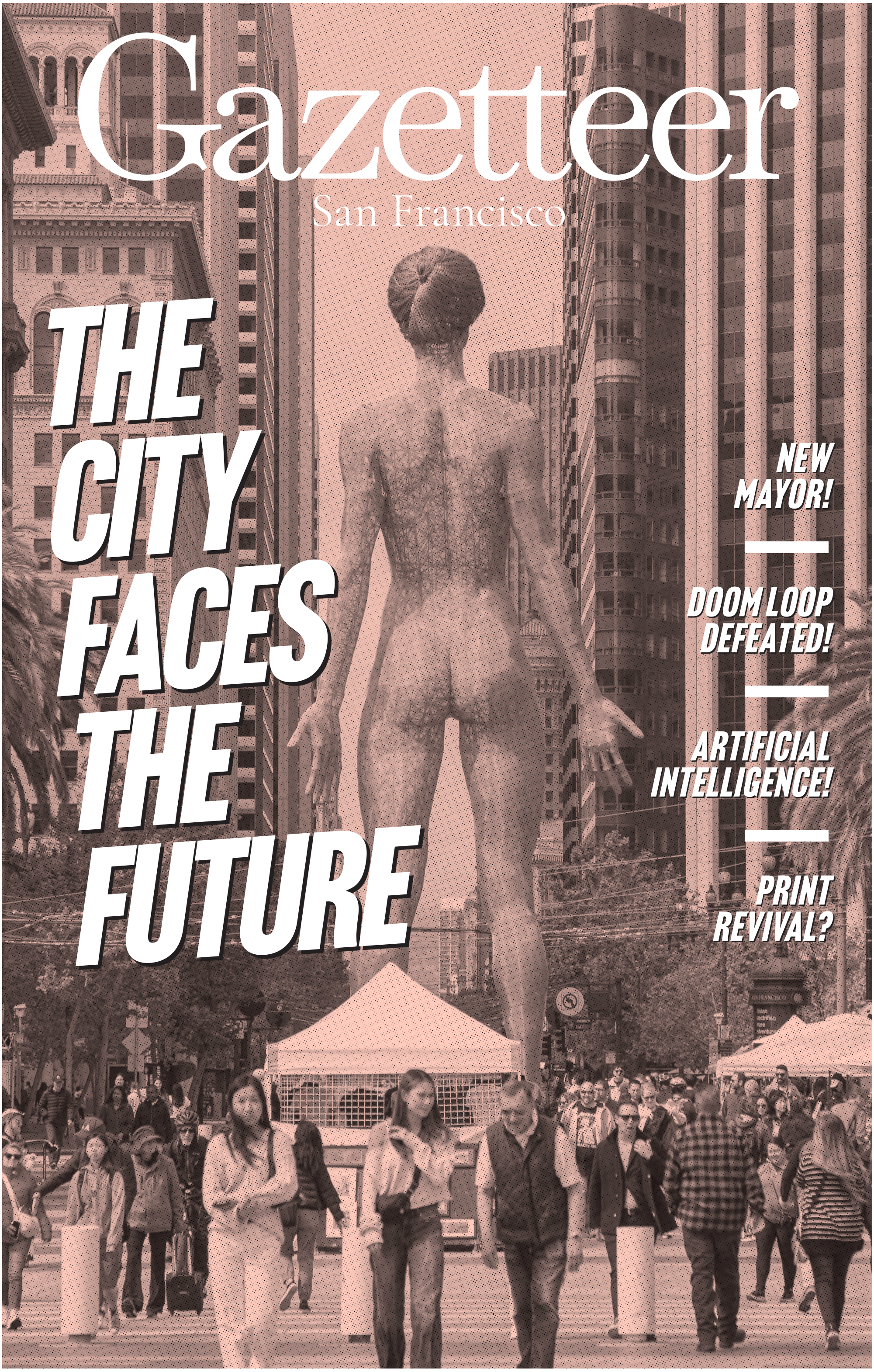
WINTER 2025 ISSUE 1

Gazetteer

San Francisco



THE CITY FACES THE FUTURE

NEW MAYOR!

DOOM LOOP DEFEATED!

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE!

PRINT REVIVAL?

Inside

Digest
The best of *Gazetteer SF* in easily digestible bite-sized morsels. PAGE 5



Print Returns
Cydney Hayes chronicles the resurgence of magazines, books, and newspapers in the Bay Area. PAGE 8

Kick It
Joel Rosenblatt embeds in the cutthroat scene of youth club soccer tryouts. PAGE 12



Danko Unchanged
Eddie Kim pens a love letter to the Fisherman's Wharf mecca of fine dining. PAGE 18



An Analog Evening
We kicked off season two of our Chat Room event series by celebrating the non-digital. PAGE 21

ON THE COVER

The "R-Evolution" statue looks up Market Street.

TÂM VŨ FOR GAZETTEER SF / CATCHLIGHT LOCAL

Crossword answer
See Page 23 for puzzle

A	W	A	S	H	■	J	A	N	E	■	M	A	R	E
K	A	R	L	T	H	E	F	O	G	■	A	L	E	X
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TÂM VŨ FOR GAZETTEER SF / CATCHLIGHT LOCAL

A letter from our publisher

Byron Perry
Publisher



I launched *Gazetteer San Francisco* online in 2024 to fight back against our broken information ecosystem. Our core strategy is that we don't depend on algorithms to reach our audience, while our journalistic mission is to publish true, untold stories about San Francisco with a little bit of irreverence and pizzazz.

A print newspaper — the first issue of which you're holding in your hands right now — is the natural evolution of this strategy. As far as I know, there are no programmatic ads, tracking pixels, or recommendation engines embedded in the paper. Print is the ultimate example of owning your distribution and monetization as a publication. (Speaking of which, we're now open for advertising business. Should you wish to buy an ad, please get in touch.)

The industry gospel in the past decade has been that print is dying, but we're seeing green shoots of interest in the medium from people all around the Bay Area, as Cydney Hayes reports in a wonderful piece in this issue. We believe that's because no screen can ever compare to the feel and pace of reading on physical paper. That's something we all need more of in 2026.

The written word has become devalued. First by the internet click farms and content mills of the 2010s, then by large language models that can pump out plausible but factually incorrect writing at scale. *Gazetteer* strives to be the opposite of all that, and I believe that there's no better place than the printed page to restore value to the word.

That said, we're not against technological advancement. We're against the harms caused by thoughtless and greedy implementation of technology. We are not anti AI; we are anti AI slop.

The main reason we read, I believe, is to connect with humans. And the main reason we read local news is to understand from other humans what's happening in our vicinity.

Our journalistic mission is to publish true, untold stories about San Francisco with a little bit of irreverence and pizzazz. A print newspaper is the natural evolution of this strategy.

So that's what you can expect from *Gazetteer* in print: Original San Francisco news stories, written by humans and meant to be read by humans. We'll distribute 10,000 copies of our newspaper on a quarterly basis in the finest coffee shops and gathering spaces across the city, and mail it to paid subscribers. (You should subscribe.)

San Francisco is an incredible newspaper town. A century and a half of booms and busts have provided fodder for nosy scribblers and ambitious publishers doing their best to tell the story of this place. The city has attracted prospectors, beatniks, hippies, gangsters, scammers, and visionaries. It's an immigrant city. And an inclusive city. And a city that encourages entrepreneurship and thinking differently. I shouldn't have to tell you that this city has a dark side...

It all makes for a fertile news environment, and it's one we are excited to cover in print as we have online for the last year and a half.

I hope that by reading our paper you'll feel more connected to the people and happenings of this great city.

Gazetteer
San Francisco

News for humans by humans since 2024

About Us
Gazetteer publishes original local news written by humans and delivers it directly to subscribers via email, text, and print, bypassing algorithms.

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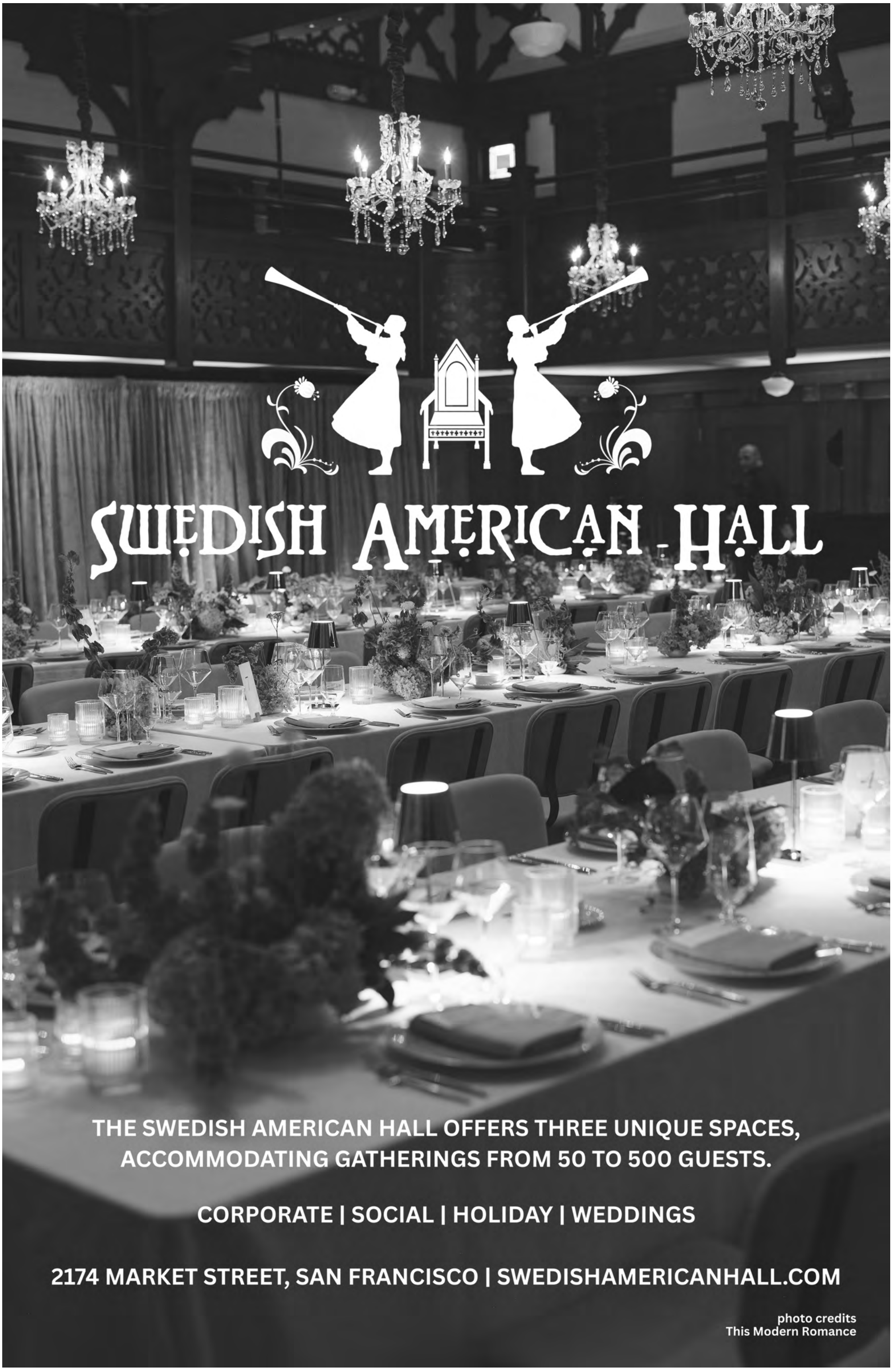
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TÂM VŨ FOR GAZETTEER SF / CATCHLIGHT LOCAL

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

‘Look on my works’

By Matt Haber

2025 was a big year for San Francisco.

In January, Daniel Lurie was sworn-in as the city’s 46th mayor, agreeing to what is probably the worst salary in San Francisco: $1 a year.

A political newcomer from a prominent family, Lurie ran his self-financed campaign on the fentanyl crisis and homelessness, but in Autumn his focus was pulled to another serious threat. President Donald Trump’s promise to deploy troops to “clean up” the city was the kind of test that would send even a veteran politician hiding behind their desk. Were it not for some friends in high places (Thanks, Jensen; Mahalo, Marc) the mayor might’ve been forced to say the president’s name — if only to curse him — as tanks rolled down Market Street.

The truth is, Lurie finds himself running a city that has already cleaned itself up. This year, San Francisco finally broke free of the doom loop narrative. Tourists once again crowd the streets and struggle with BART turnstiles; AI companies are throwing around money like drunken sailors; public artworks are sprouting up across town whether people like them or not.

The city is not only back on its feet, but standing tall. You can feel it at SFMOMA, where crowds lined up for the Ruth Asawa retrospective and laid down to let Ragnar Kjartansson’s “The Visitors” wash over them. In August, tens of thousands of people (with hundreds of nitrous balloons) filled Golden Gate Park for three days of Dead & Co. Stars like Seth Rogen, Olivia Wilde, and Andrew Garfield have been spotted filming around town, a reminder that when it comes to scenic locales, San Francisco is always close-up ready.

It’s worth remembering that only three years ago, national publications like *The Atlantic* were calling San Francisco a “failed city,” and a VC who moved his company to (where else?) Austin drew whoops of approval from a conference audience by calling this place “probably the worst-run city in the United States.”

So, yeah, we’ve come a long way, baby. We’re still struggling with fentanyl and homelessness and it remains to be seen if the mayor’s “sobering centers” will have much impact. There are other problems, including the fact that most residents can barely afford to live here and the AI bubble is at serious risk of popping, but as the calendar turns to 2026, there are reasons to feel hopeful.

San Francisco continues to be the place where people can come to reinvent themselves or create new things. Need proof? Look in your hands at this, the first print edition of *Gazetteer SF*. A new print publication in 2025? Talk about a moonshot! This town is full of ’em.

And like San Francisco, we’re just getting started.

Meet the staff



Matt Haber
Editor-in-Chief

Matt started his journalism career in 1995 as a freelance writer for *Wired*. He’s worked for *The Village Voice*, *The New York Observer*, *The Atlantic*, *Fast Company*, *Inc.*, *Alta Journal*, and others. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *New York*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Guardian*.



Joshua Bote
Associate Editor

Joshua focuses on the nexus of culture, trends, and digital phenomena within San Francisco. Previously, he covered technology for *The San Francisco Standard* and *SFGATE*. He also served as a trending news reporter at *USA Today* and a music writer at NPR. His work has been published in places like *New York Magazine*, *Billboard*, and *Paste*.



Cydney Hayes
Business and Technology Reporter

Cydney covers culture and trends in San Francisco’s business, tech, and anti-tech scenes. She has previously written about tech, culture, and media for *The Drift*, *Architectural Digest*, *Baltimore*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and elsewhere.



Eddie Kim
City Reporter

Eddie reports on San Francisco news — including politics, crime, commerce, social conflict, and everything in between. He was a longtime features writer at the critically acclaimed men’s magazine *Mel*, and has contributed to major publications including *Vice*, *Slate*, *The Guardian* and *Paste*. He began his career doing hyperlocal journalism at *L.A. Downtown News*, where he won multiple awards from the L.A. Press Club and California News Publishers Association.



Olivia Peluso
Food and Drink reporter

Olivia covers the fields, kitchens, characters, ingredients, trends and traditions that define our local dining scene. She was formerly a reporter at *Forbes* and has appeared in *Vogue Business*, *Travel + Leisure*, *Offrange*, and *Business Insider*.



Joel Rosenblatt
Reporter

Joel covers the forces in San Francisco — money, business, personalities, local law, and politics — that bind the city and pull it apart. He most recently worked for *Bloomberg News* reporting on state and federal courts. Previously, he covered the crime beat for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and was a freelancer in New York City.



Chelly Guzman
Operations Coordinator

Chelly is the operations coordinator at *Gazetteer*. Prior to joining, she led marketing and project management efforts at commercial real estate brokerage firm Maven Properties. At *Gazetteer*, she is now overseeing HR, event coordination, marketing, and community management, amongst many other responsibilities.



Byron Perry
Founder and CEO

Byron is the founder and CEO of *Gazetteer*. Before founding *Gazetteer*, he was the founder and CEO of Coconuts Media, chairman of the Society of Publishers in Asia, and an editor at *Variety*, *The Phnom Penh Post*, and *San Francisco* magazine.

Gazetteer San Francisco **Masthead**

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We welcome feedback.

Digest



"Naga," the bubble-blowing dragon of Golden Gate Park, is one of many Burning Man-inspired sculptures recently installed in San Francisco.

CHELLY GUZMAN / GAZETTEER SF

Big Art's burning question

Earlier this year, arts writer Sarah Hotchkiss published an article for KQED headlined "Who Has a Say in the Flood of Public Art Coming to San Francisco?" In it, Hotchkiss investigated the sources of private money behind massive public art installations like Marco Cochrane's mesh giant known as "R-Evolution" at Embarcadero Plaza and "Naga," the bubble-blowing dragon created by Cjay Roughgarden, Jacquelyn Scott, and Stephanie Shipman, installed in Golden Gate Park.

It's the same private-public partnership that's behind the incoming citywide project called Big Art Loop, which Mayor Daniel Lurie announced will install more than 100 temporary large-scale sculptures along the city's waterfront and through Golden Gate Park over the next three years.

As Hotchkiss explains, public artworks are usually subject to a lengthy approval process by the San Francisco Arts Commission, whose board members generally have professional art, art history, and curatory backgrounds. And it often takes a long, long time.

Big Art Loop does not go through that same process. The project is funded and operated through a private initiative called Big Art SF, a partnership between a for-profit organization called Building 180 and the Sijbrandij Foundation, a nonprofit backed by GitLab co-founder Sid Sijbrandij. While private capital can cut through the bureaucracy of installing large-scale public art, it can also sidestep public oversight and community input.

The curatorial process behind the Big Art installations begins with artist submissions, which are then filtered through Building 180 and its "partners," a group that Shannon Riley, CEO and founder of Building 180, said can change based on where the artwork will be placed.

Many Big Art pieces are industrial, flashy, and modular, made to be constructed and deconstructed easily. Haters and admirers both called this look "Burning Man art."

"I grew up in San Francisco so I know about the Burning Man side of the art world here," said visual artist DJ Meisner. "It's just so clear when you see the art that it's like, 'Oh, I'm supposed to be unbelievably wealthy and high looking at this.' I'm neither of those things, so I'm just annoyed to be looking at it."

"Burning Man has been a part of the culture here for a long time, but in the past it's been kind of invisible," said Chris Brown, the creative director for Mill, a consumer composting company. Brown thinks placing that art in public spaces is "refreshing."

Burning Man art, per Brown who has attended the festival "at least" 10 times, is an "invasion of something into a space that it's not naturally built for." That's why he thinks "Naga," for example, translates so well; it looks cool snaking through the Playa and emerging from the water in Rainbow Falls on JFK Drive.

The best public art, according to art historian and curator Josefin Lundahl, shouldn't be an invasion, but rather a blending with its environment. "I can't help but think about Ruth Asawa's fountains in Japantown. It melts in beautifully with the landscape," Lundahl said. "It's built specifically for the community that lives there. It ties back to her own ancestry, and it's gorgeous." —*C.H.*

The basement tapes

On a recent Wednesday evening, Mitsu Okubo was excitedly showing a guest his collection of VHS tapes. Those facts, in themselves, aren't all that notable: Every Wednesday, Okubo and his friend and collaborator Luca Antonucci invite people to their basement space on 23rd and Capp Streets to watch movies on VHS and, well, Okubo seems generally very excitable, especially when he's talking about VHS.

Almost every inch of the windowless Mission basement, which also serves as the office for Antonucci's art book publishing company Colpa Press, is filled with lurid, oversized VHS boxes. "We've been collecting for maybe like 15 or 20 years," Okubo said of the 3,000 or so tapes he and Antonucci have amassed from defunct video stores, estate sales, and the community of collectors.

The heart of the basement collection is horror, many of the boxes featuring slashers, killers, and hideous mutant freaks of one kind or another. "I've been watching horror movies since I was a kid," Okubo boasted as we browsed. "I actually have very fond memories of seeing *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* when I was, like, six years old." (It's worth noting that he was wearing a Leatherface T-shirt as he said this.)

As we spoke, about eight people, mostly regulars, were milling about, drinking beer, some eating burritos they'd brought with them, waiting for the night's screening to begin.

That night, Okubo and Antonucci were midway through a monthlong "Ghost in the Machine" series, and were showing *The Mangler* (1995). Directed by Tobe Hooper, it was a decently budgeted Stephen King adaptation about a demonic industrial washing machine in a small town in Maine.

It's a safe bet that no one was there to see *The Mangler* because they loved it so much the first time around. ("With its hysterical Bible recitations and poorly choreographed battles and chases, it offers the horror-movie equivalent of visual and verbal gibberish," wrote Stephen Holden for *The New York Times* in a 1995 review that was actually kind of generous.)

Everyone there had come for the pleasure of watching a (bad) movie with friends, cracking jokes, and never once looking anything up with our phones. We were also, in a way, honoring Okubo and Antonucci's lifelong passion for VHS.

"VHS is inherently a degenerative medium," Okubo told me dreamily. "You're slowly watching something die." — *M.H.*



The Future Past's original jeans (center), with a women's version (left) that was the subject of concern, plus a men's version (right) that is still up for sale.

COURTESY OF BANANA REPUBLIC, LINDSEY HANSEN

Jean jacked

Lindsey Hansen's eyes light up when she talks about a particular pair of jeans.

They're vintage Levi's 501s, probably dating back to the '80s, that she mended by hand last year to sell at The Future Past, the retail and tailoring shop she owns on Clement Street.

The jeans were in rough shape, Hansen said, but she saw an opportunity to recraft them. She cut the threadbare parts, transplanted denim from a pair of jeans with a similar wash and wear pattern for a visible patch, and embroidered an oval sashiko cross-stitch to reinforce the knee and the thigh.

The jeans were one-of-a-kind; at least until Banana Republic released a mass market pair that bore a strong resemblance to the jeans Hansen had hand-repaired.

The Mid-Rise Barrel Patchwork Ankle Jean was sold by Banana Republic, retailing for $180. The pants feature nearly identical mending in nearly identical locations, including the telltale re-worked left back pocket.

In November, Hansen took to Instagram to call out the similarities in their designs. A longtime vintage collector and fashion industry lifer, she started The Future Past as a way to work in the industry without contributing to the wastefulness of fast fashion.

Jenna Guisto, who works at The Future Past, first spotted the big-brand dupe on an Instagram sponsored ad. It was an ad directed to the exact wrong person, Hansen remarked.

Soon, supporters called out Banana Republic on the brand's social media posts, including on a video made by the brand showing a mood board where a mockup of the jeans is visible. In response to critical comments, a designer for the brand whom the *San Francisco Standard*'s Sam Mondros identified as Jessica Geesey, stated that the jeans were inspired by a "vintage pair on our travels that we then recreated and paid homage to," not a replica of the Future Past's model.

"I'm sorry that you feel like you were 'copied' but that definitely wasn't the case in any way shape or form," Geesey's comment continued. "We are simply paying homage to a centuries old Japanese tradition."

The post and comment have since been deleted, as has an Instagram profile apparently belonging to Geesey. Still, the allegations (and the company's response) went viral.

Hansen pointed out the irony of a big-market, fast-fashion brand reproducing a one-of-a-kind pair of upcycled pants for mass consumption when her business was founded on an ethos antithetical to that approach to design and marketing.

"You've stolen this thing but you've completely missed the point of this thing," she said. — *J.B.*

Will Ocean Beach become Miami Beach?

Will Ocean Beach become Miami Beach?

Probably not, but worries about mega-development along the water is forcing Mayor Daniel Lurie to deny that his proposed "family zoning" plan won't transform San Francisco's coastline into a billionaire's row of gleaming skyscrapers worthy of Tony Montana.

"I don't want Ocean Beach turning into Miami Beach," Lurie declared in a TikTok video in October.

The mayor is far from the first person to make this particular quip. The Ocean Beach/Miami Beach comparison has been everywhere in the last two years, from the talking points of politicians to headlines to social media posts.

There's one man you can thank for this: Former Supervisor Aaron Peskin.

"I coined the phrase in my contest for mayor last year," Peskin said with a laugh. "The phrase that I used a lot was, 'San Francisco can build the housing we need without turning Ocean Beach into Miami Beach,'" Peskin told me.

"Lurie keeps running around saying 'My plan isn't turning Ocean Beach into Miami Beach!' To be fair, dude, I never said your plan is to do that," Peskin said with another laugh.

"Let's be clear: The proposal he is championing does not create a row of 40-story condos for miles. However, the truth is that there are at least 10 sites within the coastal zone that can be built up to 110 feet or even higher under the plan. I believe SF would deeply regret that if it comes to pass, but I am not claiming that's the same as Miami Beach." — *E.K.*

DIGEST

‘Sometimes a homeless man has no choice’

Shortly after 5 p.m. on a Monday evening in September, Mayor Daniel Lurie was on Market Street, as he is many days. I was on Market too and I spotted the mayor crouched low, talking to a homeless man. The man was on the ground near a wheelchair, some of his belongings, including his hat and coat, strewn about him.

Approaching the mayor and the homeless man, I took a photo. They both looked up and I could tell Lurie was annoyed by my presence; the homeless man winked at me, which made me feel a little better.

The man, who told Lurie his name, didn’t seem entirely coherent. He slurred his words, causing the mayor to lean in closer to hear him. The mayor asked if he had been in a shelter, and offered to call city services on his behalf.

The man questioned Lurie’s motives.

“If I see someone on the ground, I’ve got to check to make sure they’re OK,” Lurie told the man. “I want you to be in a shelter, or in treatment. We’re here to help.”

“I know what you’re trying to do,” the man responded. “You’re trying to clean up the streets.”

“I’m trying to do that, and I’m trying to help people,” Lurie told him.

“Sometimes a homeless man has no choice,” the man replied, sounding suddenly a lot more coherent.

“I understand that,” Lurie said. “We need to do better as a city.”

The man asked Lurie who he was and when Lurie said his name, and explained that he was the mayor, the man responded, “The mayor!? Fuck!”

The two shook hands. The man picked himself and his belongings up, got back into his wheelchair, and moved on.

After their exchange, I approached Lurie and told him I was a reporter.

“This is not about getting press,” he said. In the past during his walkabouts, he brought reporters, but not today. He granted me one question, so I asked how he had come upon the man, and what would happen to him. Lurie told me he talks to homeless people five to ten times each day.

“If I see someone in distress, I don’t think we — I as the mayor — should walk by anybody that is lying on the ground, on the cement, on the cold cement, anymore,” Lurie said.

“And so what’s the resolution here?” I asked.

“Well, I can get his name, and I can get our neighborhood outreach team to try to get him into a shelter, or in his case recovery, or a treatment bed, which we’ve been standing up a lot more of.”

“We stand up more beds, and that’s what we’re doing,” Lurie said. “I mean, we’ve stood up 300 to 400 of the right kind of beds. And we need to be at 24/7,” he said.

Shelter, and a bed, available around the clock for those who need it? It seemed at once reasonable, and far away. — *J.R.*



San Francisco Mayor Daniel Lurie talks to a homeless man on Market Street in September.

JOEL ROSENBLATT / GAZETTEER SF

Spray and prey

In late August, I received tips that a person had been detained by ICE at 100 Montgomery St. and was being transported off site.

By the time I got there, a melee was already unfolding among law enforcement agents, protesters, drivers, and passersby. Protesters had crowded around the main entrance of the court to block the transfer and confront federal agents; the masked and gaiter-clad agents then diverted the operation to the court’s garage entry around the corner on Sutter Street in an attempt to put the detainee in a waiting car.

With agents hitting bikes with batons, cars honking, a bus stuck in the road, and pedestrians filming and shouting, tensions were through the roof. Despite verbally identifying myself as a member of a press, a baton-wielding Customs and Border Patrol officer shoved me as I stood in the street.

Seconds later, an officer with ICE’s Enforcement and Removal Operations team grabbed me by the throat, pushing me onto the sidewalk. Then without provocation, an agent pulled out his pepper gel and sprayed the protester next to me, and then shot a stream straight into my eyes.

The searing pain came as quickly as the attack itself. I fell to the ground near Sansome and Pine streets, more surprised than seriously hurt. I felt the thick liquid smearing on my face as I attempted to wipe away as much of it as possible.

Several nearby protesters rushed to my aid, instructing me to tilt my head back as they flushed my eyes with water. I wasn’t able to see properly for 20 minutes.

Through hazy, sore eyes, I noticed other protesters continuing north, energized and upset about the assault on two people. A US citizen was allegedly detained near ICE HQ, at 630 Sansome St. shortly after I was incapacitated, according to multiple witnesses.

This would mark the second time in two weeks that a US citizen in San Francisco was detained by ICE. Such detentions are a gray area for the agency — it has competing directives that simultaneously prevent agents from detaining US citizens, but also allows them to arrest anyone for a felony during an immigrant-grabbing operation.

What happened to me and the protester is a sign that individual federal agents are now willing to employ brute force against people who are not attacking them or even entering their personal space.

I was not able to get any identifying info or badge numbers from any federal agent on the ground. The man who sprayed me walked away, unconcerned about the outcome, off to continue his job removing people from the streets of our city. — *E.K.*

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A city is made up of stories that illuminate the inner lives of its residents and expose the inner workings of its leadership and industries. The best cities — and make no mistake, San Francisco is one of the world's best — tell those stories in multiple languages and from contradictory points of view.

Since *Gazetteer SF* launched in 2024, our writers and contributors have sought those stories and told them with accuracy and style.

What follows is a small selection of some of our favorite longform pieces and a new one commissioned for this, our first print issue. The stories of San Francisco never stop, and neither will we.



FELIX URIBE FOR GAZETTEER SF / CATCHLIGHT LOCAL



As AI rises, the Bay Area is experiencing a full-on print revival, from magazines to books to the paper you're holding in your hand

By Cydney Hayes

It was spring in West Berkeley, and Robin Sloan had begun an experiment: He was going to create something to outsmart artificial intelligence.

Inside his small, sunlit printing studio that he calls The Lab, the bestselling sci-fi author *Wired* recently called "the tech world's greatest living novelist," spent days toggling between tabs, testing font after font against ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini. He was looking for typefaces so visually obscure that their messages could slip past the models undetected. He found that he could beat two of them, but one — usually Gemini, whose "eyes are very sharp," Sloan noticed — was able to read it.

Finally, Sloan unearthed from his font archive an old blackletter typeface so excessively flourished that he suspects it was made as a joke, a work art for art's sake that would never be used to write something legible; but that, for the purposes of Sloan's experiment, was the point.

It worked.

Soon, Sloan's Risograph printer spat out 1,000 broadsides later trifolded into zines. On one side, Sloan proposed a set of strategies "for artists of all kinds" to confound and rebuke AI scrapers. On the cover, that spindly blackletter declared the most important directive: "KEEP IT SECRET."

Sloan titled his publication *The Secret Playbook*.

The Secret Playbook exists only in print. I only had to ask, and Sloan dropped a copy (plus a different one, just for fun) in the mail. Soon, the elegant designs of the US Postal Service delivered the materials to me within the week.

"There's this awe, this really appropriate and unsettling awe, at the increasing capabilities of these models and systems," Sloan told me when I visited him at The Lab a few days later. "You're like, 'What can't they do? What can't they figure out?'" Sloan realized that the things AI can't figure out are always the things inaccessible to them.

Sloan isn't the only person to try to create things outside of the all-consuming maw of generative AI and the corporate behemoths behind them. In the isolating, brain-melting age of AI, all sorts of people across the Bay Area are turning — or, returning — to print.

This year, the San Francisco Zine Fest saw an explosion of interest in zines and a record number of exhibitor applications. It was the same story at the San Francisco Art Book Fair, which was bigger than it's ever been, expanding across four venues in Dogpatch. Startups and pranksters alike are stapling flyers to telephone polls to get the word out about their products and events. Coffee shops are hosting zine pop-ups and Substackers are throwing magazine parties. A group of established Bay Area writers began circulating a print-only "organizing pamphlet-meets-literary magazine" called *The Approach*, which joins *San Francisco Review of Whatever, Unscene*, and other titles printed on pages available across the city.

"The value of print is actually not about paper. It's about the set of demands and offerings that that paper has," Sloan posited. "Privacy, stability, reliability, sovereignty."

Sloan offered other adjectives, too: Print was tactile, giftable, collectible, durable. Print can also be a little mischievous, whether as notes passed in class or samizdat circulated under authoritarian regimes.

> **"The value of print is actually not about paper. It's about the set of demands and offerings that that paper has. Privacy, stability, reliability, sovereignty."**
>
> ROBIN SLOAN

In the spirit of the very offline project, I won't share all the strategies outlined in *The Secret Playbook*, but they include keeping things secret, playing with scale, and having fun — the last one being very important in a time largely defined by emergency. "Obviously, a lot of it is playful," Sloan explained of *The Secret Playbook*'s down-with-the-system posturing, but underneath is a real sense of alarm.

One engine undoubtedly driving the print revival is the surveillance state. No longer a sci-fi nightmare, the concept of "if a product is free, you are the product" is now common knowledge; the enduring tech business model is to sell our information to other tech companies, the whole slimy process enabled by the insistence that everyone wants convenience and instant gratification, no matter the cost.

Print, however, moves at a more human speed. "I think the desire for instant access has been a little overstated," Sloan said.

For those in what remains of the media industry in 2025, the rise of AI slop is another strong argument in print's favor.

After years of companies prioritizing their digital arms, magazines such as *Spin*, *Nylon*, and *Ebony* revived their print operations to entice advertisers struggling with the diminishing efficacy of web ads. In these magazines and advertorial publications, advertisers can reach more engaged audiences, even if they have to sacrifice some access to the hyper-granular data they've grown accustomed to.

"The median value of a word on the internet is going to zero," said Alexis Madrigal, Sloan's good friend and the co-host of the popular KQED show Forum. Madrigal is right: Reading online is a deeply corrupted experience with websites littered with pop-ups ads. (On mobile, pages auto-refresh constantly, foisting new ads upon your eyeballs.) Less cluttered, uninterrupted reading experiences are often locked behind paywalls. "The attention and financial economics of writing things on the internet has kind of broken down entirely," Madrigal said.

Or, as Sloan put it to me: "If there was a system for writing and publishing that was going to work on the internet, we would have it by now."

Sloan and Madrigal are both in their mid-40s and came up when the media ecosystem was less decimated. Madrigal lamented Twitter's death march from a lively place to "write for other writers," to Elon Musk's alt-right echo chamber. Bluesky, Threads, and Substack tried to be homes for writers, but no platform seems able to resist the siren song of endless feeds or vertical video. The pace and privacy of print media appear to run counter to the fundamental machinations of the tech industry.

Despite this, another boomlet of magazines and journals has come from the tech world, where paper is suddenly an exciting new platform. In this scene, print is not a tool to reject the digital world but, rather, a way to extend it.

Sitting at Stoa Bar in Lower Haight, Jasmine Sun, a 26-year-old writer and former Substack product manager, sipped a dainty cocktail of sherry and chartreuse as she explained how the conflicts between the tech and media industries set the stage for a techno-print revival.

In 2020, Sun founded *Kernel*, a futurist publication that comes out annually. She used to describe the *Kernel* worldview as "techno-optimist" but later rebranded without the label to avoid association with the venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, who took to using the phrase in a manifesto he posted in 2023.

According to Sun, the tech industry has become very interested in creating its own culture industry, especially in the last five years or so. "People describe it as, like, 'telling our own story,'" she said. In tech circles, they also call it "going direct."

"Tech really doesn't trust the mainstream media. There's been kind of a movement within the tech community [by] investors, CEOs, whatever to build their own media platforms to sort of supplant the New York media," Sun told me.

Tech companies have been going direct with print publications almost since the advent of the consumer internet: Yahoo partnered with media company Ziff Davis to launch *Yahoo! Internet Life* back in 1996. Later, like all media, they reoriented their business strategies and prioritized digital content; now, as some consumers return to print, the companies are back on the presses once again, putting out sleek, branded magazines and books that build out a world with their products at the center.

Stripe launched Stripe Press in 2018; in 2023, fintech company Mercury turned its editorial vertical *Meridian* into a print product. In May this year, Hinge and Substack collaborated on a book about love; in August, Microsoft put out a corporate publication called *Signal*.

The worldview Sun espouses in her magazine is not exactly corporate, but it does advance a vision of the tech industry and a print ecosystem living in harmony. In fact, *Kernel* began as a Substack newsletter called *Reboot*, which Sun launched with a friend as a sociology major at Stanford and bored at her home just outside Seattle during the pandemic. Part of her motivation was dissatisfaction with the tech journalism coming out of mainstream publications. "It was either extremely pessimistic or extremely optimistic in a way that we didn't feel like was very nuanced," Sun said.

So, she went direct.

Eventually, the community Sun built on Substack spun off into a Discord server, which now has hundreds of thousands of members. Then, in 2021, she brought it into the real world. She invited ten writers she admired — some friends, some distant Twitter mutuals — to "a writer's retreat in the woods" in Asheville, NC, to make their first print magazine.

When she landed at Substack the same year, she said, she realized that reading or writing was not treated as magical or radical: It was another consumer product to monetize and scale. Email newsletters were the right platform to reach the largest audience possible; later, a microblogging feed was added to bring users to the app, as well as a short-form video feature to keep them there. Whatever works.

This is, in Sun's words, a rational approach to publishing, a subtle but important contrast to what Sun sees in the "literary folks [who] have both an aesthetic and a sentimental attachment to print that's not exactly quote-unquote 'rational.'"

But even at Substack, print beckons. "Every time we had a hackathon [at Substack], at least one person builds a print thing where it's like, 'Convert your Substack post into zine," Sun recalled. "I would not be surprised at all if in three years Substack has a print operation."

A Substack press likely would not be financially viable on its own. Nearly none of the publishing operations spun up during this print revival are. This time, in a publishing landscape where the systems of production and distribution have been hollowed out, print isn't necessarily about that; print is just cool. "Print objects have an aura that brings people to them," Madrigal said. "You're not gonna print out a story you published online and hand it over," he laughed.

"It's more fun making a zine and giving it to your friends as a gift," Madrigal said. "You're making an object. You're making a thing that it just has, honestly, more intrinsic value than words on a screen. Something that is so deeply underrated in media creation is that shit's just fun sometimes."

I am sure Robin Sloan and Jasmine Sun both believe their visions for print are more than just fun. But, I do not find Sun's use of print to "go direct" on behalf of the tech industry very hopeful for humanity, nor do I find Sloan's conviction that the qualities of the print object can protect it against capitalism totally airtight. The huge turnout at this year's Zine Fest did not convince me that simply being in rooms with people will slow tech's corrosion of culture. But in a world upended by loneliness crises and AI delusions and plummeting literacy rates, to have more print floating around is probably a good thing.

Three months after I read *The Secret Playbook*, Sloan sent me, unprompted, his most recent zine. Another beautiful trifold broadside, it was dotted with a brilliant shade of Risograph pink that a screen cannot capture. In it, Sloan proposes a new idea to fix the e-book economy by making it more, as he likes to say, "printy." The model would do away with e-reader accounts and user data and give every physical book or magazine a QR code, allowing purchasers to access and freely share a digital version up to 100 times.

Sloan argues this is the way to bring the qualities of print — the privacy, accessibility, giftability, everything but the physicality — to the digital world. It would also reposition the digital world as an extension of the physical one, as we all once conceived it to be.

I don't know if this would work, or how it might get adopted by businesses. If it could slip through profit incentives and consumer apathy, I am sure some people would enjoy the print-ified digital format.

For me, I try to avoid reading on my phone as much as I can. Even a PDF makes me feel a little ill these days. Mostly, I was just happy the Postal Service had moved this interesting and beautiful piece of mail through the world, from his studio in Berkeley to me at my desk.



Author Robin Sloan was looking for typefaces so visually obscure that their messages could slip past artificial intelligence undetected. He unearthed an old blackletter typeface so excessively flourished that, for the purposes of Sloan's experiment, worked. This illustration uses that typeface to spell out, "If you can read this, you are a human."

RECLAIMING THE LEGACY OF

The Fillmore



Netsanet Alemayehu co-owns Sheba Piano Lounge with her sister, Israel Alemayehu, which opened at 1419 Fillmore Street in 2006.

As City Hall focuses on revitalizing downtown, Black business owners envision a bustling neighborhood with Black food, culture, and people

Story by Megan Rose Dickey

Photos by Felix Uribe
for Gazetteer SF / CatchLight

Darlene Roberts first moved to the Fillmore in 1965 from Tulsa, Oklahoma at 19, back when the neighborhood was known as the "Harlem of the West." Over the decades, Roberts said she has watched the neighborhood morph into a place that is almost unrecognizable.

"It feels the same way it did during urban renewal," Roberts told *Gazetteer SF*. "Like they're pushing us out all over again."

Case in point: the controversial $100 million Upper Fillmore Revitalization project backed by billionaire venture capitalist Neil Mehta. Described by then-Supervisor Aaron Peskin as a "hostile takeover" of the neighborhood, Mehta insisted that the plan entails renovating the Clay Theater and sprucing up a few storefronts. In September, a fuller picture of the project emerged with more storefronts affected.

The story of the Fillmore today is one of attempts at revival. Black business owners, longtime residents, and those with deep roots in the area are trying to reclaim its legacy, while city resources increasingly flow toward the revitalization of downtown.

Now, Roberts, as well as other local business owners in the Fillmore, are trying to take matters into their own hands, while still hoping the city will do more to help.



Owners of the few Black-owned businesses in the Fillmore are determined to increase support for businesses in the Lower Fillmore as Upper Fillmore thrives and to reclaim the neighborhood as a Black cultural hub.

"The hope at that time was really, very high. It has so much history, Black history in there. Now you don't see that many Black businesses on Fillmore."

NETSANET ALEMAYEHU, *co-owner of Sheba Lounge in the Fillmore*



Darlene Roberts, founder of Fillmore Jazz Ambassadors, moved to the Fillmore in 1965 from Tulsa, Oklahoma. MEGAN ROSE DICKEY / GAZETTEER SF

'We thought that it was going to boom'

The Fillmore was once the epicenter of jazz and Black culture in San Francisco and beyond. At one point, there were more than two dozen nightclubs in a square mile, including Jimbo's Bop City and the Champagne Supper Club, home to Billie Holiday's stage debut in San Francisco. Roberts remembers those days fondly.

"It was going *on*," she said.

Charles Sullivan, known fondly as the "Mayor of the Fillmore," was a big-time promoter in the neighborhood. He owned Jimbo's and was responsible for organizing major shows for a number of big artists, Roberts said.

Sullivan was killed in 1966, the exact circumstances of his death still unknown. Around that time, the Fillmore became the focus of the city's redevelopment agency. Under the guise of "urban renewal," the city used eminent domain to acquire properties in the Fillmore, shutting down jazz clubs, tearing down businesses, and forcing people out of their homes.

"A lot of people lost and this feels the same way," Roberts said. "I'm just so — I'm so frustrated. And, at 78, it's probably not a really good place to be, but here I am."

Neither the mayor's office nor District 5 Supervisor Bilal Mahmood, who represents the Fillmore, responded to *Gazetteer*'s multiple requests for comment.

The city has tried and failed to bring Black culture back to the Fillmore before. In 1986, the late Agonafer Shiferaw, opened a second location for Rasselas Jazz Club in the neighborhood. Shiferaw already ran the legendary jazz club on California and Divisadero streets, did so with the encouragement of San Francisco's redevelopment agency, according to Shiferaw's widow, Netsanet Alemayehu, a co-owner of Fillmore staple Sheba Lounge.

"The redevelopment agency at that time, when they were planning to revive the jazz district, they invited him," Alemayehu told *Gazetteer*. "So he came to the Fillmore and opened Rasselas Jazz Club. It became a destination for a lot of African-American people. They gathered there, they held birthdays there, he allowed all the political meetings there."



The Fillmore was once the epicenter of jazz and Black culture, with the neighborhood dubbed 'the Harlem of the West.' At one point, there were more than two dozen nightclubs in a square mile. The story of the Fillmore today is one of Black business owners, longtime residents and those with deep roots in the area trying to reclaim its legacy.

San Francisco's Black population reached its peak in 1970, with around 96,000 residents accounting for 13.4% of the city's population. As of July 2024, Census estimates put the figure at 5.7%.

Shiferaw invited other Black people to open small businesses in the Fillmore, and Alemayehu and her sister, Israel, ended up being some of those business owners. The sisters opened Sheba Lounge in 2006. In 2007, the Fillmore Heritage Center opened. That space included the upscale dining restaurant 1300 on Fillmore and the music venue Yoshi's.

"The hope at that time was really, very high," she said. "It has so much history, Black history in there," Alemayehu said. "Relating to business, we thought that it was going to boom there."

But things didn't go according to plan. Rassela's closed in 2013; Yoshi's, which had been rebranded as the Addition, closed in 2015; and 1300 on Fillmore closed in 2017. With those closures, the dream of reviving Fillmore's status as a jazz destination disappeared.

"Now you don't see that many Black businesses on Fillmore," Alemayehu said.

'I want to see us all thrive'

Ericka Scott is founder and owner of Honey Art Studio on Sutter and Fillmore. Growing up in San Francisco, Scott remembered there being more Black-owned businesses on the Fillmore corridor than there have been over the past 10 years. I remember that, too. From the early 1950s through the early '90s, my late grandfather ran his dental practice on Fillmore and Bush streets. (The Fillmore was also a lively hub for Black professionals, but that's another story for another day.)

The building where his practice was located survived the days of urban renewal and is where my father runs his own dental practice. As a kid, I spent a lot of time at the office, sitting in the waiting room. There were certainly more Black people in the neighborhood then than there are today.

The data proves it.

San Francisco's Black population reached its peak in 1970, with around 96,000 residents accounting for 13.4% of the city's population, according to the US Census data. Since then, the numbers have steadily declined. As of July 2024, Census estimates put the figure slightly higher at 5.7%.

Scott recalls being around a lot of Black people growing up, but once she returned to the city around 2019, after she attended UC Berkeley and moved to Los Angeles, she "kind of had a meltdown," Scott told me.

"Like, 'Oh my God, there are no Black people around.'"

With a background in business and entrepreneurship, Scott saw an opportunity to contribute to the Black community in the Fillmore.

Scott and Alemayehu are now working alongside Fernay McPherson, owner of Minnie Bell's Soul Movement, to determine how to increase support for businesses in the Lower Fillmore.

McPherson, who was born and raised in the Fillmore, told *Gazetteer* she opened her business to honor the legacy of what was once a thriving Black cultural hub. She ultimately wants to revitalize that legacy. "I want to see us all thrive," McPherson said.

Alemayehu, Scott, and McPherson meet regularly to discuss how to further develop the business merchant corridor. Their big vision is for the Fillmore to once again be a place that is bustling with Black food, Black culture, and Black people.

Alemayehu shared a memory of some Black tourists from Georgia who visited San Francisco and wound up at Sheba Lounge. They told her they had heard all about Fillmore being a jazz district and being rife with Black-owned businesses. They asked her where all the Black businesses were, she recalled.

"And I said, 'well you're sitting in here, this is it.'" G

CLUB SOCCER CONFIDENTIAL

Inside the ultra-competitive world of San Francisco's private youth soccer clubs, where kids hustle and parents do their best to keep up

Story by
Joel Rosenblatt

Photos by
Tâm Vũ
for Gazetteer SF / CatchLight Local

On a chilly, gusty soccer pitch in Ingleside on a Saturday afternoon, Beau Wilson, 11, was mentally preparing for his first tryout for one of San Francisco's competitive club teams.

Though he had agreed to allow me to track him through the process, I left Beau alone for the time being — resuming our conversation after the tryout, and later, after he got the results. To me, he looked relaxed, but his dad, Erin, knew otherwise.

"He's a little bit nervous, that's for sure," Erin told me privately. Beau is an outgoing, social kid, his dad explained. Beau was in a deep state of calm before the tryout, a sure sign, his dad said, that he was "feeling it at the moment."

While Beau sat calmly, dozens of kids in red or blue pinnies were running around before they were organized into groups and called into drills and scrimmages by the club coaches evaluating them.

Club tryouts play out across San Francisco's soccer fields over a single weekend, usually in May, and come heavily laden with anticipation by the young players and their adults. For would-be junior soccer stars, this is the premier local league.

> **"I honestly don't know what the end game is, but some parents get really serious about it, their kids end up playing five days a week, and often burn out or develop injuries. It doesn't always end well for the kids."**
>
> CLUB SOCCER PARENT

This morning, Beau was trying out for SF United, one of nine private soccer clubs operating in San Francisco. With rosters of hundreds of kids each (at least one has more than 1,000), the clubs are a much more expensive, and controversial, alternative to the mostly public school-based teams organized under San Francisco's Recreation and Park Department.

Beau's foray into club soccer began because his public school-based recreational team dissolved. Here's where the controversy comes in: Many parents blame the private clubs for pressuring them with a message that if their kid doesn't join, they'll be left behind. Some club coaches criticize other clubs for baiting families with false promises of a "pathway" to play collegiate or even professional soccer. (It's worth noting that these players are, in some cases, eight years old.)

The clubs, which can cost $3,000 to join, "cherry pick all the rec kids out of the rec league, so that if you just want to stay on a team with your friends, that becomes impossible," one parent told me. "The school teams get cannibalized by these clubs." (The parent, who identified herself as "no-name angry mom," spoke on condition of anonymity because she feared retribution against her kid from the clubs.)

"It becomes this mindless march towards a club," she added. "I honestly don't know what the end game is, but some parents get really serious about it, their kids end up playing five days a week, and often burn out or develop injuries," she said. "It doesn't always end well for the kids."

Full disclosure: I am one of those parents. Both of my kids have played club soccer for years. I've pushed both of them hard, sometimes too hard, to play for top teams. And I have been reprimanded by their coaches for instructing them from the sidelines, generally considered a no-no for parents attending games. Both kids have implored me to restrain myself to modest cheering only, and set sharp limits on how many comments I can make each game. I try.

Worse, maybe, is the fact that I am one of the parents who took my kid out of a strong recreational team, creating the first fissure that, after other desertions, caused that team to crumble. That was a difficult decision. Recreational squads tend to be more free-spirited and depend on cooperative family involvement. They're often parent-coached, with unique, colorful jerseys and names with nods to the schools they grow from.

Club teams, by comparison, can feel like soccer factories churning out duplicate players. On any given weeknight, every pitch across the city — Beach Chalet, Crocker Amazon, Minnie & Lovie — is swarmed with armies of club players in practice uniforms. Getting players to those locations three days a week is a parental commitment that can test even the strongest marriage or relationship.

Club teams are also called "travel teams," something you've probably heard more than enough about from friends or colleagues with kids between the ages of eight and 18. The traveling part of the name is no joke: On a recent Sunday, one of my kids had a morning game in Davis, and the other an afternoon match in Aromas (25 miles south of Santa Cruz). One weekend earlier this year, I took one of them to a team tournament in Temecula. Estimated cost, all in: $2,500.

That amount of concentrated travel is unusual, but even when games are confined to the Bay Area, there are many weekends when my kids play two to four matches. All that chauffering, chaperoning, and cheering (respectfully, of course) leaves little time for anything else.

At this time last year, Beau was playing in the rec league for the Grattan Gecko Scorpions when it suddenly fell apart. "I didn't want it to break up," Beau said solemnly, "but it just did."

Its dissolution sent his family scrambling to find him a team. For the last year, the San Francisco Vikings, a club, agreed to take him for one of its recreational league teams. But the Vikings team proved to be weaker than the Gecko Scorpions, and left Beau wanting more competition, hence his presence at the tryout.

"I feel like the team I'm on right now can't really, like, push me up, and help me get better," Beau told me. "Some of the kids don't really care about this sport."

On the tryout field, I felt myself rooting for Beau, a boy who I'd only met briefly the day before. (Journalistic decorum and years of being chastised by my kids in mind, I cheered internally, not verbally.) At the same time, I was impressed that his parents, Erin and Kaella, seemed relaxed and even somewhat removed from the process.

"I'm here for him, to support him," Erin said. "I'm excited for him. But I don't care so much about the outcome that I'm nervous."

I tried to imagine what the coaches were seeing, wanting Beau to get the ball more often. One of his shots deflected off a goalpost, a near miss. In a scrimmage, his team was beaten badly. I was excited in a two-on-two drill when he managed a nutmeg, but it looked like a lucky accident, which he confirmed afterwards.

At the end of the tryout, Beau said, the coaches told the players that they'd like everyone to get a spot but that there aren't enough for all of them.

"I hope I make the team," Beau told me.

On Sunday, the day after Beau's SF United tryout, Lindsay Kauffman was overseeing tryouts at the South Sunset fields. The founder and executive director of Girls Unite, a soccer club for girls, non-binary, and trans kids, Kauffman thinks there are too many clubs in the city, transforming the competitive league into a "capitalist adventure."

As many clubs have grown in pursuit of revenue — for instruction, field time, equipment, and tournaments — their coaches are spread too thin, covering five or more teams, Kauffman said. Girls Unite coaches are capped at two teams each, she said. Her advice to parents is that if a child is happy, learning, and playing with friends, they should stay on the team they're with.

"In San Francisco, I think, more than most places, people are just always looking for what's, you know, greener on the other side," Kauffman said. "There's some bizarre dissatisfaction in the city, looking for some kind of perfection."

According to Kauffman, San Francisco soccer clubs pushing kids to be single-sport athletes too young has resulted in more injuries. She supports the pursuit of a primary sport, but encourages her players to leave room for other interests.

> **"They get really stressed out, and deluded, about what it is that they should be thinking about for their kid."**
>
> SHANI SIMPSON
> *Director of coaching for the San Francisco Seals*

"Take up art, do dance classes," she said. "We want to help them become well-rounded people, and have an identity outside of one thing."

Shani Simpson, the director of coaching for the San Francisco Seals, thinks there's a more insidious way in which clubs are misleading players and families. He points to some clubs, including the San Francisco Glens and San Francisco Elite, selling a "false dream," he said, of their programs leading to college teams or professional sports careers.

Simpson, who played Division 1 soccer for the University of San Francisco, and professionally for three different Major League Soccer teams including the San Jose Earthquakes, estimates that about one percent of kids playing club soccer in the city will go on to play in college. (Kauffman offered the same low guesstimate.)

"They have these catchphrases, saying, 'We're gonna get college eyes on you,'" Simpson said. "They're not providing the environment where they're developing these high-level college players and pro players, but that's what they sell, hard."

Joe Dugan, president and executive director of SF Elite, said in an email that 100 of the club's players "have gone on to play college soccer since 2015," and that the club is "very proud of these accomplishments." A representative of the Glens did not respond to a request for comment.

Where the cannibalization of recreational players is concerned, Simpson believes the responsibility is a "two-way street," with parents sharing some of the blame for breaking up viable rec teams too early.

"They get really stressed out, and deluded, about what it is that they should be thinking about for their kid," Simpson said. He's seen a pattern of parents covertly moving to clubs, without telling the other rec families, leaving those teams in a lurch.

"Parents aren't always honest with their parent group that they're going to leave, or that they're looking for something else," Simpson said. "And yeah, of course, clubs are looking for players."

I was struck by something else Simpson said: that recreational teams "naturally" break up when kids get to be nine or ten years old. Some players are ready to invest more time in the game, and are hungry for a bigger challenge; some parents are also ready to invest more money and drive time.

Soccer is called "the beautiful game" for many reasons. One of them, speaking as a longtime sideline habitué, is the player's ability to control and possess a ball at their feet while simultaneously knowing the best place for it to go next, and the dexterity to put it there. To see children as young as eight doing that, creatively, freely, and under pressure, can be remarkable. As with anything special, it requires time and commitment.

The problem is that adults' expectations, or even hopes, for that kind of talent too early can rob the sport of its joy, which is essential to making it truly beautiful — and may be lost amid the big time hustling by parents and clubs.

I caught up with Beau about a week after his tryouts and the results were in. He was rejected by the Glens but got an offer from SF United, which he declined because a compromise presented itself. He had decided to rejoin the Vikings to play alongside four friends from his Gecko Scorpions squad. The team is transitioning from the recreational league to the big time: a competitive travel team.

Beau was hopeful yet pragmatic about his decision. "The Vikings offer was at a higher level," he said, but with that team, he'll be playing with friends. Seems like a win to me.







Top: Beau Wilson, at end of row, center, and other children do practice drills before the SF United FC soccer team tryouts at Minnie & Love Ward Recreation Center.

Above right: Beau does some footwork to warm up.

Lower right: Beau competes with other children for the SF United soccer team.



Kaella Madix Wilson, left, hugs her son Beau before the tryout.



Beau Wilson is all smiles before the SF United FC soccer team tryouts before the SF United FC soccer team tryouts at Minnie & Love Ward Recreation Center in May.



SF United is one of nine private soccer clubs operating in San Francisco with rosters of hundreds of kids each and a much more expensive, and controversial, alternative to the mostly public school-based teams.

TECHNOLOGY

Artificialize your intelligence for $25 an hour

Craigslist is full of calls for 'research participants' to help train AI models. You only need to give a bit of your humanity

By Cydney Hayes

In 2019, Anne stood in line outside an unmarked office building in Dogpatch, waiting for work to begin. What the work would entail, well, she wasn't exactly sure.

Anne (who asked *Gazetteer* not to use her real name, citing strict nondisclosure agreements), and presumably many others waiting that morning on Illinois Street, had found the gig on Craigslist. The listing didn't offer many details, just to show up to the address, do some simple activities, and walk away with $100 cash.

"It was this quiet area," recalled Anne, who is in her 50s. "But there were a bunch of people waiting outside, so I figured, 'This must be it.' Then I heard all this yelling, like, 'SHUT UP!' or 'LOOK AT ME!' or 'HOW ARE YOU?!'"

Eventually, someone led Anne into the building, through two sets of heavy curtains, and into a small room, "which was obviously not soundproof." The room was empty except for an old TV set. Anne's instructions appeared on the screen. "It would show certain phrases and tell you to whisper, or scream." She was instructed to express different emotions: angry, happy, "really sad," she recalled. She assumes her vocalizations were recorded, possibly on video.

"It was quite fun," she said.

Anne fake-raged, fake-moped, and fake-smiled through the hour, before heading home with a crisp $100 bill in her pocket, satisfied. "I referred, like, everyone I knew."

With that gig and subsequent ones, Anne joined a new and curious sector of the gig economy: Helping train artificial intelligence on the humans it would eventually serve and, some say, replace.

In addition to scraping huge datasets from video content posted to YouTube, TikTok, and other social media sites, tech companies have contracted untold numbers of short-term human workers like Anne to train their AI for voice models used for customer service chatbots, voice-to-text services, and facial recognition tools. The labor costs for these $100 gigs are a tiny outlay for growing companies valued in the millions and billions of dollars.

Anne says she gigs full time and finds most of her work on Craigslist. That first gig in 2019, which was posted on the site by a now-defunct voice bot company called Monster AI, was particularly lucrative. But as the AI industry has boomed, the pay for gig workers training the models has declined. Anne said the standard rate now hovers around $25 an hour, which she said is on par with other gig work she does, like staging homes and staffing events.

Over the last six years, Anne has made faces, moved around rooms, conversed in soundproof booths, read, whispered, and mimed at computer screens to train AI models. She has been fitted with headsets rigged up with microphones, motion sensors, sponges, and other devices that allow the companies to collect whatever data they need, which, like so much machine learning technology, is frequently shrouded in secrecy.

When we think of gig work, we usually think of platforms like Uber or DoorDash, where a subcontracted person is directly involved in the consumer experience: Call a car, and a person will you pick you up; order food, and a human will, at the very least, text you a photo of the package at your door. But AI-training gigs extract not only labor but biometric data from their contractors, functioning more like medical studies. In fact, they are often advertised as "studies" on Craigslist, social media posts, and flyers posted around university campuses.



The paid test subjects contracted by AI startups grapple with how to balance the need for money with ethical questions around the impacts of AI. CYDNEY HAYES / GAZETTEER SF

Unlike medical studies, which are highly regulated, the tech companies soliciting paid test subjects are often evasive about who they are and what they're building. Anne does not remember the 2019 gig mentioning AI at all. Only in retrospect could she identify it as an AI study, having done other similar trainings recently that are more upfront about their commercial intentions. These days, companies seem more likely to explicitly tag their Craigslist listings under "AI" and "gigs," but they rarely disclose their names, which participants may only learn once they sign an NDA.

Conduit, an AI company developing a "thought-to-text" brain-computer interface, is one exception; its name is clearly listed in its many Craigslist postings currently calling for research participants.

Gigging for Conduit pays $25 an hour, with higher rates for sessions before 9 a.m. or after 7:30 p.m. The study involves messaging with AI for two hours while wearing a large, brain-scanning headset that looks like a motorcycle helmet.

A Conduit participant named Vic (not her real name), who is in her early 30s and, like Anne, grew up in San Francisco, told me that the helmet is so heavy she always asks her boyfriend to give her a neck massage when she gets home from a training session.

"I do the study because I need the money. Do I care for the study? Absolutely not. Do I think it's BS? Absolutely. Do I think they're just trying to use human beings to create human robots? Absolutely."

"VIC"
(Not her real name) A woman in her early 30s who participates in A.I. studies

More than just physically taxing, Vic also said the studies can be emotionally draining. She said the conversations with Conduit's AI chatbot start off basic, asking about hometown and profession, but can get invasive quickly.

"They were like, 'What are your regrets?' and 'Tell us about a time you gave up on something and why?'" she said. When she gave vague answers, the AI pushed her to go into further detail.

"It's kinda too far. Like way too far. And if this information or data does get leaked, it's nobody's business to know what I have going on," she said.

Privacy is a concern for these gig workers. The transparency Conduit displays on their Craigslist postings only goes so far; the company lists their name and explains that the study will help train their AI, but how exactly the participants' data will be used and protected is unclear.

Earlier this month, I signed up to do the Conduit study. Its research facility is housed in a dingy semi-basement behind an unassuming Victorian at 660 Oak St. Inside, blackout curtains section off the room into dark cubicles. In the front area, an employee named Terry quickly ran through the privacy disclosures, mentioning at the very end that, like at any company, a data leak is certainly possible, and to keep that in mind as I sign the paperwork.

I was unable to participate in the study as I refused to sign the NDA.

Conduit's headquarters at least had some privacy. Anne said that most of the gigs she had participated in took place in unbranded, rented office spaces in SOMA and Midmarket. At one gig that paid $15 an hour, which is below minimum wage, Anne was stationed at a desk in the middle of an open-plan room, selling fragments of her interiority to another AI startup while its full-time employees worked around her, as if she wasn't there.

"That felt like, 'Wow I'm pathetic.' I'm sitting at the little dunce desk for low pay, while they're doing all the important work," she said. Eventually she asked for earplugs, because it was too loud to concentrate. "I was finally like, 'This is just below my dignity, I can't.' This is below minimum wage, and I'm like decades older than all these people working here."

Some AI training gigs are one-time only, but many allow participants to return several times. Sometimes they can offer gig workers nearly full-time income, while the studies last.

Last year, Anne spent nearly five months gigging for a company called Wispr Flow, reading the entirety of Hanya Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life* three times over: once aloud in a normal voice, then again in a whisper, then for a third time in silence, just mouthing the words. The book is over 800 pages long, and infamously hard to stomach. "Oh my god, it was traumatic," Anne laughed anxiously, recalling how the monitor would emit a cheerful *ping!* sound and display "Good job!" while she read graphic depictions of self-harm. When she chose the title off the top of an alphabetically organized list, she had "thought it was just a one-off gig. I didn't know I'd be coming back!"

At that gig, Anne enjoyed the social aspects. She got to know familiar faces, other subcontractors who were making this their nearly-full-time gig. One woman said she was commuting in from El Cerrito.

Once, on a walk between reading sessions, Anne stopped into a nearby thrift store and struck up a conversation about the study with the man behind the counter. She told him that at the beginning of each session, she was instructed to recite a nonsensical poem — a public domain text known as the "Grandfather Passage" — to calibrate the machine. It went: "You wish to know about my grandfather. Well, he is 93 years old. He dresses himself in an ancient, black frock coat." Before she finished, he jumped in to recite it with her; he had been doing the study, too.

She even felt a sense of camaraderie with the Wispr Flow team. "It was a great gig," she said. The people running the studies "were all really young and really smart, and they were really excited about what they were doing."

Anne, who grew up in Polk Gulch, said she is "not angry at all the tech people."

"That's just what they're into, and I'm tired of everyone hating on everything," she said. "But I do think it's had an impact on our daily lives. I mean, I'm not feeling great about where all this AI stuff is going."

Vic echoed the feeling. "I'm just not a fan of the whole AI thing," she said. "Soon we'll all be out of homes, jobs, everything."

Anne said she feels some cognitive dissonance between her day-to-day experience training AI and the ambient threat the industry poses to the economy and social reality.

"I do feel an element of shame about doing the studies, about contributing to this vast thing that's going to overtake humans," she said. "I would not be surprised if I'm held accountable for contributing to a bad thing. Maybe I'll just view myself at some point as someone who contributed to something that's doing harm."

Vic expressed similar mixed feelings about participating in the development of AI. "I do the study because I need the money. Do I care for the study? Absolutely not. Do I think it's BS? Absolutely. Do I think they're just trying to use human beings to create human robots? Absolutely."

But for better or worse, their immediate needs — food, rent, gas — dwarf these ethical concerns.

"Honestly, apart from this conversation, I've never really thought that hard about all of it," Anne told me. "Needing money is a real motivator." G

The searchers



ABOBE STOCK

Off the beaten path with Bryan Jessop, the forager supplying San Francisco's Michelin-star restaurants

By Olivia Peluso

The first thing Bryan Jessop did when I met him in a parking lot was say hello. The second thing was request that I disable geotagging from my iPhone camera.

Those in the mushroom foraging scene, it seems, must strike a balance between camaraderie and secrecy. Theirs is a passion that can be shared, but easily ruined. For Jessop, a professional wild food forager for some of San Francisco's premier fine dining restaurants, the stakes are high.

Luckily, he was still willing to let me tag along to an undisclosed (and un-geotagged) location, so I climbed in the passenger seat of his car and swore myself to secrecy.

On the drive, he pulled up his phone to show me our to-forage list. Listed in quarts: radish flowers, nasty (short for nasturtium), lobster mushrooms, yerba buena mushrooms, borage flowers, to name just a few. It seems like a tedious and laborious list for one day, let alone every, but he's finally sought some help. After a decade running the show solo, this spring Jessop enlisted three foragers to assist him. Each morning, he synthesizes the orders from chefs that trickle in throughout the night prior (some, chefs being a largely night-blooming species, as late as 2 a.m.) and divvies up the duties.

On any given day, Jessop fulfills orders for a broad list of flowers, grasses, lettuces, herbs, and garnishes found growing wild below foot. His business, Morchella Wild Foods, has a Michelin star-stacked client list including Lazy Bear, Quince, Sons and Daughters, and Californios. He and his team deliver to about 25 restaurants a week, up to three times a week. But this is all supplemental labor to support his greatest love and the inspiration for his business: mushroom foraging.

"Mushrooms are my favorite part. It's what got me into this," Jessop said. "It was kind of the dream; like, maybe I could hunt mushrooms for a living. Just do this all the time and travel all over the West following the mushrooms."

Early rains can yield more mycelium diversity and longer seasons, like a "multiplier," for the year, Jessop explained. It's a fungi fanatic's wish come true, on top of being good for business. "If we get normal rain from here on out, it'll probably be a once-in-a-decade mushroom event," Jessop told me, eyes wide.

Jessop got into mushroom hunting in 2009 with his brother. With the help of *Mushrooms Demystified*, a useful guidebook by mushroom guru David Arora, and the knowledge of a generous mentor, the brothers learned the ropes and grew into outright devotees. One particularly plentiful foraging season, the brothers came upon a large amount of morels and, having far too much to eat themselves and share with friends, went door-to-door selling them to various chefs in SF. Soon enough, Jessop realized he could start a business. He named it Morchella after the genus name of morels, and officially opened shop in late 2015.

But it's the delectable little porcinis, or *Boletus edulis*, that are his favorite. There was a time not long ago in Europe when foraging was regarded as famine activity and animal behavior, save for the sexy truffles and porcinis. These gourmet mushrooms (their name translates to "little piggies" in Italian) are brown and white with thick stems and spongy, as opposed to gilly, undersides. Their nutty, savory flavor enlivens any pan.

Just make sure they're not *Amanita phalloides*, which make for an effective last meal on earth. Mushroom foraging has long carried this risk: Certain fatal species can be easily mistaken for the tasty ones by the untrained eye. But Jessop says spooky stories of mix-ups, like the deadly jack-o'-lantern mushrooms being mistaken for delicious chanterelles, adulterate the work of seasoned professionals and tarnish the reputation of these subterranean gems. Jessop is confident, but not careless. Selection is the blessing of foraging as a purveyor, not a survivalist; if a mushroom doesn't look right, he doesn't risk it.



OLIVIA PELUSO

"It was kind of the dream; like, maybe I could hunt mushrooms for a living. Just do this all the time and travel all over the West following the mushrooms."

BRYAN JESSOP
Professional wild food forager

Eventually, we pulled off the road and got to hiking. I carried a small empty pack soon to be filled with porcinis, while Jessop donned a backpack stuffed with a five-gallon bucket of mushroom scraps. He often returns cuttings and unused bits to the earth to stimulate the fungus networks of his spots. He led me off the trail to a very particular tree grove and got on his hands and knees to push little buttons in the brush. Sometimes, a tiny mound is just a tiny mound. Other times, it's a porcini.

Much to this amateur's delight, we found some precious porcinis! The largest had been besieged by hypomyces, a parasitic fungus. In some cases, hypomyces are safe: It's what turns a russula mushroom into a lobster mushroom. But in this case, the hypomyces makes the porcini toxic to eat. We also found a few less-than-perfect porcinis, not handsome enough for the Michelins but certainly sufficient for Jessop's home kitchen.

They say love what you do and you'll never work a day in your life. An all-year full-throttle rain-or-shine wild foraging business is not for the faint of heart, though in Jessop's case, "I think I enjoy it more now than when I first got into it," he said. "In general, any day that I'm mushroom hunting, it doesn't feel like work." G

A participant in San Francisco's orgasmic meditation startup looks back



Photos of the author around the time she joined OneTaste.

CHARNA CASSELL

An early taste of OneTaste

By Charna Cassell

This past summer, Nicole Daedone, the founder of OneTaste, and her colleague Rachel Cherwitz were found guilty in a Brooklyn court of forced labor and are now facing possible sentences of up to 20 years in prison. While the trial was held in New York, the story of OneTaste was based in San Francisco. OneTaste started here and was an almost perfect merging of a few of this city's long-standing interests: sex, community, self-expression, technology, and capitalism.

I met Nicole more than 20 years ago. As I remember her, Nicole was a master of marketing and seduction. She built a multi-million dollar company off of curious, wounded, and awkward people seeking healing tools. She also found great success tapping into the cohort of tech-employed nerds who wanted to master sexual skills and connect with women. But OneTaste was also appealing to recovering fundamentalist Christians trying to heal their shame, women who were sexually abused and found themselves disconnected from their bodies, married couples longing to breathe life into their fragile relationship, people freshly divorced or exploring polyamory for the first time, and sexy twentysomethings who were ready to play and explore. OneTaste took on all comers, including, for a short time, me.

In 2004, I spotted a OneTaste flier in my grad school cafe touting Orgasmic Meditation, known among Nicole's adherents as OMing. I'd just gone through a breakup, and I wanted to reclaim my orgasm. OneTaste's feminist approach to sexual liberation and the attention paid to the female orgasm appealed to me.

When I attended a meeting at their Folsom Street location, OneTaste members greeted me with warmth, authenticity, and directness. I was excited to find a resonant community of embodied, shame-free people interested in sexuality and healing. Nicole's bold presence drew me in, as did her communication style.

At the first process group night I attended, I witnessed the "Hot Seat," an exercise in which one person sat in front of the group as people asked exposing, penetrating questions. Watching this person, I felt vicarious discomfort — my face flushed with shame and heat, and my chest tingled — but as the game escalated, it felt like we were sharing secrets and had been friends for years.

This sparked enough interest for me to go to another OneTaste gathering: a demonstration of a 30-minute extended orgasm. The modest staging was decorated with a massage table surrounded by candles; the audience sat in folding chairs. When it was time, a thin young woman wearing a silk robe was ushered out and gingerly laid upon the table. She disrobed, and I remember thinking that her body looked prepubescent, especially compared to the man standing over her.

During the demo, the man, whom I later learned was OneTaste cofounder Robert Kandell, hovered his hand above the naked woman's body, slowly moving it up and down from her chest to her legs. Audience members were then invited to come up and run their hands over the top of her body and feel her energy.

I learned later that she'd been training for this marathon, so to speak: she'd been stroked for numerous hours over weeks without going over the edge of a hard orgasm, putting her in a perpetual state of turn-on.

It didn't take long before I felt electrical currents crackle through my limbs, and my torso began to spasm and shake.

As my body convulsed, Nicole came over and placed her hands on my legs. Another person placed hands on my feet. I'd lost the ability to speak. Nicole vocalized reassuring tones similar to those used by midwives, and I joined her. Soon my sounds became cries. And just like a woman in labor, the moaning offered me a release. I cried and shook and had what they referred to as a crying, whole-body orgasm.

After the demo, Robert and Nicole sandwiched me between their bodies. I told them, "I feel like I am a baby, and you are my mother and father, yet I also felt like I gave birth."

"Exactly," Nicole whispered to me. "We are all of it."

I was sold.

That night, they set me up with a man I'd never met before for my first Om'ing "date" later that week. He was a bald, thick man with a fringe of dark eyelashes that made him look like he was wearing eyeliner. He was shy, and when he smiled, his gapped teeth made him resemble a sexy Jack-o'-lantern.

Our meeting was something between a romantic date and a pelvic exam. Yes, my pants were off, and a man I was attracted to was touching my genitals, but it felt clinical. I've been more turned on during a pap smear.

As I lay there not feeling much of anything, I found myself wanting him to touch my clit with more pressure. But as he moved up and down longer, the tissue under the tip of his index finger became sensitized and I began to feel more aroused. I appreciated that the focus was on riding waves of sensation rather than racing to a climax. I still see the value in this kind of practice.

Over time I grew disillusioned with OneTaste. Once, despite feeling a cold coming on, I dragged my aching body to a workshop but wanted to leave early. Staff members tried to coerce me to stay, saying I wasn't "really sick," I was being resistant. I was also being told to "listen to my pussy," a favorite refrain of Nicole's. The dissonance hit me hard. *What about the rest of me?*

Our meeting was something between a romantic date and a pelvic exam.

That night, we were instructed to stand in two lines, men across from women, with the women blindfolded. A woman in her 50s obediently, if reluctantly, put on her blindfold, but soon began to sob audibly, eventually crouching on the floor screaming.

This was not a sensual, liberatory exercise. This was crossing a line. Since no one on staff did anything about it, I intervened.

Talking with her, she explained that her father used to blindfold her and beat her. Exercises like that can be re-traumatizing, especially when done without attention to wounds that get activated. By leaving this woman sobbing on the floor, the OneTaste crew inadvertently repeated her original trauma.

I was done.

One Sunday, four years later, I looked up from my menu at a restaurant where I was having brunch in Berkeley, and I instantly recognized my waitress: It was the woman I'd seen guided through a 30-minute orgasm on the massage table.

Amazingly, she remembered me and greeted me warmly, yet her vacant, flat stare held so much grief and fear. When I asked her if she was okay, she shook her head. She wouldn't be the last person I met who carries trauma from their time at OneTaste.

Nicole's oft-repeated advice to "listen to your pussy" might've built an empire, but it didn't seem to have done much for that fragile, wounded woman. I'm so glad I didn't just listen to my pussy. I listened to myself.



The Red Victorian Hotel in Haight-Ashbury has become an easy target for graffiti and squatters. JOEL ROSENBLATT / GAZETTEER SF

Resurrecting the Red Vic

Despite a fight with her partner, a Los Angeles landlord is trying to restore peace to the iconic hippie hotel on Haight

By Joel Rosenblatt

For decades, the historic crimson hotel at 1665 Haight St., formally known as the Red Victorian, was owned and operated as a bed-and-breakfast by visual poet Sami Sunchild, the founder of the Peaceful World Foundation.

After Sunchild's death in 2013, the Red Vic operated for a time as part of the Haight Street Commons, a network of nonprofit communal properties. In 2022, the building was sold bringing hopes of renewal.

Three years later, the three-story, 20-room hotel sits in a state of disrepair, an easy target for graffiti and squatters.

"It used to have a real prominent role in the neighborhood," said Tia Lombardi, a board member of SF Heritage, an architectural preservation group. "Whoever owns it doesn't seem to be taking care of things."

The owner, or one of them, is Simone Shah. She's been working behind the scenes to change the Red Vic's trajectory. In an interview with *Gazetteer SF* in September, Shah said she hoped to reopen the Red Vic as a boutique hotel in January. When I spoke to her again in November, this ambitious goal did not seem likely to be achieved.

"I know that all the neighbors hate us," Shah told *Gazetteer SF*. "I hope some day they'll see the whites of my eyes, and see that I'm not an asshole."

Shah, 47, lives in Malibu, and owns the Burlington Hotel in Los Angeles, an "unexpected cash cow." The Red Vic is her first investment in the Bay Area.

The Red Vic's reopening, she said, has been delayed by a fight she's having with her longtime real estate partner, Alexander Rivkin, who sued her last year. In his complaint, Rivkin, whose aesthetics clinic in Beverly Hills advertises a "non-surgical nose job," claims that Shah diverted revenue from their partnership, treating it as her "personal piggy bank" to buy and operate her own properties.

"I've never stolen from anyone in my life," Shah told me, calling the lawsuit "sad and unnecessary." The litigation has spooked potential investors in the Red Vic project, Shah said, and cost her more than $500,000 in legal fees.

Under Shah's redesign, each Red Vic room will have its own bathroom. (Previously, some guests shared showers and toilets.) Shah plans to maintain some of the names and themes that Sunchild used for certain rooms: Summer of Love, Flower Child, and Peace. She plans to replace others with her own ideas: China Cat Sunflower and Janis, based on a rumor that Joplin once stayed at the Red Vic. A new psychedelic room, Alice, will feature a pink and purple checkered design, a nod to Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat.

The rooms, which remain small, will go for between $200 and $300 a night, more expensive than the bed and breakfast was, Shah said, but still cheaper than the nearby Stanyan Park Hotel. She hasn't decided yet what she will do with the ground floor.

Built in 1904, the building was first known as the Jefferson Hotel. In 1967, amidst the flower power of the neighborhood, it became the Jeffrey Haight, a crash pad for hippies. Sunchild bought it in 1977, painted the building the color it remains today, and named it the Red Victorian. But the Red Vic is not in fact a Victorian, according to Woody LaBounty, President of SF Heritage, who notes that it's an Edwardian.

"Sunny was an odd person," LaBounty said, calling Sunchild by her nickname. "I don't know if she had the gift of relating to everybody in a sort of friendly way. She was just her own sort of dynamic that you either got, or you didn't. You liked her or you didn't."

The Peaceful World Foundation, the Petaluma-based nonprofit Sunchild founded, continues to fund Bay Area organizations. In 2023, it contributed more than $100,000 to various programs and foundations, including to Intermusic SF for its Peace Through Music Project, and the Tides Center's Youth Art Exchange, tax filings show.

The foundation also loaned Shah $3 million of the $3.8 million she paid for the Red Vic when she bought it in 2022. After Shah's company stopped making payments on the loan, Peaceful World sued her last year and moved to foreclose on the hotel. Shah got caught up on the payments and averted foreclosure. (Representatives for the Peaceful World Foundation didn't respond to requests for comment.)

Shah has remained optimistic on timeline. "We literally just have to hang up some light fixtures, and put in the furniture, which we already have for the most part," she said. An elevator also needs to be installed, and the build-out of the ground floor will require another $500,000 to $1 million, depending on what it ends up as, she said.

A graduate of Stanford, the opening marks something of a return to the Bay Area for Shah, who said in her experience, the complaints of crime and homelessness in San Francisco are overblown.

"I absolutely love the city," she said. "I haven't had a bad experience because of anything at the Red Vic. It's just been, sort of, internal conflict that's made it not happy."

Renovated rooms are planned to be named Janis and China Cat Sunflower, among others.

Tastes have changed a lot since 1999, but Gary Danko and his Fisherman's Wharf restaurant have not

Waiting for Danko

Story By Eddie Kim

Photos by Ximena Natera
for Gazetteer SF/CatchLight



Chef Gary Danko sits in a booth at his eponymous restaurant on North Point Street.

The kitchen at Gary Danko at Fisherman's Wharf is diminutive, just about 400 square feet, with skinny walkways that require a flip of the hips every time you pass a cook. That flip comes naturally for the staff, which was already in rhythm by the start of dinner service at 5 p.m. on a Thursday last month.

Two cooks chatted while sculpting little crowns of horseradish onto cylinders of gleaming salmon. Another was hunched over petite bowls of buttery corn soup, dotting them with red pickled peppers. A pair of cooks in the center of the kitchen juggled hot pans of sautéed goods, while a stout man off to the side seared off a row of plump steaks.

If a great kitchen is indeed an orchestra, as Fernand Point the father of modern French cuisine once said, this felt more like a jazz ensemble poised to deliver their take on the standards served up with signature flair.

I watched as chef Brandon Lucero momentarily lost himself in a pan of risotto, using a flick of his wrist to melt cubes of butter into golden waves of rice. Studded with lobster and rock shrimp, the risotto hasn't left the menu since Danko opened his eponymous restaurant in 1999.

"This menu is tried and true. We try to do simple things really, really well here," said Lucero as he spooned the risotto into a bowl. It flowed off his spoon like lava: the perfect texture.

It is rare for a dish to stick around for 25 years in an industry with a terminal case of attention deficit disorder. There's always something novel, especially in San Francisco's fine dining scene, which has a staggering number of Michelin-star restaurants. For so many food writers and young chefs alike, deliciousness isn't enough: innovation and newness is the thing.

Change for change's sake is anathema to Danko. "I return to a restaurant because there are certain dishes I've had there and I want to go back and enjoy it again," he told me. "It's not like I want to go back to have some crazy discovery of, 'Oh, wow, they're putting popcorn on it and it's so creative,'" he said, waving a hand in mock amazement. "I blame the Food Network for really screwing up everything for entertainment value, basically."

You don't become a Bay Area institution by just serving up the trends diners see on TV (or, these days, Instagram and TikTok.) To some, Gary Danko's consistency reads more like his restaurant is frozen in amber. To others, it's timeless, an honorable trait in an era obsessed by the new and the next.

As hundreds, if not thousands, of restaurants have opened and closed in San Francisco since the turn of the millennium, Danko, 69, has stood alone. He no longer mans the kitchen, but he scrutinizes the restaurant from floor to ceiling nearly every day. "I've got the eye for everything," he told me. Spending time embedded with his team and dining at his restaurant as a customer, I had no reason to doubt it.

This is a man who put San Francisco on the fine dining map in the 2000s and stuck around ever since. There may not be another like him.

Step into Gary Danko at 800 North Point St., and odds are, your eyes will need adjusting: first to the dim light of the dining room, and then to the decor, a throwback to the sumptuous design of high-end restaurants in the early 2000s.

In the last decade, many of the world's best restaurants have adopted minimal, Scandinavian-inspired decor. Gary Danko, meanwhile, remains a temple of flower arrangements and crisp linens, all illuminated in amber light. The space is divided into two cozy rooms with about a dozen tables each and a petite bar in the center. You can hear the buzz of conversation in the air, but it's never loud. Every window is blacked out, encouraging diners to lose track of time.

When I dined here in September, my partner and I were greeted warmly and whisked away to our table. A minute later, an amuse bouche, a tiny bowl of sweet, summery pea soup, appeared in front of us with the speed and efficiency of an F1 pit crew.

"Part of my whole philosophy is that I can't see this restaurant just as a cook," Danko would tell me later. "I have to see it as an owner, as a guest. If you walk in the door and you're ignored, and you've seen this in many restaurants, it feels like they could care less that you're here.

"There's an old saying: The handshake of the host affects the taste of the roast."

Our first course was Danko's famous glazed oysters. Three trimmed oysters sat in a pool of emerald lettuce cream and a buttery fondue of leeks, topped with generous dollops of briny caviar. Hiding in the sauce were little pearls of zucchini, a melding of land and sea, luxurious in texture and flavor. I wouldn't have changed a thing.





Above: Chef de cuisine Brandon Lucero prepares a butternut squash bisque for the staff servers to try. Top: A plated dish of scallops and carrots is ready to be sent to diners at Gary Danko.

The restaurant has always had a prix-fixe menu, in which you select either three, four, or five courses from a series of starters, seafood, meat, and dessert. As first-timers, we stuck to the hits. Each bite clarified why the old favorites just work.

The roast lobster with potato puree and chanterelle mushrooms, perfumed with tarragon, was on every other table for good reason. (A waiter told me that a gentleman once ordered three of them in a row.)

An herb-crusted duck breast came with a smoky round of crisp duck hash and a baton of braised endive, all of it dressed in a pool of sticky, savory jus.

Our desserts were charmingly vintage: a tropical Baked Alaska, lit on fire at the table, and a silken creme bruleé dotted with golden cherries and other sweet garnishes.

Danko would tell me later that he abhors the kind of fine-dining restaurant that leaves people craving a burger on the way out. After my two-hour meal, however, I could barely budge. Three courses cost $130 per person: Not cheap, but a great deal in a town where you can blow the same money for a smattering of "small plates."

It's also hard to put a price on hospitality. Everyone cared that it was my first time there. It made me feel like I needed to come back.

Danko credits a trio of women for inspiring a life in the kitchen. He grew up in the upstate New York town of Massina, where his first influence was his mother, a Louisiana farm girl who had a deft hand at soul food. She later adopted the Hungarian culinary traditions of Danko's father, who built homes for a living.

The second figure was Mabel, his boss at a local eatery called the Village Inn, which Danko's father had renovated.

The younger Danko, who tagged along to the construction site, wasn't so fond of pulling insulation and pouring concrete. Instead, he disappeared into the Inn's kitchen, where Mabel took him under her wing. His stint began at 12 years old with odd jobs and continued all the way through high school. There, he graduated from hat-check boy to a line cook, learning every element of the business ("even laundry").

His third, and most formative, mentor was Madeleine Kamman (1930-2018), a French-born restaurateur and teacher known for her masterful sauces, obsession with quality, and blunt opinions.

Danko discovered Kamman through a cookbook in the library of the Culinary Institute of America, where he enrolled in 1975. She was an influential advocate for French cookery, opening a critically acclaimed restaurant, Chez La Mère Madeleine, and a cooking school in Boston. To Danko, Kamman had knowledge that seemed far more evolved than the basics he learned at CIA. He knew how to make a hollandaise sauce; Kamman taught him why it worked and how to perfect it.

As Danko roamed both coasts, taking gigs in San Francisco and Vermont, he kept thinking of Kamman. Their first meeting came when he enrolled in her two-week class in Boston. Afterward, Danko kept reaching out, even after Kamman moved her restaurant and school to New Hampshire. Kamman waved off each request, replying that her program was "full."

After repeated rejections, Danko mustered the courage to ask her a loaded question: Was it because she, a famously strong feminist, didn't want to deal with another man?

"She told me, 'Gary, you are full of shit. I don't want to hire you because you're a CIA graduate. They give me too much grief,'" Danko said, laughing.

Finally enrolling in Kamman's school led to years of tutelage and collaboration. She helped Danko land a job as chef of Beringer Vineyards in Napa Valley in 1986, and in 1992, he moved to the Ritz-Carlton in SF. It was there that he debuted the anything-goes prix-fixe menu, a revolution in an era when restaurants only offered identical courses for the entire table.

His work at the Ritz garnered him rave reviews from local press and the award of "Best Chef — California" from the James Beard Foundation. Danko has zero desire to wax poetic about those accolades, but remains pragmatic about their importance: "They get attention. They help you build your own business."

The idea for that business started to come together after Danko departed the Ritz in 1996. He was soon courted by Michel Elkaim, a friend and the proprietor of Chez Michel at Fisherman's Wharf. The longstanding bistro needed a reset, and Elkaim wanted Danko to lead the kitchen.

Danko, though, was done with the idea of working for someone else.

Then, as if destined by the gods of Fisherman's Wharf, Elkaim decided he would sell Chez Michel. Danko and his then-business partner, Nick Peyton (whom Danko met at the Ritz), pounced on the opportunity. They opened their doors in 1999, and immediately won praise. The *Chronicle*'s Michael Bauer deemed Gary Danko "the most refined, sophisticated restaurant to open in the Bay Area in the past decade." The *Examiner*'s Patricia Unterman called the food "exquisite" in a perfect four-star review, emphasizing the generosity of service and Danko's depth of flavors.

Within a year, Gary Danko won the James Beard Award for Best New Restaurant in America. Then, in 2002, the Zagat guide declared Gary Danko the best restaurant in SF — a title it would hold for five straight years.

Danko had come a long way from laundering linens at The Village Inn.





The staff prepare for Saturday service prior to opening, top, while a server heads out of the kitchen, above, with dinner plates for the seafood course.

Many employees, such as director of operations, Matt Moffitt, and general manager Cole Mathers, have stuck with Danko since the early days. The restaurant used to tout the most experienced front-of-house team in the city; while Moffitt mourns the loss of veteran staff during the pandemic, Danko continues to recruit top talent from institutions like Quince and House of Prime Rib. In Moffitt's view, the draw is not just Danko's reputation for excellence, but the stability and gregarious vibe of the restaurant.

During my dinner, the entire team demonstrated the precision that comes with experience and good mentorship. My water glass never ran low, nor did the bread on the table. Servers offered curiosity, care, and the right dose of friendly banter.

Greg Lopez, Danko's life partner as well as his director of service, has seen it all over the last two decades. After my dinner, Lopez sat with me at the bar, telling endless stories while we sipped espresso martinis (the best in the city, for my money) mixed by ex-Quince cocktail wizard Michael Kudra.

"Gary is like a chemist. He's so exacting about the flavors he wants. It's not about weird combinations. It's that technique he learned from Madeleine. It's not about a sprig of this, or a sprinkle of that for decoration," Lopez said. "It's more like: Is the food hot? Is it delicious? Will people come back?"

Lopez met Danko while working as concierge at the Ritz, and it didn't take long for the duo to start dating. After about a year, Danko asked Lopez to meet him in the former's apartment on Nob Hill. Lopez expected a breakup since Danko, after all, was subsumed by the restaurant. Instead, Lopez walked into a room lit by dozens of candles and dressed in roses.

"Gary looked at me, and he said, 'Greg Lopez, don't mess this up. You're good for me, and I'm good for you.'"

Lopez joined Danko's staff in 2004, and they will celebrate their 24th anniversary this month. He summed it up neatly: Whether behind a stove or in romance, Danko is a man of conviction. "He knew," Lopez explained, "in his heart."

Belinda Leong, the acclaimed chef-owner of b. patisserie, joined Gary Danko as a prep cook in 1999, fresh out of culinary school. What struck her about Danko then was his intensity.

"Back then, chef was in the kitchen at all times," she said, using the culinary honorific for Danko. "He was a very scary chef. Very, very demanding. He wasn't abusive, but everyone was scared when he was around. This was when he was training everyone in the kitchen himself."

> **"I can't see this restaurant just as a cook. I have to see it as an owner, as a guest. If you walk in the door and you're ignored, and you've seen this in many restaurants, it feels like they could care less that you're here."**
>
> GARY DANKO

Leong remembers "a lot" of cooks who took a verbal beating for their blunders, but she also effused about Danko's desire to teach. She had next to no pastry experience, but her head-down, focused demeanor, even with menial tasks, impressed Danko. He mentored her into the role of pastry chef, and Leong stuck around for nearly nine years.

"He was always so hands-on. He cleaned everything himself. He's huge on cleanliness and not wasting anything," Leong said. "Cooks would throw stuff like onion trim or pineapple scraps in the bin, and he would be right there, picking it up and showing exactly how much they wasted. To this day, I don't waste a single ounce of anything."

French-born Killian Guillotin has been in charge of desserts at Gary Danko since 2023. For his entire first year, however, Guillotin pumped out the old-school hits, slowly earning Danko's trust.

His patience showed Danko he wanted to learn, not flex, and the chef eventually gave Guillotin freedom to change signature dishes. Instead of serving three different crèmes brûlées in ramekins with cookies on the side, for example, Guillotin now composes a far more beautiful plate, garnished with seasonal fruit, dots of tart fruit gel, and a crisp sablé biscuit that sits on the plate like a crescent moon.

Danko's reticence to reinvent his crowd favorites isn't born of caution, Guillotin observed. It's about pleasing the guest. "When you lead a restaurant for so long, and you are that successful, you're going to see a lot of faces come and go in the kitchen," he said. "I'm not the first to come in and want to change things. But I needed to prove myself. That's not a bad thing. It's what makes you successful."

Danko can no longer tackle 16-hour days; his feet and hands hurt, and his back has been bothering him, he told me.

As Danko was saying this, Moffitt interrupted: "He says that, but he'll never show it to me. He still walks faster than I can. I can't keep up with him half the time."

Danko's appetite has changed, too. When I asked him about any notable meals or trends in the SF food world, he offered a soft shrug. Lopez is the one who explores SF's hip new restaurants, Danko said. The chef prefers simpler things now: quinoa with fruit for breakfast, a roast chicken salad with chickpeas and avocado for lunch, the occasional wagyu burger.

"I can't eat like I used to," Danko admitted.

Last year, the restaurant lost its one Michelin star after 17 years in the Guide, but there's little sign that the loss has affected bookings. Danko doesn't seem to be bothered.

"I was against Michelin coming to America in the first place. I called it the Wizard of Oz — some guy in a tower with power," he said. "And I never wanted a second star. Once you get it, you have to up all your accoutrements and reduce the number of covers. But I want this restaurant to be reasonably priced."

Though he didn't say it to me outright, Danko must be thinking of life after his restaurant. He has a second home in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he enjoys entertaining old friends. Danko and Lopez also travel for industry soirées, including a recent birthday party for Patrick O'Connell, the chef-owner of The Inn at Little Washington in Virginia. The couple stayed up all night, mingling with fellow culinary kings like Daniel Boulud and José Andrés.

"I keep telling Matt that he could take the restaurant over…" Danko says, trailing off.

Moffitt shakes his head shyly at the suggestion.

Back in the tiny kitchen, I watched as Chris Maluso, a veteran expediter, commanded the pass and called out orders. Guillotin flitted around with arms full of ingredients. The servers cracked jokes as they snagged their plates and flew into the dining room. Nobody had to yell. This jazz ensemble was, in all senses, cooking.

A cook suddenly appeared next to me and offered a snack: A teeny buckwheat pancake topped with caviar, a slice of smoked salmon, and crème fraîche.

It was sublime. Exactly what I needed, and I didn't need to ask for it. It was so Danko: a simple, perfect bite that made me feel at home.

Food&Drink

SOME PIG

San Francisco companies are creating cell-cultivated meats. Is this the future of nutrition for a hungry planet, or another Impossible dream?

By Olivia Peluso



With cultivated meat technology, we can enjoy meatballs made from this literal pig which she continues to roam alive and free. PHOTO: MISSION BARNS

Earlier this year, a Yorkshire pig named Dawn was strolling around an upstate New York farm despite the fact that a group of agricultural industry folks and some curious eventgoers ate meatballs made from her in San Francisco.

Unlike 124 million of her brothers and sisters who are slaughtered in the US every year to make BLTs, pork chops, Christmas hams, and a thousand other dishes, Dawn gets to live her best life even as her body continues to yield cultured meat created by the San Francisco-based startup Mission Barns.

Cell cultivation, otherwise known as cellular agriculture, is a process whereby cells are extracted from living animals and grown under laboratory conditions into animal flesh. The meat that Mission Barns created using Dawn's cells is a blend of this cultivated pork fat and plant proteins, to be sold as meatballs, bacon, and salami at the Oakland Sprouts.

San Francisco is having a cultivated meat moment. Wildtype, a Dogpatch-based startup, launched its cultivated salmon in an acclaimed sushi restaurant. And two Bay Area-based cultivated chicken companies, GOOD Meat and Upside Foods, have been approved to sell their products in the US.

"There's no debate that people love meat. The real question is, how can we satisfy the world's growing desire for protein in safe, sustainable, and delicious ways?" said Enakshi Ganguly, a spokesperson of the Good Food Institute, a nonprofit think tank. "That's where cultivated meat and seafood come in, and the Bay Area is setting a great example for how this field can innovate and scale."

Raising livestock for meat requires a lot of our domestic crop yield: We feed more of our soy, corn, and grains to livestock than we do humans. More than two-thirds of all agricultural land is devoted to growing feed for livestock, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization.

With cell cultivation, a very small number of cells can grow into large amounts of meat. One cell painlessly extracted from an animal can create an infinite amount of protein-rich food.

The FDA and USDA jointly regulate cultivated meat and poultry. The FDA first oversees the cell collection, cell banks, and cell growth, and differentiation. The agency then transfers oversight to the USDA, which follows the product through the harvesting phase of cell cultivation.

However, the FDA unilaterally oversees cultivated seafood and game meat, as those are not regulated under the federal meat and poultry inspection acts. That meant one less regulatory abeyance for Wildtype, whereas Mission Barns awaited USDA approval for four months following FDA's confidence stamp.

With regulators on their side, the only true barrier keeping cultivated meat and seafood out of stores across the country is scale. Producers have yet to reach a viable production rate to stock nationwide — or rather, in 43 states since Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Montana, Indiana, Texas, and Nebraska have banned cultivated meat production, with other states considering bans. While lawmakers claim the bans are to protect consumers from mislabeling, it's worth noting that special interests are in play: Nebraska Governor Jim Pillen, for example, is well known as the owner and founder of the state's largest pork producer.

But even Big Meat has caught on to the cell cultivation hype: Some of the largest meat companies in the world, including JBS, Tyson, and Cargill, have invested in cultivated protein companies or launched their own product lines.

If consumers can look past the bioreactors and vats, they'll learn that the animal cells used for these products are not genetically engineered or modified. (This aversion to genetic modification is precisely what keeps plant-based meats like Impossible off European shelves.) Cultivated meat also eliminates the potential for pollution or environmental factors that can impact the quality of animal meat, including how nutrient-dense the animal's diet is. Mission Barns' feed stock allows them to manipulate the nutritional content of their products, such as lowering saturated fats or adding Omega three fatty acids.

Nutrients and health benefits don't matter, though, if consumers won't eat it. The stories their makers tell about what gaps cultivated meat and seafood fill in our food system, how "clean" they are, how resource efficient the process is, or how many Dawns were saved mean nothing to consumers motivated by cost and taste.

"With the plant-based meat industry, there was initially a lot of hype and a lot of consumer interest, but after a while, I think consumers tried some of the products in the market and weren't really impressed," says Bianca Lê, a cell biologist and strategist at Mission Barns. "The number one reason is because of taste. And the number one thing that is missing in these products is the lack of real animal fat. Plant oils don't really do the same thing."

The meat made from Dawn is different and diners, if they're willing to try it, may taste the difference. It's a new dawn thanks, in part, to old Dawn.

The braised beef shin at Happy Crane is good enough to drink

By Omar Mamoon

Every year a restaurant comes along and captures the attention of the press followed by eager diners and, if all goes well, awards and accolades.

This year's top contender was Happy Crane in Hayes Valley. Run by the London-born, Hong Kong-raised chef James Yeun Leong Parry, Happy Crane has already garnered raves, favorable press, and long waits by eager patrons.

Parry moved to Hong Kong when he was just six, but eventually moved back to England to study business as an undergrad. It was only upon graduation that he realized cooking was his passion, but it was a little late for culinary school. "My parents were like, there's no way — we've just paid for university," says Parry.

Instead, Parry sent a letter to the chef at Bo Innovation, a modern fine-dining restaurant in Hong Kong that was one of the most celebrated contemporary Chinese restaurants in the world at the time.

"I just wrote an email saying that, Hey, I have no kitchen experience, but I do speak Cantonese and Mandarin and English," says Parry. "That's been a common theme in my career: language skills have helped me progress." Case in point: Parry was also able to land a role at the modern kaiseki restaurant RyuGin in Tokyo because its chef needed someone who could speak English.

After cutting his teeth in Asia, Parry landed at Benu and fell in love with San Francisco, where he met his wife and chose to stay. "I've always just moved a few years here, a few years there, but I've never felt more comfortable anywhere else in the world," he told me.



The braised beef shin at Happy Crane in Hayes Valley takes inspiration from jiang niu rou, the classic cold dish you'll find throughout Northern Chinese restaurants.

OMAR MAMOON / GAZETTEER SF

Parry's long path to Happy Crane offers an important lesson: success doesn't happen overnight. Parry's story would be just an interesting yarn if his food didn't live up to the hype. Luckily, it does.

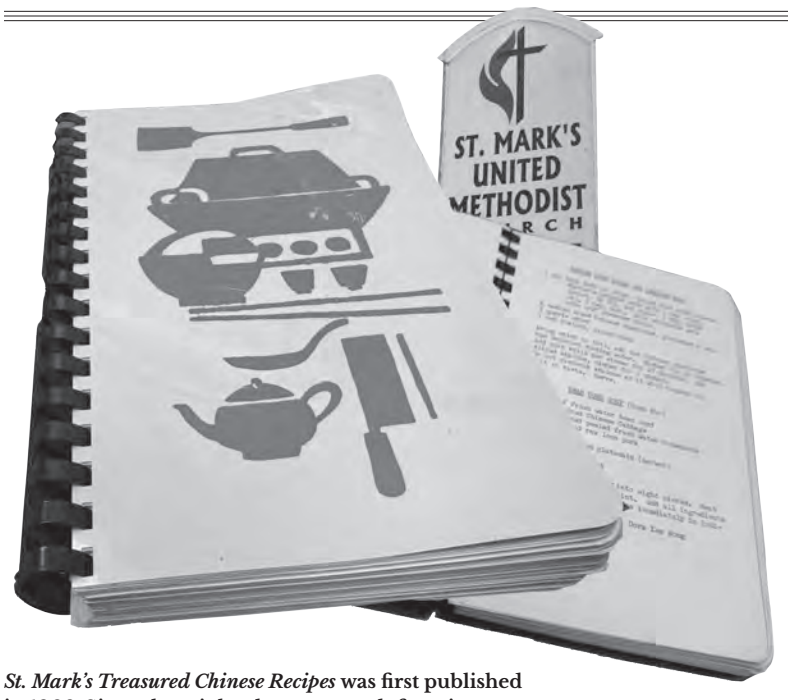
If you visit Happy Crane, you'll want to get all the dim sum and then some. I recommend the braised beef shin, which takes inspiration from jiang niu rou, the classic cold dish you'll find throughout Northern Chinese restaurants. The dish features thinly sliced beef shin or shank braised in a flavorful master stock that gets better and better with time.

To make it, Parry prepares the stock with light soy, dark soy, aromatics like ginger and scallion, rock sugar for sweetness, and a mix of spices including szechuan peppercorn, star anise, and fennel seeds. The beef gets braised in the liquid for about eight hours, low and slow until tender.

When cooked through, the beef is removed and allowed to cool along with the stock before being placed back into the braising liquid and refrigerated overnight to allow the beef to reabsorb some of the potent master stock.

The next day, the beef is sliced thin in a deli slicer, plated up over a pool of master stock, topped with a spicy chile-oil vinaigrette, and dressed with thinly sliced leeks and cilantro. There are also crispy coins of thinly sliced fried lotus root for texture and a braised seasonal vegetable for an extra Californian component. On my visit it was artichokes, but Parry tells me he's moved onto celtuce.

This dish is everything: sweet, spicy, meaty, vegetal, rich yet somehow simultaneously light and refreshing. If you're like me, when the dish is done and all that's left on your plate is a pool of the potent stock, you'll want to raise the plate directly to your lips and sip.



St. Mark's Treasured Chinese Recipes **was first published in 1966. Since then, it has become a cult favorite among Cantonese families in California and nationwide.**

PHOTOS: JOSHUA BOTE, YELP

Humble Stockton Cookbook continues to inspire

By Joshua Bote

"Be adventuresome — cook Chinese!"

So concludes the foreword of *St. Mark's Treasured Chinese Recipes,* a spiral-bound yellow book published by St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Stockton.

For more than 50 years, the humble volume — better known as the Stockton Cookbook, or just "the yellow book" — has been a staple in Cantonese households across California.

"Everybody had this cookbook on their shelves," said Geoffrey Why, a longtime Stockton Cookbook devotee from the Bay Area who lives in Massachusetts.

It began, like many church cookbooks do, as a fundraiser. Since its first publication in 1966, it's had outsized influence. As one of the earliest cookbooks to lay out the rich milieu of Cantonese cuisine for a broader American public, it has become something of a foundational text for many Chinese households, particularly in the Bay Area.

In the 1960s, St. Mark's United Methodist Church was one of the main cultural hubs for Stockton's Chinese community.

"All of my aunts and uncles, including my parents, we all went to this church," Rachelle Chong, a Clinton-era FCC commissioner who lives in San Francisco, told *Gazetteer SF* as she thumbed through her copy of the cookbook in her West Portal office.

One of the church's most prominent members was Blanche Ah Tye. Her mother, Rose, was considered the church's matriarch. Blanche, Chong's aunt, was a part of the church's Women's Society of Christian Service, a group that Chong and her cousins lovingly referred to as the Mother's Club.

Every so often, the church would host festivals, and the Women's Society cooked up a smorgasbord of crowd-pleasing Cantonese food: chow mein, black bean chicken, egg rolls, and char siu, along with other staples.

"Everybody loved this festival because the food was so good," Chong said. "And it was cheap. You could come and get a whole plate for like five bucks."

At some point, the church needed funds, and so the idea of a church cookbook was born.

The Women's Society got to work (and put their families to work, too). Evelyn Wong, another well-known church member, took on the role as the chief writer and editor of the cookbook, aided by Blanche as her deputy, along with an army of parishioners, friends, and family members.

Over the course of two years, church members developed and shared traditional recipes that Evelyn compiled and edited.

The way that Gordon Ah Tye, Blanche's son, recalled it, she was the "creative" mastermind of the book's contents.

"Auntie Evelyn just had a way with words," Gordon explained. "You know how some people can just explain something and then people get it? Well, she had a way with words that she edited many of the recipes and ways that were just extremely understandable for people."

Production was primarily inside a church gym kitchen, and in family homes and garages; the task of assembling the books fell largely to members of the church. All the kids had memories attached to the process: Blanche would lay out the pages in order on card tables in the garage, and press all the kids in the family into service. Evelyn's daughter, Valerie Wong Garrett, recalled assembling the pages of the original cookbooks "on a series of ironing boards" at the age of nine.

The first run of 150 books was a hit: They sold out quickly, prompting two more publishing runs. Later editions would nix the Western recipes to focus entirely on Chinese cooking, and included an index. The book eventually totaled 451 Cantonese recipes.

"It made a lot of money for the church and I think it was probably their primary revenue generator," Gordon said.

Blanche received dozens of thank you notes after the cookbook was published.

"Someone…would send back a thank you note asking to order, you know, 10 more," Gordon said.

One woman, he recalled, credited the cookbook with saving her marriage to her Chinese husband.

"'I'm Caucasian and I didn't know the first thing about how to cook Chinese food, but your book and the way that it explained things, I could understand,'" he recalled the letter saying. "And so I started to be able to cook good Chinese food and it saved my marriage because then I could cook what my husband preferred."

Instead of killing off the yellow book, the internet has kept it alive. It's been referenced in Facebook group comments and blog posts, often mentioned with reverence. A nearly-complete copy of the book (with a red cover) is available to read on the Internet Archive, including a few annotations from the book's original owner.

For newcomers and true believers alike, the book holds weight as a piece of history.

"It time-travels me back to California," Geoffrey told *Gazetteer*. "When I read the recipes, I'm in 1960s Stockton, or 1960s South Bay. I can see the dishes now, I can see the cover, I can see everything." G





Top: From left, Christopher Renfro, Thomas Abbott, and Jenna Hawk share insights on urban farming in San Francisco. Above: From left, Ben Ospital, Lindsey Hansen, and Joshua Bote share a laugh about something fashionable no doubt.





Above, master of ceremonies Eddie Kim keeps the panels running on time while, below, keynote speaker Caterina Fake discusses analog life in the digital world.

GAZETTEER EVENTS

Going analog

On November 19, *Gazetteer SF* hosted Chat Room: Analog at Swedish American Hall on Market Street, a celebration of the pleasures of hands-on experience, especially in our digital age.

The idea for the night was simple enough: Bring interesting people together to discuss how San Franciscans are returning to tactile experiences. Folks like artist and founder Caterina Fake, Two Eighty Project vintner Christopher Renfro, *Zyzzyva* editor-in-chief Oscar Villalon, and Modern Appealing Clothing co-owner Ben Ospital took to the stage for lively, wide-ranging conversations.

Panels included a look at print featuring Villalon, *Kernel* co-founder Jasmine Sun, and Bathers Library creator Justin Carder moderated by Cydney Hayes; a chat about urban farming with Renfro and farmers-educators Thomas Abbott and Jenna Frank led by Olivia Peluso; a confab about in person shopping with Ospital and The Future Past owner Lindsey Hansen with Joshua Bote; and a keynote interview with Fake conducted by Matt Haber. Eddie Kim served as our MC.

To encourage attendees to create and explore, we welcomed artists like Crochet Jam creator Ramekon O'Arwisters, punk publisher V. Vale, and typewriter artists Benjamin Bernthal and Holly Juliet Zimbert. DJ Tangerine Meadows and DJ Trippy Chris got the crowd going.

Gazetteer SF has hosted Chat Rooms as a way to connect with our subscribers and the wider reader community since 2024. Analog was our most ambitious event yet and a reminder that with all the distractions available in our pockets, the most interesting things can still be found in real life. G





Attendees and speakers enjoyed scintillating conversation and free-flow beverages at Swedish American Hall.

PHOTOS: MAXIMILLIAN TORTORIELLO



COMMENTARY

THIS ARTICLE WAS NOT WRITTEN BY AI

With bots recommending nonexistent beach reads, it's time for writers to rediscover what we're made of

By Matt Haber

About fifteen years ago, I was working for a small but influential weekly paper in New York that was under assault. On the business side, our ads were disappearing to the internet; on the editorial side, scrappier, savvier online-only publications were siphoning away our readers.

In an effort to save our sinking dinghy of a paper, the owner occasionally invited experts to come talk about the still mysterious digital frontier and how we might succeed there. I remember sitting in a conference room with Craig Newmark, just about the humblest person I've ever met with a globally-known company named after him, and another gathering with some hot shots making a presentation larded with ye olde Web 1.5-era jargon. During the latter meeting, one digital visionary who probably referred to himself as some kind of "rock star" or "ninja," told us that we needed to add more links within our stories since "Google likes lots of links."

Because I was younger then and loved the sound of my own voice, I recall saying something like, "Why would I do that? I work for the *New York Observer*, not Google."

His response still echoes in my mind: "We all work for Google now."

The above is what we in the journalism racket call an anecdotal lede, a bit of throat-clearing that's meant to help illustrate some of the larger points of the piece you're reading (or more likely skimming). While a decent editor would probably scrap it, I'm using it to lightly establish my authority while offering a bit of my humanity. It lets the reader know that I'm someone worth listening to as I gear up to make my point.

Was my story self-indulgent? Maybe even a bit self-aggrandizing? Sure, but then again, so am I, and so is nearly every other writer you might ever hope to meet and thank for our hard work promoting Truth for the benefit of the World. (You're welcome.)

It's exactly those sorts of human qualities that disappear when artificial intelligence programs — like the one that spewed out a summer reading list full of hallucinatory recommendations for the *Chicago Sun-Times* this year — are employed to create what I can still barely bring myself to call "content."

It's extremely impressive that, with a few prompts, programs developed by San Francisco companies like OpenAI, Anthropic, and others can cobble together sentences and paragraphs and even mimic the tones and styles of publications and individual writers, much less come up with semi-plausible plots for Rebecca Makkai or Rumaan Alam novels. But even as the words these AI bots generate are already appearing on screens and in print, even the best are destined to be hollow at their core. A bot's output will always lack the thing that brings the best writing to life: humanity.

Could a bot — regardless of how many pieces of prose it scans — write with the cool intelligence of Joan Didion, or achieve the moral clarity of James Baldwin, or capture the misanthropy in Tom Wolfe's exclamation point-riddled pensées, or, despite the number of jokes it analyzes for impact and structure, replicate the wit of Dorothy Parker or, should it let its digital freak flag fly, replicate the "gonzo" journalism of Hunter S. Thompson, or even, should some nostalgist dream it to, resurrect the dilated, syntactically limber sentence structure of Murray Kempton, whose switchback-filled, 106-word-long, copy editor-infuriating sentences I have just poorly taken a stab at emulating?

No. It cannot. Because what each of these writers brought to their work was themselves, something even the most cutting-edge bot can never hope to emulate because a bot has no self to bring.

And, yet, we have to sit with the reality that we writers have been training ourselves to think and write like bots.

The only thing writers can do, then, is to write more like ourselves, to become, in a sense, more human.

In the decade and a half since I learned that I worked for Google (minus the salary, stock options, and snack-filled grab-and-go kitchens of actually working for Google), journalists have internalized the lessons of that web expert. We've flattened our tics to attract clicks.

We've forced ourselves to write shorter pieces with punchier ledes, the better to keep up with social media's constant refresh. Our headlines are now packed tightly with proper nouns and shorn of extra filigree in hopes of "optimizing" for search engines. We're letting algorithmically-determined trending topics serve as our assigning editor, prompting us to write about whatever is happening right now. No, *now*. Editors spend their days looking at stories that achieved high traffic in order to replicate them, more or less, exactly in hopes of similar results.

Need more proof of the bot-ization of writing? Look no further than X (if you're still there), where many writers spent the last decade training themselves to write within the company's artificial constraints: limited word count, no editing (except with a premium membership), and arguments so shorn of nuance, they might as well be binary code. The short, sharp shock of X makes the construction of sentences, the building of paragraphs, and the overall effort of writing just too difficult to bother with. X's visible metrics taught writers what worked and what didn't, allowing the canniest to occasionally "win" the platform, albeit on the platform's own narrow terms.

How is this reconfiguration of our writing — and our thinking — any different from feeding petabytes of text to large-language models to mimic AP or *New York Times* styles in order to generate mathematically precise simulacra of articles and editorials? We turned ourselves into bots in order to create content (there's that word again) to appeal, in large part, to bots. Now the real bots are coming for our jobs and all we can do is look on in horror.

The only thing writers can do, then, is to write more like ourselves, to become, in a sense, more human.

We may not be able to beat the bots at their own game, but we can choose to play among humans again. Writers need to dig deeper into their personalities, write with exuberance and pretentiousness, deploy ever more self-indulgent anecdotal ledes, and reclaim the written word for the sake of all of our humanity.

The Fun Page

SAD LIBS

An Out-of-Town News Report About San Francisco

_____ (Typical white woman's name) moved to San Francisco's _____ (High-rent neighborhood) just over _____ (Number 1-3) years ago from _____ (Name of City). (She asked that we withhold her full name for fear that her friends will _____ (Verb) her in their group chat.) She came to the City By the Bay for the weather, to enjoy _____ (Recreational activity), and to take a job as a _____ (Job title) for _____ (Name of tech company).

She says she likes her life here, _____ (Verb ending in -ing) in the Marina, spending Sundays enjoying _____ (Leisure activity) and attending the annual _____ (Verb ending in -ing) Man Festival where she always spends time in the _____ (Noun) Dome. But like so many before her, the _____ (Number 23-29)-year-old learned that life in San Francisco isn't all _____ (Cocktail, plural) and Rice-a-Roni.

"It's not at all what I expected," she said, standing beside her _____ (Type of vehicle) that sports a bumper sticker proclaiming _____ (Progressive slogan). First, there's the cost. A _____ (Coffee beverage) can run you $ _____ (Number), and that's without the foamed oat _____ (Liquid). She's had her iPhone _____ (Number) stolen more times than she can count; she heard from a friend whose _____ (Type of family member) read it on _____ (Social media platform) that gangs of teens are going around tearing out people's _____ (Body part, plural) randomly on the street as part of a viral TikTok trend.

"And then there's the _____ (Bodily fluid)," she said with obvious _____ (Emotion). "I step in it every time I leave my _____ (Type of workout) class." She estimates she's ruined at least _____ (Number) pairs of Allbirds that way. Then there are the people _____ (Verb ending in -ing) Fentanyl out in the open or selling _____ (Toiletry, plural) shoplifted from the last remaining _____ (Pharmacy chain).

Here in the town where Tony Bennett once left his _____ (Body part) and Mark Twain famously spent the _____ (Adjective ending in -est) winter of his life one summer, people have finally had enough. Many are blaming progressive policies, like the decriminalization of _____ (Noun) and out-of-touch politicians like _____ (Name of recalled politician) who failed to stop the flow of Fentanyl in _____ (Number) days after taking office.

Some residents are choosing to move to places like _____ (City that is the capital of Texas) where rents are cheaper, and a _____ (Food item) costs less than a _____ (Luxury item). Others are choosing to stay despite their _____ (Emotion), making adjustments like carrying a _____ (Noun) with them for protection against teens and drugs. Still others are distancing themselves, _____ (Verb ending in -ing) through posts on _____ (Social media platform) while _____ (Verb ending in -ing) in the back of their Waymo on the way to _____ (Popular restaurant name) for farm-to-table Rice-a-Roni at $ _____ (Number) a plate.

Are these people _____ (Verb ending in -ing)? No. But they sure _____ (Verb) like they think they are. They may leave their _____ (Body part, plural) in San Francisco, but in their minds they're already _____ (Verb ending in -ing) somewhere else.

Gazetteer's Believe it or not!



Sam Altman has been spotted driving a Koenigsegg Regera, a rare Swedish sports car with a price tag estimated at between $3 and $5 million.



Le Marais, a bakery in the Castro, sells a croissant almost the size of a football that's made with 400 grams of butter. It costs $22.



Levi's jeans didn't have belt loops until 1922, nearly 50 years after the pants were first patented.

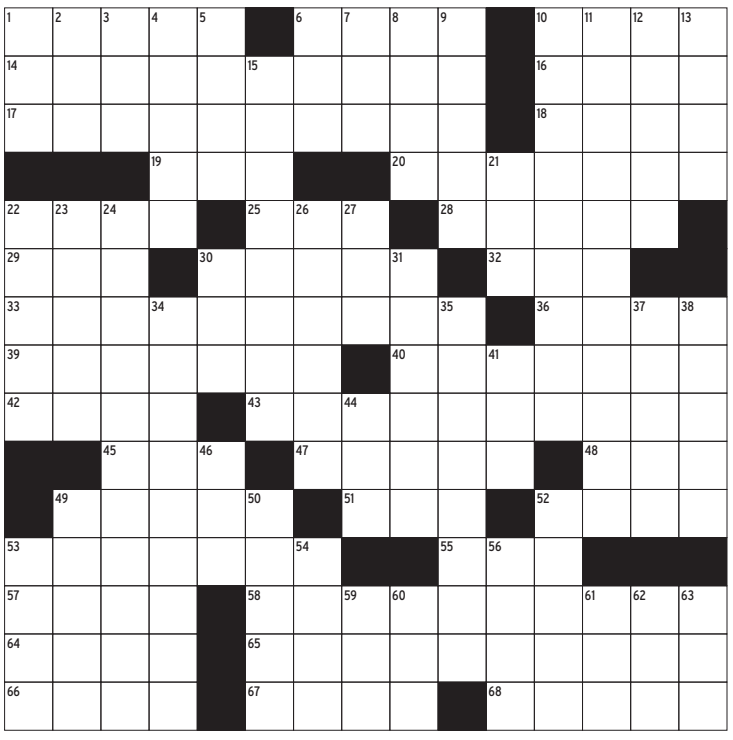


There are fewer than 2,000 residents living in Colma and more than 1.5 million people buried in its 17 cemeteries.



BART was the first mass transit system in the US to have cell phone service, allowing riders to argue with their spouses even under the Bay and play mobile games at top volume.

CROSSWORD By Rafael Musa



ACROSS

1 Teeming (with)
6 ____ the Bakery (San Francisco business named after the owner's daughter)
10 Female zebra or horse
14 Affectionate nickname for a San Francisco weather phenomenon
16 California senator Padilla
17 Stuff that annihilates when colliding with its "ordinary" counterpart
18 Evaluate
19 Counterpart of "thx"
20 Like geological activity around the San Andreas Fault
22 Tide _____
25 Common file type
28 Lake split between California and Nevada
29 "The Simpsons" shopkeeper
30 Content of some life-saving donations
32 Org. for the San Jose Earthquakes
33 "We need to confront the facts ..."
36 Shade akin to cyan
39 Spellbind
40 Registrations
42 Org. regulating workplace training
43 Some stereotypical suburban minivan drivers
45 Summer hrs. in Iowa
47 Reduce, _____, recycle
48 Fish eggs
49 Enjoy, as a shot of fernet
51 Top-left key
52 Nuisance
53 Like some spooky houses, allegedly
55 Contraction that omits a "v"
57 Queen _____ (ornate architectural style seen in San Francisco homes)
58 Pop stars?
64 Squid ink containers
65 Gay rights activist honored by SFO's Terminal 1
66 Chuckle syllables
67 "Ginger" or "pale" drinks
68 "Same for me"

DOWN

1 Letters before a pseudonym
2 Pale
3 Academy of _____ University
4 Lapses
5 Code styled using CSS
6 Work after "private" and before "stream"
7 Fore's opposite, on a ship
8 Negative responses
9 Bird in a 10-Down
10 Low-lying wet ecosystem
11 Park next to the "Painted Ladies"
12 Fix, as shoelaces
13 CTO or CFO
15 Is busy
21 Terse affirmation
22 Diet that does not allow sourdough bread
23 Bids first in bridge
24 Crackly-crust bread that's a Bay Area staple
26 Many a worker at Zuckerberg San Francisco General
27 Enemy
30 Deg. for a designer
31 Object thrown in a track-and-field event
34 Sus behavior
35 Reason for overtime
37 Some fancy hairstyles
38 It's good to have
41 Exam not required for most UCSF PhD applications since 2019
44 Start to cry?
46 Palindromic explosive
49 Mother of Perseus, in Greek myth
50 "Tik Tok" star
52 Parties for seniors
53 _____ out (discuss)
54 _____ citizenship
56 Mononymous Irish singer
59 Opposite of post-
60 Ioniq and Lyriq, for short
61 Short film?
62 Spanish phone greeting
63 Enjoy Heavenly or Northstar California, say

Answers on Page 2



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San Francisco

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