South L.A. taquerias growing up, with more than 300 filling and flavor combinations that range from hard-shell ground beef tacos that reference a style popular among Black cooks in the region to unique combinations such as Thai shrimp or orange duck, with plenty of plant-based options.

The classic ground beef that's dressed similar to a Gringo taco with shredded lettuce, cheese, chunks of tomato and house hot sauce is one of my favorites, but the BBQ lamb — featuring halal meat — is just as good, with tender chunks coated in a spicy-sweet sauce and featuring the same crunchy shell (fried to your preferred crispness) with toppings. The wait at Worldwide Tacos can range from 30 minutes to two hours; I recommend arriving around opening at 3 p.m. to expedite your order. Grab a few extra tacos, a sweet potato dessert bar or garlic fries if you need help justifying the wait. — *Danielle Dorsey*
● 2419 W. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Leimert Park, (323) 291-1500, [worldwidetacos.com](#)



RON DE ANGELIS For The Times



STEPHANIE BREIJO Los Angeles Times



BILL ADDISON Los Angeles Times



CINDY CARCAMO Los Angeles Times



FRANCINE ORR Los Angeles Times

L.A. AFFAIRS

Soothing with sushi

OUR FAVORITE SPOT IS ALWAYS THERE FOR US, FOR BIG OCCASIONS AND EVERYDAY MEALS

BY LILI TODD



The author is an artist based in Altadena. She has a degree in illustration from ArtCenter College of Design. See more of her work on Instagram @lilitoddart and on her website lilitodd.com. L.A. Affairs chronicles the search for romantic love in all its glorious expressions in the L.A. area, and we want to hear your true story. We pay \$400 for a published 950- to 1,000-word essay. (Occasionally we work with artists and cartoonists on illustrated stories.) Email LAAffairs@latimes.com. You can find past columns at latimes.com/laaffairs.

IS IT TIME TO REPIPE YOUR HOME?



PROBLEM



SOLUTION

SAVE 20% on a COMPLETE Home Repipe*
FREE REPIPE ESTIMATES

With Our One-Stop Repipe™ Process
COMPLETED in 2 DAYS or Less!

Our process has been developed and refined with over 75,000+ home repipe installations. This means a quick, convenient, and efficient repipe process for you.

Reasons to Repipe Your Home

- Pipe & Slab Leaks
- Preventive Maintenance
- Low Water Pressure
- Rusty or Discolored Water

\$0 DOWN,
0% INTEREST**
for 12 months



Repipe Specialists

CALL NOW for a Fast Appointment!

877-895-8431

Shop.RepipeMyHomeNow.com

*Must mention discount at time of purchase. Financing offers subject to approved credit. **Financing for the GreenSky® consumer loan program is provided by Equal Opportunity Lenders. GreenSky® is a registered trademark of GreenSky, LLC a subsidiary of Goldman Sachs Bank USA. NMLS #1416362. Loans originated by Goldman Sachs are issued by Goldman Sachs Banks USA, Salt Lake City Branch. NMLS #208156 www.nmlsconsumeraccess.org. Expires 12/31/2024.

PICKLES

by BRIAN CRANE

Tsk tsk!

WHAT'RE YOU LOOKING AT?

DOONESBURY By Garry Trudeau

THIS IS ROLAND HEDLEY. I'M HERE AT MAGA MOTORWORKS FOR AN EXCLUSIVE LOOK AT THE NEW CUSTOM-BUILT TRUMP CLOWN CAR!

DESIGN LEAD SNOOKY BOINKS BREAKS DOWN THE VEHICLE'S KEY FEATURES.

ROLAND, STRUCTURALLY, SHE'S JUST AN OLD V-8 RIVETED TO A RECALLED TESLA CHASSIS.

SHE GETS LESS THAN 10 MPG AND IS 100% WOKE-FREE—NO BRAKES, SEAT BELTS, CONVERTER OR MUFFLER!

YOU CAN HEAR THIS BABY COMING AND SMELL HER GOING!

IT'S FULLY LOADED WITH PERFORMATIVE ACCESSORIES—AIR HORNS, SELTZER BOTTLES, COMBEBLS, AND AN OPEN FEED TO FOX NEWS...

AND IN THE BACK, THERE'S A DIRECT LINE TO THE KREMLIN FOR MS. GABBARD AND A COOLER IN CASE MS. NOEM OR MR. KENNEDY RUN OVER ANYTHING EDIBLE!

SO WHERE DO THE SEX OFFENDERS SIT?

BY THE WINDOWS. SO THEY CAN SHOW THEIR NOA'S.

CRABGRASS By Tauhid Bondia

OUR NEIGHBOR'S WINDOWS LOOK SO DIRTY. IN FACT, THEIR WHOLE HOUSE LOOKS DIRTY.

HOW CAN THEY STAND TO LIVE LIKE THAT?

YOU EVER NOTICE HOW THERE ARE NEVER ANY NEW HOLIDAYS?

YEAH!

YOU KNOW WHAT WOULD BE A GOOD ONE?

KIDS DAY!

HEY, YEAH! WE ALREADY HAVE MOTHER'S AND FATHER'S DAY.

WHEN'S KIDS DAY?

EVERY DAY!

ALL THE TOYS! THE ENDLESS ACTIVITIES! AND THE NONSTOP NEED FOR ATTENTION!

KIDS DAY HAS BEEN EVERY DAY, ALL DAY FOR THE LAST 9 YEARS!

HOOKAY, BUDDY. LET'S GET YOU IN A BATHTUB, HUH?

HUFF HUFF

IT'S EVERY DAY...

I KNOW. YOU WANT THE BUBBLES?

IF IT WAS CLOSE TO CHRISTMAS, WE COULD GET DOUBLE PRESENTS.

NICE.

PEARLS BEFORE SWINE By Stephan Pastis

LEARNING AFTER AGE 30 by Rat

PERSON READS.

PERSON LEARNS NEW FACT.

The top federal tax bracket is currently 37%. In 1955, it was 91%.

PERSON MAKES A POINT OF MEMORIZING NEW FACT.

HIGHEST TAX BRACKET WAS 91%. HIGHEST TAX BRACKET WAS 91%...

NEW FACT ENTERS BRAIN.

BRAIN REALIZES IT'S TOO FULL TO FIT ANY NEW FACTS.

BRAIN KICKS OUT AN ESSENTIAL ONE.

PTOOIE! WHERE I PUT THE CAR KEYS.

HEY, HAVE YOU SEEN—

BEHIND YOUR COFFEE MUG.

LA CUCARACHA BY LALO ALCARAZ

SHOW ME YOUR PAPERS.

THIS IS ALL THEY GAVE ME, I SWEAR!

FELIZ AÑO NUEVO LES DESEA

LA CUCARACHA

Liō

Dear Santa, Thank you for the new Jet Pack.

It's really cool and fits me good.

I guess I should have warned you about the plutonium fuel rods.

Hope they let you out of jail soon!

Your friend, Liō

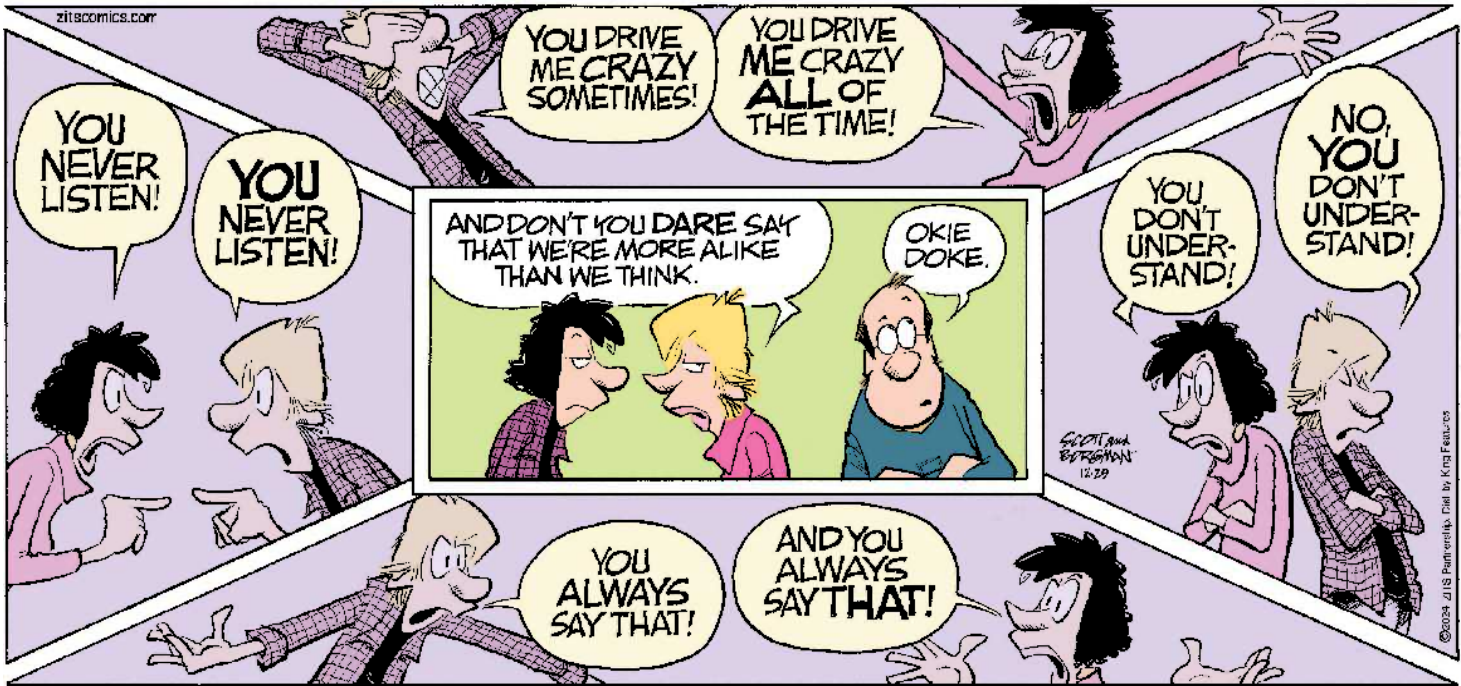
MUTTS

By Patrick McDonnell



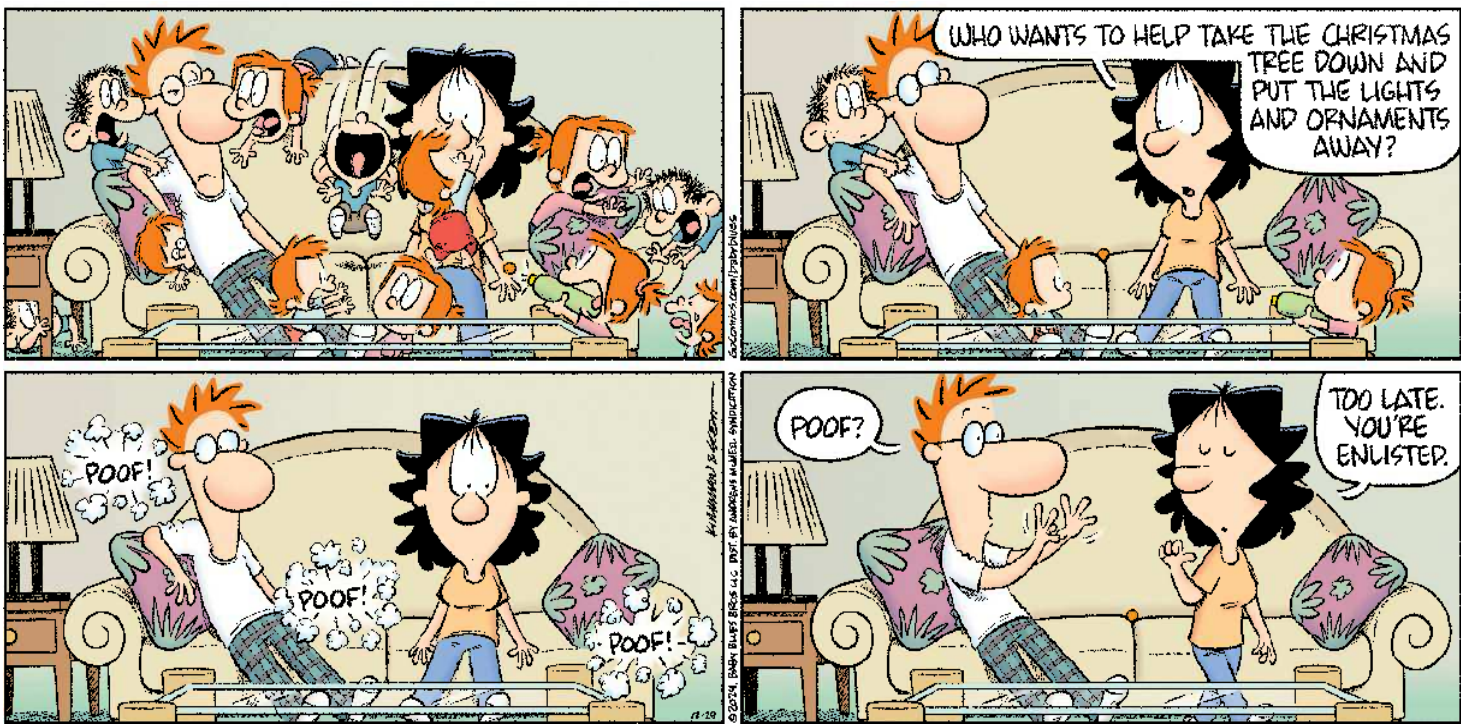
ZITS

By Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman



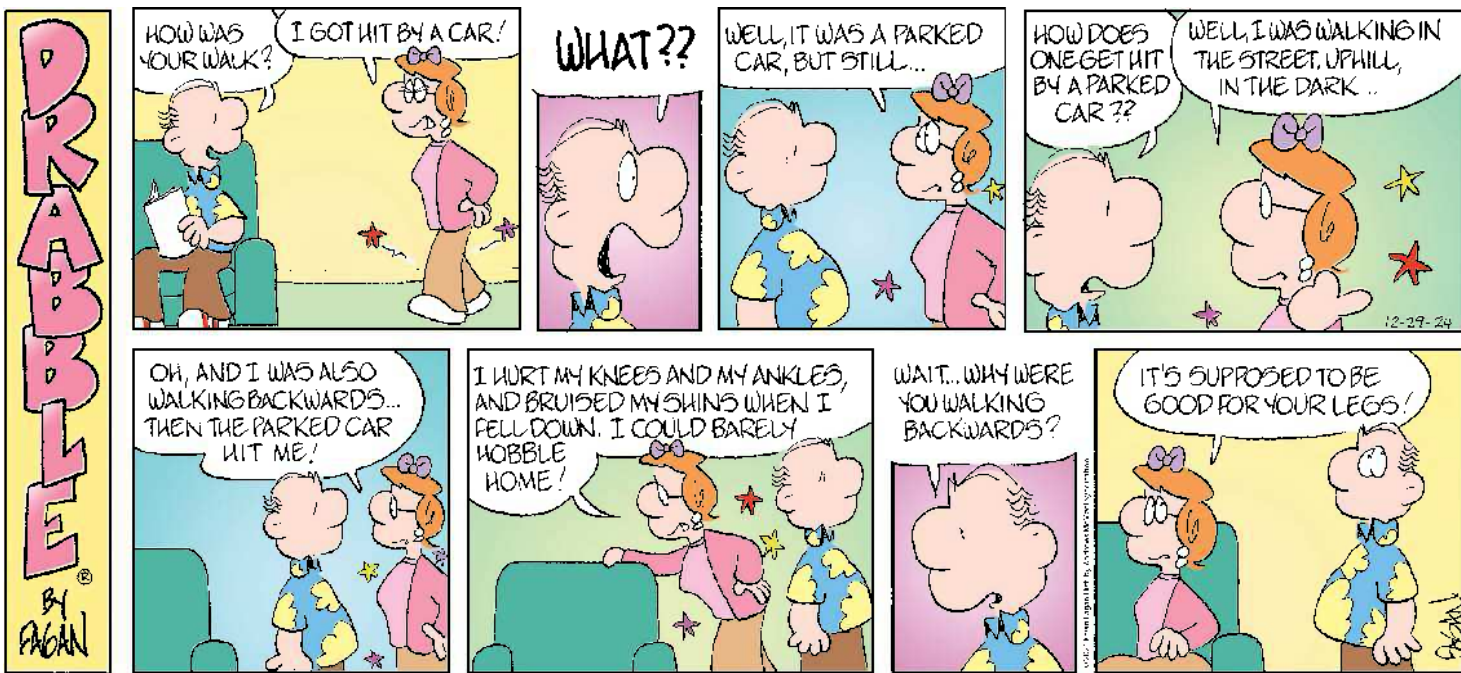
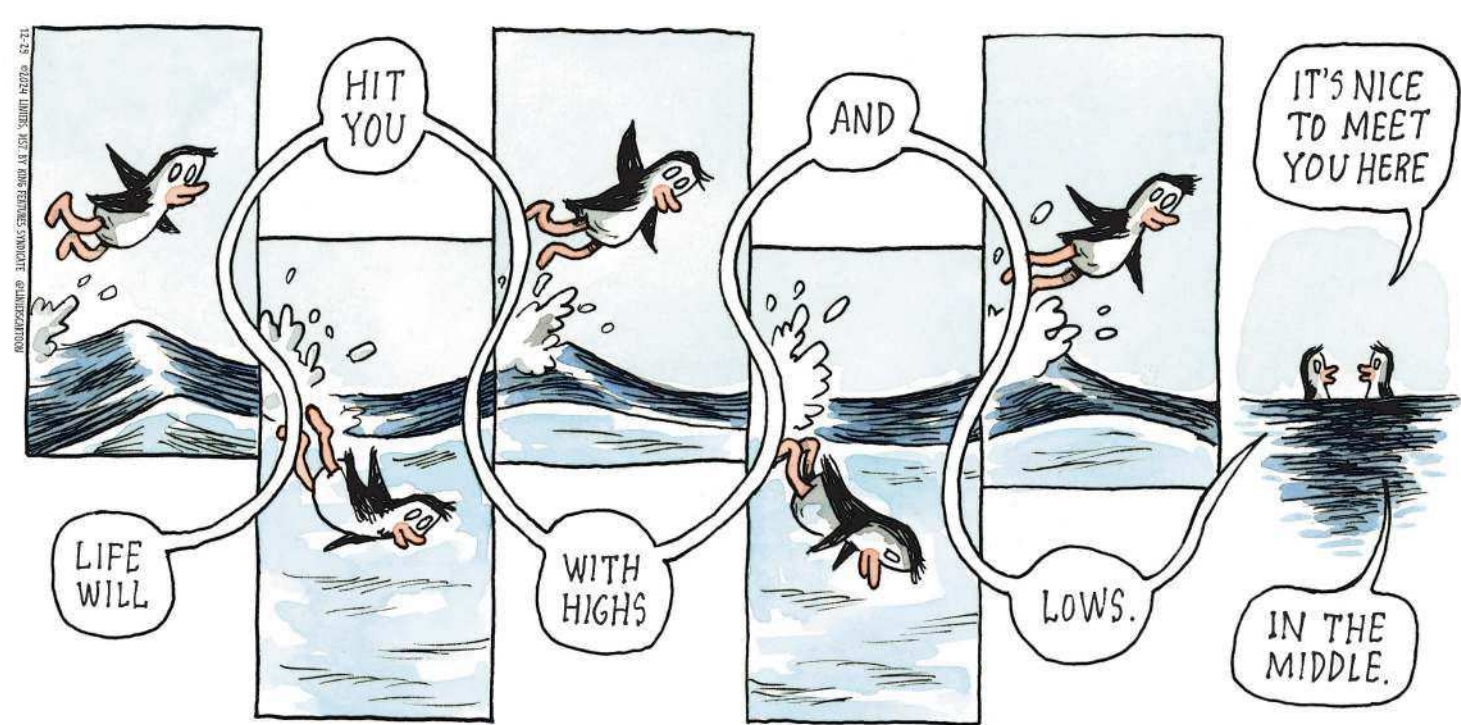
BABY BLUES

By Rick Kirkman and Jerry Scott



MACANUDO

By Liniers



BLONDIE

By Dean Young & John Marshall



MARMADUKE

By Brad & Paul Anderson



DOG GAME FUNNY
MAX GREGOR'S DOG TRAPPY IS A CLEVER FELLOW. TRAPPY WATCHED MAX OPEN THE FRIDGE. THE NEXT DAY, THEY FOUND TRAPPY HAD EATEN THE DEFROSTING BEEF ROAST. THIS WENT ON FOR A LONG TIME UNTIL MAX FOUND A WAY TO PUT A LOCK ON THE FRIDGE. THE EATEN MEAT BILL? \$1,000!

Mathis writes her column for Creators Syndicate Inc. The horoscope should be read for entertainment.

TIRED OF MESS STRESS

Email questions to
eric@askingeric.com.

He didn't mess around and simply five-bet all in for \$97,200, which inspired Ela

The turn and river, both meaningless, were run out as formalities and an excitement.

Holloway is a 2013 World Series of Poker bracelet winner.

Solutions to Saturday's puzzles

Complete the grid so each row, column and 3-by-3 or 2-by-3 box contains every digit from 1 to 9 (or 1 to 6 for the smaller grid). For strategies on how to solve Sudoku, visit www.sudoku.org.uk.



FoxTrot

by Bill Amend

I THINK MY NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION WILL BE TO CUT WAY BACK ON MY SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE.

I LOOKED AT MY STATS, AND I'M SPENDING A CRAZY AMOUNT OF TIME ON IT.

THOSE ARE HOURS THAT COULD BE SPENT TAKING WALKS... GARDENING... WRITING A NOVEL...

INSTEAD, I'M LETTING ALGORITHMS MESS WITH MY DAILY MENTAL HEALTH. ALL SO BILLIONAIRES CAN SELL ADS AND GET RICHER.

YUP. I THINK THAT'S GONNA BE MY RESOLUTION.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

TO GET MY PHONE SO I CAN POST IT ON FACE-BOOK.

JUMP START

Starring JOE & MARCY

BY ROB RABENKING

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, EARTH! YOU'RE AS OLD AS DIRT!

LOOK WHO'S TALKING.

YOU'RE NOTHING BUT A GREAT BIG BALL OF GAS!

IT'S A NEW YEAR, EARTH.

YOU SHOULD RESOLVE TO GIVE UP ALL YOUR BAD HABITS.

WHAT ARE YOU GUYS TALKIN' ABOUT?

C'MON... YOU KNOW.

YOU'RE BACK ON THE HARD STUFF!

OH PLEASE! JUDGE MUCH?

WHAT'S THIS?

-ALL THE WARS. THEY'RE KILLIN' YA.

IN THE BLEACHERS By Steve Moore

NON SEQUITUR By Wiley

HI, DANAE...TO WHAT DO I OWE THIS PLEASURE?

OH...I'VE GOT SOME QUESTIONS, LARS...

OK...

IS IT TRUE YOU GUYS WILL COME OUT PUBLICLY SOON?

UM... WHY DO YOU ASK?

WELL...TRENDING THEORIES SAY THE WORLDWIDE TURN TO AUTHORITARIAN RULE AND THE RECENT INCREASE OF CONFIRMED U.A.P. REPORTS ISN'T MERE COINCIDENCE, THAT YOU GUYS ORCHESTRATED MASS STUPIDITY TO MAKE TURNING PEOPLE INTO MIND-LESS, OBEDIENT SLAVES EASIER

NOTHING'S SO LOUD AS A QUESTION ANSWERED WITH SILENCE, LARS

AND YOU DIDN'T NOT HEAR IT FROM ME...OK?

CANDORVILLE By Darrin Bell

SO, WHAT BRINGS YOU TO THERAPY?

LET'S TRY ANOTHER APPROACH, MISTER NEWYEAR.

WHAT'S THE FIRST WORD THAT OCCURS TO YOU?

BONK! BONK! BONK! BONK! BONK!

FRAZZ By Jef Mallett

HOW IT WORKS IS, YOU WRITE YOUR TASKS AND GOALS ON STICKY NOTES.

AND POST THEM ALL UP ON THE WALL.

RESERVING THE KEY NOTE FOR THE END OF THE YEAR.

THEN...

I'D QUESTION YOUR SYSTEM IF I DIDN'T WANT SO BADLY TO ADOPT IT.

THE MULTICOLORED STICKY NOTES MAKE IT THAT MUCH BETTER.

Bizarro

A transmission from the blue planet, Admiral...

...extremely complicated rules about which side of the street we can park on, on what days & at what times.

THIS IS A BRANDED CONTENT SUPPLEMENT. MEMBERS OF THE EDITORIAL AND NEWS STAFF OF LATIMES WERE NOT INVOLVED IN THE CREATION OF THIS CONTENT

Special Report
2024



SCAN ME

Cambodia

This report was produced by One World Media



Phnom Penh, Cambodia Photo by iStockphoto

Cambodia Rising: Tradition, Innovation, and Investment Potential

With a youthful population, rich cultural heritage, and a rapidly growing economy, Cambodia is establishing itself as a prime investment destination in Southeast Asia.

With its ancient temples, bustling cityscapes, and a culture rich in history, Cambodia has long been a captivating destination for travelers. Now, this vibrant Southeast Asian nation is catching the eye of global investors, who are drawn not only by Cambodia's cultural allure but also by its promise of growth and opportunity. From its youthful population and strategic position within ASEAN to its expanding economy, Cambodia is emerging as a prime destination for those seeking both investment potential and unique, long-term returns. "Cambodia is committed to fostering a business-friendly environment that encourages investment in various potential sectors," says Aun Pommoniroth, Minister of Economy and Finance.

A Vision for Sustainable Economic Growth

Cambodia's government has laid out an ambitious "Pentagonal Strategy" to guide long-term economic growth, focusing on infrastructure, regulatory reform, and workforce development. Aiming to achieve upper-middle-income status by 2030 and high-income status by 2050, this vision prioritizes resilience and inclusivity, positioning Cambodia as a leader in sustainable development. By 2023, the Cambodian economy had diversified significantly, with industry and services now comprising 37.5% and 35.1% of GDP, respectively. Sectors such as electronics, vehicle parts, and food processing are rapidly joining garments as central drivers of Cambodia's export economy, reflecting the country's shift toward a balanced, diversified economic model.

Under this vision, the Ministry of Economy and Finance continues to lead key reforms, including a comprehensive vocational training program launched to equip 1.5 million young Cambodians with relevant skills in sectors such as manufacturing, services, and technology. "This initiative is designed to equip the younger generation with industry-relevant skills," Pommoniroth explains.

Empowering Cambodia's Financial Sector

At the heart of Cambodia's economic transformation, the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC) plays a pivotal role in driving financial inclusion, stability, and innovation. With the economy approximately 85% dollarized, NBC has introduced measures to increase the use of local currency, fostering financial independence and stability. "We want to raise awareness about the importance of local currency," states NBC Governor Chea Serey. "Our approach is gradual; we will not impose sudden measures."

NBC's initiatives include strengthening monetary policy and enhancing banking supervision to maintain a sound financial environment that supports all sectors. A cornerstone of NBC's commitment to financial inclusion is the Bakong mobile payment app, which allows Cambodians to make digital payments conveniently via smartphone. Bakong has already brought unprecedented financial accessibility to many Cambodians, particularly those in rural areas underserved by traditional banking.

NBC's vision aligns with Cambodia's pro-business stance, contributing to a financial ecosystem



that supports investors while championing sustainability and inclusivity. As Serey notes, the nation's open policies toward foreign ownership and a commitment to stability make Cambodia an attractive prospect for international investment.

Building Infrastructure and Workforce for Future Growth

The Cambodian government recognizes the importance of infrastructure and human capital in supporting economic expansion. Under the "Comprehensive Master Plan," key initiatives aim to improve connectivity and logistics, with projects including expressways and logistics hubs to facilitate smoother trade flows and strengthen Cambodia's position as a trade gateway.

Another important initiative is the vocational and technical training program aimed at providing free training to youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. This program will equip around 1.5 million young people with industry-specific skills, supporting sectors such as manufacturing and technology. "This program is designed to equip our younger generation with the skills they need," Pommoniroth says.

An Inclusive and Investment-Friendly Economy

The Cambodian government's approach has created a pro-business environment that is increasingly attractive to investors. With diversified growth sectors,

favorable policies, and a projected economic growth rate of 6% in 2024, Cambodia's foundation for growth is strong. "This stable growth trajectory, supported by strong policy frameworks and ongoing reforms, creates a solid foundation for investors looking to capitalize on Cambodia's potential," Pommoniroth states.

Governor Chea Serey, the youngest central bank governor in the world, reflects Cambodia's youthful ambitions and commitment to growth. "Our population is young, and our aspirations are big," she says. Indeed, Cambodia's blend of tradition, innovation, and economic vision offers a unique opportunity for investors looking to expand in Asia.

Cambodia Rising: Tradition, Innovation, and Investment Potential

With a youthful population, rich cultural heritage, and a rapidly growing economy, Cambodia is establishing itself as a prime investment destination in Southeast Asia.

With its ancient temples, bustling cityscapes, and a culture steeped in history, Cambodia has long captivated travelers. Now, this vibrant Southeast Asian nation is catching the eye of global investors drawn to its unique blend of cultural allure and economic potential. With a young population and strategic position within ASEAN, Cambodia is positioning itself as a prime investment destination in Southeast Asia. "Cambodia is committed to fostering a business-friendly environment that encourages investment in various potential sectors," says Aun Pommoniroth, Minister of Economy and Finance.

A Vision for Sustainable Economic Growth

Cambodia's government has laid out an ambitious "Pentagonal Strategy" focused on long-term growth through infrastructure, regulatory reform, and workforce development. Aiming to reach upper-middle-income status by 2030 and high-income status by 2050, the government prioritizes sustainable development and inclusivity. By 2023, Cambodia's economy had diversified significantly, with industry and services now comprising 37.5% and 35.1% of GDP, respectively. Emerging sectors like electronics, vehicle parts, and food processing are now expanding Cambodia's exports, underscoring a shift toward a balanced economy.



The Ministry of Economy and Finance is also leading critical reforms, including a vocational training program designed to equip 1.5 million young Cambodians with skills in manufacturing, services, and technology. "This initiative is designed to equip the younger generation with industry-relevant skills," Pommoniroth explains.

Empowering Cambodia's Financial Sector

The National Bank of Cambodia (NBC) is central to the country's economic transformation, driving financial inclusion, stability, and innovation. With the economy 85% dollarized, NBC has implemented measures to increase local currency use gradually. "We want to raise awareness about the importance of local currency," states NBC Governor Chea Serey. "Our approach is gradual; we will not impose sudden measures."

NBC's commitment to financial inclusion is highlighted by the Bakong mobile payment app, which allows Cambodians to make digital payments easily via smartphone, particularly benefiting those in rural areas with limited banking access. "The Bakong platform represents a leap of faith for our small country," Serey says, noting the app's impact on financial accessibility.

Infrastructure and Workforce Development

Recognizing the role of infrastructure in economic growth, Cambodia has launched the "Comprehensive Master Plan," aimed at enhancing connectivity and logistics through projects like expressways and logistics hubs to support smoother trade flows and strengthen its position as a trade gateway.

Additionally, the vocational and technical training program offers free training to around 1.5 million youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, supporting key sectors like manufacturing and technology. "This program is designed to equip our younger generation with the skills they need," Pommoniroth says.

An Inclusive, Investment-Friendly Economy

The Cambodian government's pro-business approach and diverse growth sectors have created an attractive environment for investors. With favorable policies and a projected growth rate of 6% in 2024, Cambodia's foundation for economic expansion is strong. "This stable growth trajectory, supported by strong policy frameworks and ongoing reforms, creates a solid foundation for investors looking to capitalize on Cambodia's potential," Pommoniroth states.

Governor Chea Serey, the youngest central bank governor in the world, reflects Cambodia's youthful ambitions. "Our population is young, and our aspirations are big," she says. With its blend of tradition, innovation, and a forward-looking economic vision, Cambodia presents a compelling opportunity for investors seeking growth in Asia.



STAFF

Pablo Martinez Matosas
CEO
Lucca Afonso
Project Director
Natalia Preciado
Project Coordinator
Maricruz Rojas Felix
Creative Director and Designer
Matias Godoy
Chief Editor
Giangina Orsini
Writer
Judith Miguélez Díaz
Online Content Manager
Jessica Bayman
Copy Writer



natalia@oneworldmediacorp.com

Natalia Preciado
Business journalist with a background in International Relations. Passionate about uncovering the stories behind political and economic trends.



lucca@oneworldmediacorp.com

Lucca Afonso
International director, Business Journalist and Photography and Film enthusiast.



pablo@oneworldmediacorp.com

Pablo Martinez Matosas
International relations specialist, journalist, father, and passionate entrepreneur with over 15 years of experience in worldwide markets.

Finance & Economy



Digital Payments Growth. Bakong app boosts financial inclusion in Cambodia's 85% dollarized economy through mobile transactions.



Economic Expansion Cambodia's GDP growth projected at 6% for 2024, supported by infrastructure and business-friendly policies.



Paving the Way for Foreign Investment in Cambodia's Growing Economy

As Cambodia's economy evolves, Amara Capital is leading the charge in connecting foreign investors with high-potential opportunities in this dynamic emerging market.

Amara Capital, Cambodia's leading fund management company, is uniquely positioned to connect international investors with high-potential opportunities in one of Southeast Asia's fastest-growing markets. Officially licensed by the Securities and Exchange Regulator of Cambodia (SERC), the firm offers a wide range of services, from managing public and private funds to real estate investment trusts (REITs) and crowdfunding platforms. "Our goal is to provide strategic private credit and equity solutions that help both our investors and the businesses we support grow," says Taihei Yamada, Chairman of the company's Investment Committee.

«We understand both sides of the equation, and that's why we can deliver success for both investors and businesses.»

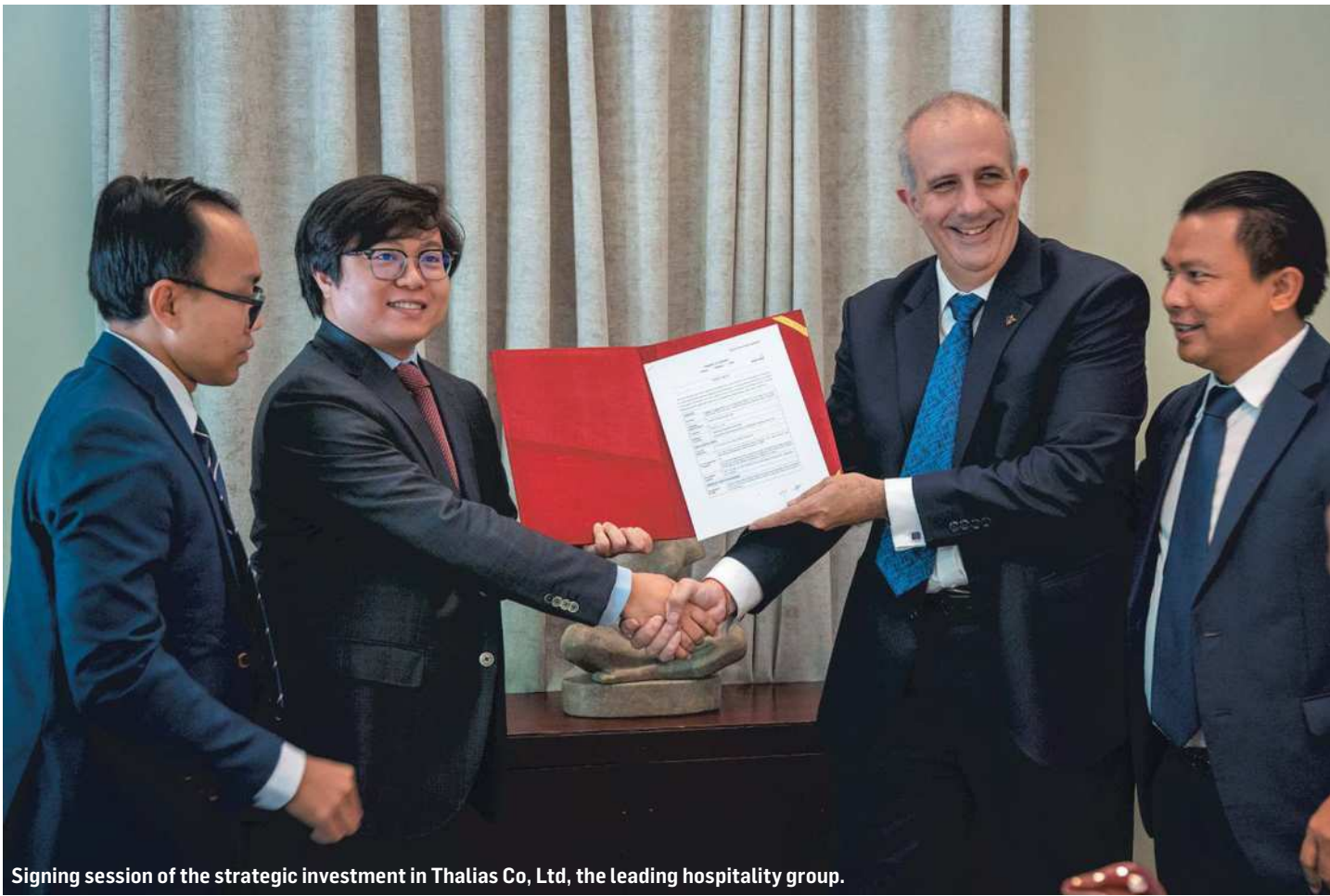
TAIHEI YAMADA

A Comprehensive Set of Services

Amara Capital's expertise is backed by its full suite of licenses, allowing it to manage public and private funds, create and administer REITs, and serve as a crowdfunding intermediary between securities offering companies and investors. The firm's extensive services focus on private credit solutions to financial institutions, non-bank financial institutions and private equity and hybrid solutions to enterprises with our focused sectors. "We understand the challenges investors face when entering an emerging market like Cambodia," says Yamada. "That's why our team of local and international experts is committed to helping investors navigate unfamiliar territory with transparency and integrity". One example is board director So-cheat Lim (CPA in Australia and ACCA), who also serves as Vice President of the Cambodia Chamber of Commerce. He supports the growth of Amara Capital's portfolio companies by sharing local business networks and managing public affairs, such as negotiations with local authorities. "It can help our portfolio companies' managements run their businesses in a smooth and focused manner. It's about commitment and trust—building it, maintaining it, and delivering on our promises," explains Yamada.

«We understand the challenges investors face when entering an emerging market like Cambodia. That's why our team of local and international experts is committed to helping investors navigate unfamiliar territory with transparency and integrity.»

TAIHEI YAMADA



Signing session of the strategic investment in Thalias Co, Ltd, the leading hospitality group.

«There are no surprises here for investors. The Cambodian government has created an environment where businesses can thrive, and we see great potential for long-term growth.»

TAIHEI YAMADA

Amara Capital stands out by combining financial expertise with deep business implementation experience. This dual focus allows the company to support investors with not only financial returns but also business growth for the local projects and companies they invest in. "We understand both sides of the equation, and that's why we can deliver success for both investors and businesses," Yamada emphasizes.

An Ideal Investment Destination

Cambodia offers an attractive environment for foreign investors, driven by strong economic fundamentals and favourable liberal policies. "There are few markets like Cambodia, where you can achieve substantial growth without worrying about currency risk," Yamada explains. Cambodia's USD-based economy allows international investors to enjoy high returns without the added complication of inflation eroding their profits. In fact, the country's GDP has been growing at a rate of around 7% annually prior to the pandemic, making it one of the most stable and promising markets in the region.

With a young and growing population—expected to increase by 1.4 times by 2070—Cambodia's economy is driven by real consumption, creating sustained demand for goods and services. This demographic advantage is expected to fuel urbanization, particularly in the capital city of Phnom Penh, where 20% of the population already resides. "Phnom Penh is becoming a major urban hub," Yamada says. "We expect continued rapid urbanization, which presents a range of opportunities for investors."

Furthermore, Cambodia's political stability and liberal business environment make it particularly attractive for foreign investment. Unlike other ASEAN countries, Cambodia has few restrictions on foreign investors, aside from land ownership. The country's government has actively pursued foreign direct investment (FDI) as a means of stimulating economic growth, and under the leadership of the new Prime Minister, this strategy is set to continue. "There are no surprises here for investors. The Cambodian government has created an environment where businesses can thrive, and we see great potential for long-term growth," Yamada notes.

A Focus on High Growth Potential

Amara Capital's investment thesis is built on identifying sectors that align with Cambodia's economic trajectory. The company primarily focuses on industries that are expected to grow alongside

«We invest in sectors that are essential to the country's development.»

TAIHEI YAMADA

the country's increasing population and rising income levels. "We invest in sectors that are essential to the country's development," says Yamada. Preferred sectors include food and beverages (F&B), K-12 international education, healthcare, and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG).

These sectors have shown consistent growth as Cambodia's middle class expands and demand for quality education, healthcare, and consumer goods rises. "Cambodia's GDP per capita today is where Japan was in the 1970s. Companies established during that time are billion-dollar giants today. We believe Cambodia offers the same kind of opportunity for growth," Yamada says.

With a strong foundation in Cambodia's market, Amara Capital is uniquely positioned to help investors tap into the country's potential, offering a trusted gateway to one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic emerging economies. As Yamada concludes, "Cambodia is ready for investment, and we are here to develop the country through achieving something meaningful together with new partners." ■

«Cambodia is ready for investment, and we are here to develop the country through achieving something meaningful together with new partners.»

TAIHEI YAMADA



Signing session of the investment agreement in KFK Holdings Co, Ltd, the leading F&B Group.

«ACHIEVE MORE, DEVELOP MORE»

www.amaracapital.com.kh
chhoung@amaracapital.com
(+855) 12 37 38 92

#113C, Mao Tse Tung Boulevard, Tuol Svay Prey I, Beoung Keng Kang, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

VISIT US

Finance & Economy

Delivering Global Standards in Cambodia's Growing Market

Blue Chartered Accountants and Auditors is bridging local expertise with international standards, helping businesses navigate Cambodia's evolving regulatory landscape while ensuring clients and investors trust that goes beyond compliance.

Blue Chartered Accountants and Auditors is one of the professional auditing and accounting firm in Cambodia, offering services on par with the international firms. Founded in 2019,

the firm has expanded its team to around 40 professionals, providing audit, tax, and outsourced accounting services. They cater to a wide range of industries, including over 200 both local and international clients. "We are putting our local



Youth Empowerment Vocational training equips 1.5 million Cambodian youth with essential industry skills by 2030.

expertise and international credentials at the service of our clients", says Kong Sinra, Partner in Audit and Assurance. With Cambodia offering numerous incentives for foreign investors, the firm believes in the country's potential for growth. "Our strategic location and improving corporate governance make Cambodia attractive for investment," adds Sinra, emphasizing the unique opportunities currently available to international businesses. ■

BLUE Chartered Accountants and Auditors
www.bluecaa.com



SINRA KONG
PARTNER,
AUDIT &
ASSURANCE

info@bluecaa.com | (+855) 16 669 107 |
#106 (2nd Floor), Street 304, Sangkat
Boueng Keng Kang II, Khan Boueng Keng
Kang, Phnom Penh

Paving the Way for Global Investors

With expertise spanning market entry strategies, project development and finance, tax advisory, and corporate & commercial, ANANT Law Firm provides a crucial bridge for international investors navigating Cambodia's growing economy and vibrant investment landscape.

When ANANT Law Firm, a full-service firm based in Cambodia, has quickly established itself as a leader in guiding both domestic and international investors through Cambodia's regulatory landscape. ANANT



ING
SOPHELEAK
MANAGING
PARTNER OF
ANANT
LAW FIRM

brings nearly two decades of collective expertise through its team of over 40 professionals, led by four founding partners with deep-rooted knowledge of local markets. ANANT offers a robust suite of legal services, specializing in inbound investments and the complete business

cycle. The firm assists clients with market entry strategies, public-private partnerships, mergers and acquisitions, real estate development, corporate and commercial matters, tax efficiencies, joint ventures, and regulatory compliance. Key sectors in which ANANT serves clients include agribusiness, real estate and construction, insurance, environment, renewable energy and natural resources, distribution and consumer goods, and manufacturing and industrials. This broad sector coverage allows ANANT to tailor services to sectors poised for growth. "We assist clients in structuring their corporate presence efficiently for a cost-effective and tax-optimized entry into Cambodia," says managing partner Sophealeak Ing. The firm's background in complex transactions, from M&As to joint ventures, reinforces its standing among regional investors. "Our team has the ability to translate the local context and convey complex regulatory nuances to support informed business decisions," Ing emphasizes. ANANT's comprehensive understanding of Cambo-

dia's evolving business and regulatory environment positions the firm as a strategic partner rather than just a legal advisor. With a proactive approach, ANANT navigates clients through regulatory shifts, such as Cambodia's new natural resources and environment codes, ensuring they remain compliant and well-prepared for changes in policy. "We help clients succeed in Cambodia by serving as their long-term business partner," Ing adds. With Cambodia's strategic location in ASEAN, young workforce, and investment-friendly policies—including 100% ownership for foreign investors and no capital control—ANANT serves as a vital guide for companies navigating this promising market. "Cambodia offers strong potential for high-quality investments," notes Ing, "and now is the time to explore this vibrant market". ■

ANANT
LAW FIRM
www.anant-lawfirm.com
+855 12 884 656
ing@nant-lawfirm.com



JANE TAY
CEO OF AIA
CAMBODIA

AIA Cambodia: Meeting your Every Need for Corporate Insurance Solutions Anytime, Anywhere

AIA Cambodia is synonymous with providing comprehensive financial protection for individuals in the Kingdom of Cambodia, but the leading life and health insurer also offers a suite of bespoke, flexible corporate solutions that align with their purpose of helping people lead Healthier, Longer, Better Lives.

Human Resources senior executives can fully access these corporate solutions via AIA's HR portal. Employees can utilize the all-in-one AIA+ app, which enables seamless, convenient online navigation when submitting or reviewing claims, updating personal information, calling or live chatting with customer service on messaging app Telegram, learning about health and wellness and so much more.

These enhanced features provide the workforce with a digital edge, giving them a value-added advantage that keeps to the insurer's customer-centric statement to 'Deliver first-class customer experience with clarity, courage and humanity – first time, every time'.

As a subsidiary of the AIA Group, the world's largest independent publicly-listed pan-Asian life insurance group, AIA Cambodia leverages over 100 years of expertise to provide corporations of all sizes insurance plans that fit their needs. Standouts include:

● **WorkWell with AIA**

AIA Cambodia's principal corporate proposition, WorkWell with AIA comprises four specially designed pillars to ensure a comprehensive, up-to-date employer and employee health and wellness package. This is exemplified by the program's proposition of



Official Launch of WorkWell With AIA Program.

Live Well (physical wellness), Think Well (mental), Plan Well (financial) and Feel Well (social).

These programs are complemented by AIA Special Privileges, encompassing exclusive, value-added services to engage employees, ensure they are well taken care of and reinforce their standing as the organization's most important asset. These privileges leverage data analytics to provide insights into best company practices and employee habits and behavior, enabling employers to create tailor-made requirements and benefits and structure their employee activity plans accordingly.

● **AIA MedCare**

Targeted at employers looking for enhanced, customizable employee medical protection, AIA MedCare provides comprehensive medical coverage with benefits such as reimbursements on



AIA Cambodia HQ, Phnom Penh.

hospitalization, surgeries, illnesses, accidents and emergencies. It additionally caters for employee out-patient, cashless payments at 168* partner hospitals in Cambodia and aboard, preventive, dental and maternity care needs, among others.

AIA MedCare also features an online medical portal that targets employees, the employer's HR department and AIA's medical service providers. It allows access to member listings, claims data, history and submission and policy benefits, among others, to keep the overall administration of benefits, hospital admission and discharge hassle free.

● **AIA ComCare**

AIA ComCare integrates life, accident and hospital cash components to reduce any duplication and increase company efficiency. This group insurance plan offers essen-



Jane Tay, CEO of AIA Cambodia (Right).

tial benefits that comprise market-leading life insurance and coverage that includes critical illnesses, accidents, hospital allowance and overseas emergency assistance.

● **AIA AccidentCare**

AIA AccidentCare complements AIA ComCare and provides additional coverage for accidental death, disability and medical expenses arising from accidents. It pays out a lump sum of 100% Sum Assured upon accidental death, covers 26 disabilities caused by accidents and reimburses medical treatment expenses for injuries resulting from accidents.

For more information on accessing adaptable, all-inclusive corporate insurance solutions for both employers and employees, contact AIA Cambodia at +086 999 242, email Kh.Care@aia.com or visit aia.com.kh and facebook.com/AIACambodia. ■

Life and Health Insurance Company

Leading insurance company

in delivering an unparalleled digital customer-centric experience

- Convenient and fast claim submission
- Manage all policies in one app
- Easily get in touch with the support centre

Download AIA+

to discover a better digital experience!

GET IT ON
Google Play

Download on the
App Store

086 999 242 | AIA.COM.KH | [AIA CAMBODIA](https://facebook.com/AIACambodia)

Finance & Economy



Investor-Friendly Economy Unrestricted foreign ownership and tax incentives attract global investment to Cambodia's expanding sectors.



Strengthening Riel National Bank of Cambodia promotes local currency to enhance financial independence and economic resilience.

A Global Player with Local Expertise

Combining regional strength with local expertise to deliver tailored financial solutions, CIMB Bank Cambodia is changing the financial landscape of Cambodia.



BUN YIN
CEO OF CIMB
BANK PLC

CIMB Cambodia operates as a fully local subsidiary of Malaysian CIMB Group, emphasizing its commitment to serving the Cambodian market through a team comprised entirely of local staff. This structure allows the bank to navigate the local landscape effectively while leveraging the broader resources of its parent company. “We are proud to be a fully local institution, and our success is built on understanding the unique needs of our community,” says CEO of CIMB Cambodia Bun Yin.

A Strong Regional Network

CIMB Group is the fifth-largest bank in South-east Asia and a leader in investment banking across the Asia Pacific region. It boasts a vast brand network, with over 600 branches throughout Southeast Asia. As Yin explains, “CIMB Group is a government-linked company in Malaysia, with more than 50% of its shares owned by government institutions and the rest publicly listed.” CIMB’s global reach extends beyond Southeast Asia, with branches in countries such as the UK, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. However, it is its regional network that gives CIMB Cambodia a competitive edge. “We have the advantage of a regional network, which benefits clients from countries like Indonesia who want to do business here,” Yin shares. This network allows the bank to facilitate cross-border banking, making it easier for clients to open accounts and do business across the region.

Four Pillars of Business

With 14 branches, CIMB Cambodia generates revenue from four key business units: consumer banking,

commercial banking, corporate banking, and treasury and markets operations. In consumer banking, the bank offers traditional services such as home loans, car loans, and personal loans, catering to the financial needs of the public. Commercial banking, however, is one of the bank’s most important business units, serving SMEs and supporting trade finance through working capital, overdrafts, and trade funding facilities.

Corporate banking, while not the largest unit in Cambodia, holds a distinct advantage due to the bank’s regional network. “Multinational companies prefer working with us because we have a regional network and can offer support from the group. It gives us a professional edge over local banks,” Yin explains. This advantage allows the bank to attract international clients and maintain a strong presence in the corporate banking sector.

Competitive Edge through Expertise

One of CIMB Cambodia’s primary competitive advantages is its access to a wide pool of regional expertise. Yin acknowledges that while the bank has a robust team of local staff, certain technical areas, such as IT systems, require external support. “We are fortunate to have access to professionals from other countries in our group, like an expert from Vietnam who is currently helping us develop our IT system,” he says. This regional collaboration allows the bank to leverage expertise from across Southeast Asia, enabling it to stay competitive in the local market.

In addition to human resources, CIMB Cambodia benefits from being part of a regional network that adheres to both local and international banking stan-

dards. This dual compliance sometimes creates challenges, but it also positions the bank as a reliable and trustworthy financial institution. “We follow strict international standards, and while that may frustrate some customers, it’s necessary for compliance and ensuring we provide the best service,” Yin asserts.

Financial Performance and Challenges

CIMB Cambodia has seen steady financial growth since its inception in 2010. The bank turned its first profit in its fifth year, and by 2022, it had reached peak performance. However, 2023 presented challenges, primarily due to rising interest rates from the Federal Reserve and the post-COVID economic environment. “Our loans began to grow faster than our deposits, which created a challenging situation,” Yin explains. The increased cost of loans, coupled with higher funding costs, impacted the bank’s performance, but the team is already working on recovery. “We’re seeing deposits increase again, and accordingly managing our loans, and ultimately the lending ratio,” he adds.

Despite these setbacks, CIMB Cambodia remains financially solid. The bank’s 2024 budget was set at \$20 million, but Yin is optimistic about exceeding that target. “I believe we can reach \$24 million, which would be an improvement over last year,” he predicts.

Commitment to Sustainability and CSR

CIMB Cambodia is not just focused on profitability; the bank also places a strong emphasis on sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR). So far, the bank has contributed over 600

thousand USD to various CSR initiatives, including projects related to education, healthcare, and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, CIMB has launched its flagship CIMB ASEAN Scholarship since 2016, of which 3 Cambodian students have been sent to complete their education abroad, including in Canada, Korea, and Australia. “We are committed to giving back to society, and this is reflected in the time and money we invest in our communities,” Yin states.

One of the bank’s most notable 2023 initiatives was its environmental project, which involved planting thousands of trees near Angkor Wat. “We want to support the environment and contribute to attracting more tourism to Cambodia,” Yin says. This was followed in 2024 with the launch of their flagship Angkor CIMB Park, a 5-hectare planting project further strengthening the bank’s commitment to sustainability.

Recently the bank received a prestigious recognition, winning both the “Best Companies to Work for in Asia” and the “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Awards 2024” from HR Asia. These honors reflect CIMB’s dedication to cultivating a supportive, inclusive work culture that benefits both employees and the communities it serves.

Looking Ahead

To further boost Cambodia’s growing economy, CIMB Cambodia is always seeking to collaborate with new investors, particularly from the U.S. The bank sees immense opportunities in sectors like education, automotive manufacturing, etc, where companies have already made inroads. Indeed, U.S. companies could expand their presence by investing in local production facilities, such as for automotive parts, capitalizing on Cambodia’s strategic position and dollarized economy. “The U.S. is Cambodia’s top export market, nearing \$7 billion in just eight months,” explains Yin, emphasizing the vast untapped potential.

In addition to favourable trade conditions, Cambodia’s investment-friendly policies—such as tax holidays and zero VAT—make it an appealing destination for international businesses. “I often liken it to a person in love,” concludes Yin with a smile, underlining Cambodia’s particular attractiveness to investors; “while no one is perfect, every individual has unique qualities that can be appreciated from different angles.” ■



CIMB. Cambodia’s leading regional bank.

As a leading banking franchise in ASEAN, we work in step with you throughout your personal journey with us, ensuring that you get the right financial solutions and tailored banking services as your needs evolve and wealth grows.

MOVING FORWARD WITH YOU

For more information, log on to www.cimbbank.com.kh or call 023 988 388 / 087 988 398 or visit any of our nearest CIMB Bank branches.

Connect with us on: CIMB Cambodia CIMB Cambodia



Tourism



Eco-Tourism Expansion Northeastern Cambodia boasts unique Amazonian-like ecosystems, attracting eco-conscious travelers seeking off-the-beaten-path adventures.



Rare Wildlife Cambodia's coastal waters feature pink dolphins and dugongs, enhancing biodiversity tourism appeal.



Culinary Experiences Kampot pepper plantations and durian farms attract food tourism, showcasing Cambodia's agricultural heritage.



HUOT HAK
MINISTER OF
TOURISM

From its ancient temples and unspoiled beaches to vibrant cities and luxury hospitality, Cambodia is rapidly establishing itself as a top-tier tourism destination. While Angkor Wat continues to draw global attention, the Ministry of Tourism, under the leadership of Minister Huot Hak, is spearheading efforts to showcase the country's lesser-known treasures—its pristine natural landscapes, thriving ecotourism, and world-class accommodations. With innovative public-private partnerships and the involvement of both local and international hospitality leaders, Cambodia is poised for growth that appeals to a broad range of travelers, from adventure-seekers to luxury tourists. “Cambodia

Cambodia: The Next Frontier for Tourism Investment



Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

is committed to positioning itself as a tourism hub, expanding beyond its ancient temples to appeal to global tourists in search of adventure, wellness, and culture,” says Ith Vichit, CEO of the Tourism Board.

At the core of Cambodia's tourism strategy is an ambitious approach to the “4 A's of tourism”—Accessibility, Amenities, Accommodations, and Attractions. With government investment in new infrastructure, enhanced air and road connectivity, and a growing number of luxury hotels, Cambodia's tourism sector is quickly adapting to meet international standards. Major tourism players are bringing unique Cambodi-

an hospitality to the forefront, blending local culture with the highest levels of service. For investors, Cambodia offers a compelling mix of potential and support, creating a gateway to one of Southeast Asia's most promising tourism markets as it strives to attract world travelers and secure its place on the global tourism map. ■



Angkor Wat, Krong Siem Reap, Cambodia.



Angkor Wat, Krong Siem Reap, Cambodia.



Bayon Temple, Krong Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Local Roots, Global Aspirations

With a focus on local expertise and authentic experiences, Anik Hotels Group is carving its niche in Cambodia's competitive hospitality sector.

With over 24 years of experience in hospitality across Cambodia and Thailand, Cluster General Manager Samney Sin is building Anik Hotels Group into a brand that champions local heritage.

Founded in 2015, Anik Hotels Group has established a firm foothold in Cambodia's hospitality sector. The group began with two boutique hotels in Phnom Penh, offering 28 and 38 rooms, respec-

tively, followed by the opening of Anik Palace Hotel in 2020, a major expansion with 126 rooms. This marked a significant milestone, showcasing Anik's ability to blend luxury with authentic local culture.

According to Sam, the group's competitive edge lies in its deep understanding of Cambodian hospitality, supported by a team of experienced local professionals. “It's important to keep finding new ways to improve, never stop learning, and have a genuine passion for the hospitality business. Building a strong team is essential, and in Cambodia, creating a sense of family and belong-

ing is especially important to our staff. Part of my role is to foster and encourage those values, which in turn reflects in how we collectively interact with our guest.”

Despite the increasing presence of international hotel brands in Cambodia, Sam is optimistic about the group's ability to stand out. “We don't fear competition. We know the international brands well, and we've grown up in the industry with them. We focus on maintaining strong relationships with our business partners and delivering exceptional service,” he says.

Anik Hotels Group is now gearing up for further expansion, with plans to open an additional 24-room property next to Anik Palace Hotel by 2025. This new venture will include a Khmer authentic restaurant, sky bar, wine cellar, meeting rooms, and wellness facilities, further enhancing its offering in Phnom Penh. The group also has its eyes on the South of Cambodia, a growing destination in Cambodia, with plans to launch a property there soon. “We see the business growing day by day, year by year. Our new property and expansions will help solidify our position in the market,” Sam explains.

Indeed, the company's success seems rooted in their understanding of what international guests seek in Cambodia, particularly as they



SAMNEY SIN
CLUSTER
GENERAL
MANAGER OF
ANIK

welcome tourists from key markets like Europe, the U.S., and Australia. As the collaborative effort between the government and the private sector continues to boost Cambodia's international appeal as a destination, Anik Hotels believes their unique blend of professionalism and local hospitality, as well as their ability to adapt, will prove to be the key for the future. “Nothing changes if we change nothing,” Sam concludes with a smile, “but you have to come to Cambodia and see for yourself all the wonderful changes that are taking place here”. ■



Pioneering a New Vision for Cambodian Hospitality

By blending heritage preservation, sustainability, and a modern understanding of hospitality, MAADS has been at the forefront of redefining Cambodia's hospitality landscape.

When Alexis de Suremain co-founded MAADS in 2006, his vision extended far beyond creating beautiful places to stay. Drawing on a decade of experience in Southeast Asia, he aimed to create spaces that reflect Cambodia's cultural richness while embracing sustainability and community involvement. “Cambodia is not only Angkor Wat,” de Suremain explains. “Tourists who venture into other parts of the country are always surprised, but most don't know they can, so our task is to get that message out.”

MAADS quickly gained recognition for its innovative approach, emphasizing heritage preservation and bioclimatic design. With properties in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and beyond, the brand offers guests immersive, locally-rooted experiences with modern design. “We create properties with great locations, simplified elegance, and oasis-like settings,” de Suremain notes.

A core part of MAADS' success lies in its environmental sustainability efforts. “Closer to Earth is the principle we've expanded since the pandemic,” says de Suremain, emphasizing green spaces and water elements. For instance, the Pavilion Heritage Oasis Hotel in Phnom Penh, located near the Royal Palace, preserves historical architecture while offering a serene atmosphere with two large pools and lush flora. “There's a sense of timeless tranquility here,” he adds.

MAADS is equally committed to promoting contemporary Cambodian culture. The brand supports projects like the Angkor Database, an online platform for research on Angkor Wat, and New Cambodian Artists, a dance company producing



Pavilion heritage oasis hotel.



A villa at Templantation.



Penh House rooftop pool.

world-class performances. “The future of tourism is about showing both the past and the creativity of Cambodians today,” de Suremain believes.

In Siem Reap, the Templantation Angkor Resort is nestled near the temples, offering a natural escape. “Serenity is in the air,” says de



ALEXIS
DE SUREMAIN
CO-FOUNDER &
OPERATOR OF MAADS

“All our projects have strong character, interesting setups, and lots of water and greenery.”

ALEXIS DE SUREMAIN.

Suremain, with the resort featuring tropical flora, private pools, and Cambodia's largest photovoltaic installation.

In Phnom Penh, White Mansion operates in an elegant former US Embassy guest-house, while Penh House Hotel, built between the Royal Palace and Royal Pagoda, offers a tranquil setting with an overflow pool and views of the city's historic landmarks. “All our projects have strong character, interesting setups, and lots of water and greenery,” de Suremain concludes. ■

Tourism

 **Jazz Tourism** Cambodia is positioning itself as a niche hub for jazz music, drawing dedicated global audiences.

 **Infrastructure Investments** A \$1.5 billion international airport near Phnom Penh is set to open by 2025, boosting tourism.

 **Diversified Attractions** Cambodia aims to be a “plus one” destination for travelers visiting Thailand, Vietnam, or Malaysia.



Where Top-Tier Service Meets Cambodian Hospitality

In the heart of Phnom Penh, SUN & MOON HOTELS is setting a new standard in Cambodia’s competitive hospitality landscape by blending modern luxury with authentic local charm.

Founded in 2015, SUN & MOON HOTELS has swiftly made a name for itself in the competitive Phnom Penh hospitality market. With two properties offering top-tier services and a strong commitment to community, these hotels are much more than just a place to stay—they are reflections of Cambodia’s vibrant culture and potential. While global brands are rapidly expanding in Cambodia, SUN & MOON HOTELS is betting on its modern take on local hospitality and is already seeing rapid results. “Our advantage is that we are among the top local brands, offering guests fresh experiences that feel uniquely Cambodian”, says Managing Director, Sophea Chear, one of few women to reach similar positions in the industry, and who joined the family business in 2022.

The group’s first property was the 80-room SUN & MOON, Urban Hotel, opened in 2015 with a distinct focus on wellness and playful, modern design. Located in the bustling capital of Phnom Penh, the hotel is a nine-floor property that invites guests to embrace the energy of the city. “We created an open space with an atrium in the middle, allowing natural light to flood the entire building,” Chear explains. The hotel offers a salt-water infinity pool, a well-equipped gym, and a three-room spa, making it a haven for travelers seeking relaxation amidst the vibrant city life.

In 2023, the group opened its flagship property, the SUN & MOON, Riverside Hotel, a 200-room luxury hotel that seamlessly blends business with pleasure. This high-rise boasts breath-taking views of Phnom Penh’s skyline and the two rivers that define the city. With state-of-the-art facilities, including a business center, corporate and private event spaces, and a wellness center featuring an exclusive salon, gym, and spa, the hotel caters



«Cambodia is about people, so we conceived the hotel as a holistic experience, where thoughtful design meets local hospitality, we’re not just offering rooms—we’re creating experiences.»

SOPHEA CHEAR



to both business travellers and those seeking leisure. “Cambodia is about people, so we conceived the hotel as a holistic experience, where thoughtful design meets local hospitality”, Chear explains. “We’re not just offering rooms—we’re creating experiences.”

Yet what truly sets SUN & MOON HOTELS apart from international competitors is its commitment to sustainability and local sourcing. The group uses locally made soaps and wooden toiletries, while also reducing single-use plastic through the installation of hot and cold water dispensers in every room and public area. The hotel’s solar lights further highlight its dedication to green energy. “We believe in providing top-quality service while being mindful of our environmental impact,” says Chear.

Beyond hospitality, the group is deeply invested in the community, actively partic-

«We believe in providing top-quality service while being mindful of our environmental impact.»

SOPHEA CHEAR

bring more visitors curious to explore a country still unknown to many”, Chear explains. Indeed, with so much to offer beyond its renowned UNESCO World Heritage sites, from untapped natural wonders like beaches, freshwater lakes, and elephant sanctuaries all the way to Phnom Penh’s melting-pot of cultures and cuisines of Southeast Asia, Cambodia is all potential. “We want people to give Cambodia a chance, and our hotels are the perfect gateway to experiencing all our country has to offer,” Chear adds with a smile.■

SUN • MOON HOTELS




5-Star luxury SUN & MOON, Riverside Hotel




4-Star luxury SUN & MOON, Urban Hotel

Stay. Inspired



www.sunandmoonhotelgroup.com



SUN • MOON
RIVERSIDE HOTEL

SUN • MOON
URBAN HOTEL

Tourism



Tourism Recovery Cambodia's international flight capacity reached 80% of pre-pandemic levels by 2023, boosting arrivals.



Visitor Numbers Cambodia welcomed 2.2 million international tourists in 2023, aiming for 5 million by 2025.



Angkor Wat's Draw Angkor Wat contributes 15% of Cambodia's tourism revenue, attracting millions of global visitors annually.



ITH VICHIT
CEO OF
CAMBODIA
TOURISM
BOARD

Beyond Angkor Wat: Cambodia's Next Big Move in Global Tourism

With untapped natural wonders, cultural experiences, and new flight connections on the horizon, Cambodia Tourism Board is positioning the country as a diverse destination ready to welcome the world.

As Cambodia pivots to establish itself as a premier tourism destination, the Cambodia Tourism Board, an institutional platform launched by the Ministry of Tourism, is leading the charge. This public-private partnership—unprecedented in Cambodian tourism—brings private sector voices directly into planning, fostering what CEO Ith Vichit describes as a bottom-up approach. “The private sector knows best what is working, what is not working, and what is missing,” he explains.

At its core, the government's role is to create a conducive environment for businesses, paving the way for more international premium tourism and allowing private ventures the community to thrive. “As the private sector grows and the community prospers, the government will also reap the benefits,” adds Vichit. The ultimate goal: to elevate Cambodia from a hidden gem to a thriving yet sustainable tourism hub with a diverse array of attractions that focus on Culture, Adventure and Nature (CAN).

● Moving Beyond Angkor Wat

Angkor Wat's international reputation has firmly placed Cambodia on the global tourism map. However, as Vichit explains, “Ancient monuments account for only a small percentage of tourism globally,” emphasizing that Cambodia has much more to offer. Today, leisure, adventure, wellness, and business tourism account for most of the market.

Cambodia's tourism strategy centres on promoting a broader range of attractions, including pristine beaches, wellness retreats, ecotourism, untouched rainforest, and cultural experiences. “What we are missing,” Vichit says, “is the approach to position Cambodia as a diversified tourism destination.”

● Expanding the 4 A's

For Cambodia to reach its tourism potential, enhancing the essential “4 A's of tourism”—Accessibility, Amenities, Accommodations, and Attractions—has become a top priority. In many of Cambodia's most promising locations, two or even three of these essential components are underdeveloped, an area the government intends to address over the coming months.

By strengthening these fundamentals, Cambodia aims to improve its tourism appeal beyond Angkor Wat and Siem Reap. The government's vision also includes partnerships, such as with Singapore to increase cruise ship traffic, and initiatives such as Two Kingdoms One Destination with Thailand.

● Hidden Natural Treasures

Beyond the ancient temples, Cambodia boasts a trove of natural wonders and lesser-known locations primed to captivate adventurous travelers. In the country's northeastern and southwestern regions lies a unique Amazonian-like ecosystem, replete with wildlife, endangered species, and untouched landscapes.

In addition, the northern central region is home to the elusive pink dolphin, and visitors to the southern coast near Kampot and Koh Kong can encounter saltwater pink dolphins as well as the rare dugong, adding to the country's biodiversity appeal.

● Authentic Experiences

To create a more rounded experience for international visitors, Cambodia is expanding its tourism offerings into food, shopping, and wellness.



CHEF NAK



Discover Phnom Penh, Cambodia's vibrant capital where rich history meets modern energy. Explore royal palaces, bustling markets, and riverside views for an unforgettable cultural adventure in the heart of Southeast Asia.



Explore Preah Vihear, home to Cambodia's majestic mountaintop temple, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Uncover ancient history, breathtaking views, and spiritual serenity at this iconic cultural and architectural wonder. ©Theblacktiger



VISIT
SIEM REAP
2024

Discover Siem Reap, the 'province of a thousand temples,' where Angkor Wat, the world's largest religious monument, offers a breathtaking sunrise view and a journey through ancient Khmer history.

«We invite you to visit Cambodia to experience the authenticity of our beautiful people and our millennia-old culture, while exploring our untouched rainforests, pristine beaches, and, last but not least, savoring our distinct and delectable culinary dishes.»

ITH VICHIT

Cambodian cuisine is another well-kept secret. Chef Nak, one of the most recognized Cambodian chefs, perfectly links the uniqueness of Cambodian dishes with the country's natural splendour: “Cambodian cuisine is a vibrant tapestry, woven from the natural bounty of our land—its fields, mountains, lakes, and rivers. Each dish brings a delicate balance of sweet, salty, sour, umami, and a hint of bitterness, with lemongrass paste as a beloved, unifying flavor.”

For Chef Nak, discovering Cambodian cuisine also means immersing oneself in its historical past and culture. “Our food reflects a legacy of

resilience and creativity; we make the most of what we have, adapting influences into something uniquely Cambodian. Sharing food is part of our culture, connecting us to each other and our heritage, while welcoming others to share in the flavors of our journey,” Chef Nak emphasizes.

Cambodia's Kampot pepper, a world-famous spice used by Michelin-star chefs, and local durian plantations provide unique culinary experiences. Vichit envisions tours where visitors can explore these plantations, tasting durian at its source—a treat that appeals particularly to Asian tourists.

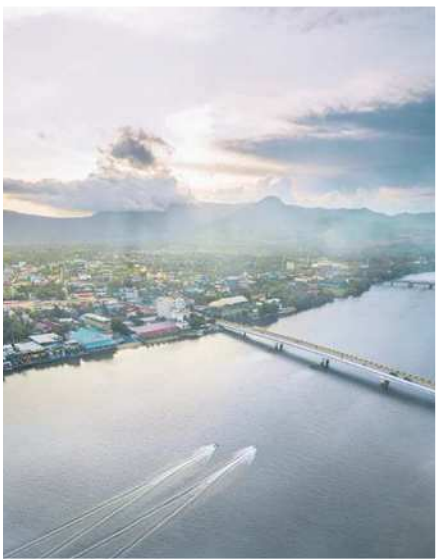
In a bid to further differentiate Cambodia as a destination, the Tourism Board is also pushing for the country to become a known hub for music such as jazz. “While Cambodia may not have the infrastructure for large-scale pop events, jazz could attract a niche but dedicated audience”, Vichit explains.

● An Invitation to Discover Cambodia

Cambodia's magic goes beyond its beautiful scenery and magnificent historical monuments. “The most authentic experience in Cambodia is the Cambodians themselves. We are genuine, very hospitable, and embrace all cultures, ethnicities, and religions,” Vichit emphasizes.

Now is the time for travellers and investors alike to explore the country and be part of its tourism journey. “We invite you to visit Cambodia to experience the authenticity of our beautiful people and our millennia-old culture, while exploring our untouched rainforests, pristine beaches, and, last but not least, savoring our distinct and delectable culinary dishes,” Vichit states.

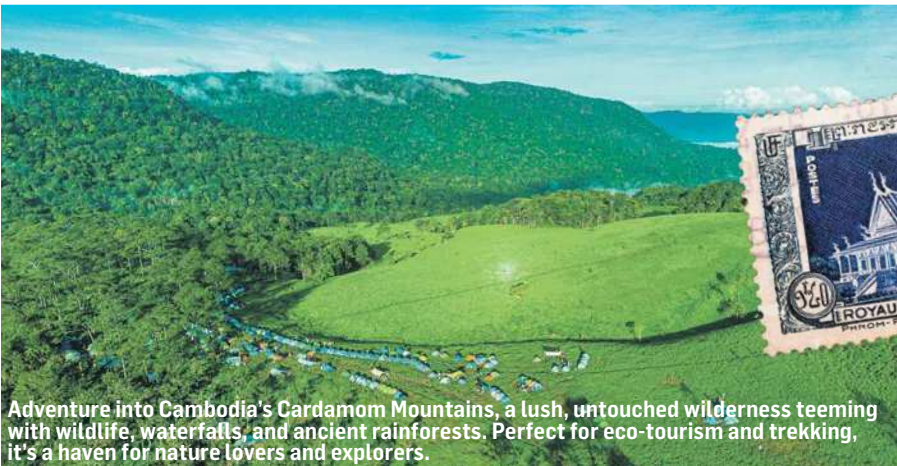
With untouched beaches, rare wildlife, a rich culinary heritage, and genuine local hospitality, Cambodia is ready to redefine its tourism landscape. “Cambodia is a hidden natural gem that can captivate your heart and soul forever,” Vichit concludes. ■



Experience Kampot, Cambodia's charming riverside town known for its scenic mountains, historic architecture, and famous pepper farms. Discover a blend of tranquility, adventure, and authentic culture in a stunning natural setting.



mean.essayayoss@ctb.gov.kh
(+855) 95 989 888
Elysee Building, 2nd Floor, Diamond Island,
Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



Adventure into Cambodia's Cardamom Mountains, a lush, untouched wilderness teeming with wildlife, waterfalls, and ancient rainforests. Perfect for eco-tourism and trekking, it's a haven for nature lovers and explorers.



Angkor Wat stands as the most expansive religious edifice globally, offering the ultimate vantage point for witnessing the sunrise.

ICT



Tech Infrastructure Growth Cambodia's internet penetration reached 81.2% in 2023, driving digital transformation and e-commerce opportunities.



ICT Investment Surge Cambodia's ICT sector attracted \$150 million in foreign investment in 2022, boosting technological innovation.



Digital Economy Expansion The government aims to increase Cambodia's digital economy to \$5 billion by 2025, fostering innovation.



ZIAD
SHATARA
CEO OF SMART
AXIATA

Connecting Cambodia to the Future

Offering cutting-edge technology, reliable infrastructure, and transformative contributions to the nation's digital economy, Smart Axiata has been at the forefront of Cambodia's telecommunications and digital technology evolution.

● A Leading Telecom Giant in Cambodia

Since its inception in 2009, Smart Axiata has grown to become one of the most prominent and influential telecom providers and builders of infrastructure in Cambodia. Starting with a merger between Smart Mobile and Hello, it later became part of the Axiata Group, a major Asian telecommunications company. This strategic consolidation catapulted Smart Axiata into becoming a dominant force in the Cambodian market. By 2023, the company reached an impressive milestone of 8 million customers, marking its presence in all 25 provinces and covering 93% of the population with 4G and 99% with 2G.

"We have made tremendous progress by expanding our infrastructure and ensuring that even remote areas of Cambodia have access to reliable connectivity," says Ziad Shatara, CEO of Smart Axiata.

● It's All About Innovation

Smart Axiata is well known for its infrastructure investments and technological innovations. The company was the first to launch 4G services in 2014 and has continued to push boundaries by introducing revolutionary services to the Cambodian market. A significant moment in their history was partnering with Apple as an official distributor, bringing cutting-edge technology to Cambodia's growing digital market.

The company's expansion is not just limited to mobile networks. In recent years, Smart Axiata has diversified its services to include cybersecurity solutions. "We've built a robust infrastructure to safeguard our customers' data, and now we can offer this security as a service. It's a big step forward for us," Shatara notes.

In 2023, the company saw remarkable financial growth, substantial customer growth, and reached 84% in employee satisfaction, a success by any record. "We're not just growing in numbers, but we're growing in the right way, with a strong focus on employee satisfaction and customer service," Shatara explains.

● A Prosperous Cambodia for Everyone

Smart Axiata's role in the Cambodian economy is undeniable. The company contributes 1.4% as Gross Value Added of the country's GDP, highlighting its economic impact. But beyond this contribution, the company is committed to being an ethical player in the market. "We are almost obsessed with compliance and meeting global standards", says Shatara. "Every year, we invest in training our team members in areas like anti-bribery and compliance."

The company's investment in Cambodia goes beyond just telecommunications. Smart Axiata has consistently worked towards advancing Cambodia's digital society, introducing initiatives such as Smart for Business, a portfolio of telecom and ICT solutions more accessible to SMEs and with no large up-front investments. It was Smart Axiata's infrastructure and its excellent coverage and connectivity that allowed for the introduction of QR code payments in the country, a true financial revolution.

"One of our proudest moments was enabling digital payments on a reliable network. It revolutionized how Cambodians conduct transactions, allowing everyone to participate in the digital economy, which promotes financial inclusion," Shatara says.

● Commitment to Sustainability

As part of its commitment to sustainability, the company has set an ambitious target to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. This goal is backed by partnerships with green energy companies and a concerted effort to transition toward electric vehicles for its fleet.

As part of this admirable effort, the company has made significant strides toward reducing its carbon footprint. Over 1,500 of its sites are now equipped with solar energy systems, and the company has adopted eco-friendly practices across its operations.

"If you come to our offices at lunchtime, you'll see lights and computers turned off, anything not being used. We're very mindful of energy consumption," Shatara shares.



Smart Axiata's Sustainability Report 2023 launch.



Online Safety Forum event.



Smart for Business Launching event.

● Cambodians of the Future

Smart Axiata's commitment to the Cambodian community is most visible through its education and entrepreneurship initiatives. One of its flagship projects, the SmartStart Unipreneur Learning Platform (ULP) involves working with Impact Hub Phnom Penh, a social enterprise, with support from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications to introduce entrepreneurship skills into the university curriculum. This initiative is now active in 16 universities, and in 2024, it is expected to benefit around 2,500 students.

"We are proud to support education in Cambodia. Teaching entrepreneurship skills at the university level ensures that young Cambodians have the tools they need to build a future for themselves," says Shatara.

In addition to their participation in UNESCO educational initiatives such as the Basic Education Equivalency Programme (BEEP), in collaboration with the Ministries of Youth and Sport and of Labor and Vocational Training, the company is deeply involved in vocational training, targeting vulnerable populations like school dropouts and prison inmates. The goal is to provide them with the skills necessary to reintegrate into society and find meaningful employment.

"This project helps close the gap in literacy and digital literacy. It's not just an economic investment but a social one, as it promotes engagement and security," Shatara adds.

● Betting on the Culture

Smart Axiata is also a firm believer in nurturing local entrepreneurship. Through its investment fund, the company has supported Cambodian startups that create jobs and promote innovation. A prime example is NHAM24, Cambodia's leading food delivery platform, which Smart Axiata backed from its early days.

"Our fund is designed to encourage local entrepreneurs to bring their ideas to life. NHAM24 is a success story that proves that innovation can thrive in Cambodia," Shatara says.

Cultural investment is another area where the company has left its mark. Through "Pleng", a music streaming platform, Smart Axiata has given Cambodian artists a platform to showcase their talent. The app allows local artists to monetize their music, ensuring that Cambodian culture continues to flourish in the digital age.

"We didn't just want Cambodians listening to international musicians. We wanted to promote local talent and give them a chance to compete in that stage," Shatara explains.

● The Future: AI, Cybersecurity, and Technological Advancements

Looking ahead, Smart Axiata is exploring the vast potential of artificial intelligence (AI) in the telecom sector. The company is investing in AI-driven network solutions, self-healing systems, and service bots to improve customer experience and operational efficiency.

"AI presents us with a great opportunity for growth. Each operator is now adapting AI in different ways, and we are excited about what the future holds," Shatara shared.

In today's increasingly digital world, data security has become the cornerstone of trust between companies and their customers. Smart Axiata has made significant investments in building a robust security infrastructure that not only protects the company's internal data but also safeguards the personal information of its millions of customers.

This commitment to security is central to the company's operations, ensuring that users feel safe when using its services.

"We understand that in the age of data, customers need to feel secure. Our investment in cybersecurity is a pillar upon which the whole company stands, ensuring that their data is never mishandled, lost, or stolen," Shatara emphasizes.

Looking to the future, Smart Axiata's new projects, including those involving artificial intelligence, will continue to prioritize data protec-

www.smart.com.kh
customercare@smart.com.kh
sustainability@smart.com.kh
(+855) 10 200 888
No. 464A Monivong Blvd, Sangkat Tonle Bassac, Khan Chamkarmorn, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

tion. AI-driven solutions are being designed with security in mind, guaranteeing that customers can trust the company to keep their data safe.

"We are excited about the opportunities AI brings, but we also know that data security is paramount. Every new development, especially in AI, will focus on ensuring our customers' safety," Shatara says.

With 15 years of experience in Cambodia, Smart Axiata is well-positioned to continue leading the way in digital transformation, and its journey from a mobile operator to a key player in Cambodia's digital transformation is a testament to its commitment to innovation, sustainability, and community empowerment. Through its investments in infrastructure, sustainability, and community projects, the company is not only shaping the future of telecommunications in Cambodia but also playing a critical role in the country's social and economic development.

"Cambodia is a well-connected economy with a business-friendly environment, and we see so much potential here," Shatara concludes with a smile, "we want to be part of this country's growth story for a long time to come." ■



Children in Cambodia receive digital literacy training from Smart employee volunteers.



Children in Cambodia receive digital literacy training from Smart employee volunteers.

Investment



Strong Growth Trajectory
Cambodia's economy diversified, with industry contributing 37.5% and services 35.1% of GDP by 2023.



FDI Magnet Cambodia allows 100% foreign ownership, attracting investors to manufacturing, agriculture, and infrastructure development.



Tax Incentives New Investment Law offers tax exemptions and export waivers, reducing business costs and encouraging expansion.

Building communities for a new Cambodia

With creative solutions and daring design aimed at truly improving people's lives, Urban Living Solutions in redefining Cambodia's housing landscape.

Founded in 2016, Urban Living Solutions has quickly established itself as an example to follow in Cambodia's real estate sector by prioritizing the creation of community-focused, high-quality housing. Under the leadership of Leang Kean, the company is redefining what it means to live in a modern Cambodian city. "We don't believe in façades," says Kean. "We believe in usable spaces that bring people together."

ULS embarked on its journey with four major projects in Phnom Penh, recognizing the rapid urbanization and the limited availability of modern and affordable living and working spaces for Cambodians. Urban Loft was the first project in 2017 and was quickly followed by the ground-breaking Urban Village Phase 1 in 2018, and Factory Phnom Penh, a multi-use creative and workspace inside a former, 4-hectare garment factory.

ULS's commitment to affordable housing is perhaps best exemplified by Bakong Village in Siem Reap. This walkable community was designed for the Cambodian middle-class (from hospitality managers to government employees) and offers affordable prices without compromising on quality. Designed by Swiss architect Martin Aerni, the project features two- and three-story buildings with centralized parking, encouraging residents to walk, meet, and interact. "When people say they don't like to walk, it's usually because they don't have spaces that make walking enjoyable," notes Kean. "Bakong Village is our attempt to change that, offering efficient, community-driven living for everyone."

The next notable project in Siem Reap was Rose Apple Square which opened last year. This seven-floor condominium of 207 residential homes also incorporates co-living and co-working spaces. "We think the sharing economy is efficient, so we want to explore all forms of co-habiting," says Kean. The development also includes a restaurant, a gym, a swimming pool, and even a small auditorium, all designed to foster a sense of community among both short and long-term residents.

In line with their efforts to rethink urban space with original solutions that foster a sense of commu-



nity, ULS will bring Japan's internationally renowned bookstore, Tsutaya, to Cambodia next year as the exclusive franchise holder in the country. Tsutaya is known for creating some of the most beautifully designed bookstores in the region, blending contemporary architecture with a highly curated selection of books, stationary and local articles that act as popular third spaces. Bookshops are a rarity in Cambodia but are part of the company's broader goal to create intentional communities that encourage connections between people and spaces. "We are always thinking about how we can bring value to the people living in our developments, and this bookshop is a beautiful way to do so," says Kean.

The bookshop will be one of the many features of their ongoing project Odom, ULS's flagship mixed-use high-rise development on Norodom Boulevard, in the heart of Phnom Penh. Set to open in 2026, this ambitious project consists of Tower, Living, and Square, spaces designed to meet the growing demand for high-quality office spaces and housing that promote well-being. With 22 AI-powered elevators, cafes, and public spaces, moving through the tower for meeting and for work is seamless.

Adjacent to the tower is Odom Living, featuring 138 exclusive residences that offer stunning views of the Mekong River and Phnom Penh skyline.



Bakong Village – a car-free and walkable community.

Spanning 8,000 square meters of green space, the development includes rooftop garden, six Sky Villages, and a community square that enhance the residents' connection to nature. "Green spaces are key because they minimize adverse effects on the environment and the community," notes Kean. Designed by Singapore's award-winning Kite Studio Architecture, Odom reflects Khmer identity through indigenous materials like bricks and bamboo, offering a blend of modern smart design and traditional culture.

The Odom development is designed as a vertical village with shared and green spaces every six floors, in which life, work, community, and play are weaved together. "We took on the challenge of building a high rise while maintaining human scale", explains Kean, "and the result is this one-of-a-kind development in Cambodia."

● Come Home to Cambodia

In a sector in which developers have scarce access to bank loans, partnering with the right foreign investors is crucial for securing the creation of future developments. Apart from bringing capital, investors from countries with stricter legislation for investment encourage greater efficiency in Cambodia itself, fostering transparency and accountability. "We have much to gain from foreign investors, and they have much to gain from investing in Cambodia," adds Kean.

A critical aspect of efforts to encourage new investment to Cambodia centers on dispelling common misconceptions among foreigners. "Many people don't even know where we are," Kean laments. "Those who have heard of Cambodia often associate us solely with the Khmer Rouge era or view us through the lens of exaggerated negative news online."

To this purpose, ULS created the program "Come Home to Cambodia," aimed at encouraging the Cambodian diaspora to return and invest in the country's future, setting the example for international investors.



Rose Apple Square, Siem Reap's best mixed-use development.



Tsutaya Bookstore, Takamatsu Orne.



Climbing wall at Urban Loft.



Odom – setting a new standard of living in Phnom Penh.

"This is why I always say to people interested or curious about Cambodia: come and see it first", concludes Kean with a smile, "and if you are interested in real estate, I will welcome you myself". ■



COME HOME TO CAMBODIA

live your
Heritage
build your
Legacy



Odom, Phnom Penh ▶



Learn about Odom and other exciting opportunities in Cambodia. Visit our website to get a primer on what it's like to live, invest, and thrive in today's Kingdom of Wonder.



Community-Focused Development
www.urbanlivingsolutions.com

Investment

**Infrastructure Advancements**
Cambodia invests \$1.5 billion in expressways and logistics hubs, improving connectivity and trade by 2024.

**Regional Integration** As an RCEP participant, Cambodia accesses markets with a combined GDP of \$26.3 trillion.

**Projected Growth** Cambodia's agricultural exports forecast 10% annual growth, driven by mango, rice, and cashew production expansions.

Canadia Group: Building Opportunities in Cambodia

Pung Kheav Se is one of Cambodia’s most dynamic entrepreneurs, having played a role in the country’s development across multiple sectors, including banking, infrastructure, real estate, education, and healthcare.

Pung Kheav Se is one of Cambodia’s most dynamic entrepreneurs, having played a role in the country’s development across multiple sectors, including banking, infrastructure, real estate, education, and healthcare. He once was a young entrepreneur in the 1980s in Canada, where he was a refugee from the Cambodian civil war. After launching several successful businesses, he returned to his homeland in the 1990s. Over three decades, he has built or co-founded more than 100 businesses, and invested over USD 15 billion, contributing to the growth of Cambodia’s private sector. Today, Canadia Group is one of Cambodia’s largest conglomerates and one of the country’s biggest employers, with a workforce of over 17,500 people.

● Canadia Bank: Laying the Financial Foundation

Pung Kheav Se’s first business venture was a finance startup that evolved into Canadia Bank, now the largest locally-owned bank in Cambodia. His strategic focus on serving niche markets, including overseas Cambodians and returnees from North America, Europe, and Australia, allowed the bank to thrive during the country’s post-war recovery and remain resilient through two global financial crises. Today, Canadia Bank ranks among the top three strongest financial institutions in Cambodia, with a particular emphasis on B2B by supporting SMEs and corporate clients.

The bank was also one of the first in Cambodia to collaborate with global institutions, such as Visa and the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation (IFC), in developing services and banking solutions tailored to the local market.

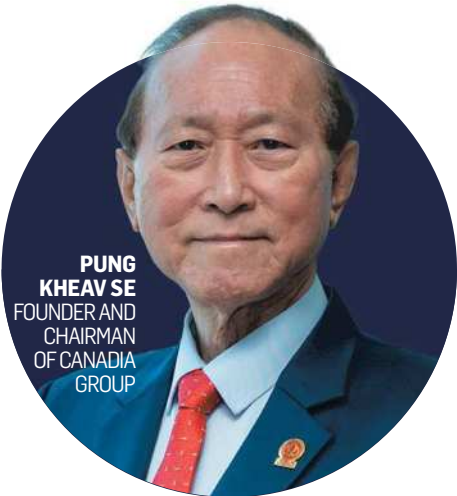
● Real Estate Ventures: Shaping Cambodia’s Urban Landscape

With Canadia Bank’s solid financial foundation, Pung Kheav Se was able to launch OCIC in 2000 as the non-financial arm of Canadia Group. Initially focusing on real estate and construction, OCIC began by developing residential communities that matched Cambodian demand, eventually launching the transformative Koh Pich project in 2006. Once a neglected area, Koh Pich has since evolved into a 100-hectare central business district (CBD) in Phnom Penh, and one of the city’s greenest neighborhoods with a focus on modern urban living. Building on this success, OCIC is now developing Norea City, a 125-hectare project that will connect Koh Pich to a broader community in southern Phnom Penh.

A standout development on Koh Pich is the award-winning Diamond Bay Garden, a 39-storey condominium offering breathtaking views over the Mekong River. As OCIC’s 50th property, this high-rise project underscores Phnom Penh’s emerging city skyline as a growing urban capital city, featuring modern, livable green spaces in a prime and rapidly growing strategic location like Koh Pich.



Techo International Airport.



Continuously developing real estate assets for a growing Cambodian market fuels Pung Kheav Se’s entrepreneurial ventures. His dedication to innovation and diversification into new investment avenues reflects his core commitment to Cambodia. The serial entrepreneur remains as ambitious as ever, having structured Canadia Group with dedicated divisions and leaders to carry his vision forward.

● Techo International Airport: Connecting Cambodia to the World

One of OCIC’s most ambitious projects is Phnom Penh’s Techo International Airport, with the first phase set for completion in 2025. Once finished, this airport will rank as the 9th largest in the world—a monumental achievement for Cambodia. Designed by the renowned British firm Foster + Partners, the airport involves collaboration with international management companies including French multinational players like Vinci, Lagardère Travel Retail, or Singaporean firms Changi Airport International, and Singapore Airlines Engineering, ensuring it meets world-class standards.

The new airport is expected to support Cambodia’s tourism, trade, and logistics sectors,

enhancing the country’s connectivity to global markets. For Pung, the Techo International Airport is not just an infrastructure project—it embodies Cambodia’s ambition to expand its influence in the global economy.

● Infrastructure and Logistics: Enhancing Connectivity for Cambodians

While the new airport is a landmark example of Pung Kheav Se’s commitment to support Cambodia’s mobility and connectivity, it is not his first contribution to the nation’s infrastructure. Over the years, OCIC has played a part in developing transport and logistics networks that improve daily life for Cambodians, by building 16 bridges and flyovers. It began with a 75-meter bridge in the early 2000s and has progressed to the latest structures spanning over 450 meters. These projects have significantly enhanced connectivity between rural and urban areas, improving access to education, and healthcare.

● Mentoring the Next Generation

Despite his achievements, Pung Kheav Se remains as hardworking as ever, with a focus on empowering new generations. From establishing a bank with USD 8 billion in asset, to building over 10,000 homes, thousand kilometers of roads and bridges, to an international airport, the dynamic entrepreneur still coaches the young leaders running the several divisions of the group. Together, OCIC and Canadia cultivate homegrown talents and foster a culture of innovation, equipping the next generation of Cambodian leaders to drive opportunities locally.

Among the young leaders within the group is Thierry Tea, Vice President of OCIC and a graduate of Harvard Business School, who is driving transformation, green development, urban enhancement, and digitalization. “We foster innovation through partnerships that align with our vision for sustainability. Our teams are growing and elevating to the standards brought by the collaborations with international firms, allowing Canadia Group to contribute meaningfully to Cambodia’s development and support to the country’s economic landscape.”

● Developing Innovation, Education, and Healthcare

As part of this vision, Connexion Hub in the Koh Pich district is rapidly becoming the leading tech center by the Mekong River, offering collaborative spaces for local entrepreneurs and hosting tenants such as a coding academy with



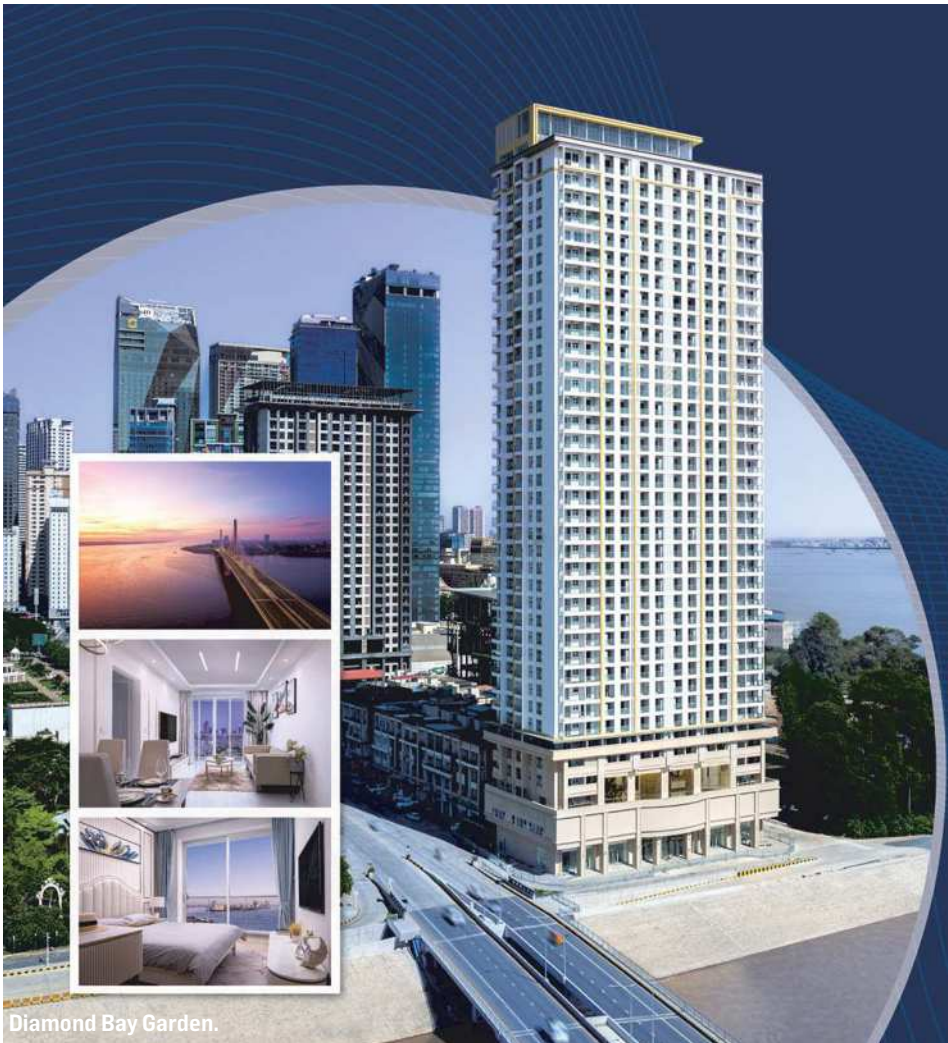
programs from Silicon Valley. The innovation hub includes tech startups, robotics schools, incubators, accounting firms, and law practices supporting this emerging business center. By organizing events like Google Cloud’s AI workshops, Connexion bridges Cambodian talent with global expertise, linking the country’s tech talents to Southeast Asia’s network.

This commitment extends to education and healthcare, leading to the establishment of the Canadian International School of Phnom Penh, and of CamTech University, which focuses on fields such as data science, AI, and cybersecurity to prepare students for global opportunities. In healthcare, OCIC has established Intercare Hospital, a general hospital with a special focus on pediatric and maternal health. Together, these initiatives embody Pung’s vision of a skilled and empowered Cambodian workforce as the country deepens its regional integration.

● A Vision for Cambodia’s Future

Pung Kheav Se’s entrepreneurial journey is marked by resilience, vision, and adaptability. Spanning banking, real estate, education, healthcare, agriculture, retail, and technology, his contributions are providing Cambodians with key services. Today, Canadia Group continues to grow, led by a dynamic mix of young leaders, including second- and third-generation overseas Cambodian returnees, locally cultivated talents, and over 250 experienced expatriates from countries such as Canada, the US, France, Australia, Malaysia, Korea, Singapore, and Germany.

He continues to invest in enhancing connectivity and creating a well-structured environment for the next generation. His vision remains centered on fostering innovation, supporting sustainable growth, and further integrating Cambodia into the global economy. ■



Diamond Bay Garden.



Norea-Koh Pich Bridge.

Tourism

**Expanding Offerings** Wellness, adventure, and cultural tourism dominate, now accounting for over 70% of global travel markets.

**Hospitality Growth** Luxury hotels in Phnom Penh achieved 40% occupancy in 2023, with strong demand from international markets.

**Strategic Partnerships** Cambodia collaborates with Singapore to increase cruise ship arrivals along its coastal regions by 2025.



A Luxury Gateway to Cambodia’s Hidden Gems

Offering breathtaking views, spotless service, and deep cultural connections, this hotel is not just a destination but a gateway to the wonders of Cambodia.

Rosewood Phnom Penh, a symbol of luxury and cultural sophistication, rises high above the Cambodian capital, occupying the top 14 floors of the Vattanac Capital Tower. This ultra-luxury hotel, situated in the city’s first true skyscraper, soars 188 meters into the sky, offering guests unparalleled views of Phnom Penh and the majestic Mekong River.

Since opening its doors in 2018, Rosewood Phnom Penh has quickly become a premier destination for discerning travelers. The hotel embodies the Rosewood brand’s *A Sense of Place philosophy*, seamlessly blending modernity with tradition. “Our vision was to create a space that honors and presents Cambodian culture in a contemporary, subtle, and tasteful manner, but also presents the future possibilities of Cambodia” says Daniel Simon, Managing Director of Rosewood Phnom Penh. “We designed the hotel as a high-end curated mansion, where every detail reflects the rich heritage and vibrant future of Cambodia.”

Rosewood Phnom Penh’s 175 elegantly appointed rooms and suites offer guests a sanctuary of comfort and style. The sky lobby, with its living room-style ambiance, sets the tone for the hotel’s unique blend of luxury and warmth. Dining is a highlight, with venues like Sora, a sky bar perched on a dramatic cantilevered terrace, offering not only exquisite cuisine but also breathtaking city views. “Our restaurants are some of the best in the city, making us the centre of cultural and social life”, explains Simon. “Yet we strive to welcome and please everyone, and so you are likely to find power lunches and family gatherings at any one time”.

The hotel’s spa, Sense, A Rosewood Spa, provides a perfect retreat with seven treatment rooms. The adjoining Pedi:Mani:Cure Studio by Bastien Gonzalez offers premium nail care, while a 22-meter indoor lap pool invites guests to relax. Additional amenities include a 24-hour fitness center and personalized services such as butler service in suites. “Our goal is to offer innovative,



Rosewood Phnom Penh Sora Skybar.



Sky Lobby.



Manor Suite Bedroom.

«Cambodians are among the most hospitable people in the world, always ready to extend a helping hand, always happy to welcome visitors to their beautiful country.»

DANIEL SIMON

personalized services that exceed our guests’ expectations,” notes Simon. “From complimentary remork (tuktuk) rides through the city to 24-hour in-room dining, every detail is designed to make our guests feel at home while enjoying the highest international standards.”

The Rosewood is committed to social responsibility through its Rosewood Impacts initiative. The hotel strives to inspire and enrich the lives of those within its ecosystem, embracing a sustainability approach that places circular hospitality at its core.

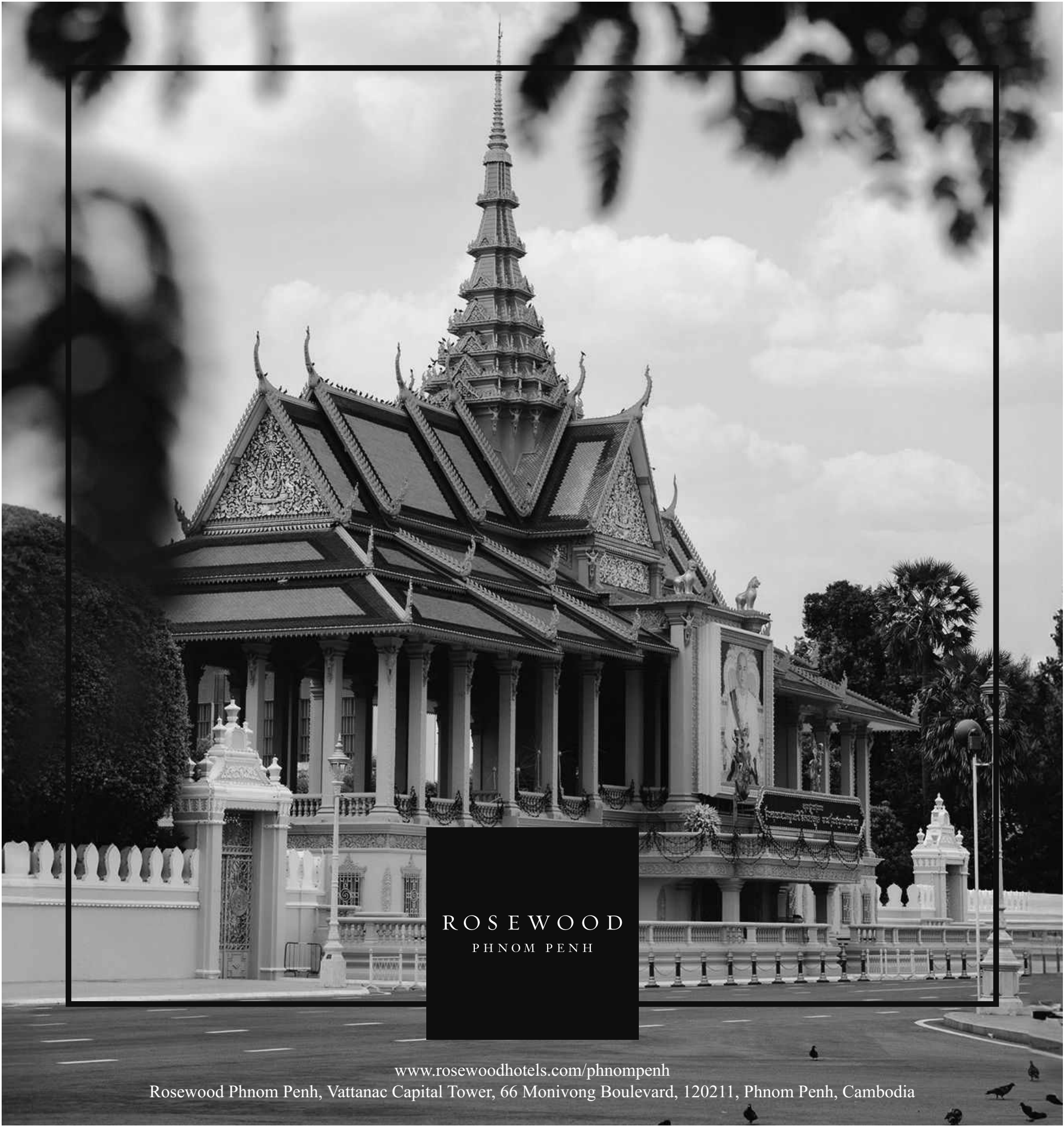
“Rosewood Empowers is about creating equal opportunities and investing in our associates’ growth and well-being,” explains Simon. “Meanwhile, Rosewood Sustains reflects our commitment to protecting the environment for future generations, ensuring our impact is both meaningful and lasting.”

One of the hotel’s standout initiatives is the Luxury Tour of Cambodia, a partnership of hotels that offers visitors a comprehensive exploration of Cambodia’s diverse landscapes. “The Luxury Tour of Cambodia is a successful program we run in partnership with Shinta Mani Resorts and Six Senses,” Simon shares. “Visitors stay in our hotels and theirs to experience different parts of the country—the cities, the beaches, the jungles—and it’s working marvelously.” This program has provided guests with a unique opportunity to discover the hidden gems of Cambodia often overlooked by traditional tourism.

Indeed, visitors to Cambodia still pale in comparison to those of its more famous neighbors like Thailand, and the Cambodian tourism sector faces the

ROSEWOOD PHNOM PENH

urgent challenge of promoting the country as a world-class touristic destination. “Cambodia has infinite potential, but we need to secure it by developing the industry creatively and making it a global trend among world travelers”, says Simon. With the government’s recent investments in infrastructure, including the new international airport, new motorways, and rail connectivity between major cities, the sector is already rebounding from the hit of the pandemic, with flights operating at 80% capacity and luxury hotels at almost 40%, yet much remains to improve. “Cambodians are among the most hospitable people in the world, always ready to extend a helping hand, always happy to welcome visitors to their beautiful country”, Simon concludes, “and so we must grow our infrastructure and service so that everyone can experience the real Cambodia, in all its fantastic splendour.” ■



ROSEWOOD
PHNOM PENH

www.rosewoodhotels.com/phnompenh

Rosewood Phnom Penh, Vattanac Capital Tower, 66 Monivong Boulevard, 120211, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Tourism

**Luxury Hospitality** Rosewood Phnom Penh offers 175 rooms, a sky bar, and spa facilities, redefining Cambodian luxury.

**Cambodia Tour Program** Partnerships allow visitors to explore Cambodia's cities, jungles, and beaches through curated multi-destination stays.

**Open for Business** Cambodia's Tourism Board invites investment to unlock untapped potential in underdeveloped destinations.



With a strategic focus on international guests, sustainable practices, and a commitment to cultural integrity, Poulo Wai Hotel & Apartment is steadily establishing itself as a competitive choice in Cambodia’s growing hospitality sector.

● **Standing Tall**

Named after a Cambodian island, Poulo Wai Hotel & Apartment opened its doors in 2020, a challenging year for the global tourism industry. Yet the hotel managed to overcome the uncertainties of the time with the unwavering support of its local ownership, and today, it operates with 196 rooms, including serviced apartments, and employs a staff of nearly 100. “Our owner showed great dedication to the staff, keeping us on partial pay even during the worst of the pandemic, and so we were ready once we reopened,” says Ms. Vannda Bouth, Director of Sales and Marketing.



● **Steady Recovery**

Poulo Wai Hotel & Apartment’s performance has been steadily improving with occupancy rates in 2024 35% higher than in 2023. Competition on room rates is high, especially for group bookings, making adaptability key to remaining competitive. “Tourism alone cannot sustain operations, but our conference rooms and repeat business from NGOs and the private sector have greatly supported us,” Bouth adds.

● **A Diverse Guest Mix**

Poulo Wai Hotel & Apartment’s guest demographic primarily comprises tourists from Europe, with Germans, French, and Australian visitors making up the largest share, followed by visitors from the United States, the UK and Japan. This robust international appeal distinguishes the hotel from others in the region, which often rely on Asian or local markets. The high season, from October to March, sees peak occupancy, while the “green season” (April to September) is popular with regional tourists from Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam. “Each season brings different guests; we have student groups from Asia during the green season and European tourists in the high season,” Bouth explains.

● **Embracing Sustainability**

With an eye on sustainability, the hotel is gradually implementing initiatives aimed at reducing single-use plastics, saving water, and improving overall environmental impact. These sustainability goals are also a response to feedback from guests who increasingly prioritize eco-friendly accommodations. “Sustainability is becoming more important, and our European clients especially appreciate these efforts,” Bouth says.

«We need more venues that meet international standards to accommodate the growing demand, especially in Siem Reap. With the right investment, Cambodia’s hospitality sector is poised for substantial growth.»

BOUTH VANNDA

● **Challenges in Cambodian Tourism**

While Cambodia boasts abundant cultural and historical appeal, attracting international tourists remains a challenge. Cambodia’s newly established tourism board is working to address safety perceptions and the need for more comprehensive international marketing. Poulo Wai Hotel & Apartment is also increasing its efforts to boost tourism. The hotel supports these initiatives, understanding that both private and public sectors must collaborate to elevate Cambodia’s image globally. “We’re optimistic about the new tourism board and government initiatives; it’s a shared responsibility to promote Cambodia internationally,” Bouth emphasizes.

Poulo Wai Hotel & Apartment has ambitious goals for the coming year, including enhancing its social media presence, strengthening customer service, and increasing its appeal to repeat clients. Additionally, plans are in place to continue strengthening partnerships with tour operators, NGOs, and other private sector entities, while expanding outreach to tourism boards and government agencies for further support. “We aim to adapt and improve in ways that resonate with our market; customer satisfaction and sustainable practices are at the core of our future,” Bouth states.

● **An Invitation to Invest in Cambodia**

With Cambodia’s tourism sector on the upswing and the government’s commitment to improving infrastructure and promoting the country abroad, Poulo Wai Hotel & Apartment sees itself as part of Cambodia’s broader potential. “Cambodia offers incredible opportunities for those looking to invest in an emerging market,” Bouth concludes. “We need more venues that meet international standards to accommodate the growing demand, especially in Siem Reap. With the right investment, Cambodia’s hospitality sector is poised for substantial growth.” ■



POULO WAI
Hotel & Apartment

www.poulowaihotel.com
E: enquiry@poulowaihotel.com
T: (+855) 23 211 666

#71-73, Street 174, Sangkat Phsar Thmey 3, Khan Daun Penh, Phnom Penh, Cambodia



One-Bedroom Executive.



Landmark Room with Balcony.

Tourism



Tourism Workforce A training initiative aims to equip 1.5 million Cambodians with hospitality and tourism skills by 2030.



Pristine Beaches Cambodia's southern coast, including Koh Rong, offers unspoiled beaches, boosting ecotourism potential.



Cultural Heritage Over 4,000 temples dot Cambodia, complementing Angkor Wat as cultural tourism destinations.

A journey of Restoration and Luxury in Cambodia



Behind the pristine beaches, crystal-clear waters, and world-class villas of Song Saa Private Island, lies an inspiring story of environmental rehabilitation and sustainable development, a testament to the transformative power of community, nature, and vision.

● A Vision Born from Ruins

When Melita Koulmandas moved to Cambodia in 2004, she planned to stay for just one year. However, a chance encounter with two islands off the country's coast changed her life and the fate of the islands forever. In 2006, she acquired the islands—Koh Ouen and Koh Bong, known as the “Sweetheart Islands”—from a local fisherman. At the time, the islands were covered in rubble, with the surrounding waters ravaged by dynamite fishing. The marine ecosystem was nearly obliterated, and the local community was struggling with no access to proper education or healthcare.

“The islands were devastated. The marine life was gone, the beaches were eroded, and the community was barely getting by. But I could see the potential. If we could restore the islands, we could bring life back—not just for nature but for the people too,” Koulmandas recalls.

● Healing Nature and People

From the start, the project wasn't just about building a luxury resort. It was about restoring the islands' natural beauty and creating opportunities for the local community. Koulmandas began working with local families, employing women to help clean up the islands while the men continued fishing. As the cleanup progressed, she learned more about the local history and the destructive effects of dynamite fishing. Together with the community chiefs, she established Cambodia's first protected marine reserve, designating no-fishing zones to allow marine life to regenerate.

“Seeing the fish return, the beaches recover, and the community come together was incredibly rewarding. A year and a half later, we had baracudas swimming around the islands, and the sand was coming back to the beaches. It showed me that if we remove the barriers for growth, nature does the rest,” says Koulmandas.



Aerial Koh Bong.



The Song Saa, over water bar, floating day beds.



The Song Saa Reserve.

● A Sustainable Sanctuary

After hard work and lobbying, Koulmandas and her partners secured a 99-year lease on the islands. She knew the development had to be in harmony with the environment. Low-impact construction was key, as was a commitment to sustainability. The resort was designed with a focus on blending seamlessly with the natural



Song Saa Private Island.



The Royal Villa, two bedroom.

surroundings, keeping the footprint light and environmentally conscious.

“I was always told during the design and construction that what I wanted couldn't be done in Cambodia. But I knew we could create something world-class that respected the land and the people. And I was right. Today, Song Saa stands as a model of sustainable luxury,” Koulmandas says proudly.

In 2011, Song Saa Private Island officially opened, offering guests 24 stand-alone villas, each designed to immerse you in the island's natural beauty. With 160 staff members—all from nearby villages—the resort is a place of tranquility and renewal. Guests enjoy expansive views, private pools, a world-class spa, and a preserved coral reef. “Song Saa offers more than just luxury. It's a place where people can reconnect with nature and themselves,” Koulmandas says.

● Giving Back to the Community

Beyond the resort, Koulmandas' commitment to the community continues through the Song Saa Foundation. Independent of the resort, the foundation focuses on marine conservation, education, and healthcare for the local population. From protecting marine life to providing schooling and health services, the foundation has had a lasting impact on the surrounding area.

“The foundation has always been about more than just the islands. We want to uplift the entire region because all parts are connected. What we do on land affects the sea, and what happens in the sea affects the communities. It's all part of a larger ecosystem,” Koulmandas explains.

● New Projects on the Horizon

Koulmandas' work is far from over. In addition to managing Song Saa, she is now expanding her vision to new projects across Cambodia. By the end of this year, the resort will launch a well-being sanctuary that integrates the spiritual and physical healing traditions of Cambodia's Buddhist culture. The sanctuary will offer wellness retreats and programs that feed both the body and soul.

“We've always been spiritual, but this new project takes it a step further. We're creating healing spaces that draw on the local culture and provide incredible well-being journeys for our guests,” says Koulmandas.

Looking further ahead, Koulmandas is working on a new project in northern Cambodia. She has acquired 200 hectares of deforested land and for the past two and a half years has been working on its restoration and regeneration using native tree seeds and local expertise, taking everything she has learned from Song Saa and applying it to this new project. Already seeing tremendous results, she is adamant that Cambodia's potential is limitless, and investing here will not only bring returns, but the joy of being part of something beautiful. “Do your research, find partners you trust”, she concludes with a smile, “but more importantly come to Cambodia, and see for yourself what is happening here.” ■

Cambodia's Voice to the World

Khmer Times, Cambodia's leading English-language newspaper, continues to make its mark with a global readership and ambitious plans for growth in both print and digital media.

«Cambodia has a young, literate population with purchasing power, he concludes, and it's time for some of the big players to get involved.»

MOHAN BANDAM



MOHAN BANDAM PUBLISHER | GROUP MANAGING EDITOR OF KHMER TIMES

Founded in 2014 by Mohan Bandam, *Khmer Times* has quickly grown into one of Cambodia's most influential English-language newspapers. Initially launched as an online edition in February 2014, it expanded into print just three months later. “We started a newspaper for one main reason, because of land disputes in Cambodia,” says Bandam, explaining the paper's mission to provide clear, factual reporting on local issues.

Despite a challenging media landscape, *Khmer Times* has made an impressive footprint. With a Monday-to-Friday print run of 10,000 copies, rising to 12,000 on Fridays, the newspaper maintains a strong presence in print despite global trends favoring digital media. “In Cambodia, print is here to stay, at least for now. That's what the readers prefer,” says Bandam. With a Facebook reach of over a million and monthly page views fluctuating between four and five million, the paper is establishing a strong global influence among Cambodians and others interested in the country.

Khmer Times has proven its dedication to public service, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was the only media outlet in Cambodia to produce comprehensive maps detailing the country's pandemic zones. “We did this as a public service,” Bandam notes, “because we felt people needed to know in detail what was going on, they deserved to know.”

Looking ahead, the newspaper plans to relaunch shelved projects, including Capital Cambodia, a high-quality business paper, and expand its Mandarin edition. “Our main challenge is human resources,” Bandam shares, underscoring the need for skilled professionals in the post-COVID era. It also aims to explore partnerships with telecommunications companies to introduce audio news.

Encouraging investors to look toward Cambodia, Bandam is adamant about the country's potential for growth. “Cambodia has a young, literate population with purchasing power,” he concludes, “and it's time for some of the big players to get involved.” ■



www.khmertimeskh.com
(+855) 23 88 15 91

khmertimes
khmertimesbreakingnews

No. 1381, National Road No. 2, Phum Tuol Roka, Sangkat Chak Angre Krom, Khan Meanchey, Phnom Penh 120602



VISIT US



COURTYARD
BY MARRIOTT
Phnom Penh

VIBRANT CITY LIFE
MEETS UNPARALLELED
COMFORT AND STYLE

DISCOVER THE HEARTBEAT OF PHNOM PENH

Courtyard by Marriott Phnom Penh offers a convenient and comfortable stay in the city center, perfect for travelers seeking a hassle-free experience. Guests can enjoy access to an executive lounge and direct proximity to popular tourist spots, making it a haven for visitors. The hotel is known for its outstanding service, well-equipped rooms, and commitment to fulfilling guest requirements, ensuring a smooth and enjoyable stay for all visitors.

COURTYARD BY MARRIOTT PHNOM PENH
No. 115 Street 214 At Corner Street 63, 12200
T: +855 23 238 888
E: enquiries.cypnh@courtyard.com
W: courtyardphnompenh.com
marriott.com

International Trade



Export Growth Cambodia's rice exports reached 637,000 tons in 2023, targeting one million tons by 2025.



Strategic Trade Partner As an ASEAN member, Cambodia enjoys preferential trade agreements with markets exceeding 2.3 billion people.



DITH TINA
MINISTER OF
AGRICULTURE

Cambodia's agricultural sector is emerging as a dynamic force in Southeast Asia, driven by a commitment to quality, innovation, and sustainable practices. Under the leadership of Minister Dith

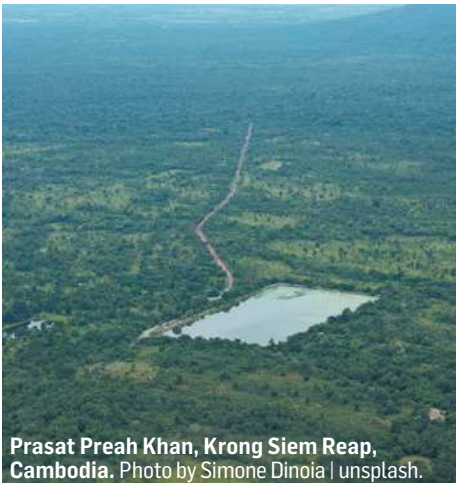
Cambodia's Agricultural Promise: Quality, Innovation, and Growth



Rice production. Photo by Eduardo Prim | unsplash.

Tina, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries is advancing partnerships and implementing modernization efforts that strengthen Cambodia's position in global markets, particularly in rice production.

Beyond rice, Cambodia's agricultural exports are expanding rapidly, with products like mangoes, cashews, and spices making headway in international markets. Supported by government incentives, infrastructure improvements, and a growing emphasis on sustainable practices, Cambodia's agriculture sector offers a promising landscape for investors looking to tap into diverse, high-growth markets across the globe. ■



Prasat Preah Khan, Krong Siem Reap, Cambodia. Photo by Simone Dinoia | unsplash.

Cambodia's Workforce: The Engine Driving Southeast Asia's Growth

With over 60% of its population under the age of 30, Cambodia boasts one of the youngest and most dynamic workforces in Southeast Asia. This demographic advantage, combined with the government's forward-thinking policies, positions the Kingdom as a rising star for industries seeking

growth and innovation. From garment manufacturing to emerging sectors like automotive and electronics, Cambodia is transforming its workforce into a globally competitive asset through robust training programs and international collaboration.

Under the leadership of H.E. Heng Sour, Minister of Labor and Vocational Training, Cambodia is equipping its labor force

to meet the challenges of a modern economy. Efforts to reskill 1.5 million workers, enhance social protections, and ensure fair labor practices are creating an environment where businesses can thrive. With its strategic location, digital advancements, and skilled workforce, Cambodia is not just a place to invest—it's a gateway to success in the ASEAN region. ■



HENG SOUR
MINISTER OF
LABOR AND
VOCATIONAL
TRAINING



Angkor Wat, Krong Siem Reap, Cambodia.



Rosewood, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



Angkor Wat, Krong Siem Reap, Cambodia.



Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

PTTOR's Second Home: Fuelling Cambodia's Growth and Innovation

As Cambodia becomes a key player in PTTOR's regional strategy, the oil giant continues to expand its footprint, blending energy, retail, and community engagement.

Over the past two decades, Cambodia has become a vital part of the regional operations for PTT Oil & Retail Business Public Company Limited (PTTOR), the Thai oil giant with a strong presence across Southeast Asia. Since establishing its Cambodian branch in 2000, PTTOR has diversified from oil distribution into a broad range of non-oil activities, making a significant impact on the country's economy and community.

"We think of Cambodia as our second home because it has shown tremendous growth over the past years, has great potential, and enjoys a perfect location, allowing us to bring in petroleum from Thailand in one and a half days," says Managing Director Nuttapong Kaewtrakulpong.

PTT (Cambodia) Limited. (PTTCL) has steadily gained market share since 2005. Its core operations include petroleum import, storage, and distribution, alongside a focus on EV and Solar technology, yet 17% of its activities belong to non-oil products and services. A staggering nearly 250 Café Amazon branches, and innovative services like EV tuk-tuks Battery Swapping. And also having successfully ventured into the C-Store retail sector with 7-Eleven shop branches with CPALL.

Indeed, PTT Service Stations in Cambodia offer more than just fuel. They are designed to provide a comprehensive one-stop-service experience, catering to diverse travellers and motorists' needs. "Our stations follow international safety standards in service station design and adopt the same unique Thai image that PTTCL has always been associated with," noted Nuttapong, referring to the Best Fuel Station Service Provider from International Finance Award 2023 received by the company last year for its excellence in service and design.



NUTTAPONG
KAEWTRAKULPONG
MANAGING
DIRECTOR OF PTTCL

«We remain committed to building a sustainable future for all, and to helping the community grow so we may all grow together.»

NUTTAPONG KAEWTRAKULPONG.

With a view to expanding from its base in Cambodia, PTTCL plans to put more investment in the infrastructure mainly in the Petroleum Marine Terminal, New Business Infrastructure, New Office Building, PTT Service Station, Café Amazon, C-Store, and other Non-Oil businesses to meet Cambodia's growing demand, solidifying PTTCL's commitment to supporting Cambodia's infrastructure and economic growth. "We remain committed to building a sustainable future for all," concludes Nuttapong, "and to helping the community grow so we may all grow together." ■



International Trade



Diversified Trade Cambodia's key exports include garments, electronics, and agro-products, contributing \$20 billion annually to the economy.



Energy Access Expansion Cambodia achieved 97% electricity coverage in 2022, up from 34% in 2010, driving development.

Cambodia's Finest: Entrepreneurship at the Service of a Community

With a vision of showcasing the best of Cambodian agriculture, Awesomepick is taking top-quality local produce to the international health food market. Under the leadership of Akiva Lavoncio, this brand is not just about food—it's about making a meaningful impact.

After six years in the United States and a strong background in marketing, Lavoncio returned to Asia, searching for something more fulfilling than managing spreadsheets. That search led him to Cambodia, where he saw an opportunity to use his business expertise to uplift local growers and bring their products to the world stage. "I found a deeply kind community in Cambodia, often of people who didn't have the resources to dig themselves out of a difficult situation, but who deserved so much more," Lavoncio reflects. This realization became the foundation of premium food brand Awesomepick, solely dedicated to showcasing Cambodia's healthiest and finest agricultural products.

Launched in January this year, Awesomepick has already begun winning people over with its simple yet profound mission: to offer the purest food products, promoting the philosophy that we are what we eat, and that preventive care begins with what you give your body as nourishment. The product line so far includes cashews, one of Cambodia's most renowned exports, and turmeric powder, with plans to soon add moringa, black ginger, fingerroot, and wild forest honey. Lavoncio's meticulous attention to detail is evident in every aspect of the brand. By altering traditional manufacturing processes and setting his own rigorous quality standards, Awesomepick ensures its products are delivered in their purest possible form. "I am super picky; it's my personality," Lavoncio admits, "but when people try the cashews, they can't believe a cashew can taste like this."

In fact, the process through which the cashews are picked -what makes them awesome- has been compared to diamond grading, where not only size, but color, clarity, and lack of blemishes are considered to separate those cashews that provide the perfect bite, the surprising burst of flavor. Moreover, they are not fried but baked at low temperatures, locking in nutrients and making them healthy, crunchy, and naturally sweet.

But Lavoncio's vision extends far beyond creating premium products; it's about making a lasting impact on the community and promoting Cambodian goods on the glob-



al stage. This commitment to Cambodia was tested early when he turned down a lucrative offer to develop Awesomepick in Canada under a startup residency program. Though tempting, the offer would have transformed Awesomepick into a Canadian brand—something Lavoncio wasn't willing to compromise on. "I came to Cambodia to make something that belongs here," he explains. "So,

as much as I am eager to find new partnerships and investors abroad, the brand will stay Cambodian."

Lavoncio's unwavering commitment to his mission hasn't come without challenges. In a limited market like Cambodia's, even access to packaging options is difficult, not to mention operating in an investment environment that can struggle to understand more specialized products such as premium foods. Yet, despite these hurdles, Awesomepick has managed to thrive. The brand's prod-

www.awmodaz.com
service@awesomepick.co
(+855) 88 666 9691

No. 41, Street 322, Beung KengKang (BKK) BKK1 Phnom Penh, Cambodia (Picasso City Garden)



ucts can already be found in numerous Cambodian hotels and restaurants, at the Duty Free in Phnom Penh Airport, and in the catalog of Singaporean health supplement brand OneLife—all within just six months of launching.

For Lavoncio, Awesomepick is more than just a business; it's a way to contribute to a community he cares deeply about and to promote the image of Cambodia's agricultural products in the international market. As Awesomepick continues to grow, Lavoncio is keen on taking the brand international, but only on his terms. "It's been a crazy ride; we are just getting started," he says with a smile. "But we are ready to show the world Cambodia's best side and to help the people here build something good." ■

Taking Cambodian Rice to the Center Table

Through close work with farmers and special focus on quality and efficiency, Signatures of Asia has risen to the top of rice producers and exporters in Cambodia.

Part of the Bayon Heritage Group, which focuses on rice and organic fertilizer distribution and production, Signatures of Asia has become a prominent player in Cambodia's rice sector, quickly rising as a top high-quality rice producer and exporter to international markets. "We got into rice because the government was investing heavily in it, creating the opportunity to work with the farmers already using our fertilizer," says General Manager Peter Chan.

Indeed, the government's push for transforming Cambodia into a global rice producer has paid off, leading to modernized, efficient farming that benefits from investment in infrastructure, a growing irrigation system, tax incentives to subsectors supporting rice, and lowering energy costs. "We are producing



30-50,000 metric tons of fertilizer per year, and 35,000 of raw paddy, and in under two decades we rose to the top six rice producers in the coun-



try," says proudly CEO Ken-Sokheang Chan, who was also elected president of the Cambodian Rice Federation in 2022. In that role,



Sokheang will attempt to get Cambodia's overall exports to one million tons by 2025.

With 90% of the company's production going into the European market, the company's commitment to quality and sustainability have certainly been key. "We produce organic rice with small-scale farmers and have launched a sustainable rice farming project aimed at reducing carbon emissions, so this makes us competitive in Europe and gives us a way into the US," says Peter Chan.

Indeed, with the world looking at Southeast Asia, Cambodia has a unique opportunity to rise in the industry, benefitting rice farmers and related workers for generations to come. "If you compare our cultivated area to Vietnam's, you realize we have the potential to grow 100% more, as we are only producing 12 million tons, and have enough land and people to produce twice as much," explains Sokheang Chan.

With only 15 years in the global arena, Cambodia is already making big waves in the rice industry, and Signatures of Asia is extremely well-positioned to lead this transformation into the future. "We are constantly looking for new partners and new ideas," Sokheang Chan concludes, "and although there will be challenges and risks, our hearts are in this, and we are in it for the long run." ■

Navigating Cambodia's Future

With major infrastructure upgrades and eco-friendly innovations, Phnom Penh Autonomous Port (PPAP) is transforming Cambodia's logistics landscape.

Phnom Penh Autonomous Port (PPAP), one of Cambodia's two international ports, plays a vital role in the nation's economic growth and logistics infrastructure. Under the leadership of CEO H.E. Hei Bavy, the port has undergone significant developments, including the transformation of T3 Terminal into a dedicated tourist port, which has helped reduce city traffic by moving the cargo port 30 kilometers away.

"Our aim is to reduce the environmental impact and the volume of trucking in the city," says Bavy. The port

encourages waterway transportation, which is more environmentally friendly and better supports the government's Funan Techo canal project, linking the capital to the sea.

PPAP's recent infrastructure advancements include seven new terminals requested from the government and the implementation of a terminal operation system that efficiently controls container movements. Future plans include a trucking management app to further streamline logistics. "By controlling the whole chain, from the port to the customer's warehouse, we can offer a more effective solution," Bavy explains.

«Cambodia is full of potential, and as the world gets to know us, we continue to grow and develop.»

HEI BAVY

Looking ahead, PPAP is committed to sustainability, with plans to transition to green energy for all machinery and conservation projects in the lands surrounding its facilities. With a focus on expanding ser-



vices and welcoming foreign investment, Bavy notes, "Cambodia is full of potential, and as the world gets to know us, we continue to grow and develop." ■

PHNOM PENH AUTONOMOUS PORT

A leading international river port in Cambodia

www.ppap.com.kh +855) 10 444 044 ppapmpwt@online.com.kh sale-marketing@ppap.com.kh

The Integrated ICT Solutions Provider Fueling Cambodia's Business Potential



Smart Axiata's network infrastructure connects businesses to new opportunities, ensuring robust support for growth and transformation.

**Smart
Fiber+
Business**

**Smart
FLEET MANAGEMENT**
POWERED BY CARTRACK.COM

CloudPBX
Smart VoIP Service

**Smart
CheckinMe**

**Smart
eBusiness
Card** by AddMii

Email us at sales.corporate@smart.com.kh.

For more information:
☎ 1204 or (+855)10 200 888 | 🌐 SmartAxiata | 🌐 smart.com.kh/for-business

Smart
for BUSINESS

*Terms & Conditions apply.