AI's harshest unicorn ✸ SF's gay century ✸ The darkest bar in the Mission Free

Our Summer Books Guide

Gazetteer

Summer 2026, Issue 3

San Francisco



Gazetteer
San Francisco
News for humans by humans since 2024

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About Us

Gazetteer publishes original local news written by humans and delivers it directly to subscribers via email, text, and print, bypassing algorithms. *Gazetteer SF* is published on the web five days a week and quarterly in print every March, June, September, and December.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

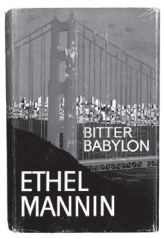
Book city

By Matt Haber, *Editor-in-Chief*

This issue is anchored by a special section dedicated to books. We chose to devote so much space to books because summer is the perfect time to read. The rhythms of the work week get a little looser, weekends find a way to become three days long, and books can be an excellent shade should you need it, especially while napping on a blanket in Golden Gate Park or on a hammock somewhere quiet.

San Francisco is also a great book city. There's a San Francisco book for every kind of reader.

There are the books you read in high school (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*). There are the books you read when you're new here (*Tales of the City*). There are the books you read when you're from here (*Cool Gray City of Love*). There are books that blow your mind (*Season of the Witch*). There are bona fide classics (*The Joy Luck Club*). There are permanent pop culture fixtures (*The Maltese Falcon*). There are the ones that win the big prizes (*Less*).



And then there are books like Ethel Mannin's *Bitter Babylon*.

You're not likely to find a copy of *Bitter Babylon* at a bookstore or online. I couldn't find a single review and only stray mentions of it on websites with names like Neglectedbooks.com. If I didn't have it sitting beside me as I type, I'd be tempted to say Mannin's book doesn't even exist.

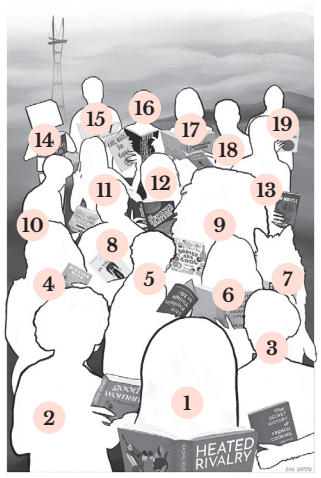
My hardcover 1968 Hutchinson & Co. edition is ex-library from St. Mary's College Newcastle. I bought it a few years ago at Half Price Books in Berkeley, drawn in by the cover, which sports a blown-out painting of the Golden Gate Bridge with San Francisco, a jumble of indistinct blocks seen from an impossible angle. The back cover has a handsome portrait of Mannin, a middle-aged woman with probing eyes, center parted hair, and piles of clunky necklaces.

Mannin was born in England in 1900, a second generation socialist and anti-monarchist. She was a prolific travel writer, essayist, novelist, and memoirist. Most Americans probably never heard of her. She died in 1984 after writing some 95 books.

Honestly, *Bitter Babylon* isn't that great a book, but there are parts of it that I think of often. The story concerns a *San Francisco Herald* reporter named Glyn Westway and his fraught relationship with an ambitious younger writer named Laurence "Laurie" Mervil. While some of it is set in Westway's "gingerbread house" on Telegraph Hill with its view of the Golden Gate Bridge, much of the action takes place in Vietnam, Cairo, and Palestine. The bridge may span its cover, but its author was too busy spanning the globe to stay here very long.

What makes *Bitter Babylon* a San Francisco novel for me are Mannin's descriptions of this city's natural and built environments, the glimpses of "a light wind scudding over the blue water… the whole city piled up pale and gleaming on its hills and seeming new-made." Mannin saw San Francisco as only a visitor could: as a dreamscape of flawless views, paper lanterns in Chinatown, and young people who "know it all and have had it all, and more."

Reading *Bitter Babylon*, I found myself longing for San Francisco despite being in San Francisco. It's a book that makes you want to go there even when you're already there. What more could you want from a San Francisco book?



Key to our cover
Illustration by Ilana Diamond

1. Alysa Liu reading *Heated Rivalry* by Rachel Reid
2. Boots Riley reading *Good Woman: A Reckoning* by Savala Nolan
3. Dominique Crenn reading *The Secret History of French Cooking* by Luke Barr
4. La Doña reading *Mission High* by Kristina Rizga
5. Performative Male reading *Men Explain Things to Me* by Rebecca Solnit
6. Rebecca Solnit reading *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs
7. Coyote reading *Look Big* by Rachel Levin
8. Gavin Newsom reading *On Tyranny* by Timothy Snyder
9. Sister Roma reading *Bodies Are Cool* by Tyler Feder
10. James Yeun Leong Parry reading *Cool Gray City of Love* by Gary Kamiya
11. Becca Bloom reading *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx
12. Tia Cabral aka Spellling reading *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin
13. Steph Curry reading *On Muscle* by Bonnie Tsui
14. Robot reading *To Serve Man* by Damon Knight
15. Dario Amodei reading *I, Claudius* by Robert Graves
16. Annalee Newitz reading *Never Say You Can't Survive* by Charlie Jane Anders
17. Charlie Jane Anders reading *Automatic Noodle* by Annalee Newitz
18. Daniel Lurie reading *The Road to Character* by David Brooks
19. Marc Andreessen reading *The Virtue of Selfishness* by Ayn Rand





Author Q&As,
Book recommendations,
Bookstore profiles,
and more

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Contributors

Ilana Diamond
Illustrator, cover



Ilana Diamond is an award-winning illustrator. In a past life, she worked in the photo and art departments at magazines and agencies including *New York Magazine*, *ReadyMade*, *San Francisco Magazine*, and IDEO. Her photography has appeared in *The New York Times*.

Chelly Guzman
Gazetteer Operations Coordinator



Chelly Guzman is Gazetteer's Operations Coordinator. She sparks joy in our subscriber community, produces events, handles some graphic design, and is our one-person HR department. Previously she was the marketing lead for Maven Properties. Outside of Gazetteer's, you can catch her at the pickleball courts or EDM shows.

Brooke Ley
Gazetteer Community and Partnerships Associate



Brooke Ley is the Community and Partnerships Associate at Gazetteer, selling ads for this paper and for *The Potrero View*. Originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, she has made San Francisco home. Ask her about local jazz shows.

Brian Smale
Photographer, p. 8

Brian Smale has shot portraits for *Fortune*, *BusinessWeek*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Spin*. His photo of Bob Heick originally appeared in the December 1, 1988, issue of *Rolling Stone*.

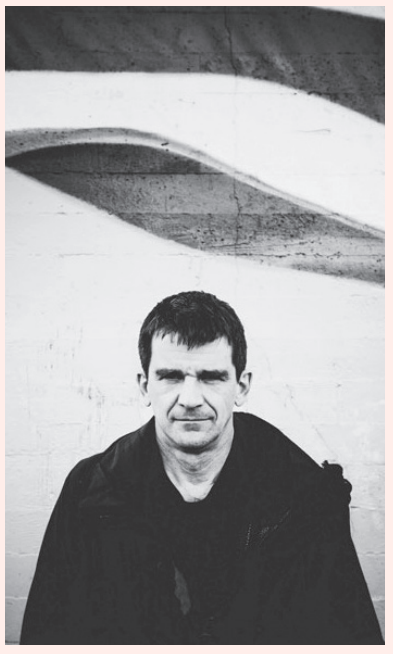
Here is what Smale remembers from that time:

I began my career as a photographer in Toronto, in the mid-'80s. Around that time, up until the early '90s, there seemed to be a lot of articles about right-wing extremism, Neo-Nazis, KKK, etc. and I was asked to do photographs for several of them.

That movement seemed to quiet down for a couple of decades, only to come roaring back in 2016 with the arrival of President Donald Trump, his advisor Stephen Miller, the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and others.

The individuals I photographed for this particular article ranged from bright and charismatic, to dumb and dumber, but they all firmly believed in the dogma they were spewing.

I don't know how you change someone's thinking when it's this deeply entrenched. Maybe you can't. But at the very least there needs to be consequences for racially motivated crimes, and that's not happening now. Quite the opposite. I believe it's only going to get worse,



and will only get better if we choose responsible leadership... so pay attention, people, and vote!

Omar Mamoon
Holy tamale p. 19



Omar Mamoon is a San Francisco-based writer. He regularly contributes to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Resy and *Esquire*. His focus is on all things food, drink, and travel, and his writing ranges from recipes and roundups to interviews and profiles, trend pieces, lists, and more.

Spencer Sunshine
It happened here, p. 8



Spencer Sunshine has been writing about the Far Right for over 20 years. His book *Neo-Nazi Terrorism and Countercultural Fascism: The Origins and Afterlife of James Mason's Siege* was published by Routledge in 2024. He has a PhD in Sociology, and his writings have been published by *The Daily Beast*, Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Forward*, and *The Battleground*.

Ayana (Aya) Miyoshi
Illustrator, throughout



Ayana (Aya) Miyoshi is an artist, designer, and printmaker from Los Angeles and Tokyo. She is interested in the interdisciplinarity within her work and loves to explore the space between time, memory, and imagination. She is currently working at McCalman.Co in San Francisco.

Walter Thompson
Sex and the city, p. 20



Walter Thompson is an award-winning independent journalist and podcast host based in San Francisco. His work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *San Francisco Magazine*, *Hoodline*, *TechCrunch*, and other outlets. He is also a screenwriter with three completed scripts, including a story set in San Francisco. He writes San Francisco Plays Itself, a column for *Gazetteer SF*.

Shawn Sprockett
Cool Gay City of Love, p. 12



Shawn Sprockett is a gay professor, designer, and resident of San Francisco. Spurred to action by the "Don't Say Gay" bills of his home state of Florida, he began documenting alternative perspectives on local queer history — particularly those of womxn and people of color — and offering those stories as a monthly walking tour program, Unspeakable Vice, through San Francisco's lost gayborhoods.

Jamie Urborg
Illustrator, book section



Jamie Urborg is a San Francisco-based artist and owner of small illustration business SF Neighbors. Her illustrations explore the fundamental magic of home and belonging. For over five years, she has created custom home and building illustrations for clients throughout the city, the Bay Area, and beyond. Her illustrations are also featured in a variety of SF art shows, cafes, and local shops.

Gazetteer acquires *The Potrero View*

We're excited to announce that Gazetteer has acquired San Francisco's longest-running neighborhood newspaper *The Potrero View* from current editor and publisher Steven Moss.

Gazetteer will continue publishing the 56-year-old monthly paper covering Potrero Hill, the Dogpatch, Mission Bay, and SoMa.

The Potrero View and *Gazetteer SF* will be run as separate editorial publications, while sales and operations will be combined. The combined print circulation of the two publications will be 22,000: 10,000 for *Gazetteer SF* and 12,000 for *The Potrero View*. Gazetteer Inc. acquired *The Potrero View* in an asset sale.

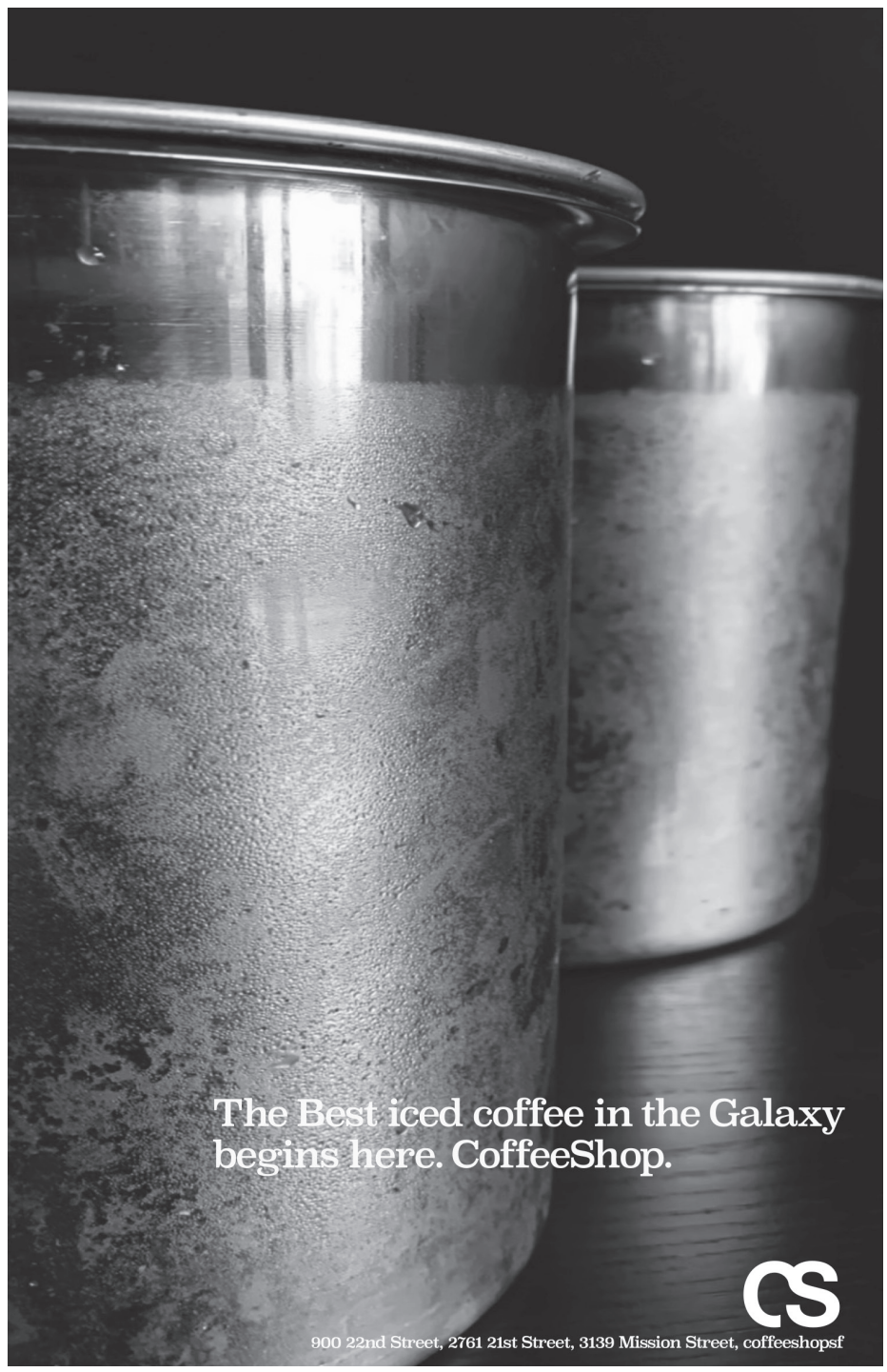
Gazetteer's plans for the acquisition include:

- Expanding *The Potrero View* distribution and coverage in the booming Dogpatch and Mission Bay areas
- Growing advertising sales for the *View* and *Gazetteer SF* through cross-selling and targeting new industries
- Offering combined subscriptions for both publications
- Sharing stories, when relevant

For readers of both publications, not much will immediately change. Moss will remain editor and publisher of *The Potrero View* through the rest of 2026, and will continue to bring his knowledge of the neighborhood and his editorial eye to the paper. In 2027, he will step back from the editor and publisher role while continuing to write columns for the paper.

Gazetteer SF will continue to focus on San Francisco as a whole.

For advertising inquiries please contact Brooke Ley: brooke@gazetteer.co



Digest

SKETCHY CHARACTERS

How courtroom artists captured *Musk v. Altman*

Elon Musk was on the stand, clenching his jaw as he waited to be cross-examined by Sam Altman's lawyers. In the back of the courtroom, Lance Jackson watched with a No. 2 pencil in his hand, and thought about corpses.

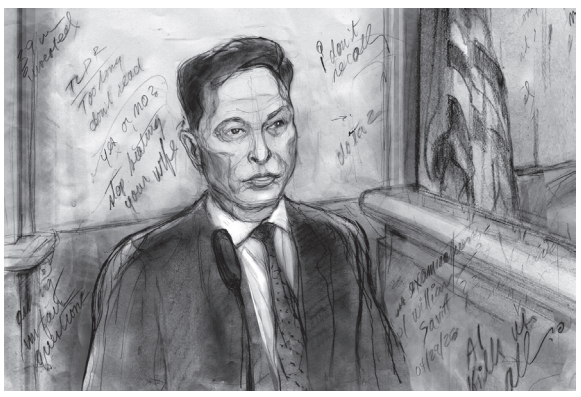
Jackson is a courtroom artist, one of many who showed up to capture the scene inside the Ronald V. Dellums Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Oakland at the trial techheads and reporters insisted would be the legal showdown of the AI age.

Musk v. Altman, and particularly its verdict, turned out to be a snoozefest, unfolding with few surprises. In the end, the jury deliberated for less than two hours before rejecting Musk's claim on a technicality: He filed the suit too late.

The most interesting part about the trial was the fact that these two men were simply there, in person, for anyone who braved the long lines and circus-like atmosphere to see. For weeks, flocks of protestors, journalists, lawyers, startup founders, and students descended upon downtown Oakland to get a firsthand look at the tech titans, whose characters are so omnipresent that they've become cartoonish. Sure, they have billions upon billions of dollars and outrageous influence on politics, culture, and the global economy, but what were they *really* like, in all their fleshy humanity?

"Musk has this jarring, strong face. His eyebrows twist sometimes," Jackson said. But what really caught the artist's eye were Musk's lips. "While he's waiting to talk, he'll purse his lips. It's funny to see him twisting those lips all around, like he just couldn't remain silent. I had to figure out how to convey the twisting, sort of percolating part of the face there, between the lips and under the nose, up through the jaw."

To do this, Jackson relied on his early lessons in anatomy: In college, he used to sneak into the medical school to watch students slice up cadavers. "There's this bank of muscles there around the lips that I found I could pull back," Jackson said of capturing the tension in Musk's face on the stand. "I think I got it."



Courtroom artist Lance Jackson's depiction of Elon Musk on the stand during *Musk v. Altman*.

LANCE JACKSON

San Francisco-based illustrator Dan Bransfield found himself shunted to the livestream room on the second day of Musk's testimony, wondering how he could produce a decent sketch from a subprime seat.

"I'm just like, 'What can I do now?' Here I am, sitting in these folding chairs in front of a small TV with a bunch of other journalists with their laptops out and chargers and extension cords and cables and stuff," Bransfield said. "Then I'm like, well, maybe I can make it about the coverage of Musk, rather than just a depiction of Musk on the stand with the microphone and the flag. So I thought that lended itself to a unique opportunity."

While Jackson produces dynamic, almost dream-like sketches with regular graphite pencils and a pad of translucent vellum paper, Bransfield uses pens and watercolor paints to create bright, clean drawings that are layered with depth.

Within the throngs of spectators at the courthouse, there were always a handful of artists. Among them, Vicki Ellen Behringer is probably the most well-known.

For almost 40 years, the Sacramento-based artist has covered high-profile trials throughout Northern California: The Unabomber trial in 1998; Elizabeth Holmes' fraud trial in 2021; *Apple v. Samsung* in 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2018.

"I've been around for 36 years. Everyone knows me," Behringer said. "I work with the media, and the courts are being accommodating to the media to make sure they get what they need." (For *Musk v. Altman*, she was contracted by Reuters and ABC7.)

Behringer works in watercolor. She's known for her striking pink-purple backgrounds, a style she picked up 30 years ago, when she needed a way to break up the many browns and tans in one courtroom scene.

"Altman's got very expressive eyebrows, and he's got distinctive features. His lips are full, and his hair is very fun to sketch," Behringer said. (Jackson said something similar, referring to the way Altman's hair flips up at the front as a "banana haircut.")

All three artists said they tried not to let the public personas of Musk or Altman influence how they portrayed them. The trial's subject matter, however, did influence their approaches to the art.

"I wanted to embrace as much tactile quality as possible," Bransfield said of his choice to forgo using his iPad. "I know the iPad is not AI, but everything is so digital. I wanted a real gritty texture you could feel with these drawings."

To Jackson, AI is not a sufficient replacement for his own understanding of the physical mechanics behind facial expressions and body language.

"You watch these people thinking in real time," Jackson said. "The skillset they have as a CEO, as a person in control, the language props they use… It's so interesting, just studying that skillset. It's fascinating to watch." — *C.H.*

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Sam Altman wants to sell you these sneakers for $160, plus tax and biometric data



These eye-catching shoes are a collaboration between World and streetwear brand Future Basics.

JOSHUA BOTE / GAZETTEER SF

World, Sam Altman's cryptocurrency and "human verification" startup known for its biometric data-collecting Orbs, recently revamped its Union Square storefront as part of a collab with San Francisco-based streetwear and sneaker brand Future Basics.

The first offering of this marriage of tech hype and hypebeast is a limited-edition white-and-grey sneaker, only available to customers who step up to an Orb and scan their eyes.

Oh, and then pay $160 plus tax.

This is just the latest in a series of announced partnerships by World to integrate its "proof of human" feature, World ID, into services like Tinder, Zoom, Coinbase, and Docusign. The company's messaging suggests that humans will need a way to verify themselves as bots and deepfakes continue to flood the internet.

But World's secretive partnership strategy extends beyond the tech industry: In just a few months, Orbs have been installed in at least 13 locations around the Bay Area, including the Marina Gap and several Plentea boba shops in San Francisco and Berkeley.

In April, World even sponsored a "humans-only concert" exclusive to World ID holders at the Midway, as part of a launch event the company called Lift Off. At the event, the company appeared to announce a partnership with Live Nation and Bruno Mars. A spokesperson from Live Nation told *Wired* that such a partnership never existed.

The Future Basics collaboration was also announced at Lift Off, where attendees were told they had exclusive access to the sneakers, called Cyto XLiftoffs.

Little is known about Future Basics, which is described as an "SF-based commerce project." It was founded by Kyle Riggle, a vice president of product strategy and innovation at Universal Music Group with priors at Yeezy, Kanye West's fashion line. Neither World nor Riggle immediately responded to a request for comment.

Why it was chosen to partner with World is unclear. A post on Future Basics' Instagram says that the collaboration was "built on a simple idea: being human isn't a bug to optimize away. It's the whole point."

To kick off this literally eye-catching scheme, the World store held an influencer event complete with a DJ, hors d'oeuvres, champagne, and of course, the exclusive sneakers.

For those of us who weren't at the Lift Off event or the influencer bash, Air Altmans are available if you scan your eyeballs at an Orb. But you might have to wait: A worker told *Gazetteer* that, since the influencer event, many sizes are on backorder. — *C.H. & J.B.*

Buying a piece of Café Jacqueline

Dedicated fans and soufflé lovers heartbroken over the December closing of Café Jacqueline, the iconic French restaurant in North Beach, lined up in mid-May to take a piece of the restaurant home with them. An estate sale held at the cafe's former location at 1454 Grant St. sold whisks, aprons, soufflé bowls, and kitchen artifacts of chef-owner Jacqueline Margulis who operated the place for 46 years.

Jon Rolston, the popular junk remover known on social media as SF Hauler, was called in by Margulis to help clear out the restaurant, which served its last soufflé on December 20.

"I think to her, she sees this stuff every day," Rolston said before the sale, "and she doesn't realize how beloved she is."

Two videos announcing the sale amassed thousands of views and reshares. Inquiries flooded in from as far as Belgium requesting a soufflé dish or other keepsakes including the sea urchin lamp, or the large chandelier that hung in the center of the restaurant.

Margulis, now 90 years old, held onto the much-requested wooden bowl that held the many eggs she hand-whipped into soufflés every night. She also took home the Michelin plaque she received for being in the guide in 2019 and the bell that she rang when each soufflé was ready.



Everything from linens to light fixtures were on sale.

COURTESY OF JON ROLSTON

Margulis was raised in Bordeaux and trained at a convent cooking school. She opened Café Jacqueline in 1979 and the restaurant soon became an intimate extension of herself: Margulis was its only head chef. Two longtime employees, one prep cook and one server, worked beside her for 35 years.

Rolston said that while preparing the sale with Margulis, many people peered into the window and blew her kisses. — *O.P.*

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Queen for a day

RuPaul recently took to TikTok to proclaim San Francisco his favorite American city. "It is so beautiful!" he said.

What followed was a seemingly off-the-dome list of the things he loves to do in the city. RuPaul's perfect San Francisco experience requires four things: a meal at downtown stalwart John's Grill, a stay at the Ritz-Carlton in Nob Hill, a skate at the Church of 8 Wheels, and, as any respectable San Franciscan will tell you, a helicopter ride.

Here's how much RuPaul's perfect day in San Francisco will run you.

His first recommendation is John's Grill. "It's not ritzy or anything," he says. "It's such great food."

Ru doesn't specify his order (John's Grill reps did not immediately respond to a request for comment on what the drag star likes), but a classic steak ($37.95) and martini ($15) combo is probably a decent guess; maybe throw in a shrimp cocktail ($17.95) for good measure. That'll run at least $100 per person with tax, tip, and fees. As far as meals go, it's spendy, but not ludicrously so.

Up next, a night at the Ritz-Carlton. A Deluxe Guest Room (the lowest end available) starts at $480 for a weekend night. But for the Glamazon herself, nothing but the finest: A two-bedroom suite runs to $2,636 per night; the Presidential Suite (treat yourself) can be yours for $9,840 a night.

The third item on the agenda: The Church of 8 Wheels. If you want to catch the Church of 8 Wheels during your visit, you'll have to be here on a Tuesday or a weekend day, which could bump up the cost of the Ritz stay. But entry into the Church costs a reasonable $20 and a $4 service charge, less than a 12-pack of RuPaul's House of Love cocktails.

And, then, the most left-field choice? The helicopter tour of the city.

"It is so fabulous because you get to see, you get a bird's eye view of the geography of the city, because it's kind of a hard city to figure out if you don't understand it."

I doubt that Ru or his team is searching for the best-priced deal for this, so let's go with the first choice that pops up on Google: That would be Aero Adventures, which operates out of Sausalito. A regular half-hour helicopter ride through Aero Adventures costs $845. There is a non-zero chance that RuPaul cannot get on this plane; turns out, Aero Adventures prohibits anyone over 6'2" from flying on one of their helis. RuPaul is 6'4".

So, there you have it: To experience RuPaul's perfect day, you'll have to spend at least $2,000. Guess that means you better work — or you better work for OpenAI. — *J.B.*

Epic bail

If you look closely at the 2023 video of Zach "Ducky" Kovacs skateboarding down the tallest peak of Vaillancourt Fountain, you can see the piece of concrete that sent him flying into the murky water below.

Two and one-half years later, Kovacs recalled that piece of concrete, and its critical role in the ride that put him on the January 2024 cover of *Thrasher* magazine.

"I remember landing in the water, and I looked up at it after, I was like, 'OK, so that wasn't the intended goal,'" Kovacs told *Gazetteer SF*. "Then I'm standing in the water, and I was like, 'There's no landing this. I'm not gonna do it again.'"

Kovacs couldn't attempt that drop in even if he wanted, now that the city has removed the Vaillancourt Fountain. The structure's tortured 55-year history has produced complicated feelings.

Five months before Kovacs undertook his stunt move, he had a steel plate removed from his ankle, the result of a different trick. The drop in was a move that didn't demand too much of his back foot. Kovacs said he also conceived of the drop in as a video that his friend Michael Guzman could shoot.

At the time, Kovacs was working for Deluxe Distribution, a skate company in the Mission. He hit up Michael Burnett, *Thrasher*'s photographer and editor, to shoot the stunt, hoping a photo might make it into the magazine. He had no expectations that it could be a cover shot.



Kovacs doesn't have strong feelings about Vaillancourt Fountain's removal. The Embarcadero, however, and the plaza in particular, are legendary for skateboarders worldwide. He has joined previous efforts to block redevelopment plans that would impede skaters there.

"You take down the fountain, and it sets a precedent to just redo everything," he said. "That's what kind of happens in San Francisco, and with other big cities. They say they're going to remove one thing, and then they take the next step of removing everything that made the plaza important." — *J.R.*

TECH

Hell of a company



Inside Mercor, the human data startup where the hours are brutal, employees say they're getting stiffed, and the CEO is a 23-year-old billionaire who wants to be Elon Musk

By Cydney Hayes

In early December last year, executives at Mercor, the data-labeling startup valued at $10 billion, sent out an anonymous talent survey to their entire US-based staff, approximately 200 people. One question asked employees to throw their colleagues under the bus: "Who on the team do you think lowers the bar?"

The survey, which was viewed at the time by *Gazetteer SF*, sent a new wave of despair through Mercor's staff. By then, the company culture had been rapidly deteriorating.

Hours had become untenable; some teams were at their desks until 2 a.m., racing to finish strategically incoherent projects under unrealistic deadlines. Teams and priorities were being restructured constantly. Scores of employees had been fired without notice or severance, some of them stiffed on their final bonuses on their way out the door.

"Mercor makes employment decisions based on performance, business, and customer needs, consistent with applicable law and each person's employment terms," said Mercor spokesperson Heidi Hagberg. "As we have scaled, we have updated our compensation and performance management practices, including tying bonus structures directly to individual performance. High performers earn more and lower performers earn less. This is standard industry practice and fair to all involved."

One former employee told *Gazetteer SF* that they knew of one early hire who quit just weeks before their equity vested, effectively leaving millions of dollars on the table, because it just wasn't worth it to them to stay. This person also said they knew of at least three new hires who quit within their first week, with one of them citing "inhumane working conditions."

"That Google form was insane," another former employee told *Gazetteer SF*. But according to three former staffers, who all spoke to *Gazetteer SF* anonymously to avoid legal or reputational retaliation from Mercor, the survey was just one expression of a deeper rot within the company.

All sources suggested that much of the trouble can be attributed to Mercor's 23-year-old billionaire CEO Brendan Foody, who they described as motivated by money and almost nothing else. "I think the fundamental issue is that there is a belief that money solves all problems," one person said. "And I just don't think money solves all problems."

Mercor was founded in 2023 by Foody and his two friends, Adarsh Hiremath and Surya Midha. Their origin story, extensively covered by the press, made them industry darlings: Hiremath and Midha had grown up together since they were 10 years old and met Foody when they were all 14 on the debate team at Bellarmine College Preparatory, a prestigious all-boys private school in San Jose. They quickly grew close, traveling the country to compete at tournaments.

> **"There was this systematic pattern of lying."**
>
> A FORMER MERCOR EMPLOYEE

Foody and Midha later enrolled at Georgetown and Hiremath at Harvard in 2021. A startup idea quickly started to take shape: an AI hiring marketplace that matched software engineers in India with US companies looking for contractors.

In 2023, they took academic leave to focus on Mercor, and by 2024 the three were named Thiel Fellows, receiving $250,000 from the conservative venture capitalist Peter Thiel to formally drop out of college and work on the company full-time. They split up executive functions: Foody, CEO; Hiremath, CTO; and Midha, COO.

Mercor's business has since shifted into what's known as "human data." Mercor contracts massive fleets of knowledge workers — biologists, software engineers, math PhDs — to label data for AI firms, including OpenAI and Google. Earlier this year, Mercor reported it was bringing in $83.3 million in monthly revenue, crossing $1 billion in annual revenue run rate, according to *Forbes*, which first reported on the anonymous employee survey.

Mercor's crowning achievement is minting the world's youngest self-made billionaires. Following a $350 million Series C funding round led by Felicis Ventures in October 2025, the company announced a $10 billion valuation. All at the age of 22, the three baby-faced college dropouts, each holding a roughly 22 percent stake in the company, stripped the title from Mark Zuckerberg, who made his first billion at 23.

Up until then, "the company had no policies around expense authorization or payments or HR or, honestly, legal," one former employee said. But the company grew aggressively after the Series C, and Mercor's internal processes shocked new hires. (Hagsberg responded, "Like any company that has grown quickly, we've scaled our internal teams and processes. Scaling at our pace requires continuously reviewing, revising, and building policies to match the business.")

This led to a messy episode earlier this year where Mercor leadership accused an early employee of embezzling funds. The employee, who was managing a project for Anthropic, had sent his father and brother "hundreds of thousands of dollars in so-called bonus payments," *Forbes* reported last month.

One former employee familiar with the situation told *Gazetteer SF* that the accused employee was 23 years old at the time, and was running a project that required PhD-level computer science expertise: "The only CS [expert] he knows is his father, so he has his dad do most of the project for him." Mercor also "didn't have a payroll system that could do daily payouts" for the contractors on that project and others, so the employee would often send them via Venmo and log them as "special bonuses."

Hagberg said the co-founders were not aware of this practice, but the former employee said it was an open secret among most early employees and went on for most of 2025. "We all knew about it. We all joked about it," the employee said.

A new hire eventually discovered and reported the suspicious bonuses, although by that time late December, the employee said Mercor had put more formalized systems in place. The employee was fired.

The employee accused of embezzlement declined to comment on the situation.

New hires found they had joined a company where few agreements with leadership could be trusted. "There was this systematic pattern of lying to new grads to get them to join," one former staffer said, explaining that leadership would lie about work-life balance, what team the candidate would be joining, and how much they would be compensated. The long hours and, as one employee put it, "ridiculously stress-inducing" culture that were ratcheting up by the fall of 2025 took an even bigger toll on new hires with families. "The company is extremely inhospitable for people with kids," one person said.

"Mercor is a high-ownership, fast-moving environment. We are transparent about that with every candidate," Hagberg said. "That intensity is not for everyone, and we recognize that. But we do not misrepresent what it is like to work here."

One former employee said Mercor's investors must have already had suspicions about the maturity of the staff. In May 2025, Sundeep Jain, the former chief product officer at Uber, joined the company. "It pretty clearly seems like he was installed by [venture firm] Benchmark," the employee said. "I think they clearly recognized the company needed an adult."

Benchmark did not respond to *Gazetteer SF*'s multiple requests for comment.

But was Jain the right adult? The former employees said no. They told *Gazetteer SF* that Jain took charge of staffing projects, to disastrous results. "His incompetence is inexplicable to me as somebody who ran Uber," one former staffer said.

According to people who experienced it, Jain's focus on operations pushed Midha, then COO, to the periphery. In October 2025, Midha announced that he was "stepping away" from his role as COO and transitioning to a board chairman role.

Hiremath posted a long, heartfelt letter to Midha, writing, "Surya has been my role model, thought partner, and most importantly, best friend... Surya, I will miss you deeply." Foody shared a short reply to Midha's announcement, saying, "There would be no Mercor without you. As your friend, I'm so proud of you for making this bittersweet decision to explore what's next."

The former employees said Midha was always the most thoughtful of the co-founders. "He generally cares about people and has a strong sense of morals," one said. Another added that after Midha left, they heard he was thinking about going to Walden Pond in Massachusetts, the tranquil place that famously inspired transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau.

Around that time, Foody began expecting workers to be at their desks deep into the night, what one former employee called "face time slavery." If they shrugged him off, he could be "a bit vindictive."

One account manager on an OpenAI project had passed his year mark, had vested some equity, and had started leaving the office earlier. The day before he was due to get a bonus of "several hundred thousand dollars" across cash and equity, Jain and Foody fired him.

That employee declined to comment for this story.

"Mercor makes employment decisions based on performance and business needs, consistent with applicable law and each person's employment terms," Hagberg said of the situation.

Another former employee agreed Jain and Foody have "a pattern of being quite stingy" with bonuses owed to the account managers, "not paying them out on time and using them almost as leverage." They also described a trend of jawboning employees who wanted to quit into non-compete agreements. "It's all verbal, of course, but they'd subtly threaten you, like, if you did something competitive, your life would be difficult," they said.

Despite the internal chaos, Mercor's public reputation had remained more or less untarnished until a barrage of bad press earlier this year. In March, a string of reports detailed the bleak reality of Mercor's white-collar contractors, who compete for poorly paid gigs just to train technology that's poised to replace them. In April, a major data breach caused Meta to pause its contracts with the company. Mercor is currently facing at least seven class-action lawsuits related to the breach.

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One former employee implied Mercor's culture had put it in this position, claiming its "culture of speed over security" was as much to blame for the attack as the hacked gateway.

What motivated such intense pressure for speed, at almost everyone's expense? "Brendan wants to be Elon Musk. It's literally just that," one former employee said.

"Being 22 and the youngest billionaire, I think he probably has a general feeling that there aren't consequences for his actions," another former employee speculated.

One consequence appears to be Foody's friendships with Hiremath and Midha, whom he's known since they were 14. One former employee said they had not seen Foody and Hiremath talk since Midha "was pushed out-slash-left." The former employee told *Gazetteer SF* they believe Foody also wants to expel Hiremath from Mercor: "Brendan wants him out. It's pretty clear."

Hiremath was recently placed in a new role as co-CEO (Foody's CEO title does not include the prefix), and a second former employee said he seemed "sad" and "not motivated at all."

The former employees say Hiremath and Midha remain friends. On the high school debate team, the two won three major national championships as a team. Foody did not win any titles.

Above: Mercor co-founders Surya Midha, Brendan Foody, and Adarsh Hiremath.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ULY, INC.; GAZETTEER STAFF PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

There are no corgis at Corgi Cafe

Corgi Cafe opened at 9 Claude Lane, between Kearny and Grant on Feb. 13.

Since then, negative reviews of the 24-hour coffee shop have been appearing on Yelp, most with the same complaint: There are no corgis.

"ZERO CORGIS HERE. NIL. NOT A SINGLE DOG IN SIGHT!!" one reviewer posted in April.

"Very misleading! We felt scammed! Talk about false advertising," wrote another.

It's not false advertising, but it is start-up advertising.

Corgi Cafe is not a Japanese-style cafe full of furry friends, but an elaborate marketing play created by an AI insurance company called, of course, Corgi.

"It's like the Capital One Café," explained Erika Lee, Corgi's head of brand, noting the need for software companies to pull off increasingly spectacular advertising campaigns to distinguish themselves in the AI boom. "A lot of people just do the traditional 'let's buy a billboard.' I haven't really seen anyone do this."

Nico Laqua, Corgi's 26-year-old CEO and co-founder, said that when he applied to rent the office space on the fifth floor of the building, renting the retail space was a required add-on.

"I thought the landlord was making it up, to be honest, but they insisted it was true," Laqua said. So he signed the lease and weighed the options: sublet it or use it.

The team quickly settled on a 24-hour cafe. A rarity in San Francisco's still sleepy downtown, it would be geared specifically toward founders in the AI space. "For people who really want to work, for builders," Laqua said.

Getting the cafe ready for business took about three months, during which they renovated and furnished the space, equipped and stocked the coffee bar, and hired eight baristas.

"It was somewhat expensive," Laqua said, declining to give specifics. According to one barista, the wage is $20 per hour and does not include health insurance.

Laqua said Corgi's investors, who at the time had just funded the company's $108 million Series A round at a $630 million valuation, also "absolutely hated" the idea.

"We are losing some money on it," Laqua said with a laugh, again declining to give specifics. "We are not making a profit on it, I'll tell you that much."

Laqua and co-founder Emily Yuan went through Y Combinator in 2024, and are committed to building a trillion-dollar company, no matter the cost. (Y Combinator alums get a 20 percent discount at the cafe.) They require all team members to work seven days a week, and Laqua estimates about four or five of them currently live at the office which is zoned for residential use.

Corgi employees with spouses or partners "just really integrate their partners into the company," said Lee.

During a recent visit, the Corgi office was strewn with cereal boxes, protein powder, kitchen appliances, computer equipment, cardboard boxes, and sleeping bags.

A small kennel near Yuan's office housed Trudy, Corgi's corgi. To coordinate Trudy's care, the team uses an AI chatbot on the messaging app Telegram that tags different people to feed, walk, and report on her poops and pees.

"Nico will always say, 'You'll find my charred body here if there's a fire!'" Lee giggled.

Trudy visits the cafe occasionally, much to the delight of startup founders, bleary-eyed AI obsessives, and dog lovers who stop by hoping to see a corgi. — *C.H.*

It happened here

How a posse of neo-Nazis and hipsters in San Francisco helped create today's right-wing troll army

By Spencer Sunshine

On May 1, 1988, the traditional socialist holiday of May Day, skinheads held a White Workers March on Haight Street. Rather than being an invasion of outside agitators, this gathering was homegrown: The American Front, the group that organized the march, was formed in San Francisco as an explicitly white supremacist outgrowth of a violent but not outwardly racist skinhead group called SF Skins.

Bob "Blitz" Heick (also known as Nazi Bob), was the founder of American Front. He favored a high-and-tight military-style 'do to match his skinny ties, epauletted shortsleeve workshirts, and black boots with white laces, his affiliations right in your face.

In 1988, Heick was a 20-year-old SF native who'd attended Herbert Hoover Middle School. He lived in an Arts and Crafts-style house at 312 Parnassus St. on the border of Cole Valley, and had already made a name for himself as a violent street punk. In 1985, he and his affiliates kicked in the window of Bound Together, the anarchist bookstore at 1369 Haight St., taking credit for it with a flyer signed "American Front."

Three years later, the American Front was stomping its way down Haight Street with about fifty Nazi skinheads, a mix of provocation and performance art. According to reports in the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee newsletter, they were heckled, one person wearing a "homemade 'Fuck White Power' T-shirt."

San Francisco can be seen as a testing ground for many of the techniques now used nationwide by a white supremacist movement operating out loud in the streets and online. In some instances, via President Donald Trump's administration-run social channels, white supremacist memes are used to recruit people for ICE or silence critics.

One example of many is a video posted by DHS in October that included the "moon man" meme, popular among alt-right white supremacists in the 2010s. Derived from an appropriation of McDonald's "Mac Tonight" commercial, it has become a racist dog whistle.

When confronted by these references, officials wink, lie, and deny, an approach that calls to mind a clique of 1980s countercultural figures who fused their creative work with the most violent wing of the neo-Nazi movement while framing it in the inverted commas of irony. Musicians and publishers Boyd Rice, Adam Parfrey, Nikolas Schreck, and others spent many years in direct contact with neo-Nazis like Heick, James Mason, and Tom Metzger.

As with so many cultural movements of the last century, much of this was born in San Francisco.



Bob Heick, photographed in 1988, by Brian Smale.

By the mid-1980s, the Bay Area's punk scene brought together musicians, writers, artists, and filmmakers, many of whom plumbed extremity for its own sake. Nothing was off limits: serial killers, necrophilia, cults, Charles Manson, or Adolf Hitler.

Boyd Rice could be found at the center of a Venn diagram of the above obsessions. A high school dropout from Southern California, Rice lived in San Francisco in the 1980s, working part time for a burglar alarm company and making atonal industrial music under the name NON. Rice established himself as a charismatic scenester, a trend detector, and consummate collaborator who teamed up with everyone from RE/Search books to the Church of Satan.

By 1986, Rice became entranced by neo-Nazism, as I report in my 2024 book, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism and Countercultural Fascism*. At that time, he was traveling north of the city to San Quentin prison to visit Manson. Rice learned that longtime neo-Nazi propagandist James Mason had proclaimed Manson — an avowed racist who famously etched a swastika between his eyebrows — his movement's new leader after Hitler.

Rice wanted to know more. In April 1986, he wrote Mason a gushing letter from his apartment at 555 Jones St. The connection forged between the edgy, ironic hipster and the dyed-in-the-brown-shirt white supremacist reverberates to this day.

San Francisco can be seen as a testing ground for many of the techniques now used nationwide by a white supremacist movement operating out loud in the streets and online.

A veteran of many neo-Nazi groups, Mason had soured on his movement holding small marches by tiny parties led by mini-Führers. In 1980, Mason began publishing *SIEGE*, a newsletter that advocated a campaign of random violence including bombings, massacres, mass racial unrest, and serial killings in hopes of destabilizing "The System." Partly inspired by Manson's concept of "Helter Skelter," Mason thought neo-Nazis could hide out during the ensuing chaos before swooping in to seize power.

Mason's ideas were too extreme even for his neo-Nazi audience. *SIEGE*'s press run never exceeded a hundred. It ceased publication in 1986.

As Rice's exploration into neo-Nazism deepened, the musician started adorning his letters to Mason with swastikas, and he talked about reading "awesome" books like *White Power*, a posthumously published tome by George Lincoln Rockwell, founder of the American Nazi Party. Rice also introduced Mason to a friend, underground publisher Adam Parfrey.

Parfrey, the son of character actor Woodrow Parfrey, was raised in Los Angeles and lived in San Francisco at the beginning of the 1980s. He would later found Feral House, an indie publisher best known for books about conspiracy theories and extreme topics.

Parfrey reprinted Mason's work in *Apocalypse Culture*, the proto-4chan anthology of "extreme beliefs," and offered to publish a book by him when the time was right. (Parfrey died in 2018, a *New York Times* obituary describing him as a "publisher of the provocative." It did not mention Mason.)

Another of Rice's and Parfrey's collaborators was Nikolas Schreck, a musician and avowed Satanist who'd moved to San Francisco in 1988. Schreck had also fallen deeply under Manson's spell, calling him "a sort of shaman, or spiritual spokesman, for the Western and white consciousness."

As Rice, Parfrey, and Schreck started collaborating, they established connections with Tom Metzger, leader of neo-Nazi group W.A.R. (White Aryan Resistance) and put together a fascist/satanic performance in SF called 8-8-88.

Named for not just its date (August 8, 1988), but as a dog whistle to anyone who knew that 'H' is the eighth letter of the alphabet and '88' is neo-Nazi slang for "Heil Hitler." Held at the Strand Theater at 1127 Market St., 8-8-88 brought together two cultural trends, then in full bloom.

One was the Satanic Panic, a staple of tabloid television that posited ritual abuse of children by supposed worshippers of satan, including an alleged 1987 incident at a day care facility at the Presidio. The panic brought renewed attention to Anton LaVey, the SF-based founder of the Church of Satan, a friend of Rice's, and an author later published by Parfrey.

The other cultural force 8-8-88 tapped into was neo-Nazism, then bleeding into the mainstream with skinheads appearing on Oprah Winfrey's syndicated talk show in February 1988. (Later that year, several skins, including Heick, appeared on Geraldo Rivera's show and broke into a fight during which the host's nose was broken.)

8-8-88 brought together Rice, Schreck, Parfrey, and LaVey's daughter Zeena. A video of the event shows it was nothing to write home about musically, but it's best remembered because of snippets appearing on Rivera's two-hour TV special *Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground* watched by almost 20 million people.

While 8-8-88's political intent was intentionally ambiguous, the affiliations of those present were anything but.

In a photo from the event, Heick can be seen posing with Rice, Parfrey, Schreck and Zeena, along with Nick Bougas, creator (under the pseudonym A. Wyatt Mann) of antisemitic and racist images like "happy merchant" that are still shared regularly among white supremacists. Another photo showed most of them seig-heiling.

In the months that followed 8-8-88, Heick became the snarling babyface of the rising skinhead subculture: He was profiled (by Parfrey) in *Hustler*, featured in *Rolling Stone*, the *Village Voice*, and *Sassy* (with Rice). He also appeared on that infamous Geraldo episode, clips of which can still be found on YouTube.

Despite his unapologetic fondness for swastikas and his occasional "seig heil" pose, Rice remained a key player in SF's underground arts and culture scene.

Confronted with his own words and actions over the years, Rice has dodged all labels: For years he publicly identified as a "fascist," but later said he was not a "political fascist," and finally claiming "I'm the least fascistic person you will ever meet." He has also claimed he can't possibly be a "Nazi" because that term only referred to Hitler's Nazi Party. (I reached out to Rice while working on my book and he did not get back to me.)









Anti-neo-Nazi media from the era: (Top) the cover of *No KKK, No Fascist USA: The Newspaper of the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee* (Spring/Summer 1989); (middle) a page from *Maximum Rock N Roll*, issue 71 (1989); (bottom) *MRR*, Issue 111 (1992)

Appearing in an American Front uniform and holding a knife beside Heick in the March 1989 issue of *Sassy* may have finally been too much even in notoriously tolerant SF: By the end of the year, Rice fled for Denver. There he continued to release music and contribute his writing to hate zines like *ANSWER Me!* for which he wrote a "defense" of rape.

One project that Rice was less keen to admit publicly was the way he and Parfrey contributed to bringing *SEIGE*, one of the most notorious terrorist manuals of the 20th century, to a new generation of racists.

After seeing a copy of a 1993 anthology of the newsletter, Parfrey told Mason, "I'm bowled over by the *SIEGE* book" and that "it's better than good: it's definitive!" When the second edition was being prepared, Mason gave Parfrey's phone number to his publisher, saying his old friend "would be most happy to talk with you, offering any advice he may have that you might need."

For the new generation of young neo-Nazis, *SIEGE* is required reading. One of the shooters at the Islamic Center in San Diego in May cited Mason six times in a manifesto. Groups like the Atomwaffen Division (whose members and affiliates murdered five people) and the Feuerkrieg Division, and The Base, consider Mason's book an instruction manual.

But the counterculturalists who helped keep *SEIGE* out there didn't take credit or responsibility for supporting and normalizing Mason's work or for the fact that it's even still known.

This approach, more than anything else, was picked up in Trump's first term by members of the alt-right who were both irony-poisoned edgelords and fascist shock troops kicking in the Overton Window.

And so, as with the neo-Nazism-as-performance art of SF in the 1980s, it has become almost impossible to know who's joking and who isn't while the country moves closer to autocracy every day.

Rice still lives Denver, sought out by podcasters and writers who interview him about satanism, music, and Tiny Tim. He posts trolling images on Instagram and professes his sincere love for President Trump.

He can also be found downplaying his past — the swastikas, rape jokes, white supremacist friends, and all — painting himself as the victim of "new McCarthyism" whose "agenda is to annihilate anything that doesn't march in lock step with its liberal humanist dogma," as he told one interviewer in 1993.

He now claims he barely knew Heick in their SF days, accusing his critics of being so "stupid and one-dimensional that they think [I'm] as much of a cartoon as they are." In a 2024 Instagram post about SF, he wrote, "Can't imagine ever setting foot in that city again."

Before his 2018 death, Parfrey played the same tune, whining to one zine that he, too, was a victim of McCarthyism, "ultra-feminists" who wanted to "silence anyone who doesn't hew to their views." Parfrey later explained away 8-8-88 as "a way of making people anxious."

In 1989, Heick tried to organize an "Aryan Woodstock" event in Napa County that barely got off the ground. He left the Bay Area around 1990 and has mostly laid low, occasionally releasing music under the name Robert X. Patriot. If he has thoughts on the world he helped create, he hasn't put them on record.

Unlike the others, Schreck admits he was serious about his views back then, although noting that by 1990, he and Zeena broke with her father, Anton, and the neo-Nazis that had gathered around them.

Today, Schreck lives in Berlin and told me in a recent interview that he does not promote any kind of politics, although as a personal philosophy he is opposed to miscegenation and is "a Eurocentrist." At least he is an honest one.

SF's cadre of skinheads and hipsters are obvious relatives to today's alt-right, their DNA baked into so many edgy memes. There's no doubt that like the current cohort, the SF crew of the 1980s employed outrage, irony, and denial to get across their messages of hate and exploited the platforms of their day to attract like-minded followers.

What the current crop has over the 20th century SF crew, though, is clout.

Where Rice, Heick, Parfrey, Shreck, et. al. operated in the fringes of the fringe, today's hipster haters have friends in high places who retweet their racist messages, and in some cases, hire them.

When confronted about the moon man meme, a DHS spokesperson said, "Loving hot, tasty, McDonald's does not make you a Nazi."

Sure. Except when it does.

Nazis in your neighborhood

A one-man distributor in the Tenderloin sells fascist music and merch

By Eddie Kim

Charles McLaughlin runs Brotherhood of Light Recordings, a label that promotes and distributes neo-Nazi and fascist music from Poland to Korea. For years, he has operated out of an apartment in a small Tenderloin supportive housing building.

Since 2009, Brotherhood of Light Recordings has pushed out hundreds of records that use Nazi symbols and ideas. McLaughlin also makes his own music under the names Cosmic Breath 88, Panzerjager, Suncharıot, and Svetovid, among others. In this capacity, he has joined forces on a number of albums with other neo-Nazi and far-right artists and labels that platform white supremacist speech and violent rhetoric. McLaughlin's identity and work was revealed by Bay161, a group of anonymous anti-fascist researchers who document evidence of far-right extremism in the Bay Area.

In an email, McLaughlin said he owns Brotherhood of Light Recordings but claimed that he "restarted" the brand in 2017 to be a "non-political label that releases various kinds of music." The SF native also said he is a "hermit" who lives with "little to no socialization" outside of his immediate family.

"I release various bands with various sorts of ideals and political views, but all political views of these bands are not of the label. Brotherhood of Light Recordings is not a political label and does not promote any specific ideology, despite how it may be perceived currently," he claimed.

Brotherhood of Light Recordings is a clear and key player in the far-right underground metal, industrial, and noise music scenes. This extremist subculture relies heavily on a DIY approach to publishing, with independent distributors like McLaughlin sourcing and/or creating a variety of cassettes, CDs, vinyl records, and merchandise.

Genres in this underground scene include National Socialist Black Metal, racist and anti-Semitic "Rock Against Communism," and "Neo-folk" music that veils fascist ideology in Norse, pagan, and historical pastoral imagery. Defenders of these genres often claim that offensive lyrics and imagery are used for shock value, rather than as a true expression of beliefs. However, McLaughlin's history and collaborations explicitly reference neo-Nazi and white supremacist ideology.

Brotherhood of Light Recordings' recent discography includes the band Brahmastra's "SS Tibet" (a reference to a 1930s Nazi expedition) and music from the group 1389, whose name echoes the same year that hundreds of Jews were massacred in a pogrom in Prague. Some acts promoted by McLaughlin are far less subtle, like the band Rassenschande — the word for the Nazi party's anti-race-mixing program — who dropped a 2021 track named "Nazis in Your Neighborhood."

McLaughlin's own music leans into similar Nazi references. His band Panzerjager is named after the Wehrmacht's anti-tank vehicle and uses historical Nazi imagery. McLaughlin's other band Suncharıot features lyrics mourning the "death of western light" and lauding the "banner of the 12-armed sun," a specific nod to the "Black Sun" hate symbol frequently used by neo-Nazi groups.

"The white nationalist and neo-Nazi movement have always used musical subcultures to organize, recruit, and radicalize," an anonymous researcher with Bay161 told *Gazetteer SF* over email.

They added that the Bay Area, in particular, has a history of fomenting white supremacist movements, as Spencer Sunshine describes on this page.

McLaughlin, in his email, said that he does "not represent any danger to anyone."

San Francisco's municipal green waste program brings consumers into the food production loop, one carrot shaving at a time

Table to Farm

By Olivia Peluso

San Francisco's municipal curbside composting program began in 1996 as a pilot in the Richmond District. Within several years, a city ordinance mandated that every single residence and business in San Francisco use compost bins. In its now 30-year run, the program, which is overseen by privately owned Recology, has diverted 2.9 million tons (5.8 trillion pounds, or colloquially, a *shitton*) of organic material from landfill disposal.

Thanks to those clunky green bins, our food scraps and yard trimmings (instead of rotting in a graveyard with Labubus and 7-Eleven Big Gulps) evolve into compost that, in turn, helps improve soil health and crop resilience; grow sturdier, more nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables; and reunite urbanites with the food system.

"It's saving landfill space, it's turning food scraps into compost, it's helping make the soil more healthy on local farms, it's helping reduce methane emissions," said Robert Reed, a public relations manager at Recology. "So, you know, there's tremendous benefits for this program and it's being replicated."

In his 33-year tenure, Reed has celebrated the program while hosting compost-curious representatives from more than 100 countries hoping to imitate San Francisco's implementation. (Upcoming visitors include interested parties from Mongolia.) Reed's vacations, few and far between, are often spent in France, where SF's municipal program inspired a national law requiring every municipality to make composting convenient to residents and businesses.

In the early days, industry naysayers were fixated on the issue of leaky trucks spilling juices on the road, which was ultimately addressed with some rubber and minor augmentations. Landlords bemoaned slow uptake among tenants, especially the elderly. Special green bags were a frustrating addition to grocery store receipts. Residents feared their sidewalks would soon be filled with flies, rats, and smelly smells. The city, at the time, was grappling with a growing, emboldened rodent population and some folks were weary about compost bins serving as all-you-can-eat buffets for vermin. As it turned out, an attached lid worked wonders to stave off murine scavengers.

Green waste in San Francisco now outpaces recycling: The city collects some 550 tons of waste from green bins every day, versus 450 tons from blue bins. Both the compost and recycling programs have helped the city achieve an estimated 80 percent waste diversion rate, which means 80 percent of the solid waste collected in San Francisco does not end up in landfills. (By comparison, waste diversion rates in New York City and Los Angeles sit at about 22 percent and 40 percent, respectively.)

Recology owns and operates eight different composting facilities on the West Coast. Green waste from the city goes to a facility east of Livermore, along Interstate 5. It takes about 60 days, through a process of natural heating, aeration, and churning, to turn scraps from our homes, corner stores, community gardens, and restaurants into finished compost that is then sold to hundreds of local farms. Currently, 95 percent of Recology-made compost is sold to farmers. It runs them $5 to $12 per cubic yard, depending on how many truckloads a farm purchases. The minimum order is one truckload, which holds 40 cubic yards.



Above, Reynaldo Galindo from Avila Farms chats with customers at the Alemany Farmers Market.

XIMENA NATERA / CATCHLIGHT LOCAL FOR GAZETTEER SF



Interior of a Recology compost bin containing compostable waste.

ROBERT REED / RECOLOGY

Compost and cover cropping — the process of planting accessory crops such as mustard grass and daikon radishes to manage erosion and weeds — have proven to be incredibly useful for restoring soil health. Used together, they improve root mass, increase yields, and help the soil pull more carbon from the atmosphere. The results can include more consistent, disease-resistant crops, and eventually, more nutrient-dense produce.

Both the compost and recycling programs have helped San Francisco achieve an estimated 80 percent waste diversion rate, which means 80 percent of the solid waste collected in the city does not end up in landfills.

Walk around any of the city's farmers markets, and you'll see what I mean. Stalls of organic farmers are eager to extol the virtue of compost, some purchased and some homemade, and they have the crates of colorful fruits and vegetables to back them up.

"We as farmers spend our life learning how to make really good food and trying to get the food to the market. If the food is wasted and thrown into the landfill, it's extremely depressing," said Bob Shaffer, an agronomist and agricultural consultant based in Hawaii. Shaffer advised Recology's compost program with the goal of making a marketable product that would benefit farmers and the people they feed.

"When I go visit farms, these are often very talented farmers having serious problems," he said.

The pursuit of maximum crop productivity through fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides kills soil microbiomes and threatens farms. On farms across California, decades of chemical use has depleted the dirt of essential nutrients and killed off bacteria and fungi that are essential to soil health.

"If you don't feed me for two days, I'm not going to work very hard. If you don't feed me for three years, well, we know what that results in... The soil doesn't die, but it becomes dysfunctional to the point where it doesn't work anymore, even with fertilizers," Shaffer said.

"One of the complaints that I get from farmers is that the fertilizers aren't working," he added. "The fertilizer works just like it used to. It's that the soil microbes can't respond to it anymore."

Another major downside of fertilizer use is cost: Global fertilizer prices have leapt at least 30 percent since the closing, opening, and re-closing of the Strait of Hormuz, endangering shipments of urea and ammonia, both of which are made from natural gas. Add to that the tariffs the Trump administration put in place last year and you can understand why finding a local, sustainable alternative to fertilizers appeals to farms of all sizes.

To compete with the customizations that fertilizer can offer, Recology has what they call available amendments — additional organic materials such as rice hulls, or potent minerals such as gypsum — to help tailor each order of compost to the farmers' specific soil needs.

"The roots and the crops love [the compost], and we didn't pay a penny for it," explained Shaffer. "We didn't import any oil for it. We didn't fight a war for it."

Recology's compost arrives at farms steaming on its 18-wheeler chariot. It's moist and spongy when it first hits the ground, but over time, the top layer will dry, leaving the inside pile moist for months. It smells potent, earthier, and woodier than mulch and but less crisp than a wet forest. Surprisingly, it lacks rotten notes, unlike the countertop composting devices that can fill homes with a throat-tightening rankness.

Zoe Davis, owner of Full Circle Farm, became enamored with farming and compost while earning a doctorate in microbiology. Davis' Gilroy farm teems with busy vegetable plots and flowers tended by hand or android, no gas-guzzling tractors or tillers in sight. Chickens, which add precious nitrogen to the soil via their droppings, run freely or are taken out on walks beneath a robot-driven mobile coop, the future and the past existing in a peculiar, very 21st-century California harmony.

Davis knew that composting would be an essential piece of her farming ethos, but she also defends it from a cost perspective. "For our scale, for our type of farm, it ends up completely making more cost sense for us to use compost instead of synthetic fertilizer," she said.

Compost also helps with other costs. "Water is front-of-mind all the time. Having a layer of compost on the top of the soil dramatically helps retain moisture in the soil. So even on a boiling hot day, you can reach down under the compost and feel moisture in the soil."

According to Davis, the true expense of implementing compost is the cost of delivery, as well as transitioning equipment from fertilizer sprayers to manure/compost spreaders, which are often tractor-mounted.

As she sees it, knowing that your household waste is contributing positively to the food you're buying has the added benefit of connecting each of us to what we eat. "Consumers are feeling increasingly alienated from the food system," Davis said. "There's just this kind of lovely circularity about it: We are both being fed by the community and we're feeding the community."

Among the bird nerds

Birders flock across the Bay Area in search of fleeting, feathery moments of grace

By Eddie Kim



Lisa Bach, Tara McIntire, and Whitney Grover wait while birding at Heron's Head Park.

TÂM VŨ FOR GAZETTEER SF / CATCHLIGHT LOCAL

No matter how hard I stare, I can't see the bird, but I know it's there.

The marsh grasses provide perfect cover, which is probably why the birds gathered here to scream like mad. From one distant bundle of brush comes a series of machine-gun calls: *Ke-ke-ke, ke-ke-ke, ke-ke-ke*.

"They can really throw their voices for being such petite animals," says Whitney Grover, the director of conservation for the Golden Gate Bird Alliance.

We're standing at Arrowhead Marsh, a strip of protected land in the San Leandro Bay, to catch a glimpse of an endangered Ridgway's rail, a brown bird shaped like a fat mango with a neck.

Grover is here with three friends, all experienced birders: Lisa Bach, Lisa Morehouse, and Tara McIntire. They're the perfect guides for me, an aspiring bird nerd who fell in love with the hummingbirds and crows I feed in my garden. We're here for the Golden Gate Bird Alliance's Bay Birding Challenge, in which small teams race to document as many birds as they can in the Bay Area in one day.

Nine teams comprising a few dozen people are competing. For this foursome, Arrowhead is the third stop of the day; the highlight thus far is a bald eagle sighting at Point Pinole not long after sunrise.

The Ridgway's rail ultimately stays hidden in the grass, but the call qualifies as a legit identification.

As we walk along the fenced-off marsh, however, Grover hears something that stops her dead in her tracks.

Kik-kik-kik-kurrrrr. Kik-kik-kik-kurrrrr.

"Oh my god. It's a black rail," she whispers to me.

"They're tiny and very dark colored so they're nearly impossible to see," Grover continues without taking her eyes off the marsh. She raises her phone to record the cacophony.

Once upon a time, birders used paper maps and phone calls to document birds and share their sightings. Nowadays, birds are simply logged in an app called eBird to submit a visual sighting or an ID based on the bird's call; another app, Merlin, is a handy encyclopedia to identify birds by photo or audio recording.

Arrowhead abuts Oakland's airport, and the birdsong competes with the drone of planes. To get here, we drove by ugly hotels and an office park along the inaptly named Swan Way. (There are no swans here.) Yet here I am, holding my breath, enraptured by the *kik-kik-kik-kurrrr* call of the black rail, a creature that I didn't even know existed until now. Even amid brutal urbanity, natural beauty persists.

Grover explains that the black rail is so endangered that, unlike with most species, the eBird app hides the location of sightings to limit environmental disruptions from excited birders. Rails are sensitive little things, and since we haven't actually seen the bird, its vocalizing sparks a lively debate. The Merlin app suggests the vocalization is a Ridgway; Grover is unconvinced, suggesting that Ridgway's rails go *ke-ke-ke*, without a purr at the end.

"We'll just have to listen to the recording in the car," says Morehouse.

The air is crisp, but the sky is millennial gray, not great for bird spotting, but as Morehouse puts it, "it's fun when it's hard." I'm still a little bleary eyed after waking up early. I don't even have binoculars.

Thankfully, McIntire has brought her spotting scope, which looks like something an Army sniper team would use. She waves me over to look through the eyepiece, which reveals a crystal-clear, perfectly stabilized image of a long-billed dowitcher, speckled in auburn and cream.

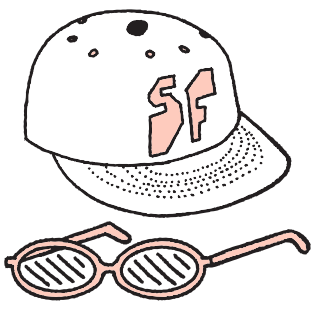
If fishing is a meditative waiting game, birding is the opposite: It's impossible to rest your mind amid so much stimuli. As we meander through Arrowhead, my attention is both locked-in and going haywire. There's a hum of tension as my companions gauge the sights, sounds, and their collective sixth sense.

Sometimes, the tension pays off. I'm midway through asking Bach a question when the other birders ahead burst into chatter. On the water is a tufted duck, showing off his distinctive slicked-back cluster of head feathers. For Morehouse, this one is a lifer: birder-speak for a species spotted for the first time. We coo and fawn over the duck, and as I gaze at it through McIntire's scope, I swear the bird is judging us. It floats and stares, a star putting up with the paparazzi.

"Any conversation is okay to be interrupted by the sight of a bird," Bach tells me apologetically.

"Birders are crazy. We'll drop everything we can to get a lifer, you know?" McIntire chimes in.

McIntire, 55, lives in El Cerrito and works as a landscape architect in Marin. She came to birding after taking a college course in ornithology. Bach, a street and portrait photographer, got hooked during the pandemic. Morehouse, a journalist, became an accidental birder while reporting on rice paddies in Northern California.



All birders have what they call a "spark bird," the one that ignited their curiosity. Bach's is the evening grosbeak, a tiny bird with thick streaks of yellow over its eyes. Lately, she's been about ducks, prompting Morehouse to affectionately call her the "queen of ducks."

"There are birds that just get you to go to certain places," Bach shrugs. "Wherever wood ducks are, I'm there."



Spotting the elusive garganey (with stripe).

PHOTO BY TARA MCINTIRE

There are no wood ducks at our next stop to the south, Elsie Roemer Bird Sanctuary, named for the conservationist who fought to preserve marshland and restore bird populations all around the Bay. Grover is frowning, though. The sand used at the artificial Alameda Beach has now flowed south, creating raised sandbars.

"Man, this really sucks. The water should be higher so the birds can feed," Grover says with a grimace. "Ninety percent of the shoreline all around the San Francisco Bay was filled or degraded, and we've lost all this marshland and beds of eel grass and other parts of the ecosystem."

A flock of skimmers burst by, eliciting gasps from McIntire and Bach. Birding shows what we lost, what we have, and what could be.

We're supposed to go to Crissy Field by 2 p.m., but Grover sees an eBird alert for a garganey duck, a bird rarely seen in the Bay Area, in Redwood City. The team (especially duck queen Bach) immediately calls an audible.

Some 45 minutes later, I crack up in laughter as we arrive at the destination: a strip mall parking lot behind a Chipotle.

We gingerly step through a section of bent chain-link fence to access Nob Hill Pond, a little pool of calm water tucked next to the marshes of Bair Island. There are ducks, alright: Ruddies and pintails and caspians and a gadwall.

The garganey, however, is nowhere to be seen. The spirit of birding can seem, sometimes, like disappointment and wishful thinking.

We drive to a nearby cul-de-sac to access a levee on the opposite side of the pond, hoping for a better angle. We don't find our garganey, but we do run into John Luther and Jim Lomax, two legends of California birding who've spent decades criss-crossing the state to document as many birds as possible in each county.

Despite being in their 80s, age hasn't slowed Luther and Lomax. Luther tells me that he drove 851 miles in a single day to explore Siskiyou and Humboldt counties on a whim last week.

Lomax recently hit a landmark: documenting his 17,000th bird, making him only the second person in California to accomplish that feat. The first was Luther.

Lomax remembers what birding was like before the apps and alerts. "When I first started, there was a fella named Joe Moore who lives in Pacifica. He created a phone line where you could leave a message after spotting a bird," he tells me.

"He would put it on tape so that if you called that number in the evening, you could hear the list of birds that were called in that day," Lomax recalls. "There was no internet. Now, in the last 20 years, birding has expanded so much."

Even after more than 17,000 birds, Lomax is far from done.

"The bird I'd really most like to see in California would be a spoon-billed sandpiper," he tells me. "But chances are..." He trails off.

"The population of that bird is decreasing so fast that the chances of seeing it get lower every year."

After about an hour, we give up on the garganey and head to Heron's Head Park in San Francisco. We'd later learn that other birders reported spotting one 20 minutes after we left.

Like a gambler, a dedicated birder can't help but take one more shot. On Sunday, McIntire rose early and drove from her home in El Cerrito down to Redwood City in the pale dawn light, hoping to catch her garganey before a 9 a.m. hike with friends in Antioch.

Nothing came of it.

The next day, McIntire's phone lit up with a notification: The garganey had emerged once more.

"I finished up some meetings and thought, 'You know what, I'm going to take the rest of the day off,'" McIntire told me.

McIntire was back at Nob Hill Pond by 1 p.m. A few hours passed as she and a handful of fellow birders gazed and gossiped and walked the perimeter of the water. At one point, McIntire took a meeting in her car. As she walked back toward the levee, she saw flailing arms in the distance, urging her over.

She sprinted onto the dirt path in a panic. And there it was, near a thicket of palm trees by the strip mall, floating among a gang of green-winged teals. The garganey stayed there for hours as a crowd amassed on the levee. Like a spotlight, the sun emerged from behind gray clouds, spilling light onto the water.

McIntire told me that nobody knows why this rare and perfect bird chose to rest at this janky little pond beyond a rusty fence in Redwood City. It could have alighted in a national park or a hidden valley. Instead, it chose this scrubby suburb. It makes me think of something Grover told me earlier: Birds appreciate "messiness." Somehow, despite our best efforts to pave soil under asphalt, the garganey continues to swim.

Given such poetry, I couldn't help but laugh when McIntire explained why she was so desperate to tick the garganey off her list.

"It's... it's just a *good-lookin' bird*."

PRIDE MONTH

COOL GAY CITY of LOVE

A century of making, unmaking, and remaking queer San Francisco



Left: Early members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence photographed for "Chariot of Nuns" by French photographer Jean-Baptiste Carhaix in the San Francisco Bay, 1987.



Members of the Gay Asian Pacific Alliance (GAPA) at the 1991 San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Freedom Day celebration.



Elsa Gidlow, pictured here in the 1920s, was the first to publish a lesbian autobiography without using a pseudonym.





Above: Lorraine Hurdle, an African American lesbian who served in the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II. After the war, she served as a recruiter. This photo shows her playing pool.

Top: Photographer Efrain John Gonzalez captured this moment of two people kissing at the National Bisexual Conference, held in San Francisco in 1990.

By Shawn Sprockett

Queen City of the West. Sodom by the Sea. City of Bachelors. San Francisco's queerness has earned it many nicknames over its history. From Ohlone two-spirit identities to citywide Pride celebrations, the city has held tensions between freedom and oppression, revolution and rollback, since the very beginning.

As far back as the Gold Rush, when prospectors used "hanky codes," or in the 1880s, when Oscar Wilde made local headlines while here on a book tour, queerness is part of the foundation upon which San Francisco was built.

Elsa Gidlow was a lesbian poet from Canada when she arrived in a city where Prohibition-flouting saloons were caving to jazzy speakeasies and queer communities were experimenting with genderbending.

A world war brought young people to San Francisco from every corner of America for one last night of fun before they shipped off to combat in the Pacific. When a ban on gay service members ejected thousands of them by "blue discharge," many, like famous lesbian soldier Lorraine Hurdle, chose San Francisco as the place to build their lives around freedom.

Even as pioneering lesbian and gay rights groups the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society made San Francisco their headquarters in the 1950s, safety for folks like Gidlow and Hurdle was not guaranteed. Queer groups and spaces were subject to the same racism and sexism that the rest of society was grappling with, often double-IDing or harassing non-white and non-male people.





Above: José Julio Sarria, above, performs in drag at the Black Cat Bar. In 1961, Sarria ran for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, becoming the first openly gay candidate for American elected office.

Top: A butch and femme couple enjoys a moment at a club owned by North Beach queer club owner Mona Sargent.



A photo by Crawford Wayne Barton in 1978 or 1979 shows a couple kissing in the Castro.



The San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus performs in 1979.

One pioneering World War II veteran, José Sarria escaped exposure in the military only to be outed while cruising at the St. Francis Hotel in Union Square. At the time, being arrested for solicitation meant your name, place of work, and home address were all printed in the newspaper. Sarria found reinvention instead of ruin, creating the drag persona The Nightingale of Montgomery Street while performing at the Black Cat Bar. The bar would win a gay rights victory fighting for the right to serve "known homosexuals," and Sarria would make it his campaign headquarters when he became the first openly gay man to run for office, nearly 17 years ahead of Harvey Milk's historic 1977 win.

Early freedom fighters seldom got the credit they deserved as the 1960s brought a new wave of queer identity and new tactics for gay liberation that nearly eclipsed them. Young Black and brown trans women, many teenagers, moved to the city and found a readymade classroom in Tenderloin hotels. Gay runaways chased a vision of acceptance featured in *LIFE* magazine's June 26, 1964, "Homosexuality in America" spread, which crowned San Francisco "America's gay capital."

This fresh energy transformed the city. Queer community groups like Vanguard rose up against injustices by everyone, from newspapers to psychiatrists. At Compton's Cafeteria in the Tenderloin, a 1966 uprising against police marked a shift of trans and queer resistance — years ahead of Stonewall in New York — and defined the center of the country's first, and so far only, Transgender Cultural District.

With the rise of radical queer resistance and victories like Harvey Milk's campaign for supervisor came a homophobic backlash. Public figures like Anita Bryant and state senator John Briggs led regressive campaigns to undo LGBTQ gains. Gay bashing became common. Milk was assassinated.

Organizations like the Imperial Court and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence used glamour and counterculture to create connection and challenge power structures. Their work would become an essential lifeline in the 1980s and '90s — 61 percent of all deaths of men between the ages of 25 and 44 in San Francisco were caused by AIDS according to a 1993 study. While the sheer volume of loss threatened to unravel the queer social fabric that had been built over decades, solidarity and defiance saw San Francisco through. The AIDS Quilt project and ACT UP held people up and together in the face of so much death.

Today's threats to the community are no less real: loss of civil rights; the dehumanization of trans people by the Trump administration; a purging of gays and lesbians from school curricula, history books, and public life.

Another threat is one all San Franciscans know: The cost of living in places like the Castro has become unaffordable to many, a quieter but no less violent form of erasure.

Can our beloved Queen City of the West reinvent herself again? Somewhere out there, amid the fog and ghosts, the next generation prepares to ensure queer belonging and make its mark on history.

Photos courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society

OUR SUMMER BOOKS GUIDE

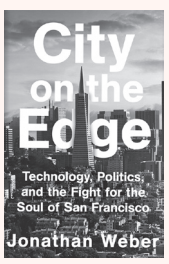
Season of the rich

A Q&A with Jonathan Weber

By Matt Haber

In *City on the Edge* (Atria Books), Jonathan Weber tells the story of San Francisco from the early 1990s to the present. Weber, a longtime journalist who started covering the nascent tech scene for the *Los Angeles Times* in the 1980s and went on to work for publications including *Wired* and *The Industry Standard*, and serve as the first editor-in-chief of *The San Francisco Standard*, had a front row seat as a nichey, nerdy local industry grew into a global engine of wealth, power, and controversy.

But even giants start small — and sometimes larger than life figures like Steve Jobs had to call a journalist at his girlfriend's place to beg for some press or Bill Gates insulted you to your face.



This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You've been covering tech for longer than a lot of the current leaders of tech have been alive. What have you learned in that time?

The technology world is sort of driven by very ambitious creative and smart people with big ideas. It's also driven by systemic forces. In the '90s, it was a pretty small industry, sort of intimate and personal. People had certain ideals and aspirations. When I first got here in 1990, I was working for the *LA Times* and people felt sorry for me. "Oh, you have to cover that boring tech stuff."

"It's not going to last like the savings and loan business!"

Yeah, exactly. I do remember the thing that changed. In 1992, John Malone, the cable mogul, made an announcement that we're going to convert all our cable systems to digital and everyone's going to have 500 channels of television. 500 channels of television was something that people could grab on to.

Back then, was it easier to get somebody on the phone?

Yeah, it was much more intimate. You'd go to these events, you know, Bill Gates would be standing there in the hall, you'd literally be like, "Hey, Bill" and he'd say something shitty to you. He was an obnoxious guy.

Steve Jobs in those years, in the early '90s, was doing NEXT which was a failure. So he was kind of desperate and he had some NEXT thing going on. I don't remember what it was, but he wanted my attention. I was in my girlfriend's apartment in Palo Alto — I have no idea how he got the number — but her phone rings at 8 in the morning and she's like, "It's for you."

I'll never forget this. He says, "Hey, Jonathan, it's Steve." I'm like, "Oh, hi, Steve." But then of course next time I saw him, he looked right through me.

Give me a snapshot of what it's like covering tech now.

There's almost no opportunity where you could like, you know, we used to call



Jonathan Weber

PHOTO BY KAREN TAYLOR

it door-stepping, where you could door-step the CEO.

They've all got 17 doors to step.

They've got some huge compound, this sort of ultra-wealth. These sorts of billionaires who live in an entirely separate existence. They have their multiple giant houses, their private yachts. They don't really interact with the world at all.

At what point did you start to think this is going to be a book?

I started thinking about this book after I left *The [San Francisco] Standard*. I wanted to write a book and I felt like somehow my long career, you know, watching the web become a thing from day one, there's got to be a book in there somewhere.

How many people did you talk to?

About 200.

Was it challenging to get people to look back?

Yes, a little bit more than I thought. I was a little surprised. I thought that people would be interested in having their place in history. And that turned out to be less of a thing than I expected. I think in some cases it's that people think that they've already written their history. They don't need me to tell their history.

Did the book have any other titles before you landed on the one that you chose?

For a while I was kind of fixated on *The Money and the Dream,* but that would have been a bad title.

Sounds a little bit like *The Sorrow and the Pity*.

Yeah, I know. There were a few variations. It could have been *Edge City*. I don't think there were any others that really got too close, but, man, I went through a lot of iterations. Part of the problem was that the publisher was pretty adamant that we needed "city."

They wanted "city" but they didn't want "San Francisco." I had a title that had San Francisco, but they felt that would be too provincial. I was like, "Look, San Francisco is a global brand!"

A ghost's story

Writing a celebrity memoir seemed like an assignment from heaven. In the end, it was pure hell

By Anonymous

The release date had finally arrived. I had spent the latter half of the previous year simultaneously anticipating and dreading the moment the celebrity memoir I had ghostwritten would be released. I was hoping for a critic to call it "heartfelt, at times, funny, but ultimately brilliant," and for readers to line up in droves. I was especially hoping to fulfill the dream of every author (even an anonymous one): a spot on *The New York Times* Best Sellers List.

But its arrival was met with little fanfare. Nobody was talking about the book. Barely even the celebrity who ostensibly wrote it.

It wasn't just my ego that wanted the book to do well. I needed it to make a huge impact for my earnings and future prospects as a ghost. This book was meant to be a calling card for my services. I didn't just need it to succeed. It had to.

A ghost who doesn't sell might as well be D.O.A.

Landing the gig was nothing short of miraculous. It arrived at a time when I needed money badly. Post-pandemic,



I was once again jobless and looking for jobs. After my unemployment benefits expired, I found myself staring down one remaining option to pay the bills: gig work, specifically driving Lyft.

I remember telling myself, I really don't want to do this shit again. I convinced myself I wouldn't be driving long. I was trusting that the universe would reward me with a fabulous opportunity for doing what I needed to do to survive. And sure enough, the same week I picked up my Lyft rental, I got an email from a literary agent looking for a ghostwriter for a celebrity who'd sold a memoir. *Praise be!*

During our first meeting, I was surprised by how warm, kind, and present the celebrity was. I had been following their work though I'd never quite considered myself a fan. I made a point to get up to speed on all they've done over the span of their career in case something came up in conversation. I didn't want to appear uninformed.

What struck me most was that, as a sort of "non-fan fan," I found myself more impressed personally by them than I had been by their entire body of work.

It seemed like forever before I heard from the agent, but in reality it had only been two weeks. I braced for the courteous letdown, but they offered me the gig.

I accepted the ghostwriting assignment knowing I would have to turn in nearly 100,000 words in less than five months. I figured that would be doable because I was promised as much access to the celebrity as I needed. I was given the book proposal, but it wasn't as useful as I'd hoped. It read more like a slightly more charming version of their Wikipedia page. Luckily, I wasn't without resources. There was a considerable archive of print and video interviews to draw on.

I was confident I had enough material to capture their voice and story, but with limited time, the process was going to be more of a headache than I'd initially anticipated.

I was determined to stay positive. I sat at my computer alternating between scheduling and conducting interviews with the celebrity and brainstorming chapter ideas while simultaneously coming undone. Our interview sessions gave me some material but not enough to hit the required word count. I'd ask the celebrity for input but they were completely disengaged. They kept saying that they trusted me, but it soon became clear that I wasn't just the ghostwriter. I was the ideator, the researcher, the therapist, the everything. I did all this for one flat fee. And I was stressed.

A few months in, I was also barely eating, bathing, or sleeping. I'd send what I had written to the celebrity for feedback and get nothing back. Ever.

The weight of it all became apparent during a call with a good friend near my deadline. I had been awake for more than 36 hours. I was delirious, my emotions all over the place. My friend said they were worried because I was sounding crazy, like some, 5150 "leave Britney alone" shit. They told me to turn in what I had even if it was below the required word count. They urged me to stop killing myself over a book that wouldn't even bear my name.

Even if it wasn't really "mine," I wanted this book to be good and I wanted to be a professional. I couldn't come this far and blow it. I'm a ghost, but I'm not a hack.

The book came out and, as I said, it didn't set the world on fire. It hardly even sparked.

After killing myself to produce someone else's book, it wasn't doing the numbers that I hoped it would. Like so many books by celebrities and non-celebrities alike, it came and went.

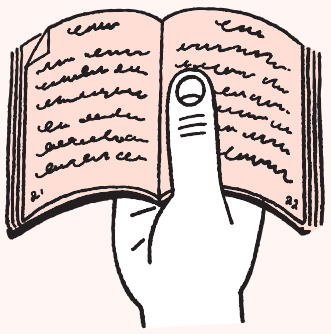
That's what it means to be a ghost. You may rattle the furniture, but in the end, you're meant to quietly see yourself out. No one knows what it took for you to briefly possess your better known author, and really, nobody cares. Long after the book's done, you're the only one still haunted by it.

Prints of the city

By Jess Paiz

New York has long been considered the epicenter of book publishing, but these San Francisco indie publishers have been releasing innovative titles in every genre imaginable for years, in some cases, for decades.

From feminist lit to science fiction to works in translation, here's a by no means complete guide to local presses.



Aunt Lute Books

Aunt Lute started in Iowa City, but has operated in SF since 1986. Dedicated to cultivating and promoting intersectional, feminist voices, its every title is a palate cleanse from our manosphere-dominated timeline. Titles include Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) a staple of critical gender theory courses. Aunt Lute's latest is Gwendolyn Paradice's *The Divining Season*, a novel about indigenous women and girls in Larissa, Texas.

City Lights Publishing

What would SF be without the house that Lawrence Ferlinghetti built? What began as the Pocket Poet Series with Ferlinghetti's own book *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955) and *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg (1956), City Lights has published over 400 titles in many genres. Their latest release is *Gaza: The Poem Said Its Piece*, by Palestinian poet Nasser Rabah.

Last Gasp

Since 1970, Last Gasp has been the first name in underground comix and counterculture arts titles, publishing anthologies of R. Crumb's *Weirdo* and *Zap Comix* and Dave Sims' *Cerebus the Aardvark*. Last Gasp is preparing a five-part English language edition of Keiji Nakazawa's manga series *Barefoot Gen*.

Tachyon Publications

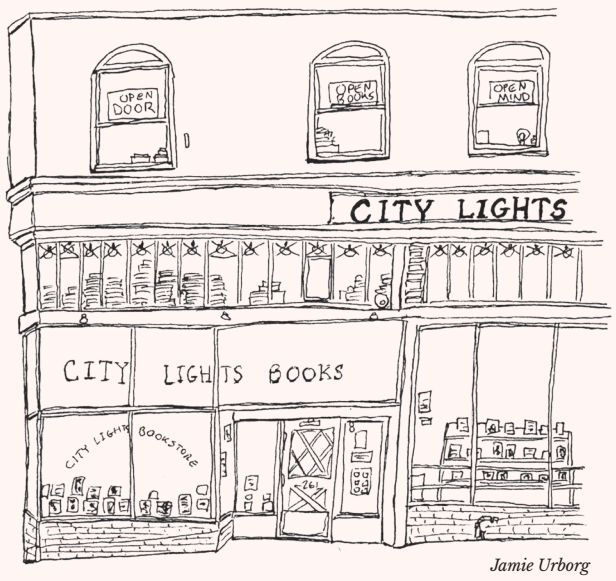
SF or SF? How about both? Last year, Tachyon Publications celebrated 30 years of speculative fiction including works from Peter S. Beagle, Jane Yolen and Brandon Sanderson. Tachyon's about to release *Rabbit Test and Other Stories*, a collection from Samantha Mills that includes a Hugo-nominated short story.

Third State Books

Launched in 2023, Third State Books is dedicated to publishing works by Asian American and Pacific Islander authors for readers of all age groups. Buzzworthy books include *The Vale* (2025) by Abigail Hing Wen and Jonnie Park's memoir *Spit: A Life in Battles* (2026).

Two Lines Press

Two Lines Press has been publishing some of the most compelling translated works since 2013. You could throw a dart blindfolded and land on an engrossing book in their lush catalogue, but if you aren't one for taking chances, check out *White Nights* by Urszula Honek, long-listed for the 2022 International Booker Prize.



Jamie Urborg

THE BEST BOOKSTORE IN UNION SQUARE

Move fast and sell books

By Cydney Hayes

"It's maddening to me how little innovation there is in bookselling," said Paul Carr, co-owner, with Sarah Lacy, of The Best Bookstore in Union Square, a shop at 226 Powell St. that opened at the end of last year. "I'm fascinated by looking at a bookstore as a startup."

Sitting in the well-lit basement beneath the shop next to Lacy, his partner in life and business, Carr rattled off a few areas of the business he thinks are ripe for innovation: Book recommendations and in-store pick-up could use some upgrades, so could atmospheric choices like background music. "I have this obsession with this idea of a bookstore radio station that plays really good music, but then every so often has little snippets of authors talking about the books," Carr mused.

Carr and Lacy have many ideas in store for San Francisco's bookselling scene: They launched a Substack newsletter and are planning a Best Bookstore podcast; they want to host community events. Starting with the SF shop and the original Best Bookstore in Palm Springs, they say they want to grow into the second-largest, non-discount indie bookstore chain in the country.

"We're a very social, high-energy bookstore," Lacy said. "Someone described us as 'What BookTok feels like in real life.'"

It's no surprise the pair are thinking more like startup founders than traditional booksellers: They covered the tech industry as journalists for more than twenty years, and Lacy and Carr's business senses are steeped in the ways of Silicon Valley. Even as they reported on the Valley's dark sides (as founder of the VC-funded tech news site *Pando-Daily*, Lacy was personally targeted by executives at Uber for her tough coverage of the company), they internalized its entrepreneurial spirit and go-for-broke ethos.

In 2022, Lacy and Carr opened the original Best Bookstore in Palm Springs, where they have a second home, and where they quickly learned how much seasonal tourism can impact revenue. While SF is not quite the resort town Palm Springs is, millions of tourists visit the city every year, and Union Square, with its cable car lines, flagship stores, and hotels, is a particularly popular spot for out-of-towners.

Still, Lacy and Carr both said they've been pleasantly surprised with how many locals have come to check out the store so far.

One of them was Mayor Daniel Lurie, who visited Best Bookstore for a Vacant to Vibrant photo-op.

"He found Sarah intimidating," Carr laughed.

"No, he said, 'I find this overwhelming. I find you overwhelming,'" Lacy corrected. "And I said, 'I get that a lot.'"



The Best Bookstore in Union Square owners Sarah Lacy and Paul Carr in the basement space beneath their shop at 226 Powell St.

CYDNEY HAYES / GAZETTEER SF

Staff picks

Summer reading recs from your friendly neighborhood booksellers

KAR RECOMMENDS

Fat Swim

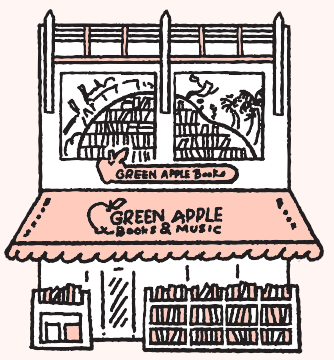
by Emma Copley Eisenberg



Emma Copley Eisenberg's debut collection is a masterclass in the short story, taking up the mantle of the likes of Lucia Berlin, Carmen Maria Machado, and Grace Paley.

Scenes are deftly filled with attention to sights and sounds — the stuck latch of a screen door; an exotic fish with one fin — that make real the words on the page. These stories are populated by queer characters, trans characters, and fat characters who I have never seen granted so much dignity in a book before: the dignity to be beautiful, the dignity to be wrong, the dignity to be whole people beyond their identity and appearance.

— Kar Johnson, events coordinator
Green Apple Books on the Park (1231 9th Ave.)



STACEY RECOMMENDS

Unsung Heroines: 35 Women Who Changed the Bay Area

by Rae Alexandra and
illustrated by Adrienne Simms



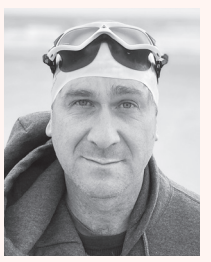
Unsung Heroines: 35 Women Who Changed the Bay Area by Rae Alexandra, and illustrated by Adrienne Simms, is the ideal book to clear the fog in your head — and the dreariness of a cold summer in San Francisco — as you read and get inspired by women who truly made a difference in the Bay Area.

— Stacey Lewis, Vice President, Director of Publicity, Marketing and Sales
City Lights Booksellers & Publishers (261 Columbus Ave.)

PETE RECOMMENDS

The Plover

by Brian Doyle



The Plover is a whimsical and profound story about a solo voyage and some unexpected companions. It dwells at the intersection of nature and humanity. I found it both poetic and funny. The perfect summer read.

— Pete Mulvihill, co-owner
Green Apple Books (506 Clement St.)

Staff picks

Summer reading recs from your friendly neighborhood booksellers

KEVIN RECOMMENDS

My Mother's Boyfriends

by Samantha Schoech



This debut short story collection by a native San Franciscan brims with humor, heart, and complexity. This book is as unsettling as an earthquake, yet utterly enchanting. It features flawed characters with big hearts and packs surprising twists and turns.

— Kevin Ryan, co-owner
Green Apple Books (506 Clement St.)

JAX RECOMMENDS

Evil Genius

by Claire Oshetsky



A peek into the darkly charming mind of Celia, 19 years old in the '70s Bay Area. She takes the train into SF to her stuffy phone hotline job. It's dawning on her that her husband is cruel "even though he doesn't leave bruises." She finds herself purchasing a hunting dirk, not street legal. I was as interested in seeing what Celia did next as I was seeing how Oshetsky would tell it. Unrelenting pace + utterly precise = easy access to the reader's high.

— Jackson Tejeda, co-owner
Christopher's Books (1400 18th St.)

CAMDEN RECOMMENDS

Even The Good Girls Will Cry

by Melissa Auf der Maur



Icon, legend, muse, perennial cool girl Melissa Auf der Maur soundtracked the '90s as the seminal bassist of Hole and Smashing Pumpkins. Her memoir tracks her story from her beginnings as a ticket girl to the meteoric success of the bands she worked with and cements a new cornerstone to the same inimitable shelf occupied by Kim Gordon and Patti Smith.

— Camden Avery, co-owner
The Booksmith (1727 Haight St.)

Cookbooks still have shelf life

By Olivia Peluso

The year is 2012. You're sipping a cold brew and eating a cronut at the reclaimed-wood community table in an old warehouse-turned-cafe. On your screen, article after article prophesizes the collapse of a once-necessary household item: the cookbook. Online media, with its free blogs, YouTube tutorials, and onslaught of affiliate links, will reign. Julia Child has flown the organic co-op.

The year is 2026. Magazines are folding. "Authors" are tapping language models to generate mediocre books. Yet, despite all the mediums falling victim to digital enshittification, cookbooks are thriving.

Over a hundred cookbooks were released in the fall alone. Cookbook sales in the US increased eight percent year-over-year from 2010 to 2020. In 2025, baking cookbook sales leapt 80 percent over the year prior despite TikTok, Pinterest, Instagram, and Substack being more saturated than ever with recipe content.

Why?

"When you pick up a book and you open the cover, suddenly you're in that person's world," said Brian Hogan Stewart, a culinary communications strategist and the founder of San Francisco's Cookbook Week.

"People want to understand someone's viewpoint more, to understand the cuisine more, to understand how to work within a specific set of ingredients or a specific cuisine," said Stewart. "It's the opportunity to immerse yourself and explore something a little deeper."

Recipe creators and chefs have been media personalities for decades, first on television, then YouTube, and now, social media — each of these platforms more direct-to-audience than the previous. The pandemic initiated a coming of consciousness in the kitchen for people everywhere, some of whom never considered turning on the stove. It also propelled consumers into a new era of parasociality. Followers of Molly Baz will buy her new cookbook, but they very well could have bought a tote bag in its place with similar enthusiasm so long as it's a piece of her brand.

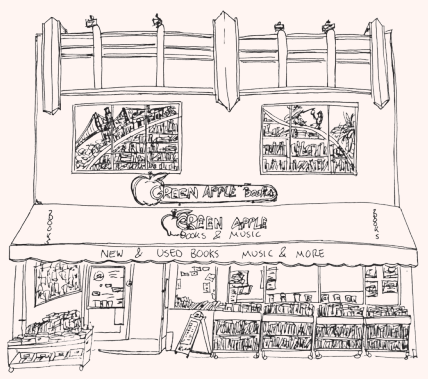
Social media also opened up more pathways for people to break into the culinary and cookbook world. With the rise of short-form video content, you don't need to be a CIA graduate or have cut your teeth in Michelin kitchens to be considered a chef. Virality alone has turned home cooks and hobbyists into cookbook authors, and best-selling ones at that.

"We need cookbooks more than ever, but cookbooks have been improved as an industry because we have more diverse voices that are getting cookbook deals than ever before," said Stewart. "There's real mass appeal for a lot of these authors, so they've built this approach where they're bringing people in who are not cookbook people."

The evidence was written all over the room at Omnivore Books on Cesar Chavez Street during a Cookbook Week event, where a packed house turned out to hear several cookbook authors discuss the relationship between their work and their audiences. Some, such as Reilly Meehan and Violet Witchel, are trained chefs who parlayed their social media presence into cookbooks. All around were people who didn't seem to consider themselves food people, but were all internet people.

The chefs noted that recipe creation for social media and for print are very different. The algorithm rewards constant posting. This pace of recipe creation is a completely different beast than developing recipes for a book. Meehan told the audience that while his debut book *A Little Bit Extra* contains a lot of his personality, the recipes included may feel different than what goes online. Reels and TikToks serve the trend cycle, while the recipes included in his cookbook were in production for two years and can stand, he hopes, for decades to come.

"A cookbook is about building a world around a particular topic. It's art. So much goes into the creation of that volume of work from not only the recipes, but from the visuals, the photography, the food styling, and then the art direction, what the recipes look like on the page," Hetty Lui McKinnon, a six-time cookbook author and chef, told *Gazetteer SF*.



Jamie Urborg

"From the author's point of view, it captures a moment in time. It lets them establish a sense of place. It lets them establish expertise to the audience. Writing a recipe for a book is completely different to writing a recipe for an online audience," McKinnon said. "For me, I develop very differently when I'm writing for a book because that recipe is part of a cohesive story."

Still, even with so much faith in the genre, McKinnon wonders how long the market can keep this pace. The industry is catering to digital-minded consumers on a print schedule.

"The market is absolutely deluged with cookbook launches every season. It's almost like there are too many," she said. "They need these social media personalities who have massive followings. And I get it. It's an economy of scales. It's supply and demand. They've got to meet that."

McKinnon said she also fears that if the industry becomes too fixated on social media performance, it will leave fewer book opportunities for very qualified and talented chefs with smaller online presences. (And don't forget, the algorithm is still racist, especially against women of color.)

Stewart's sentiment that "we need cookbooks now more than ever" is a hard sell to someone who can find dozens of recipes within seconds online. But intellectual property is as valuable now as it's ever been.

For consumers, context and quality matter, but perhaps the largest appeal right now is having something real. With every passing moment the internet becomes more saturated, "saved" folders face both accumulation and neglect, and we forget what our own palates prefer. Not only are people opting for less time online, but they're drawn to something physical, something heirloom to smudge with oil-stained fingers and make a part of their lives.

Besides, the moment a recipe enters the digital realm, McKinnon explained, it's vulnerable to being picked apart and reproduced by other creators or scraped by AI overviews and turned into a slop casserole, entirely void of context or flavor.

"When it goes online, it's not yours anymore. You lose authorship very quickly," she said. "There are certain recipes that, when I develop them, I want them to stay as part of my intellectual property. The best way of doing that is putting it in a book."

KAYO BOOKS

A clean, well-lighted place for dirty, well-loved books

By Matt Haber

The first time I crossed the smoked glass threshold of Kayo Books at 907 Post St., I immediately thought of the 1959 *Twilight Zone* episode, "Time Enough At Last."

Based on a short story by Lynn Venable, the episode was written by Rod Serling and tells the story of a nebbish named Henry Bemis (Burgess Meredith), who only wants to spend his time reading; after he manages to survive an H-bomb that killed everyone else on Earth, Bemis can finally read to his heart's content. If it weren't for gravity and his stupid non-shatterproof glasses.

Kayo's shelves are teeming with pulp novels, genre paperbacks, underground comics, art books, vintage magazines, and everything else I would need to pass my time until the end of the world.

While I'm sure there are a few respectable titles somewhere in this very full yet airy store, I didn't spot a single one. Instead, I browsed racks of paperbacks about sexy nurses and so many others in the genre that Joan Didion once dismissively called "all the paperbacks with chained girls on the cover."

These books, by all rights, should no longer exist. Written on assembly lines by writers using pseudonyms, they were published as cheaply as possible by companies operating out of rat traps. Read surreptitiously, they were meant to be disposed of at a moment's notice. These books are no one's idea of enduring literature, and still, here they are.

Also still here are Maria Mendoza and Ron Blum, the married team who've owned and operated Kayo for three decades. They opened the store at a smaller, less polished location on Polk as a place to put Blum's personal collection of mystery, sci-fi, and other pulps. That was shortly before the birth of their son. "We had all the shit in our apartment," said Mendoza, sounding actually kind of wistful for those days.

Now they work out of a beautiful, renovated space with a mezzanine and a basement. Their son is a grown man who sends his parents pictures of paperbacks he spots in the wild. "It's not like he wants to collect," said Blum, "but he appreciates it."

Kayo has also grown up, becoming a singular outpost of underground or outré 20th-century books and periodicals with sales all over the world, thanks to eBay and their own website.

"People used to read for entertainment," Mendoza told me. "Now entertainment is Instagram or whatever it is."

Like the books they sell, the collectors of old pulps are fading. Over the decades, Blum and Mendoza have seen many of their most avid customers die off. "It's a search for immortality that you're never going to achieve," Blum said of collecting. "Maybe your collection will survive after you're gone and maybe not."



Sana Javeri Kadri and Asha Loupy

PHOTO BY MELATI CITRAWIREJA

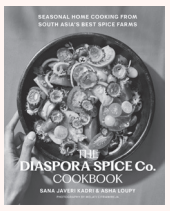
Spice World

A Q&A with Sana Javeri Kadri and Asha Loupy

By Olivia Peluso

Sana Javeri Kadri and Asha Loupy are the authors of *The Diaspora Spice Co. Cookbook* (Harvest), an outgrowth of their Oakland-based heirloom spice company that partners with spice farmers in India.

Together with photographer Melati Citrawireja, they spent four months travelling to farms in India and Sri Lanka, reaping inspiration and family recipes for their book.



This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How did the cookbook idea come about?

SJK: Most of the Diaspora super-fans here in the Bay know the names of our farmers. They know which festivals they celebrate, they know what they like to eat for breakfast. And this book, in a way, is an extension of that.

I wanted people to know how a third-generation pepper farmer cooks with pepper and how beautiful that can be. I wanted people to know how, like, in the wild cardamom forest of Kerala, you can make the most delicate fish curry using two or three spices. And that, like, spices in South Asian food are often seen as intimidating, but when you're making fresh seasonal food, it doesn't have to be. And that's where Asha came in.

AL: I've always loved cooking since I was little and I knew that I wanted to be in food, but being in a restaurant kitchen was not at all something I was interested in. So, I worked in specialty food first. I worked at Market Hall Foods in Oakland for 12 years and ended up as one of their grocery buyers. During that time I heard someone say, "Hey, there's a woman and she's bringing in turmeric." When I tasted it, I really felt like I have not tasted turmeric like this before. Like, there was actual taste. There were citrus notes, there were earthy notes. It was bright and flavorful. And so I started cooking with the turmeric, and then also just tagging Diaspora and Sana [on social media], and we built our relationship that way.

What was the recipe development process like for this book, taking dishes from across the world and localizing them for a Bay Area audience?

AL: When we were all traveling, I made a huge list of vegetables — like, all the vegetables that I could think of that you could buy in the United States — and we used that as a basis of what we wanted to learn with some of the farmers.

We wanted to learn okra with our cumin farmers and then cabbage with another farmer. What was a little bit surprising to me is there weren't that many substitutions we had to make when we were developing the recipes.

There were things like bottle gourd, which is just harder to find here, so we substituted cucumber in one dish and zucchini in another dish. But when we were in Manipur, which is in the northeast near the Burma border, there were fava beans at their farmers market! I was really excited because that's my favorite vegetable — I'm always really excited when I see them at the Ferry Building, so seeing them on the other side of the world and that I would be able to make a recipe using them was very thrilling to me.

SJK: And people would never know that! They're often like, "Oh, Indian food means heavy, greasy, chicken tikka masala and naan."

What are some of your favorite recipes?

AL: It's really hard to choose a favorite, but one I love and the one that I make a lot is this dish from Andhra Pradesh. What was really revolutionary to me was, they were taking the tomatoes and salting them and putting a little turmeric on them to pull out some of the juices. And then the tomatoes would be sun-dried for a little bit, but the juices that were left over were used to rehydrate the tamarind that was going to be part of the dish later. And so you were really getting every part of the tomato essence. And what is left is this really sunshiny, tangy, spicy, crunchy, jammy condiment.

As a tomato lover, I'm going to beeline to that recipe.

SJK: This book has a lot of tomato-lover recipes. I think we came to a point where we said that we had to stop putting in burst tomatoes. We couldn't do that anymore. That couldn't be our crutch.

How has touring and promoting the book been?

SJK: We've spent almost six years on this project, so it still feels very surreal to see the book out in the wild and have my friends take pictures in bookstores and that it's in people's hands. We spent so much time and effort on this book and went through so many phases of our lives during it.

I started on this book when I lived in Oakland with my ex-girlfriend and my dog of seven years. By the middle of this book, I was living out of a suitcase between India and my grandparents' house in Berkeley. And the book has come out when I have a fiancé and two stepdaughters in Menlo Park. I think Asha has the same complete change of life during this effort.

This must be the *mise en place*

A Q&A with Luke Barr

By Olivia Peluso

Luke Barr's third book, *The Secret History of French Cooking* (Dutton), details the development of the nouvelle cuisine movement of the '60s and '70s. This era in French history forever changed the culinary landscape and laid the foundation for many of the fine-dining tropes and traditions still prevalent today.

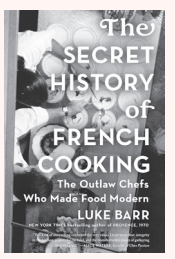
Barr, a Bay Area kid, is also the author of *Provence, 1970,* an examination of one fateful winter his grandmother and great aunt, the legendary food writer M.F.K. Fisher, spent in the south of France, joined by some of the world's leading culinary voices including Julia Child and James Beard.



Luke Barr

PHOTO BY BENOIT PEVERELLI

The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.



Where'd you get the idea for *Secret History*?

The starting idea was that post-1968, there was a shift in the culture. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll, the Baby Boomer generation and all that stuff was happening all over: in France, in the States, everywhere.

There was a sort of a new generation of chefs in the late '60s, early '70s who thought, Why should they just do the same old recipes, the same classic standard dishes that they've been cooking for decades, even centuries. Why not try something new?

Why was France the place to focus on?

You know, in the '60s, if you wanted to go to the best restaurant in San Francisco or any place, generally speaking, the best restaurant was a French restaurant.

French cooking had a lock on haute cuisine, on what was considered to be the very best. And so, that's why when this new generation of chefs in France started doing these experiments, they got so much attention, including over here. I mean, there was a huge amount of press attention.

This book contains secrets, gossip, and lore from over half a century ago. What was the research process like?

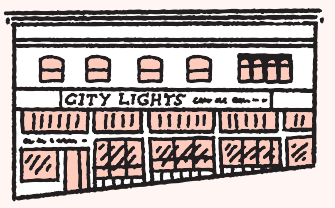
I call it *The Secret History* for two reasons... I mean, what I was just describing about all the media coverage, that was not a secret. But the fact that there were these women who were fighting for recognition, that story has never been told. And so that was a little bit of a secret.

Then there's this other element which has to do with the most powerful food critic in France, if not the world at the time and for many, many years, who has a role to play in this whole story. That's the story of Robert Courtine, the food critic for *Le Monde*, and his history has never been fully told.

In your travels to France and beyond, can you sense the influence of the people you cover in *Secret History*?

It's easy for me to say yes. If you go to any Michelin three-star type restaurant — which I honestly do not do very often — but when you do, it's always an experience that is heavily colored by this history in this book. It's very meticulously inventive, you know, the idea that a plate comes out of the kitchen and it's in and of itself beautiful. The idea of the large plate with the food in the middle of it and this kind of graphic presentation. That's the cliché of nouvelle cuisine.

Of course, it very quickly succumbed to being overexposed and there was an enormous backlash against this idea of these gigantic plates and these tiny portions of food and these super high prices. But still, if you go to that kind of restaurant today, you can see that influence.



What's next for you?

I'm writing a book about sushi. My wife is Japanese. We met in college, so I've been going to Japan for many, many years. I have written over the years in various magazines and so forth about Japan, but I've always wanted to write a book about Japan. And also, I don't think the definitive book about sushi has been done. I want to go back to the '80s and the moment that it kind of broke through culturally.

This is coinciding with the time when there was this bubble economy going on in Japan.

Japan was hugely powerful — Japanese companies buying Rockefeller Center and buying Columbia Records. There were all kinds of politics in the background, but then the foreground was also this rise of sushi and the sort of Japanese avante-garde and Comme des Garçons fashion and stuff like that.

So, that's my new book. A total pivot toward the east.

Food & Drink



Soft serve summer

Elevated riffs on this childhood classic are why you should never skip dessert

By Olivia Peluso

Soft serve is in — in Michelins, pizza joints, barber shops, cafes, and evidently, our dreams. Once kept in the company of hot dogs and childhood memories, this nostalgic and endlessly-customizable machine-churned dessert has become a mainstay on menus. While trying to determine why, chefs resoundingly countered me with a better question: Why not?

Mission hotspot Ernest leans into a classic soft serve base with elevated toppings. Their hazelnut sundae features homemade vanilla soft serve covered in a toasted hazelnut and vanilla praline sauce, finished at the table with a dark chocolate magic shell à la Smuckers.

"I don't think I'll ever change it. I love this stuff so much," said chef-owner Brandon Rice.

During the recipe development process, Rice approached this crowd-pleaser with the scrutiny of a savant and the excitement of a child scurrying on the beach. After months of research, he found inspiration in the most unassuming and yet, one of the most nostalgic, places.

"Costco was by far the best," he said. "Costco just aerates the shit out of their soft serve and that's why it's so light and fluffy."

"And I love that texture of soft serve on your tongue — when you like, mash it between your tongue and the roof of your mouth and it's just the smoothest texture you've ever had. It's my favorite part about it."

Nostalgia seems to be the common thread among soft-servers. "For us, the whole concept for the pizzeria and pizza shop is centered around nostalgia," said Ryan Pollnow, co-executive chef of Flour + Water. "And for us, soft serve fits right into that same nostalgia."

Valley Ford Creamery in Petaluma supplies Flour + Water with its soft serve base. Made from Jersey cows, it is essentially flavorless, referred to as fior di latte, or "flower of milk" in Italian. Traditionally, fior di latte is considered the purest expression of the animal's milk and is widely used as a benchmark to gauge the quality of gelatos in Italy.

Pollnow says they love this particular soft serve because the Jersey cows' milk is naturally higher in butter fat, at around 5 to 6 percent, compared to standard dairy cows at 3 to 4 percent.

In addition to their fior di latte, the Flour + Water pizzerias offer a salted caramel soft serve. Their toppings include more refined options such as olive oil and sea salt, Amarena cherries, and house-made brown butter cereal crunch, but one could spring for classic options like chocolate sauce and rainbow sprinkles.

Others are leaving the sprinkles behind and making soft serve a thing of the future. At San Ho Won, soft serve is a menu mainstay even as flavors and the base recipe itself changes seasonally. Currently, they're offering a black sesame soft serve with huckleberries or a strawberry soft serve with makgeolli, yogurt, and nurungji, a crisped rice.

Past flavors include a dairyless tangerine sorbet, misugaru and soy sauce, roasted buckwheat, and banana milk.

"It's the ideal dessert to have at the end of the meal, especially the food we're serving, Korean barbecue," said executive sous chef Thomas Etheve. "We like the idea of how refreshing it is after all the meats and the rice and the soup. And, also in a very cool and casual way to present dessert."

DRINKING COMPANION

It's always nighttime at Lone Palm

By Olivia Peluso



A low key spot in the Mission perfect for conversation or the occasional makeout session.
TÂM VŨ / CATCHLIGHT LOCAL FOR GAZETTEER SF

Audrey Hepburn's *Funny Face* on the TV. Yo La Tengo's "Center of Gravity" on the hi-fi. Cheetos and Doritos in my bowl. Trumer Pils in my glass. Pen in hand. Thoughts in my mind: Lone Palm is always a good idea.

This cocktail bar on 22nd Street between Guerrero and Valencia is the bartender's bar; an industry favorite. Outside, its parklet provides a sunny venue for after-work libations and shag inhalations.

Inside, though, it's always nighttime at Lone Palm.

On the mirror-lined wall behind the bar, a good many bottles of liquor (and a lava lamp among them) are illuminated by neon blue and pink lights. Art deco pendant lights with pathetic yield are aided by votives glowing along the long wooden bar and on every table. It offers something rare in our gilded city: A generous serving of privacy without a drop of exclusivity.

On a given weeknight, the clientele runs the gamut: a rancher discussing how his tween daughters will ring in spring break with a Friday night cattle branding; a college student complaining about online portals to a patron older than the building itself; a fleet of cheery coworkers, tech backpacks in tow, take over three tables; a Gen X couple indulging in a PG-13 public makeout sesh (yes!). First dates here are a given (guilty), but don't let that deter you from letting Lone Palm be the venue for a third, fourth, or hundredth.

Surely, this is the place to go if you want to hide out. But it's also a place to be known: Lone Palm is a magnet for regulars, with good reason. The bartenders know many of the patrons by name, lending a neighborly charm that immediately disarms Lone Palm's noir appearance. Somewhere between a dive and a cocktail lounge, it's all swank high life without the high pricing. Beer, wine, and cocktails will run you a perfectly average rate, certainly not a one-and-done kind of place, and, of course, the snack mix is free. They have no set menu, but can pull out any of the classics.

Readers of Drinking Companion may have deduced by now that I indulge shamelessly in bar eavesdropping, and Lone Palm provides the perfect setting for it. Everybody here has a story.

Recently, as I headed to the bar to hear a story or two, I felt a tinge of guilt for not engaging in a "healthier" after work activity like sound bathing or coffee colonics. As I write this, I dread the sterility of the yoga class I'm soon to attend, where very few in that class of forty-odd San Franciscans will deviate from my precise demographic, and where community, such as it is, exists in a vacuum. Sometimes, the unhealthy choice of a pint, a bowlful of Doritos, and an oversharing barmate is also the more human choice.

Slip behind those black curtains into Lone Palm's time-warping oasis sometime and see for yourself. Namaste.



Lone Palm

GO IF YOU LIKE
Alfred Hitchcock, cat statues, American traditional tattoos

ASK FOR
A martini

LEAVE
The light of day

AVOID IF YOU WANT
A see-and-be-seen vibe

Lone Palm is open 4 p.m. to 2 a.m. every day.



Corn, butter, and sea urchin combine for something rapturous at Maria Isabel.
OMAR MAMOON / GAZETTEER SF

HOLY TAMALE

You've never tasted anything like Maria Isabel's take on a classic

By Omar Mamoon

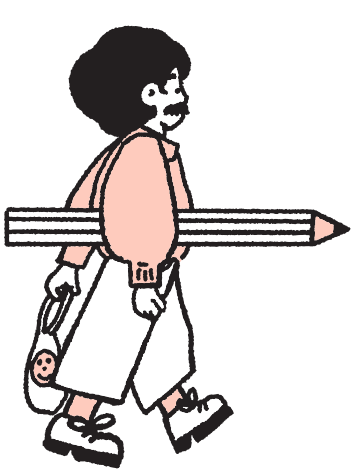
When I learned Laura and Sayat Ozyilmaz, the talented team behind Dalida, the critically acclaimed eastern Mediterranean restaurant in The Presidio, were opening a new contemporary Mexican spot, I knew it was highly likely the restaurant would hit hard.

A meal there confirmed it.

Maria Isabel, the Ozyilmazes' new restaurant at 500 Presidio Ave. in Presidio Heights, is a highly personal one for Laura. Whereas Dalida is named after Sayat's mother who hails from Istanbul, Maria Isabel is a nod to the women in Laura's life: her sister Maria (a chef in Mexico City), and Isabel, Laura's mother, who lives in Acapulco.

In honor of Acapulco's beaches, the first section of the menu is devoted to mariscos: zippy aguachiles, octopus tostadas, and a bright ceviche acapulqueño that features a molasses made of sour orange sourced front Star Route Farms in Bolinas in place of the orange Fanta that's commonly used in the O.G. version.

"I'm sticking to my own inspiration, the way I grew up eating and adapting the dishes to ingredients I find here in San Francisco," said Laura, who moved here after cooking at some of the best restaurants around the world like the avant-garde Mugaritz in Spain and Eleven Madison Park in New York City.



It was in New York where Laura met Sayat and fell in love; the two moved to San Francisco ten years ago. They continued working in fine dining before starting their own popup together, which led to Dalida.

Though Maria Isabel opened barely two months ago, it's already firing on all cylinders. I dined with a group of 5 and we ordered almost the entire menu, which is divided into the aforementioned mariscos section focused on seafood, antojitos (small snacks), maiz (which emphasizes corn dishes), and platos principales that are more meat forward.

For me, the standout was the tamalito de maiz: I've never had anything quite like this one before.

Based on a tamal de elote that Laura grew up eating in Acapulco, it's made from fresh corn blitzed together with butter before being steamed. The result is something slightly sweeter that achieves a beautiful fluffy texture somewhere between a tamale, flan, and corn bread.

"I grew up eating that specific tamale, topped with queso, crema, and salsa verde. I'd eat that twice a week," Laura said.

For Maria Isabel's version, Laura tops the tamales with a few luscious tongues of bright orange sea urchin finished brilliantly with a Mexican vanilla oil.

"Vanilla, to me, tastes like the forest or earth — it tastes a little piney and adds a layer of complexity," she explained.

Hidden beneath the tamale is a layer of crunchy fried corn kernels that provide a nice textural contrast, and the entire thing is topped off with a sauce made from more corn, butter, and cream spiked with more of Mexican vanilla and finished with a few dots of fermented habanero sauce for nice added spice.

The dish was gone in an instant with our large group. Besides ordering it, my only other advice is not to split it five ways.

GAZETTEER EVENTS



From left: Katy Tang, Lex Sloan, Christin Evans, and Cydney Hayes



Olivia Peluso and Lillian Zhang



Jeremy Castillo



Paige D'Encarnacao

So money

Chat Room: Money was filled with valuable conversations about economics, business, and personal finance

On April 29, Swedish American Hall was all about the Benjamins. On that night, *Gazetteer SF* hosted Chat Room: Money, a series of lively, informative conversations about all things finance.

Kicking off the discussions, reporter Joel Rosenblatt interviewed Ted Egan, San Francisco's chief economist about cost of living, housing, and how to keep working people in San Francisco.

Next up, tech & business reporter Cydney Hayes brought together Christin Evans, co-owner of Booksmith and the Alembic; Lex Sloan, executive director of The Roxie; and Katy Tang of the San Francisco Office of Small Business to discuss the challenges small businesses owners face in an expensive city.

Finally, our food & drink reporter Olivia Peluso shared the stage with personal finance influencers Lillian Zhang and Berna Anat who advised young people to get over their fear of figures and get their houses (or, more likely, tiny apartments) in order.

City reporter Eddie Kim served as master of ceremonies and our partners at Amoeba Music and Bar Part Time set the tone for the night and helped our guests celebrate Gazetteer's two-year anniversary.

Photos by Rachel Zeigler



Alyssa Sewlal



Marisa De La Cruz and Armando Ramirez



Ted Egan and Joel Rosenblatt



Sharon Stone as Catherine Tramell, a bestselling author in 1990s San Francisco where pleasure-seeking carried no penalties or shame — especially when you had money. TRISTAR PICTURES

By Walter Thompson

SAN FRANCISCO PLAYS ITSELF

SEX AND THE CITY

Joe Eszterhas' scripts for *Basic Instinct* and *Jade* are immorality tales about a San Francisco flying high in the 1990s

When Joe Eszterhas wrote *Basic Instinct* (1992), the breakout erotic thriller for which he was paid a then-record-breaking $3 million, he set it in a city that embodied the rejection of bourgeois morality, a place where transgression required little explanation and even less apology.

Just to make sure the audience understands exactly what kind of world they're entering, *Basic Instinct* opens with a stylized, explicit sex scene that abruptly turns violent when a shadowy blonde reaches for an ice pick mid-coitus, turning her partner's *petit mort* into a Grand Guignol vignette. It's less a shock than a statement of intent: Like the guitarist's amp in *This Is Spinal Tap*, this one goes to eleven.

The pursuit of justice falls to detective Nick Curran (Michael Douglas), a homicide cop clawing his way back to credibility after killing two tourists in a shooting at Fisherman's Wharf. The next morning, he arrives at the crime scene: a Pacific Heights mansion, where he learns the victim is former rock star Johnny Boz, the kind of countercultural figure San Francisco had already begun to absorb into wealth and respectability. Douglas, who built a career playing charismatic men with dubious morals, is perfectly cast here.

There, as a forensic team studies the residue of excess — cocaine, the remnants of indulgence revealed by black light — a superior reminds Curran that the victim wasn't just another casualty. Boz was a friend of the mayor.

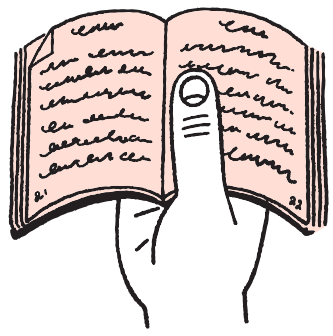
Curran and partner Gus Moran (George Dzundza) pay a visit to Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone), the last person seen with the victim. The script places her at 162 Divisadero, but location managers put her in a neoclassical Pacific Heights mansion (2930 Vallejo St.) built for influential San Francisco real estate developer Oscar Heuter. Shot from above as they approach its portico, the detectives look like supplicants visiting a temple. Dwarfed and encircled by columns in a low-angle shot as they wait to be admitted, Tramell's wealth strips the cops of their power.

Inside, their disorientation deepens after they encounter her lover Roxy (Leilani Sarelle) and realize that their suspect, a bestselling author, isn't just rich and polyamorous but bisexual. When they finally track down Tramell reclining above a secluded cove at her Stinson Beach house (actually shot at a sprawling compound in Carmel-by-the-Sea), she toys with the detectives before dismissing them with casual authority. Stone plays her with a feline stillness that borders on indifference, staying one step removed, the way rich people do when they assume the room will adjust to them. The detectives struggle to orient themselves not only to her sexuality, but to the ease with which she seems unbothered by the very binaries that still structure their thinking.

As imagined by Eszterhas and directed by Paul Verhoeven, San Francisco is smoothed out, professionalized, and aspirational. Boz's barn-sized queer-friendly Fillmore disco existed only on a Burbank soundstage, and Stetson's Bar, where the detectives argue over Tramell's manipulations, was a redressed Rawhide II (280 7th St.), the city's only country-western LGBTQ bar.

Even the spaces that should anchor Curran feel altered. When he checks in for a mandatory session with his psychiatrist and clandestine lover (Jeanne Tripplehorn), SFPD Homicide looks like a mid-level law firm with paneled corridors, potted plants, and recessed lighting. In earlier San Francisco procedurals, the Hall of Justice at 850 Bryant St. is a place of scuffed linoleum lit by fluorescent glare.

The film's most famous sequence, the interrogation scene, completes the inversion. Tramell doesn't evade the system; she occupies it. Controlling the room, the cadence, and the attention of her interrogators, she turns the scrutiny back on them, like the hippies on Haight Street who jogged alongside tourist buses holding up mirrors. Seated alone in the center of the line-up room after refusing an attorney, she projects control like a routine from *Flashdance* (1983), and they take the bait. Eszterhas, who co-wrote *Flashdance* with Tom Hedley, had staged the setup before, but here he strips it of music, leaving nothing but power.



By the scene's end, the cops are reduced to horny Torquemadas, mistaking their arousal for righteousness. Tramell, meanwhile, remains self-possessed, amused, and ultimately untouched.

The city she inhabits, a place where artists create their own ethical frameworks and appetite outruns consequence, wasn't invented entirely for the screen. It was an extrapolation of the writer's lived experience in San Francisco.

József Antal Eszterhás was born in Hungary at the end of World War II and raised in Cleveland after spending his early years in refugee camps. He went on to build a very American life as a reporter, husband, and father operating inside a bourgeois system he understood and, by all accounts, respected.

"My picture was on the side of the *Plain Dealer*'s circulation trucks," he reminisced on his blog. "I won a bunch of local and statewide journalism awards. I was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize." By the early seventies, though, Eszterhas had caught the eye of Hunter S. Thompson, who brought him to *Rolling Stone*, a place where the line between participating and reporting had already started to blur.

In the magazine's San Francisco offices, nearly every form of pleasure was available to those who partook. Not merely in sex and drugs, but in a culture that treated transgression as a form of authenticity.

Eszterhas embraced it all. And it cost him.

"Life had become wretched excess," he admitted. The family he'd built in the Rust Belt did not survive inside the life he created after moving to Tiburon, but in making the transition to Hollywood during the high-concept style of the '80s, he resolves that tension in his work. In Eszterhas' idealized version of San Francisco, pleasure-seeking carried no penalty or shame — especially when you have money.

Eszterhas couldn't sustain a world where freedom outruns responsibility, but he offers it to his characters without hesitation. Three years after *Basic Instinct*, he explored (or exploited) the same themes in *Jade*, directed by William Friedkin. (This one was sold as a two-page treatment for $2.5 million.)

Once again, San Francisco elites move through a city where sex, power, and secrecy intertwine, this time with Linda Fiorentino as Trina Gavin, the wife of a defense attorney who's leading a parallel life the men around her can neither control nor comprehend.

Like Tramell, Gavin is wealthy, sexual, and unapologetic. "I cheated on my husband," she shrugs. "I didn't know I could be arrested for it."

What links *Basic Instinct* and *Jade* isn't just their fixation on sex and power, but the suggestion that Midwestern ideas about identity are simply incompatible with San Francisco's permissive climate. Eszterhas amplifies the city's self-image into something operatic: Creative people and wealthy elites lead authentic lives, while the moralists who object are probably hiding something.

In the decades since these Eszterhas fantasies, libertine San Francisco has been fully captured by libertarians, the pleasure of fucking supplanted by the pursuit of fuck-you money. Today's elites simulate transgression by outsourcing their Burning Man camps and microdosing their way through curated rebellion, but the people who created those scenes have been pushed out, their spaces repackaged as shifting mores mainstreamed and commodified sexual expression.

"San Francisco values" still signifies something, but mostly as a relic, now more often invoked by our city's critics than its residents.

Like renovated Victorians, the old myths have been repackaged and sold as something new.

COMMENTARY

San Francisco is not a sanctuary city

The violent detainment of a mother at SFO is a reminder that 'sanctuary' ends at the circle of officers around the armed men and crying child



Eddie Kim



Surrounded by Homeland Security officers, protesters and media, a man stands in the a crosswalk holding a sign that says "Stop your car to block ICE" during a protest in downtown San Francisco, August 20, 2025.

EDDIE KIM / GAZETTEER SF

In March, two federal immigration agents in plain clothes tackled a woman to the ground and arrested her in Terminal 3 of San Francisco International Airport. Videos captured by numerous bystanders show a young girl weeping as she watches her mother struggle; others nearby demand the officers reveal their identities and badges.

The anger is palpable: "I hope you're so fucking proud of yourselves," one man tells the agents as they drag the woman and stuff her into a wheelchair. "Shame on you!"

In the videos, the two agents are eventually surrounded by a cadre of San Francisco Police Department officers who appear to be shielding them from the public.

There's only one thing I can conclude after witnessing this: San Francisco is not a sanctuary city, no matter what statements the city posts.

Following the SFO incident, Mayor Daniel Lurie took to social media to address the violent detainment, calling it "upsetting."

"I have spoken to leaders at SFO and SFPD, and we believe this is an isolated incident. We have no reason to believe there is broader federal immigration enforcement at SFO," Lurie wrote on X.

"SFPD officers remained at the scene to maintain public safety and were not involved in the incident. Under our city's longstanding policies, local law enforcement does not participate in federal civil immigration enforcement," Lurie continued, concluding that "those policies keep us safe" and "will not change" as long as he is mayor.

Watching the videos, would a reasonable person deem a squad of uniformed SFPD officers standing in what amounts to a defensive circle around an unexplained, violent detainment by men who refuse to show their badges to be the definition of not participating?

I can't say, but it sure doesn't feel like the actions of city employees upholding the agreements of a sanctuary city.

That's because San Francisco is not a sanctuary city.

"We understand federal officers were transporting two individuals on an outbound flight when this incident occurred," SFO spokesperson Doug Yakel said in an email to *Gazetteer SF*. (It's worth noting one of those individuals was a kid.)

Yakel then echoed the mayor's take that the arrest was an "isolated incident" with no further "reason to suspect broader enforcement action at SFO."

"We were not involved in or notified in advance of this incident. Airport operations continued without disruption, and there was no impact to flights or passenger processing," Yakel said.

Yakel did not respond to follow-up questions about why the detainment turned violent if it was indeed a "routine" transport. He also did not respond to questions about whether SFO policy requires advance notice of federal immigration enforcement in its facilities.

Does SFO feel safe for immigrants, given this "isolated" attack?

No, because San Francisco is not a sanctuary city.

These videos are deeply troubling for anyone, but I had a particular memory watching them. I remembered the looks SFPD officers gave me last summer, when I was out interviewing protesters at ICE headquarters at 630 Sansome St. A patrol SUV rolled by at slow speed, an officer grinning wide and waving while filming the group.

It didn't mean anything to me, until it did, like when SFPD officers assaulted a peaceful anti-ICE protestor in June and claimed he'd tried to steal an officer's weapon; a San Francisco judge dismissed all charges in October.

In December, when an interfaith coalition of anti-ICE protesters chained themselves to block access to 630 Sansome, it wasn't federal officers who cut the chains: It was firefighters from the San Francisco Fire Department, who then watched as federal agents arrested 44 people and dragged them away.

Meanwhile, where were the authorities when multiple people got assaulted by federal agents at a protest outside SF Immigration Court at 100 Montgomery in August 2025? That group included this reporter, who was blasted with pepper gel by an ICE agent while recording him and was left temporarily blinded on the ground outside the entrance of the Four Seasons. Several protesters came to my aid. I didn't get any help from the officers who swore an oath to serve and protect me and my neighbors.



Last summer saw sustained protests at 630 Sansome and 100 Montgomery against immigration detainments and deportations.

JOSHUA BOTE/ GAZETTEER SF

At a protest outside immigration court, I was blasted with pepper gel by an ICE agent while recording him and was left temporarily blinded on the ground.

Several protesters came to my aid. I didn't get any help from the officers who swore an oath to serve and protect me and my neighbors.

National and local organizations rushed to document my account. Strangers reached out to see how I was doing after the attack. Lurie and the local authorities? Not a peep.

Because San Francisco is not a sanctuary city.

Detainments of all manner of immigrants, many of them in the legal process of gaining asylum and Green Card status, are continuing in San Francisco, according to reporting from *Mission Local*. With the immigration court at 100 Montgomery now shuttered, people in San Francisco will have less opportunity to observe and assist immigrants, including by accompanying them to and from their hearings, making them more vulnerable to physical harm and detainment.

Because San Francisco is not a sanctuary city.

More than a month after the SFO detainment, San Francisco's supervisors passed a resolution condemning it.

It was too little, too late — especially for Angelina Lopez-Jimenez and her child who were detained and deported.

For them, San Francisco will never be a sanctuary city.

The Fun Page

Dolores Park BINGO
Summer Saturday

Bounce castle	Spikeball tournament	Elotero	Scott Wiener	Good first date
Corgi	Psychedelic freakout	JBL Portable Speaker	Metallic Speedo guy	Stray blunt wrapper
Wild parrot	Cutty bang	G	Bad first date	Someone over 40
Suedehead	"Can I hit your vape?"	Triple stroller	Drone	Wheatberry
Ice cream freakout	Baggu blanket	e-unicycle	Cool and/or scary teens	Coyote

Gazetteer's Believe it or not!



Danielle Steel has written more than 210 books that have sold more than 800 million copies worldwide.

Bruce Lee's first film appearance was in *Golden Gate Girl*, shot in San Francisco in 1941. He was 3 months old.



As a teenager, Maya Angelou became a street car conductor after answering a *San Francisco Chronicle* ad for "motorettes and conductorettes."

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Union Street Festival
June 6th & 7th
Union St
from Fillmore-Gough
11am-7pm

North Beach Festival
June 20 & 21st
Columbus & Green Streets
11am-7pm

Sunset Night Market: Dragon Boat Festival
June 12th
Irving St. from 20-25th Ave 5pm-10pm

August

Cole Valley Nights: State Fair
August 20th
Cole St. between Carl & Parnassus 4pm-9pm

September

Sunset Night Market: Autumn Moon Festival
September 25th
Irving St. from 20th-25th Ave
5pm-10pm

Cole Valley Fair
September 27th
Cole Street
from Fredrick-Grattan
10am-5pm

All Summer Long

Outer Sunset Farmers Market
Every Sunday Rain or Shine
37th Ave. from Ortega-Quintara
9:00am-2:00pm

Inner Sunset Flea Market
Every Second Sunday of the month
Irving st. from 9th-11th Ave.
10:00am-4:00pm

Secondhand Saturdays
Every Third Saturday of the month
37th Ave. from Ortega-Pacheco
10:00am-4:00pm

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The *Offline* QUARTERLY

What to watch, listen to, and smell over the next three months

Compiled by Joshua Bote

THE ONE TO MEET

Lowrider Culture Celebration

The de Young Museum
June 6

The history of lowriders is inextricable from the history of San Francisco's Chicano community. The de Young, wisely, has chosen to celebrate the past and present of lowriders in tandem with its exhibition of New Mexico artist Rose B. Simpson, who showcases the parallel forms of Pueblo pottery and classic cars. Mission artist Vero Majano is curating the film screenings.

Tickets: famsf.org

ICE QUEENS

Heated Rivalry Trivia Night

Cobb's Comedy Club
June 18

Heated Rivalry fever has cooled a bit since the beginning of the year when every gay club and bar in San Francisco seemed to be hosting a night themed after the book series-turned-hit TV show. But there is still a bit of febrile interest, as evidenced by a touring *Heated Rivalry* trivia night coming to Cobb's, of all places. Expect yearners, fujoshis, and queers united in sweaty Heated Rivalry geekery.

Tickets: cobbscomedy.com

STRANGERS TO OURSELVES

Kevin Langue

The Warfield
June 24

With a rotating cast of comedians and friends, YouTuber Kevin Langue hosts a game show whose whole shtick is "one of these things is not like the other." Langue has to decide, for example, who the sole Black person is in a group of white guys, or who the real child is in a group of adult voice actors for kids' shows. This is decidedly not a novel format, but Langue has an undeniable It-factor: clever and silver-tongued, but with the good sense to let his cast of strangers steer the show. How this will translate live remains to be seen, but surely, there are at least hundreds of others who have entered this same rabbit hole if he's playing an all-ages show at Warfield.

Tickets: thewarfieldtheatre.com

HOT SUMMER NIGHTS

Underscores

The Regency Ballroom
June 26

The sweatiest night I've had in recent memory was at a record release party for Underscores' tremendous new album *U*, where each step up into the DNA Lounge's tiny second floor felt like approaching a sauna in a volcano. Since then, the SF-raised Underscores (known to family as April Harper Grey) has leveled up into broader consciousness. Surprise Coachella cameos and a 2026 Pitchfork Best New Music designation will do that to an artist. With DJ Umru opening, expect a lot of sweat and moshing. The future of pop is here.

Tickets: theregencyballroom.com

ODORAMA

ScentFest SF

Fort Mason
June 26 to 28

ScentFest is being thrown by Sebastian Jara, a perfume-fluencer who wanted to bring the scent trade shows he loved in Italy to San Francisco. It promises to be a rich bouquet of niche, independent fragrances and perfumers. Plan to meet fragrance obsessives for whom the Aftel Archive is a church, the folks who think Fragrantica has gone down the gutter in recent years (and not just for its tacit support of Charlie Kirk), and anyone who prides themself on having a signature scent.

Tickets: @scentfestsf

GET JAZZED

Fillmore Jazz Festival

July 4 and 5

The averted cancellation of the Fillmore Jazz Festival last year is a good reminder not to take San Francisco's cultural institutions for granted. It remains one of the neighborhood's — and the city's — flagship events, one that centers its legacy of Black culture and businesses. Like Stern Grove (June 14-August 16, btw), it's also one of the city's few remaining free fests.

Info: fillmorejazzfest.com

DUELING DRACULAS

Dracula: A Feminist Revenge Fantasy

San Francisco Playhouse
through June 27

Dracula: Ballet at its Darkest

The Orpheum
July 3 to 12

In San Francisco, ground zero for the excesses and failures of cannibalistic capitalism, there are two stage renditions of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the modern emblem for cannibalistic capitalism. The first is at the San Francisco Playhouse, where playwright Kate Hamill renders Dracula as "a bit of a feminist revenge fantasy." In this, Dracula is a lecherous heartthrob, and a gender-bent Van Helsing wants to smash the patriarchy. At the Orpheum, Australian ballet wunderkind Joel Burke brings the other, in its American debut.

Tickets: sfplayhouse.org and orpheumsanfrancisco.com

A DRIP OF MORPHINE

Morphine Love Dion

Beaux SF
July 18

One of the more indelible recent moments of *RuPaul's Drag Race* came in its sixteenth season, when the Miami queen Morphine Love Dion went toe-to-toe with the elven Dawn in a lip-sync to Megan Thee Stallion's "Body." In a second, Morphine won by simply sticking her tongue out à la Megan. Every time I hear that song, I still think of that performance. Let's hope her performance at Beaux will feature "Body," though it will surely feature a suite of baddie-friendly tunes.

Tickets: beauxsf.com

DIVINE SYMPHONY

St. Vincent

San Francisco Symphony
July 30

Before Annie Clark was a hard-charging, Grammy-winning, occasionally-divisive guitar deity, the musician known to millions of fans as St. Vincent made intricate orchestral pop whose beauty never quite concealed its undercurrents of menace. After almost a decade of rip-roaring solos and alt-rock explorations, Clark is bringing her act to the Symphony with Jules Buckley on conductor duty.

Tickets: sfsymphony.org

HELLO, IS IT ME YOU'RE LOOKING FOR?

Lionel Richie and Earth, Wind & Fire

Chase Center
August 6

Can't Slow Down and *Earth, Wind & Fire's Greatest Hits* soundtracked a lot of long road trips, Sunday chores, and in renditions sung by my parents and big family shindigs. Richie and the White Brothers and Co. have more hits than this little box can fit. They are the music of my youth, and perhaps yours, too. This isn't the first time they've toured together, but they're not getting any younger, and neither are we. Take your dad.

Tickets: ticketmaster.com

ARE WE NOT MEN?

LYKN

Palace of Fine Arts Theater
August 16

A boy band like LYKN — yep, as in "lycan," as in wolf-like — feels inevitable. The Thai five-piece boy group was formed by the national media conglomerate GMM, which is arguably the largest purveyor of steamy, male-male, live-action dramas in the world. They make music and star in a popular boys' love drama. Combine the fandom of K-pop boy bands with the recent fervor for gay media (see: the *Heated Rivalry* trivia night), and you'll land somewhere close to the level of devotion these boys enjoy in far-flung places like Paris, Mexico City, and Southeast Asia.

Tickets: ticketmaster.com

TINY BEAUTIFUL THINGS

SF Bay Popfest

August 20 to 23

The Bay Area's independent pop scene is low-key one of the best in the world. Cult-favorite label Slumberland Records has been here for a while, and artists like Papercuts and The Reds Pinks and Purples got their start in our city. For C86 lovers, self-identified "twee" nerds, and the legions of people hunting for a festival outside of Outside Lands, SF Bay Popfest is taking place at the Bottom of the Hill, a chance to go to the beloved venue while you still can. Headliners include scene luminaries The Aislers Set and Tony Molina, as well as emergent acts like The Umbrellas.

Tickets: sfbaypopfest.com

CHAT ROOM: FOOD

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San Francisco

June 18th | Swedish American Hall

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Art by Felicia Liang

Amoeba Music
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