

AUGUST 1/2 2020

FT Weekend Magazine

# WILL COVID TAME CHINA'S WILDLIFE TRADE?

Christian Shepherd and Qianer Liu report



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*Christian Shepherd and Qianer Liu report*

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Cover photograph by Zhu Yinghao



KALPESH LATHIGRA

**'Suddenly, when lockdown happened, we had nine weeks of cheese but no customers'**

The plight of artisan cheesemakers, p32



**'There have been too many black showrunners who have had to shoulder the burden of making these big declarations'**

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**'It is simply derived by inhabiting a world, a region, through books'**

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# JOSHUA CHAFFIN

OPENING SHOT

## What I miss most now that I've left Britain



**R**ight about now I was supposed to be concluding a two-week trip to Britain with my family - our first since we moved back to America two years ago after five mostly wonderful years living in London. Things happen and plans change.

Being deprived of Britain, for who knows how long, has only sharpened my ardour for the place. As I stew in quarantine, I find myself succumbing to a classic case of British nostalgia for all the things I miss about the good old days in your strange and wonderful land.

In no particular order:

I miss the *Question Time* music. I miss that moment in every *Question Time* when somebody in the audience barks, in effect, "You're all bastards!" and everyone roars their approval.

I miss Graham Norton's company on a Friday evening, when we had small children and were too exhausted to do anything but sit on the couch.

I miss watching Glastonbury on the BBC without having to go to Glastonbury.

I don't miss Ant and Dec one bit, and I could never understand their appeal. But I appreciate that there should still be some mysteries between us.

I miss the convivial vibe of the families at the cricket club where my son played - in contrast to the self-loathing dads and baying mothers on the sidelines of our son's soccer team in New Jersey.

I miss our local butcher's impatience on match days.

I miss the woman in south Wales who wore pearls to meet me for a cup of tea at a supermarket cafeteria in Pontypool.

I miss the woman from Sheffield who made me understand that sharp elbows are the defining feature of the middle class everywhere.

I miss the Scottish fishing boat captain who took his coffee black, he explained, because if he got caught in a storm he could still drink it cold that way.

And I miss the kindly Jeremy Corbyn-supporting couple who took the time to give me a tour of their lives, from a house without indoor plumbing in Wigan to a council flat and then eventual semi-detached comfort in the Wirral. They even let me use their son's bedroom for a night. And I deeply regret that I never managed to write about their journey in the way that I'd hoped.

**I miss the sight of the cocky young men, with Beckham-esque haircuts and shaves, nursing pints outside a pub on a Friday afternoon - and the sense that only the costumes have changed since Shakespeare's time.**

I miss the horrid suits worn by your estate agents under the mistaken assumption that they confer some sense of trustworthiness.

I miss how you underestimate, and overestimate, your importance to the world.

I miss our cheap and cheerful local state school. It got the job done, and then some.

I miss my wife coming home wobbly and giggling from drinks with the other mums - not agonised and anxious.

I miss a certain breeze that would wash over the garden in late summer, instantly reminding me that I was, in fact, on an island in the North Atlantic. I miss long summer nights.

I miss your grudging acceptance that, even if you're not all in this together, you are probably stuck with one another.

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**'I miss the sense that the entire country might conceivably be tuning into the same television show, even if it is a crap one'**

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I miss a natter at the school gate after drop-off.

I miss Best Kebab after a drunken quiz night or charity auction at our children's school.

I miss the jumble of all your opposing parts and how each enhances the other - the toffs and the working class; Johnson and Corbyn; the bankers and the miners; the north and the south; Yorkshire and Lancashire; and on and on. I know you desperately want to be rid of each other. I do. But I, as an outsider, see you as a great boisterous family, and could not imagine you any other way. Really.

I miss the sense that the entire country might conceivably be tuning into the same television show, even if it is a crap one.

I miss your refusal to pathologise shyness and your tolerance of eccentricity.

I miss the Six Nations tournament, and how it carries you through the gloom of late winter.

I miss the drama of the relegation battle. (If only baseball had something similar.)

I miss The Swan pub in Crimble.

I miss the *Shipping Forecast* on Radio 4 - even though I never understood it. (I was also unexpectedly fond of *Woman's Hour* and *Farming Today*. Go figure.)

I miss whatever darkness in your collective soul moved you to make a movie about one of your greatest football managers, Brian Clough - not about his triumphs, mind you, but about his greatest failure.

I miss a young Polish woman with an exaggerated London accent, possibly the happiest and most optimistic sound I know.

I miss any sentence that begins "Da fmg is..." or "It were..."

I miss Bob being my uncle.

I miss the Thursday cake trolley, and the delirium that takes hold in the London newsroom late on a Friday afternoon, after another long week. I knew they would eventually come to an end. **FT**

.....  
*Joshua Chaffin is the FT's New York correspondent joshua.chaffin@ft.com. Simon Kuper is away*



**INVENTORY** MARO ITOJE  
RUGBY UNION PLAYER

**Maro Itoje, 25, made his senior debut for Saracens at the age of 19, going on to win the Premiership four times and the European Cup on three occasions. In 2016, he made his full England debut in the Six Nations and was named European Player of the Year.**

**What was your childhood or earliest ambition?**

I had so many dream jobs that lasted about a month each: fireman, policeman... Then, when I started following sport, I wanted to be a football player. I can't remember what movie I was watching, but I wanted to be an actor for a little while as well.

**Private school or state school? University or straight into work?**

I've experienced the two different sides of that coin. I took my GCSEs in state school, St George's in Harpenden, then went to private school, Harrow. My dad and my mother were very big on education. It was drummed into us that we had to do well and aim for the stars - we were academically equipped to take on the world. That helped shape my identity. I knew I was going to become a professional rugby player. Two or three weeks after my final day at school, I was getting ready to start pre-season. But my parents told me I also had to get my degree. SOAS [the School of Oriental and African Studies] was a great fit, in terms of location, teaching quality and the course they offered. It allowed me to explore parts of African politics that I hadn't explored before.

**Who was or still is your mentor?**

My parents. They taught me my moral code and helped shape me into the person I am today. I've had a few in sport. My first rugby coach, Stuart Mitchell - I'm still in contact with him. And there's been a whole list of others: [coaches] Joe Shaw, Alex Sanderson, Steve Borthwick. Richard Hill has been great.

**How physically fit are you?**

I like to think I'm pretty fit!

**Ambition or talent: which matters more to success?**

Ambition. So many people are ridiculously talented, but people who are ambitious and competitive outperform them. Your mentality is so important.

**How politically committed are you?**

I've got a deep interest in politics, both in the UK and internationally,

particularly Africa - I studied politics at A-level and at university. **What would you like to own that you don't currently possess?**

The World Cup wouldn't be too bad.

**What's your biggest extravagance?**

I have a guilty pleasure in a certain type of clothes. I love roll-neck jumpers, turtle-neck tops. I probably have more of those in my wardrobe than the average man.

**In what place are you happiest?**

When I'm with my family, with my friends, with the people I care about. And when I'm on the pitch and winning.

**What ambitions do you still have?**

A fair few. In sport, to keep on improving, keep on learning, keep on getting better - to be on the winning side in any team I play for, year on year. One day my sporting life will come to an end, so also to have a successful career post-rugby.

**What drives you on?**

I hate losing. I hate losing even more than I like winning! I love improving, reaching new targets and succeeding. I also want to make myself proud of what I put out there, and make all those who support me proud.

**What is the greatest achievement of your life so far?**

I think it may be trying to answer these questions.

**What do you find most irritating in other people?**

I don't like people who lie or go back on their word - people who say one thing and do another.

**If your 20-year-old self could see you now, what would he think?**

"Maro, you're going to be all right - don't mess it up."

**Which object that you've lost do you wish you still had?**

Last year I lost my phone and wallet.

**What is the greatest challenge of our time?**

Ourselves. The world is such a beautiful place. So many things go wrong as a result of human behaviour.

**Do you believe in an afterlife?**

Yes, I do. I am a Christian and I believe in heaven and hell.

**If you had to rate your satisfaction with your life so far, out of 10, what would you score?**

A very solid seven. **FT**

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*Interview by Hester Lacey.*

*Maro Itoje's "Pearl Conversations"*

*podcast is available on all*

*main podcast platforms*

**'I hate losing. I hate losing even more than I like winning'**

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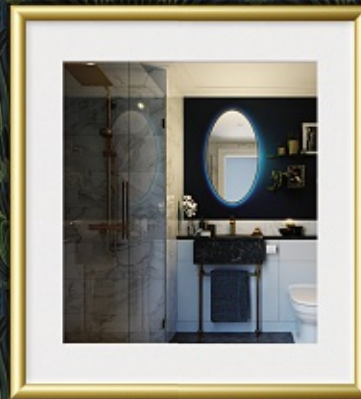
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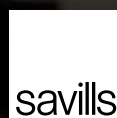


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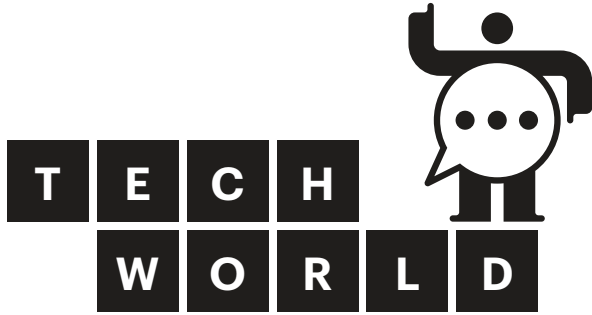
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## Time to coexist with China – not cancel it

When it comes to cyber security advice on China, the most common refrain is: don't go. If you do go, take "burner" devices with you and leave your own laptop and phone at home.

This is the advice multinationals often give their employees about travel to "high-risk" areas. It's a reasonable first step, but it assumes the world can be neatly divided into safe and unsafe, and employees can be kept on the right side of the divide. It's useless for people like me, who engage with China and live in the belly of the beast.

The approach of the US government to the rise of China's tech giants mirrors this simple approach to employee safety: just don't go there, and make sure their companies don't come over here either. Over the past year, the US government has ramped up its sanctions against Huawei in what amounts to an attempt to kill the company's global telecoms equipment business. Now the US is considering banning Chinese social media apps, including TikTok.

I'm very glad that we are talking about cyber security and China, but find our current conversation misguided because it assumes we can "just not go there". We cannot hermetically seal ourselves off from China and its companies – nor should we try to. Instead, we need to figure out practical ways to meet a challenge that has been with us since long before the rise of China: our need to coexist in a world with people we don't trust.

The rationale for US bans began as a data security concern: if we can't trust the Chinese



ILLUSTRATION BY PÂTÉ

government, we can't trust Chinese companies with our data. As a first approximation, it's true that if you don't trust a vendor, you shouldn't use it: just don't go there. But cyber security consultants would tell you that if you give impractical advice, employees won't follow it.

Avoiding China is impractical. Ripping out all of Huawei's equipment from the world's networks is costly, and Chinese groups would still remain part of the global telecoms supply chain. Huawei and ByteDance, which owns TikTok, are only two of a vast number of Chinese global tech players. In the first three months of this year, more than half of all the smartphones sold outside China were from Chinese brands – not just Huawei but also Xiaomi, Oppo and Vivo. Lenovo sells a quarter of all the personal computers in

**'We cannot hermetically seal ourselves off from China and its companies – nor should we do so'**

the world. And if you're worried about Beijing getting its hands on your data, you should be concerned about giving it to American groups too: Apple, Yahoo, Zoom and other US giants have acceded to Chinese authorities' requests for data or to freeze accounts.

If that's enough to make you want to turn off the device you're reading this on, it gets worse: the most common data leaks don't stem from the high-tech machinations of the Chinese security services or US companies. They come from simple acts of digital illiteracy, like using easy-to-guess passwords or not updating your software. For every highly trained Chinese government-sponsored hacker, there are a dozen bored teenagers looking to cause mischief online, and you can believe me because I was once one of them. (The latter. Not the former.)

But in a way, I am bringing you good news. There are effective ways of protecting yourself from 90 per cent of the threats out there. The people who create good cyber security resources do so in order to help us coexist in a world with pervasive threats. Being online, like any form of engagement, brings benefits as well as costs. As China's former leader Deng Xiaoping said of opening up the economy: if you open the window, some flies will come in.

Thankfully, the same approaches researchers have developed over decades for non-China threats also apply to China. In the Huawei case, to protect communications over an untrusted network, governments could mandate end-to-end encryption and regular audits for operators. In countries such as the UK, however, authorities are wary of their citizens using strong encryption because it obstructs their own spies as well as China's.

When it comes to TikTok, the more important debate is about how its algorithm controls what we watch – a concern for all the social media apps that influence us. Again, there is a whole field of research into algorithmic accountability and transparency, but it is not the focus in the current TikTok debate. Instead, we are still discussing whether to ever have contact with China. But we cannot quarantine ourselves indefinitely. We will have to face the threats presented by Chinese tech with scrutiny and safeguards, not with disengagement. **FT**

*Yuan Yang is the FT's deputy Beijing bureau chief*



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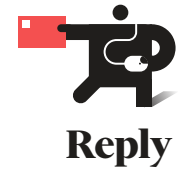
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# ROBERT SHRIMSLEY THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION



## Buffing up with Boris? It might just work out

I must admit, I'm very taken with this new government approach in which ministers are leading by example. First we had Boris Johnson talking about how he is losing weight ahead of a new obesity strategy. Now we have Grant Shapps, the transport secretary, hilariously having to go into quarantine as a result of the rules changing while he was away on his Spanish holiday.

What's next? Matt Hancock working in a care home as part of the government's new social care strategy? "The important thing to remember is that although you have caught coronavirus, thanks to the government's quick actions, lots of other people haven't." On second thoughts, perhaps one can take this too far.

Even so, the sight of government ministers acting as the nation's fitness instructors is immensely cheering. One tabloid had Hancock doing press-ups, again following the lead of Johnson a few weeks earlier. (You just know the health secretary is the type of man who would ostentatiously lose a press-up challenge with his boss.) But this is surely the motivation we have all been waiting for: you, too, can be as buff as Boris, as honed as Hancock.

It can presumably only be a matter of time before the entire cabinet is producing fitness videos for their YouTube channels. Gavin Williamson's *Shape Up and Dance* could be the sleeper hit of the summer. Eat your heart out Joe Wicks - there's a new teacher in town and his classes will definitely be back by September. Well, probably back by September.

But this is just the start: there's a personalised cabinet workout for every citizen, from *Go with Gove to Tone with Truss, Get Ripped with Raab* and Robert Jenrick's *Pump Up your Planning Application*.

Then, perhaps, a few tearful daytime-TV interviews - maybe a



ILLUSTRATION BY LUCAS VARELA

spot on *Loose Women* - in which Johnson talks emotionally about his fight against the flab and his yo-yoing weight: "Frankly Kaye, I don't think I was a very happy person. I'd go on a crash diet every time I had an election coming but then I'd sneak down to the kitchen for a wheel of manchego."

Maybe not. But what makes a premier who so often hides behind bonhomie willing to talk about himself in this way? Or supposedly serious ministers gurn their way through exercise photo opps?

The obvious answer is that they want to publicise the new health push. But there is a second layer. A government that instinctively dislikes telling people how to behave is, for good reason, doing rather a lot of it at the moment. This is all rather alien to the prime minister, who despises "nannying" and whose libertarian instincts run very deep. In many ways, this is an attractive trait in a leader. The problem is that the health of the nation is a public policy issue, and Johnson's own brush with mortality has convinced him that what is good for him is good for Britain.

So how does a prime minister who does not like being told what to do - and assumes others feel the same - square this circle? He does it by trying to place himself not

as a commissar barking fitness instructions but by putting himself at the same level, talking gently, sympathetically and, it must be said, rather effectively to people.

He may cane the purveyors of junk food but he will coax the consumers. How effective this will be may depend as much on the other parts of the strategy, exercise and nutrition regimes in schools, better food labelling, more interventionist doctors and advertising restrictions.

Even these limited efforts are certain to alienate the bizarre new contrarians who rail against face masks with all the nuance of anti-vaxxers. But the PM's readiness to speak frankly is designed to, as it were, sugar the pill. The tone is more "join me" than "listen to me".

I'm rather less convinced by his colleagues parading fitness skills - the country does not look to the cabinet for lifestyle tips. In an ideal world, we'd have Michelle Obama lead the way. But for now, the PM's personalised nudges and admission of his own frailties may be the right tone for a country that has had enough of being told what to do.

[robert.shrimmsley@ft.com](mailto:robert.shrimmsley@ft.com)

[@robertshrimmsley](https://twitter.com/robertshrimmsley). Robert will be speaking at this year's FT Weekend Festival on 'Satire in a Serious Age'

What a fantastic article ("Nuclear secrets: the Dutch whistleblower who tried to stop Pakistan's bomb", July 25/26). It shows how western countries would stop at nothing if it lined their own pockets and served their intelligence interests. It's clear that business rules.

Yeshu via FT.com

@adam\_tooze July 23  
The amazing WEB Du Bois's graphical presentation of data anchors this remarkable report via @FT on data activism and the struggle for racial justice in the US

Great article ("Race and America: why data matters", July 25/26). It's shocking to hear that the country that has the world's leading big data companies has gone backwards in terms of its openness on data. It's time for one of them to step up and help carry that baton.

TomTom via FT.com

Re "The return of the rave" (July 25/26). Before they put the wall up at Glastonbury in 1999, it was a four-day rave with well over 100,000 people. After the wall, it was a hell of a lot cleaner, safer and easier to navigate, but had lost that crazy edge.

Kimbers via FT.com

What a moving, heart-wrenching story ("The family my childhood nanny left behind", July 25/26) - and an ode to the many Filipinos who move abroad to support their families. They are frugal, infinitely caring and prepared to sacrifice their own present to focus on providing for their distant children's needs in the future.

ChrisD via FT.com

Re "The horror of accidental reply-alls", July 25/26). A senior executive I am acquainted with once emailed staff salary details across the whole trading floor. He then stood up and screamed: "No one open that last mail I sent." AJ via FT.com

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Quiz answers The link was Doctor Who 1. Josephine Baker 2. The Master 3. Norman Hartnell 4. Emily Davison (suffragette at the Derby) 5. Screwdriver 6. Lewis Capaldi 7. Amy B. Red rose 9. "La donna è mobile" 10. The Regeneration trilogy/Picture quiz Oscar Peterson + Kim Wilde = Oscar Wilde



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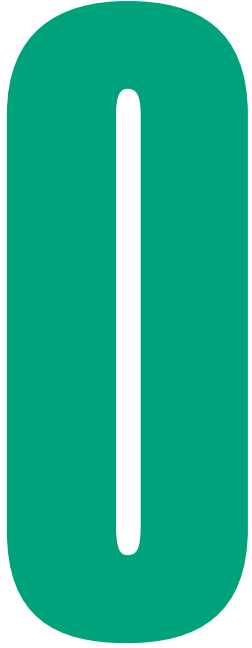
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# THE TAMING OF CHINA'S WILDLIFE TRADE

Blamed for triggering the Covid-19 pandemic, markets in many exotic species have been banned. But with livelihoods at stake and powerful industries lining up, the state faces a daunting task as it tries to prevent future outbreaks and limit the economic fallout from its clean-up.  
By Christian Shepherd and Qianer Liu. Photographs by Zhu Yinghao



Night-time activity in the Huangsha seafood market in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou



n the outskirts of Bolao town, five minutes down an overgrown dirt track into the jungle of southern China's Guangxi region, Hua Chaojiang breeds cobras by the hundred. An acrid smell and chorus of angry hisses meet us when we step into the darkness of the three-storey red-brick building. Hua, who has been raising snakes for 20 years, is unfazed. He reaches into one of the pens, grabs a tail and casually lifts up a complaining - and venomous - elapid snake. The four-year-old cobra is about as thick as Hua's muscled arm and nearly twice as long. Hua laughs when asked whether the poisonous snakes have ever bitten him. "Of course," he replies, using a metal pole with a hook to keep its fangs away from his body.

Despite their impressive size, Hua's cobras are starving. Some are already dead. It is six months since the Chinese government banned the breeding and consumption of snakes and other land-based wildlife, as part of its response to the discovery of a novel coronavirus in the central city of Wuhan. Now that Covid-19 has turned from an epidemic to a pandemic, China's prohibition looks like it could become permanent, leaving Hua with thousands of snakes and nowhere to put them. "If there is no market, what can I do with them?" he asks. To save money, Hua has cut down feeding from five times to once a week. Even so, his walk-in freezer is nearly empty of frozen cockerels. The hunger makes the cobras restless. "Snakes fight snakes. Snakes eat snakes," he says.

The snake trade has been lucrative for Hua. Before the ban, a snake would sell for about Rmb50 (more than \$7) per kilogramme in markets in neighbouring Guangdong province. He has been growing his business steadily since the 1990s, when he first started keeping cobras in a small shed with half a dozen snake pens. Later he invested profits in a new building to keep the poisonous reptiles further from neighbours. He attended courses with snake-breeding experts and passed tests to become a qualified breeder. As he expanded he moved most of his stock into the jungle, although he still keeps a few pits of oriental ratsnakes, which are not venomous, on his original farm.

In 2016, the industry of breeders and restaurants that used wild animals for meat was estimated to have a total value of Rmb125bn (\$18bn). The

government has promised to compensate breeders, but the process keeps being delayed. Hua, 50, has had to borrow money to keep the business from total collapse. "Since the epidemic came, it's not been possible to sell anything. I'm losing money on buying the chicks to feed them, on paying workers, on everything." He and other breeders travelled to the regional capital of Nanning to petition the government - to no avail. Officials talk of finding new employment for breeders but Hua struggles to imagine what that could be. "I only know how to breed snakes," he says.

Hua has been caught on the wrong side of global efforts to guard against a future outbreak of another contagious pathogen. Epidemiologists warn the next one could easily be more deadly than Covid-19, which has infected more than 16 million people worldwide and resulted in more than 600,000 deaths. The prevailing theory is that it originated in wildlife. The earliest cases of novel coronavirus identified in Wuhan were tied to the city's Huanan market, which, according to independent Chinese media reports, sold a wide range of creatures, including civets, pangolins and snakes.

The exact transmission pathway remains unclear; the best genetic matches for Sars-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, have been of coronaviruses carried by horseshoe bats from the southwestern Yunnan province. But some scientists believe the virus passed through an intermediate host before reaching humans. The pangolin, a scaly anteater once common in Asia but now endangered by high levels of poaching and trafficking, is one possible host; another early suggestion, later shown to be unlikely, was snakes.

As the country where the pandemic began, China has faced intense pressure to clean up its wildlife trade and urban live animal markets to safeguard against future outbreaks. Haunted by multiple past outbreaks - notably, severe acute respiratory syndrome, or Sars, in 2003, which was traced back to palm civets - the government has responded sharply, with the emphasis on shutting down the illegal wild animal trade. The prohibition has been hailed by environmentalists and epidemiologists alike, but many have called for it to be expanded and made permanent.

**'Since the epidemic came, it's not been possible to sell anything. I'm losing money on everything. I only know how to breed snakes'**

**Hua Chaojiang, snake breeder**

The glare of international scrutiny has further complicated the government's efforts. The original discovery of the coronavirus in the Wuhan market sparked calls in the US and Europe for China to close its "wet markets". These calls were mostly met with confusion in China, where urban markets made up of outdoor stalls or housed in large warehouses are preferred to supermarkets by the majority of the population as the place to buy groceries.

The phrase "wet market" added to the sense that the calls were misguided. The term originated in Hong Kong English to describe outdoor vegetable, fruit, meat and seafood stalls, which had slippery floors from a mixture of discarded food waste and water used to clean produce, and has no obvious equivalent in Mandarin Chinese. But this linguistic confusion is a distraction from the more significant roadblocks China faces as it attempts to control the wildlife trade to ensure future biosecurity. Even for a one-party state led by Xi Jinping, the country's most powerful leader in decades, this is a daunting task.

**The snake trade was just one of dozens of wildlife industries that boomed as China's population grew and became wealthier. Rarer species were the domain of China's nouveau riche. Carved ivory and tiger bone wine were often prized possessions and could be auctioned for vast sums or given as bribes to corrupt officials. These practices have been curtailed in recent years, thanks in part to President Xi's anti-graft campaign, which curbed flagrant bribery. But more prosaic forms of the trade have persisted and even grown.**

The country's rising wealth has created a host of markets for wildlife, some legal, some illegal and many somewhere in between. Prior to the pandemic, the farming and commercial trade of about 50 protected species was permitted in China. Many more non-protected species, such as snakes, could be bred and sold as long as the farms and businesses obtained licences from the forestry authorities.

Hua's cobras, which had received official approval, are mostly sold for food. Other species are traded as exotic pets for the urban middle class or used in Chinese medicines, many of which are mass-produced and highly popular. At the height of the coronavirus outbreak in China, more than 90 per cent of confirmed Covid-19 cases in the central Hubei province were treated with traditional Chinese medicines, according to local officials. Many of these remedies are plant- and mineral-based, but some also use wild animal parts. An injection that contains bear bile was given to more than 30,000 patients in 90 hospitals across China.

The growing demand for wildlife has brought animal diseases up close with human populations. Rapid urbanisation has enclosed the trade of both wild and traditionally farmed animals amid densely populated areas. Ever greater contact between humans and animals is increasing the chances of transmission and thus the risk of an emergent pathogen. The UN Environment Programme says about 60 per cent of outbreaks since 1940 have been zoonotic, which means they originate in animals, then mutate to become transmissible to humans. The majority of those zoonotic diseases have been from wild animals. EcoHealth Alliance, a non-profit that researches emerging infectious diseases, believes there could be as many as 800,000 unknown pathogens in animal species

# \$18bn

Estimated value in 2016 of the Chinese industry of breeders and restaurants that use wild animals for meat

From top: snake breeder Hua Chaojiang from Guangxi; one of his stock of cobras; numbered cobra eggs from Hua's farm

with the ability to infect humans. Markets such as those in Wuhan, where multiple different live wild animals are brought into close contact - and kept in cramped, unhygienic conditions - significantly increase the risk of infection spillovers, either into amplifier host species or directly into humans.

Breeders such as Hua represent the other side of the equation for the ruling Chinese Communist party, which faces a delicate balancing act. Standing in the way of the strictest bans possible are individual farmers' livelihoods and powerful pharmaceutical companies that breed wildlife for use in traditional Chinese medicine. Legal loopholes and mixed messages from the body that oversees and therefore plays a central role in facilitating the wildlife trade, the National Forestry and Grassland Administration, also threaten progress, activists say.

In Guangxi, which produces about 70 per cent of China's snakes, some 37,000 people relied on the snake trade as a source of income. Bolao is in Lingshan county, known as the "home of China's snake breeders". The region has won plaudits from Chinese state media for using the wildlife trade to spur economic growth and the alleviation of poverty. Local entrepreneurs have banded together to share best practices, create modern farms and scale up the industry.

After so many years of encouragement, they are struggling to understand why they suddenly are not allowed to farm snakes. "Lots of experts have come to Lingshan to see the industry. The higher-ups don't understand this, so they stopped it," says Deng Cunyou, an enthusiastic breeder in smart shoes and a white shirt who helps run a local co-operative. "Instead, they should have standardised the industry, made it scientific. People shouldn't just be able to breed as many as they want."

The Rongji restaurant chain, based in the southern city of Guangzhou, is arguably the world's most successful snake-meat business. With 50 locations it had revenue of Rmb450m last year. Its more popular dishes include snake braised in ginger sauce and a "dragon and phoenix" soup made from chicken and snake broth. Shelves in the office of its founder and owner, Wang Guohui, are stacked with culinary awards and empty bottles of expensive whisky and Moutai, the Chinese ►



**‘Snake is not like chicken, duck or fish, which you can have three times a day. It’s more like you have it once a month or in the winter you take a portion to your parents’**

Wang Guohui, restaurant chain owner



Clockwise from top left: Wang Guohui, owner of the Rongji restaurants in Guangzhou; live chicken head for market in Guangzhou; salt-and-pepper snake, a typical Cantonese way to prepare snake with fatter meat



◀ grain-based spirit. On the wall is a copy of a comic painted by a famous local artist that shows Wang with a bright green serpent draped over his neck.

Wang is only slightly less enthusiastic than his caricature and does not hold back in defending his business. “This current one-fell-swoop approach is forcing just about all my business into closure,” he says. Not many people knew how to prepare snakes properly when he launched the business 16 years ago, which had given him a competitive edge, Wang says. His specialism is now a liability. “If I was still deluded into thinking I could continue, I would have been bankrupt long ago.” Knowing he had to find a new business, he has sold some branches and laid off staff. “If that’s the way the policy is going, we can only go along with it.”

The impact on his business aside, Wang also argues that banning snakes outright and permanently will ripple through the supply chain, since snake breeders buy up unwanted male chicks from chicken farms that only need hens to lay eggs. He admits eating snake isn’t for everyone, but says many people still want the option, particularly on special occasions. “It’s not like chicken, duck or fish, which you can have three times a day. It’s more like you have it once a month or in the winter you take a portion to your parents.” One of the main reasons people eat snake is a belief that the meat has medicinal properties to “dispel wind and remove dampness” – especially useful in the clammy southern Chinese heat, he says.

Even with the ban, the wildlife business in Guangzhou has not disappeared. Traders in the city’s largest Chinese medicine market are selling Heilongjiang snow frogs, which have yet to be whitelisted by the government, alongside the usual legal fare such as antelope penis and antler. Some traders say they could obtain other wildlife products if needed. “Wild [animals] are definitely better than people-made options – everyone in Chinese medicine says so. Wild are also more expensive than bred, because they are harder to find and are more effective,” says one stall owner.

Wildlife breeding is not the sole risk factor in preventing epidemics; sales practices are also a concern. Although it is far from common, some Chinese cities host urban markets that sell various live wild animals. The sale of live domesticated farm animals in markets is also problematic. While both Sars and Covid-19 most likely originated in wildlife, the traditional farming, transportation and sale of these animals also pose significant dangers for the spread of zoonotic diseases. The country has faced an epidemic of African swine fever in pig farms and, since 1997, Guangdong’s live poultry markets have battled with frequent seasonal outbreaks of avian influenza virus.

In June, China’s markets were thrown back into the spotlight for a second time, when a new cluster of cases in Beijing was linked to the largest wholesale market in the city. After a city-wide testing drive, the municipal government found more than 300 cases linked to Xinfadi, a large warehouse in southwest Beijing where farmers sold meat, fish, vegetables and other goods. The exact source of the resurgence remains unclear, but Chinese officials have suggested it may have been imported from Europe on frozen produce, an explanation that some epidemiologists have labelled unlikely. In response to the outbreak, Beijing closed the market place and its sellers were redirected to a facility in neighbouring Hebei province.

# 37,000

The number of people who rely on the snake trade for a source of income in Guangxi, which accounts for about 70 per cent of China’s snake production

Guangzhou’s markets have also come under even greater scrutiny in response to the pandemic. In the Jiangcun live poultry market, stall owners complain that new measures to prevent infections have hampered trade. “Business is much worse – about half what it was last year,” says Zhou Guoxiong, a breeder who has been in the business for more than 25 years. “In January [in a nearby market], some people were arrested for selling wild animals after an undercover newspaper report and we weren’t allowed to open here until March.” After reopening, sellers were no longer allowed to let customers take away live chickens and had to slaughter them on site, which defeats the market’s main selling point, Zhou says. “Who in Guangzhou eats frozen chicken?”

An expanding middle class has also created a market for household pets. But the prevailing nervousness led to Guangzhou’s major pet market, Huadiwan, which has areas dedicated to selling fish, birds, cats and dogs, being partially dismantled this year, with many shopkeepers asked to move out. The stores that used to sell more exotic species can be spotted easily by the missing characters that have been cut out of their signs.

Liu Yiding, the owner of Tangchao, a well-known reptile pet shop that used to be based in Huadiwan, has already moved to a new location. On a quiet morning, the shop is being cleaned as workers feed crickets to the lizards and toads. “We have been to the forestry bureau to seek advice and we want to apply for a formal business licence, but there is no appropriate permit for us to apply for, so we are in a grey zone,” says Liu.

The regulators have been caught up in the constant policy updates almost as much as sellers and breeders. The rapid pace of change has made it hard for even the forestry administration to give straight answers at times. One forestry official in Guangdong says that the bureau receives a vast number of requests about what can be bred or sold. “It’s not like you can search on Baidu and find the latest information. There are some [species] that could be bred before but it’s not clear now whether they will be allowed,” he says. Work to inform the public hasn’t been great, he admits, especially explaining the science behind decisions. “Overall, the interests of ▶

# 20

Number of wild pangolins found in China by conservation groups in recent years, compared with 10,000-20,000 previously in Hunan province by one estimate

◀ farmers and small businesses haven't been very well respected."

**Few in China have been more active in pushing the** National Forestry and Grassland Administration to crack down on the illegal wildlife trade than Zhou Jinfeng, head of the China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation. "Covid is a disaster but it's a good lesson, a wake-up call," he says. The foundation was created in 1985 with a mission to reintroduce the endangered Père David's deer. Originally from northern China, the species had been hunted to extinction in China but had been successfully bred in captivity in the UK. The foundation's role has since expanded to a wide range of lobbying and awareness-raising activities for endangered species in China.

For Zhou, the pandemic has accelerated a shift that was already happening, though far too slowly. "The ordinary people are now on my side," he says. "I disagree when people say it's 'tradition'. Lots of people have told me they used to eat [wildlife], love to eat it. But now they won't eat it." On almost a daily basis, the foundation posts about violations of wildlife trade bans, as a network of volunteers across the country inform it of illegal exotic bird markets or poachers.

The reclassification of the pangolin as a first-class protected species last month, and its removal from the Chinese Pharmacopoeia of ingredients for medicine, is a key victory for Zhou. Protecting the endangered creature has been a priority for the foundation and Zhou keeps a stuffed toy pangolin on his desk. He says there used to be between 10,000 and 20,000 wild pangolins in Hunan province alone, but in recent years conservation groups have found only 20 in China.

The group has also begun using the courts to protect wildlife and Zhou hopes Covid will make that easier. Among the biggest shifts since the outbreak began is a beefing-up of the laws governing wildlife trade, as well as stricter punishments for those who break them. The main problems holding back progress towards stricter bans are "business and money", Zhou says. "Those are the forces that are doing all they can to attack us, to push back." He points out that the ancient texts that much of traditional Chinese medicine is based on talk about

pangolin scales as being "toxic" and an "inferior medicine" that should be used sparingly, if at all. "It was after reform and opening [in the 1980s] that people started to market the idea [of pangolin being medicinal] to make money."

Grace Ge Gabriel, Asia regional director for the International Fund for Animal Welfare, believes Beijing could make the shift from wildlife trading happen if it decided to, by including compensation for farmers and incentives to switch industries. "The whole disaster is caused by the legal loopholes," she says. "The basis of China's wildlife protection law was wrong. It's a wildlife protection law in name only. The law is more about protecting the utilisation of wild animals, rather than protecting them for their ecological value in the wild."

Ge Gabriel points to the use of bear bile in Tan Re Qing, a Chinese medicine injection for respiratory infections made popular during the Sars outbreak in 2003, which was included in a list of products recommended by China's health commission as a treatment for coronavirus. In the 1990s, experts in traditional Chinese medicine had begun to reject the use of bear bile completely, because wild bear populations were so low and they considered bears bred in captivity to be unsanitary. "Instead of the government taking the cue to find replacements and phase out bear farming, they continued [to allow] bear farming. What happened was they merged some of the smaller unsanitary bear farms with pharmaceutical companies to create something more sanitary looking," she says.

A spokesperson for Shanghai Kaibao Pharmaceutical Co, the leading manufacturer of Tan Re Qing, says its technology to synthesise bear bile is not yet mature enough to make the treatment at scale. The company defends the use of farmed bears, saying they do not count as "wild animals" because they are supplied by breeding units recognised by the Chinese government.

Andrew Di Salvo, a US-based wildlife veterinarian and author of a recent study on the risks of bears as a source of zoonotic pathogens, says "possible transmission of bacteria via bear bile consumption would be at the top of my list of concerns" about infections, although he adds that the overall risk may be low. "While there are numerous zoonotic diseases involving other species that may pose a greater risk to humans, that by no means reduces the importance of remaining vigilant of all potential zoonotic risks," he says.

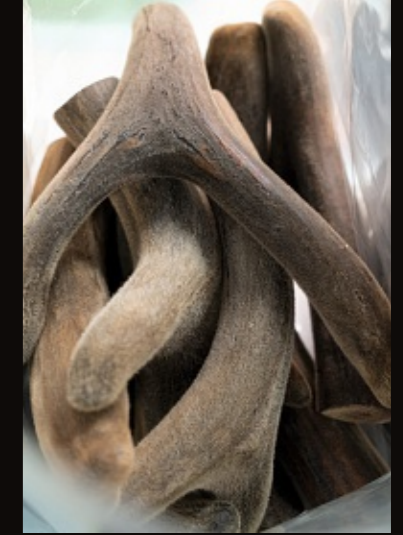
Conservationists hope the pandemic will convince China's government that promoting medicines with wild animal ingredients is more likely to cause the next outbreak than help cure this one. "The current ban is focused only on consumption, but the virus doesn't make a distinction between trade that is legal or illegal, for food or for medicine or for exotic pets," Ge Gabriel points out.

She believes the shift towards protection can happen, as it has in the past. After China banned auctions of ivory, rhino horn and tiger bone, it led to a marked reduction in poaching, which has continued to fall. "Enforcement went up, penalties were up, trade went down," she says. "Current loopholes basically put the burden of proof on law enforcement, rather than on the criminals. That needs to change." **FT**

Christian Shepherd is the FT's Beijing correspondent. Qianer Liu is the FT's assistant South China reporter. Additional reporting by Emma Zhou in Beijing



Clockwise from left: Jiangcun market (the sign says 'It is everyone's responsibility to maintain hygiene'); antlers on sale in Qingping traditional Chinese medicine market, Guangzhou; Liu Yiding, owner of a reptile pet shop in Guangzhou



**'Covid is a disaster but it's a good lesson, a wake-up call... Lots of people have told me they used to eat [wildlife], love to eat it. But now they won't'**  
Zhou Jinfeng, conservation group head



# ***‘We’re just cracking the surface in terms of black stories we need to tell’***

With another series of her award-winning show *Insecure* under her belt, the actress, producer and writer Issa Rae talks to *Anna Nicolaou* about her love for Los Angeles, lockdown life and why she’s still unconvinced by talk of a black renaissance in the entertainment industry.

Portraits by *Erik Carter*



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ssa Rae's internet is terrible. It's not even 40 seconds into our phone call and she's cackling with laughter, explaining that writing scripts over Zoom is "the worst". "Oh god," she groans. "It's been extremely painful."

Her south Los Angeles neighbourhood - among the most affluent majority-black districts in the US - has had shoddy reception for as long as she can remember. Dubbed the "black Beverly Hills" for its wealthy residents, including legends such as Ray Charles and Tina Turner, the community where Rae grew up serves as the canvas for *Insecure*, the HBO show that catapulted her from YouTube fame to a Hollywood empire.

A knack for depicting the everyday lives of black millennials in LA - in 30-minute episodes crammed with rapid-fire jokes and dreamy pastel skylines - has made Rae a leading figure in Hollywood's much-touted black renaissance, the label bestowed on the creatives behind leading films and TV shows such as *Moonlight*, *Empire* and *Black-ish*. At 35, she's the first black woman to create, write and star in her own premium cable show. She is also a workaholic - juggling her production studio and record label with several shows and movies.

*Insecure* documents the awkward growing pains of Issa Dee, played by Rae. In the pilot, Issa has just turned 29 and is struggling with a dead-end boyfriend and a dead-end career. She works at a non-profit aimed at helping underprivileged "kids from the hood" - except it hasn't hired any people from the hood. Issa is the token employee of colour, and is constantly asked questions by her white colleagues such as: "What is on fleek?" (she pretends to have never heard of the phrase because "being aggressively passive is what I do best").

The show, which this week received eight Emmy nominations for its fourth series, is a twist on the familiar tale of stunted adulthood.

While *Girls* and *Sex and the City* were centred around white women, Rae's story is of two black best friends, Issa and Molly, an ambitious, high-powered lawyer whom Issa describes as "the Will Smith of corporate. White people love Molly. Black people also love Molly." Throughout *Insecure*, Rae draws comedy out of the black experience in America.

**When we speak, it's a sunny** Tuesday afternoon in June and Rae takes my call in between writing sessions. She says, "Hey-y", as if greeting an old friend, and it feels familiar because I've been watching her play the character Issa for the past few months. Over the phone, Rae comes across like the part she writes: emphatic, self-deprecating and charming, often bursting into unrestrained laughter.

It's past the 100-day mark of lockdown life in LA, and we talk about being holed up at home. In the month leading up to our conversation, the horror of the pandemic festered into a broader reckoning over inequalities in the US, as black Americans were among the

**'I felt guilty... Having a show on the air that didn't feel like, truthfully, it mattered, it was kind of heart-wrenching'**

hardest hit by both the virus and the economic fallout. Then George Floyd was killed by the police in Minneapolis.

Rae recalls how, one Sunday night, she watched as a fresh episode of *Insecure* dropped into American living rooms at the same time as protests spread like wildfire across the US. "I felt anxious. I felt worried. I felt guilty for even talking about content at the time," she says. "A lot of that came from really wanting this moment to actually matter this time... we're so resilient as a people, but [we are] tired of being resilient. So I was feeling all of this - and having a show on the air that didn't feel like, truthfully, it mattered, it was kind of heart-wrenching."

*Insecure* has been praised as sharp, fresh, even groundbreaking, for its portrayal of a set of Americans who have not been showcased in mainstream television for a long time. Instead of stereotypes of south Los Angeles - gangsters and shootings - it represents, Rae says, the LA she's always known.

In the episode that happened to drop that Sunday, Rae's talent was on full display. Issa and her ex Lawrence reunite over the course of a romantic evening - the pair

roam around Los Angeles, from a Latin restaurant downtown to an outdoor art market where they're enveloped in a cloud installation. In the final scene, the next morning, Issa leaves Lawrence and makes her way home through hilly south LA. But it's not a walk of shame; she's proud and smiling, shoulders back. The camera stays with her as she treks up a curved, palm-lined street, past stucco houses and faded green lawns, before panning out to a stunning view of the sun-drenched city skyline.

For those who saw it, the 30-minute reverie was a reprieve - from both the lockdown and relentless news coverage, transporting viewers into a nostalgic American idealism that has fallen away in recent years. Rae has said she wants *Insecure* to be remembered as a show of the Obama era (it launched a few months before the 2016 election), not of the Trump presidency during which it has largely aired.

On portraying the black experience, she cites the US sociologist WEB Du Bois's theory of "double consciousness": the constant internal questioning about how you're being viewed by white people. "We have so much working against us," she

says. “Our day-to-day lives are just about making ourselves more comfortable.”

Rae doesn’t want to preach. Instead, she riffs on the subtleties that pervade ordinary life for black Americans, wringing comedy out of microaggressions. In another episode of *Insecure*, Issa’s friends argue with a white man on a public bus. When the police are called over, Molly questions why they are only interrogating the black group. Rather than turning the episode into an after-school special on police bias, the show moves on to the next scene and it’s never mentioned again. Rae tells me she “doesn’t really try to put a lot of emphasis on those moments on the show”.

“Because it’s real black life. And if you don’t have a camera phone with you, you see things and can be like: OK, this is racist,” she says. “But then I still have to go to work and be on time and pay my bills.”

**Rae is one of five siblings,** the daughter of a Senegalese paediatrician and a Louisiana school teacher. The family moved around, including a stint in Senegal, before settling in Los Angeles. Rae recalls the 1990s as a heyday for black television: she cites shows like *Mo’Nisha*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*

and *Living Single*, which aired on coveted primetime slots.

That fell away in the 2000s, when the biggest comedies – *30 Rock*, *Modern Family*, *Parks and Recreation* – were decidedly white. Fresh out of Stanford with a degree in African and African-American studies, and frustrated by the lack of black stories that weren’t reality TV depictions of “extremely tragic black women”, Rae started filming skits on YouTube. She called her web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and riffed on the idea of a black version of Tina Fey’s quirky *30 Rock* character Liz Lemon. The show took off and got the attention of Casey Bloys, HBO’s programming chief, who asked for a meeting, leading to *Insecure*.

Rae’s success, alongside creatives like Lena Waithe, Donald Glover and Shonda Rhimes, has led optimists to declare a black renaissance in the American entertainment industry. But Rae isn’t so sure. She pivots back and forth between optimism and pessimism. “I honestly don’t know. It changes all the time,” she says, admitting she has been feeling jaded lately.

“It feels like we’re just cracking the surface in terms of black stories that we need to tell. I’ve been noticing, in the last year, a shift in ▶



2011-2013  
'The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl'



2018  
'The Hate U Give'

2019  
'Little'



2020  
'The Lovebirds'



2020  
'The Photograph'

2016-2020  
'Insecure'



**‘Please, no. I don’t ever want to hear pandemic or Covid on the show. I honestly hope I’m dead before I see a movie about Covid’**



◀ the kind of black stories that get bought now. And I started feeling like: wow, I guess the trend is over and the novelty has worn off for this generation. And it’s back to... what else is the industry into? Because Hollywood is so quick to move on.”

Rae’s trajectory represents the type of fairytale that Silicon Valley loves: she found her audience on YouTube and the big studios came to her. Tech groups say that online disruption has levelled the playing field in media, allowing for diverse programming aimed at niche groups, rather than trying to capture huge broadcast TV audiences. In her 2016 memoir, Rae wrote: “If it weren’t for YouTube, I would still be at studios trying to convince studio execs that black girls exist.”

But, four years on, Rae tells me the streaming world still amplifies the same types of stories. “There are more outlets. But it still comes down to the executives who say yes or no. And those executives are still pretty limited in diversity.” If anything, she says, having more data about viewership trends can further validate executives’ own preferences. “Data helps them prove whether or not, in their minds, something can be successful. It almost makes it more complicated. And it almost makes them more self-assured that they’re right.”

I can’t help but feel apologetic asking her these questions, just as all actresses are asked endlessly about sexism in Hollywood. But Rae seems eager to talk, if weary. She repeatedly tells me she wants to be optimistic, but she can’t bring herself to say that she actually is.

So what can Hollywood do? “Listen to people? Employ people? Taking things down is all well and good,” she says, referencing a culling of works that Hollywood has now acknowledged to be racist. “But what are you doing to ensure that there are no images like that in the future? There have been too many black showrunners who have had to shoulder the burden of making these big declarations of: I’m going to hire more women or I’m gonna hire more black people. Just do the fuck better.”

**A**bout midway through our conversation I realise we’ve been talking about work and societal problems the entire time. But Rae is easy to talk to and breaks into laughter often, particularly when I tell her about living with my parents during quarantine. She gives away little about her own life.

I ask how she’s been feeling through all the changes this year. She demurs (“I feel like we all feel the same”) and bounces the question back. When I ask how she’s spent her quarantine, she says it has been “very work heavy. Usually, my life is work heavy.”

Perhaps her work is the best way to understand what makes Rae tick. While *Insecure* is not autobiographical, it’s hard not to perceive Rae through its themes. Issa Dee gets priced out of her apartment complex, and combating gentrification is an ongoing aspect of her story, as she builds a career in community events centred around the black people who have lived in the area for decades.

The real-life Issa is equally enamoured with her community. Last year, she co-founded Hilltop Coffee in Inglewood because there were no black-owned coffee shops in the neighbourhood. She makes a point of highlighting local spots on *Insecure*, apparently giving businesses and property values a bump that local restaurateurs have dubbed the “Issa Effect”.

Her Instagram account reveals a sillier side. In April, leading up to the premiere of the latest season, she posted videos of herself rapping, mimicking her character. “Never lonely no, even though we in a pandemic, no,” she rhymes over Yung Baby Tate. She pops a champagne bottle, seemingly alone.

But Rae is also a hyper-ambitious Stanford graduate who owns and invests in a portfolio of companies, including her own production house, which has a deal with Columbia Pictures, and a record label under the prestigious Atlantic Records imprint. Besides *Insecure*, she’s writing another HBO Max

series about a female rap group, and starring in an upcoming television movie alongside Bette Midler. There are also movies. She’s an ambassador for the makeup brand CoverGirl. She’s a Google Assistant voice. Rae has said she wants to emulate the career of Oprah. She wakes at 4am but says that quarantine has allowed her to slow down a bit in other ways.

Hollywood has always been fuelled by idealism but, as the months have dragged on, it’s becoming more apparent to even Tinseltown’s most ardent optimists that the movie business won’t be back to its original form anytime soon, if at all. After our call, the Covid-19 situation in Los Angeles worsened, prompting the governor to pare back its reopening.

If Rae doesn’t want *Insecure* to be a Trump-era show, she’s even less interested in it becoming a coronavirus show. “Please, no. I don’t ever want to hear pandemic or Covid on the show. I honestly hope I’m dead before I see a movie about Covid,” she quips.

When we spoke, she was hoping to restart filming in September, but as the pandemic worsened in California that was scrapped. Rae shoots almost entirely on location outside in Los Angeles, making filming more complicated than on soundstages, which can be more tightly controlled. For now, she’s in “full denial” and not adjusting her writing to pandemic-necessitated precautions. As Rae points out, her character finds her life passion through throwing live community events, a sector of the economy that is now shut down indefinitely.

“[Issa] cannot catch a break!” she says, voice cracking with laughter, striking the wry tone that transformed her into a viral meme when she announced this year’s all-male group of Oscar best director nominees by deadpanning: “Congratulations to those men!”

“Yeah,” she says, with that signature sarcasm laced with cheerfulness: “So stay tuned!” **FT**

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Anna Nicolaou is the FT’s US media correspondent

# FALLING GIANTS

Power station cooling towers once dominated the landscape but these much-maligned structures could be lost within a generation. Words and photographs by *Michael Collins*



COOLING TOWERS AT COTTAM,  
A DECOMMISSIONED POWER STATION  
NEAR RETFORD, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE.  
ALL PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN THIS YEAR

BELOW: FIDDLER'S FERRY POWER STATION IN WARRINGTON, CHESHIRE, IS DUE TO BE DECOMMISSIONED. FACING PAGE: THE FUTURE OF WEST BURTON, NEAR GAINSBOROUGH, LINCOLNSHIRE, IS UNDER REVIEW



Correctly addressed, they are natural-draught, hyperboloid cooling towers. All the ones in these photographs date from the 1960s, when they were built to cool the superheated steam that drove the turbines in Britain's colossal coal-fired power stations. Almost a third have already been demolished; within a generation, it is unlikely there will be any left.

Thousands of people came out at dawn last August to witness the demolition of Didcot's three remaining cooling towers. Film footage taken from a safe distance shows them sinking down into the horizon, like ships descending into the sea, the sound of the explosion lagging behind the sight of the blast. At the death, they fold like pastry, the disruption causing nearby pylons' power lines to sag and sway. Plumes of concrete dust rise out of their throats, before drifting away in the watercolour grey sky above the Oxfordshire countryside. Only 16 years previously, they had been voted the third worst eye-sore in Britain.

Standing 290ft wide at the base and 375ft tall, which is slightly higher than St Paul's Cathedral, each standard hyperboloid cooling tower is the perfect exemplar of "form follows function". They work on the principle of evaporative cooling. Hot water from the power station is pumped into the cooling tower at a height of about 30ft, where it is sprayed through a series of nozzles (much like an office sprinkler system) on to a layer of dense latticework, which is called the fill. The hot water coats this honeycomb, trickling downwards.

The base of the cooling tower sits on a plinth of 25ft-high concrete struts, which forms a massive natural draught intake. The warm air produced by the hot water rises inside the cooling tower, drawing in cold air from outside, which cools the water coating the fill. The inwardly sloping curve of the tower narrows to a diameter almost half the size of its base, arresting most of the vapour; only up to 5 per cent is lost to evaporation. The term for these clouds of vapour, which are erroneously presumed to be steam (or even smoke), is drift.

Hyperboloid cooling towers were invented in 1916 by Dutch engineer Frederik van Iterson. The first two companies that Van Iterson ►





approached to construct his invention declined the commission, but he persevered and, working in collaboration with civil engineer Gerard Kuypers, saw his design vindicated. Previously, cooling towers had been built of wood or steel - an unsatisfactory arrangement due to the risk of fire and problems with rot and rust. They were either straightforwardly cylindrical chimneys or shaped like the top half of a bottle. Van Iterson was an expert in reinforced concrete, or "concreted iron", as it was dubbed back then. He chose the hyperboloid because it offered the greatest structural strength; the ratio of shell diameter to wall thickness is less than that of an egg.

The story goes that Van Iterson demonstrated the hyperboloid's shape by twisting a cat's cradle of yarns between his hands. To prove the structure's strength, he made a model out of thin sheets of iron; the results exceeded expectations. However, when it came to the first full-size hyperboloid cooling tower, it was said of Van Iterson that his plans were not "based on a calculation", rather, "dimensions and reinforcement are intuitive and based on constructive discretion as an estimate, taking especially into account the influence of wind". The Netherlands became known as the land of the cooling towers.

In 1924, Britain's first hyperboloid cooling towers were built at Lister Drive Power Station in Liverpool. They were 120ft high, 100ft wide at the base, narrowing to 33ft towards the top. More flamboyantly shaped than their modern counterparts, they had the profile of a carafe, including a pronounced lip running along the rim. The maximum thickness of their concrete shell was 7½in, and at its thinnest, only 4½in. When they were demolished in 1972, one of the two engineers in charge commented: "What impressed me most was the way each tower fell with a 20-degree twist, vortexting into itself for all the world like bath water going down the plug." To which his colleague added: "They would have been good for years to come."

The early versions were built from the ground up on wooden scaffolding, following the specifications of Van Iterson's prototype. A rival successfully designed a close alternative, the "cone toroid"; rather than one continuous structure, it was fabricated by joining two cones together with a ring. The cone toroid was purportedly devised as a means of reducing costs, although a contrasting explanation suggested that the primary purpose was to avoid patent infringement. It was not until four decades later, in the middle of the construction boom for a new generation of power stations, christened "Hinton's Heavies" after the Central Electricity Generating Board chairman, that the soundness of Van Iterson's

calculations - and those of his competitors - was rudely re-examined. On Monday November 1 1965 in West Yorkshire, three of Ferrybridge "C" Power Station's eight cooling towers collapsed in 80mph winds. A "horrified" CEGB realised the original specifications had been taken for granted and that there were "other towers throughout the country in a much weaker state", prompting it to stipulate thicker shells and double reinforcement. Significantly or not, the cooling towers at Ferrybridge were cone toroids rather than hyperboloids.

From the start, the prospect of cooling towers looming over the countryside was viewed with consternation, earning the condemnation of bishops and eliciting such pejoratives as "Cinderella's ugly sisters". Although the Royal Fine Art Commission advised on the construction of power stations, the architecture budget was less than 2 per cent of the total investment. As their size increased, so did the level of public disapproval. No longer able to mollify this rising discontent with ornamentation and flower beds, the CEGB brought in landscape architects to mitigate the presence of these behemoths with earthworks and woods. Seeking to "simplify and clarify the elemental geometry", the architects arranged the cooling towers in diamond patterns and painted them in different colours.

The highest point in a coal-fired power station is the incinerator chimney, otherwise called the stack. The panoramic view from the stack at Cottam Power Station overlooks the cooling towers and the landscape beyond. Behind them is the black wound of the coal stock ground. Operating at full capacity, the power station burned five million tons of coal a year.

Cottam was built here because of the proximity of the Nottinghamshire coalfield and the river Trent, which winds past it to the east, supplying its water. Coal was once the future. Just over 50 years after its construction, Cottam ceased functioning at the end of September 2019.

Some of the plant's engineers who helped me when I was photographing were based there all their working lives. When the plant was running, a single cooling tower could handle more than six million gallons of water per hour. As the cooled water poured down from the fill, it cascaded in a ring around the perimeter of the base, creating a 25ft waterfall. Now Van Iterson's "wall of flowing shape" stands silent. What is to happen to the natural-draught, hyperboloid cooling towers? Not a single one is listed. Surely they deserve more. **FT**

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THE PROSPECT OF COOLING TOWERS LOOMING OVER THE COUNTRYSIDE WAS VIEWED WITH CONSTERNATION, ELICITING SUCH PEJORATIVES AS 'CINDERELLA'S UGLY SISTERS'



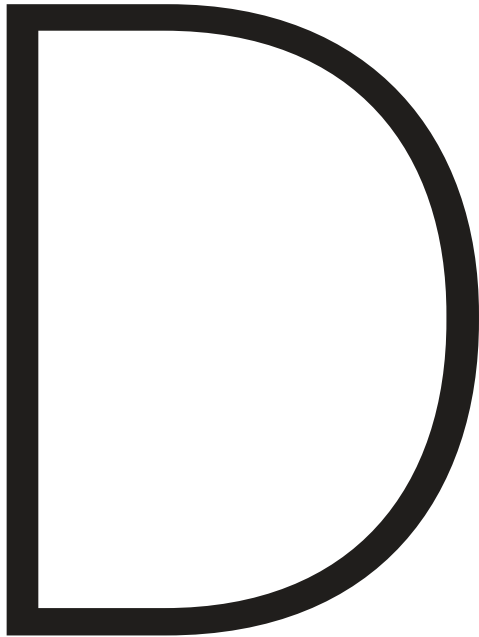


Left: Some of Jonny Crickmore's Brie-like Baron Bigod cheeses  
Right: two of his 300 Montbéliarde cows, an ancient breed originating from the Jura region in the French alps

# Tough cheese

Coronavirus has already put a huge strain on the UK's farmhouse cheesemakers and mongers, threatening not just their very fine produce but Britain's food standards and much of the rural economy. The next six months will be crucial, writes *Polly Russell*. Photographs by *Kalpesh Lathigra*





uring lockdown I sent a close friend a box of farmhouse cheese as compensation for a celebration she was unable to host. Included in the selection was an Innes Log, a soft goat's cheese with a bright, grassy flavour, which my friends and I have been enjoying for years. It has been made by Joe Bennett on a farm in Staffordshire since 1987. The Innes Log sent to my friend was, it turned out, one of the last anyone would enjoy because shortly after it was delivered, Bennett and his partner Aimee Lawn announced they were giving up making cheese and selling their farm. Innes Log and the livelihoods it supported were a casualty of Covid-19.

Since making this life-changing decision, the farm's goats have been sold and the couple are clearing out barns and sheds. "It feels very strange. It's quiet and a bit eerie," Bennett says over the phone. "Just before corona we were planning to borrow a serious amount to expand the business and build a new milking parlour. We were talking to the bank one day about investing and then everything stopped. We went from selling 1,400 logs a week to 20."

With a young child, and a baby on the way, Bennett is looking forward to spending time with his family and plans to move to Wales. "We were on a precipice and it could have gone one way or the other," he reflects. "On a day-to-day basis I miss cheesemaking because it's holistic, but now I've got an opportunity to be more involved with the children and I feel positive about that."

Bennett and Lawn were not alone in struggling to keep their business going. The impact of Covid is being felt by speciality cheesemakers across the country. Given the relatively small size of the sector and the fact that larger industries are facing catastrophe too, concern about artisan cheese might seem like a niche problem. After all, according to figures from the Speciality Cheese Association, the sector is worth an estimated £100m a year, while standard, industrial cheese is worth in excess of £3bn.

But according to Sheila Dillon, the presenter of BBC Radio 4's *The Food Programme*, artisanal cheese production is vital. "Supporting farmhouse cheese is dismissed as trivial," she says, on the phone from North Wales. "But it

is part of a web of quality food and essential to rural job creation."

Moreover, says Dillon, artisan cheese producers were among the first to fight for food standards: "Twenty-five years ago, Whitehall wanted to standardise regulations and the cheesemakers took them on. We were on a runway to US-style production - easily policed and without any complexity or diversity - but those quality cheesemakers fought this and gave heart to a whole host of specialist food producers who've followed." With the looming threat of US trade deals and talk of lowering food standards in the UK, this little-known piece of cheesemaker history seems especially prescient.

Although it is closely associated with tradition, the artisan cheese sector in the UK is relatively new. The decline of British cheesemaking began in the mid- to late-19th century thanks to factory-made imports from the US, Canada and New Zealand, with the consequence that many farmers switched from cheese to milk production. While there were still an estimated 3,500 cheesemakers in the UK before the start of the first world war, by the 1920s the cheese sector was close to collapse.

This was compounded by the establishment of the Milk Marketing Board in 1933, which incentivised milk in favour of cheesemaking, as well as the standardisation of cheese production under direction of the Ministry of Food during the second world war. When the war came to an end, only about 100 artisan cheesemakers remained. And it was not until the 1970s that this demise was arrested, thanks to the efforts of a generation of mongers and makers who were determined to champion regional and artisan production. In the years since, Britain has gained a global reputation for artisan cheese.

Today, this vibrant sector is heavily reliant on restaurants, pubs, hotels, delis, specialist wholesalers and cheesemongers to sell their products. Relatively few farmhouse cheesemakers sell to large supermarkets. With the imposition of lockdown at the end of March, their main outlets disappeared overnight and cheesemakers were left facing ruin.

"Farmhouse cheesemakers, especially those who made cheese from their own herds, had a real

problem, particularly if they had no one to sell the milk to," says Jason Hinds, the sales director and part owner of Neal's Yard Dairy. "Their overheads remain the same whatever - they have to pay the herdsman, the cows keep on producing milk, and then they have the dairy staff and overheads to cover."

The way the crisis has unfolded in the months since March has varied for different farmhouse cheesemakers. For producers of soft cheese such as Innes Log and blue cheese, the product's short life meant the impact was immediate and swift.

Take Joe Schneider, who makes Stichelton, a creamy rich cheese inspired by Stilton, using raw milk collected from the 250 cows farmed on the Welbeck Estate in Nottinghamshire. Close proximity to the farm is crucial, enabling him to assess variations in milk across the seasons and to adjust cheesemaking accordingly. Schneider started making Stichelton in 2006 and, after a few bumpy years, now produces consistently excellent cheese with a loyal customer following. Indeed, at a recent food symposium in London, an Italian cheese expert told me that Stichelton was her favourite cheese. In the world.

Originally from the US, Schneider has a dry sense of humour and a lyrical turn of phrase. Remembering the first weeks of lockdown, he recalls: "The supermarkets went into selling Armageddon cheese - stuff that's robust and lasts." In a normal year Schneider makes between 45 and 50 tonnes of Stichelton, a tiny volume when compared to the 4,500 tonnes made by the largest Stilton manufacturer, Long Clawson. In this context, every tonne Schneider produces needs to find a market. "We didn't sell a thing for three weeks," he says. "My cheese was ripe, it didn't have time to hang about, so I put as much as possible into cold rooms to slow it down, furloughed my staff and stopped producing for nine weeks."

Halting production meant Schneider avoided throwing cheese away but it has resulted in a significant gap in stock and cash flow. "I'm completely out now, with nothing to sell for six weeks," he says. To get through the next period, he has taken a salary cut, been granted a discount in rent from the Welbeck Estate and negotiated new payment terms for his milk.

The cost has not just been financial, however. "I feel lonely," says Schneider reflecting on the past months. "Ecommerce is great but I don't want to sell cheese like widgets. I want to talk to people, to make connections. I haven't seen anyone since March and it's been tough." Uncertainty about the future doesn't help either. "Now I'm making for Christmas," he explains. In a usual year, the three weeks of Christmas account for 20 per cent of annual sales. "It's a time of high anxiety because no one knows with ▶

Clockwise from top left: the silo at Crickmore's Fen Farm; Jonny Crickmore; a storage facility for housing winter feed; Montbéliarde cows grazing





◀ Covid what's going to happen and I'm just not sure how much to make right now."

The instantaneous impact of Covid-19 was similarly felt by Jonny Crickmore, the producer of Baron Bigod, a creamy Brie-style cheese made on Fen Farm, which spans 900 acres on the Suffolk-Norfolk border. "The week before lockdown, everything was shutting and it was getting worrying," he says, speaking via FaceTime from a hill above the farm. "We'd made more than normal for Easter because last year was so good, but then everyone started cancelling orders."

While Crickmore talks, it starts raining, so he strides down the field towards the large, modern dairy where his cheese is made. "We invested half a million pounds into this building," he says proudly, opening the dairy door and entering the renneting room. Inside, two of the farm's 27 employees are hosing down gleaming equipment and tidying up after the morning's cheesemaking. "We've committed to a future in cheese on the basis of Baron Bigod," he explains as my virtual tour of the building continues. "We're in this for the long haul."

Crickmore makes about 88 tonnes of cheese a year using milk produced by the farm's 300 cows. The cheese matures in six or seven weeks and is best eaten when it is between eight and 10 weeks old. "Suddenly, when lockdown happened, we had nine weeks of cheese but no customers," he remembers.

With a mass of product at the risk of spoiling, Crickmore and his team focused their efforts on finding new outlets. "We gave our milkman 4,000 wedges of free cheese to deliver with a leaflet saying, 'We hope this cheers you up!'" Crickmore says. "We sold 240 more wedges every week from then." Nevertheless, despite these efforts, three weeks into lockdown his business was still sitting on £55,000 worth of homeless stock.

Crickmore was not alone - across the sector, artisan cheesemakers and speciality cheesemongers were facing the prospect of wasting tonnes of cheese and financial ruin. Cheesemonger Andy Swinscoe runs The Courtyard Dairy, a speciality cheese shop and café set up in a former farmhouse in rural Yorkshire with a remit to champion small, farmhouse cheesemakers. "We were hit earlier than most because we're a rural business and rely on people coming to our door," he says. "I've put my life and soul into this for eight years and overnight we lost 70 per cent of trade."

Like Crickmore, Swinscoe focused early efforts on new initiatives, contacting local restaurants and sending out mailshots to their databases to build business online. "We called in every favour we could," he says, "because there's all the staff and their families who rely on us and then there are the farmers too. I really thought we'd lose the business."

Clockwise from top left: Baron Bigod cheeses in cold storage prior to being packed; ladling the curds into moulds; finished cheeses, ready to go on sale; the traditional *pelle à Brie* ladles used for the curds; young cheeses are aged for eight weeks to develop the flavours

Jamie Oliver's first video had nearly 900,000 views and generated 3,000 comments. 'He introduced farmhouse cheese to people who'd never tried it before'

Cheesemonger Andy Swinscoe

In week four of lockdown, Jamie Oliver came to the rescue. A coalition of cheesemongers and makers set up a mail-order cheese-box initiative called "Save British Cheese". Containing a 1kg selection of cheese from nine makers, the boxes cost about £30 including delivery.

"This first emergency initiative diverted tonnes of cheese at the end of its shelf life originally destined to go to retailers and food service to consumers stuck at home," says Hinds. "There was a lot of cheese that needed shifting and Jamie was the only person I knew who could get to the right amount of people."

Oliver posted a series of videos extolling the virtues of farmhouse cheese and asking viewers - as well as his 8.2 million Instagram followers - to support the box scheme. His pitch in the first post was heartfelt and persuasive. "I want to tell you a story which you can help fix," he says staring straight into the camera. "Currently, some of our very best cheesemakers in Britain are at risk of losing their businesses, their livelihoods... and it's not just about food, it's about culture... it's about the survival of these incredible British cheeses."

Oliver's first video had nearly 900,000 views and generated more than 3,000 comments. "He introduced farmhouse cheese to people who'd never tried it before," says Swinscoe, "and for no profit for him, just because he wanted to help." According to Hinds, the "Save British Cheese" scheme sold over 13,000 boxes, accounting for more than 14 tonnes of cheese. For Crickmore, it was the turning point: "We were going to lose 2,000 cheeses but we sold it all in three hours."

For makers of hard cheese, however, the problem has been pushed down the road. Tim Jones, a dairy farmer of 28 years, makes Lincolnshire Poacher, a hard mature cheese with milk from his 230 cows. He employs 16 full-time and eight part-time staff. "We grow the crops which feed the cows," he explains over the phone. "This morning's milk is turned into cheese."

When Covid struck, Jones's sales dried up but the dairy continued making. "The milk is so delicious, it's so lovely, so much work goes into that milk," he says. "And we're cheesemakers so I just refused to chuck it away." This was not a

problem in the short term - Jones's cheese can age for 18 to 24 months. However, he now has an additional 25 tonnes that need to find a market.

The "Save British Cheese" scheme doubtless prevented a lot of cheese from being thrown away but no one thinks the problem is over. "We're approaching the end of the beginning," says Hinds. "The next five to six months is going to be crunch time because there's a lot of overstock and the fate of that is hard to know."

With this in mind, Neal's Yard Dairy has started a monthly cheese-subscription scheme. "This is going to support 18 farmhouse cheesemakers," says Hinds. "It'll deliver a meaningful amount of money to those businesses and keep the lights on until Christmas." As Oliver says in his recent Instagram video about the new subscription, this is about moving from "saving to supporting" British farmhouse cheesemakers.

Swinscoe is doing his best to kickstart sales at The Courtyard Dairy. Usually the small shop serves two or three customers at a time but with social distancing in place that is currently impossible. So this week he installed what might be a world first - a vending machine with ready-cut and wrapped portions of farmhouse cheese.

However, the sector remains vulnerable and the consequences for the rural economy could be serious. "A standard farm of 900 acres producing contract milk will employ around three people," says Swinscoe. "But a farm making cheese with its own milk might employ 20 people or more. It keeps the rural economy going." The survival of many will be determined between now and Christmas. "If people would invest in one proper cheese board now and then it would make such a massive difference," Swinscoe adds.

The stakes are high but, according to Swinscoe, Hinds and artisan cheesemakers, the solution is simple. We need to eat more speciality cheese. That's a sacrifice I am willing to make. **FT**

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*Polly Russell is a curator at the British Library and the FT's History Cook; @PollyRussell1; Instagram: the\_history\_cook. Polly will be speaking at this year's FT Weekend Festival, online September 3-5. For passes and programme go to [www.ftweekendfestival.com](http://www.ftweekendfestival.com)*

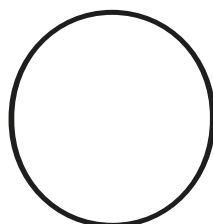


# Rowley Leigh Recipes



## Cook the books

Photographs by Andy Sewell



One of my pleasures in lockdown has been to spend time with my cookery books. I revisited Patience Gray's *Honey from a Weed* and it taught me that my failed turnips would at least yield the

boiled tops – remarkably good when doused in olive oil and dressed with a little chilli and a few anchovies. This led me to return to the obscure figure of Irving Davis, Gray's mentor, whose *A Catalan Cookery Book* Gray put together from various notes the author had made.

My knowledge of Catalonia is a hodgepodge of Irving Davis, Colman Andrews, George Orwell and a single brief visit to the region 20 years ago. My idea of Catalonia is therefore outdated, idealistic and inaccurate but I dare say you could visit the region today and not encounter many of the dishes that feature in the book. For example, you probably wouldn't find *caldereta* ("a kind of paella made in an earthenware pot: a dish of rock fishes, followed by a dish of rice") or macaroni in the oven (ingredients: macaroni, onions, chicken livers, the blood of a chicken, two tomatoes, oil, two ounces of grated Gruyère cheese) and you almost certainly wouldn't get *conill amb cargols i salsa xocolata* (rabbit with chocolate and snails).

You will not find a recipe for a fricassee of chicken with spinach and romesco sauce in the book. I have just made it up, which is not to say that it has not been done before. It is neither authentic nor inauthentic but simply derived by inhabiting a world, a region, through books, and one book in particular.

Davis called his volume a "collection of impossible recipes" but that was not to say they shouldn't be attempted, just that "the most you can do is to try and adapt them". If his recipes are not always practical, he suggests: "Why not treat a cookery book as interesting to read as a detective story or a substitute for radio or television at night?" Despite the intellectual snub, this seems a good prescription for a time of restricted movement. **FT**

More columns at [ft.com/leigh](http://ft.com/leigh)

## Chicken and spinach with romesco sauce

If you don't have a good, heavy pestle and mortar, by all means use a food processor but take care to keep some texture.

- 1 large chicken (or selected joints, breasts or thighs)
- 2 dried ancho chillies or similar
- 2 tsp pimenton (hot or sweet, or both)
- 4 chorizo sausages (optional)
- 8 cloves garlic
- Thyme
- Rosemary
- 250ml white wine
- 1 red pepper
- 2 large tomatoes
- 1 red chilli, or dried chilli flakes
- 24 almonds
- 24 hazelnuts
- 2 slices fried bread
- 20ml red wine vinegar
- 2 tbs chopped parsley
- 75ml olive oil
- 500g spinach

1 – Joint the chicken into four pieces (or ask the butcher to), the two legs and the crown slit down the middle with the wings (not tips) attached and the breasts still on the bone.

2 – Soak the dried chillies in tepid water for at least half an hour.

3 – Season the chicken pieces well with salt, pepper and pimenton, and turn in a little olive oil. Place skin side up in an earthenware oven dish, paella pan or similar. Cut the sausages into centimetre rounds and place them and the garlic cloves, thyme and rosemary between the pieces. Place in a medium hot oven (190C).

4 – After 20 minutes, pour in the wine. It should be cooked after another 20-30 minutes, depending on the size of the chicken. The chicken can still be a little pink on the bone as it will be cooked, briefly, again.

5 – While the chicken cooks, prepare the romesco sauce. Sear the pepper, tomatoes and chilli (if using) on a very hot dry griddle pan until blackened all over. Place the pepper and chilli in a plastic bag. Put the tomatoes in the oven for five minutes. If not

peeled, place the almonds in a little pan of cold water, bring to the boil, refresh in cold water and slip them out of their skins. Roast the hazelnuts in a dry pan until they start to blacken and then rub them over a sieve to remove the skins.

6 – Take the garlic cloves out of the chicken dish and pop them out of their skins into a pestle and mortar. Add a teaspoon of coarse salt and pound to a soft paste. Add the nuts and pound away until these in turn become a paste. If excessively dry, add a little vinegar. Remove the skins and seeds from the peppers and add these to the mortar. Pound again. Remove skins and seeds from the tomatoes and add the pulp. Pound again. Add the fried bread, pound away and you should have a thick and rich terracotta red paste. Add the vinegar, pound again and finish with the parsley and olive oil. It may well need more salt.

7 – Remove any stalks and wash the spinach very well in cold water. Heat a large frying pan with olive oil and sear the spinach – in batches if necessary – until fully wilted and then drain. Season with salt and pepper.

8 – Cut the chicken into smaller pieces. Warm these through, with the sausages, in their liquor. Add the spinach and then stir in successive spoonfuls of romesco sauce (probably half the recipe will suffice but the remainder will find a home and keep for a week). The liquor should now thicken into a rich sauce.

**Wine:** Davis recommends large quantities of local Priorat wine with most of his recipes but it is now a rather more polished and sophisticated drink than the fiery local red that he esteemed. The grape varieties were Mourvèdre, Garnacha and Cariñena. Varietals from Roussillon, Corsica and Sardinia as well as Catalonia should all have that garrigue flavour and fruitiness.







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# Andrew Jefford Wine

## The Picpoul fairy tale



Here's a wine fairy tale. The Languedoc is the central part of France's southern coast, stretching from Montpellier to Narbonne, wedged between Roussillon to the west and Provence to the east. Vineyards have flourished here since Greek colonists founded settlements along the coast from 600BC onwards, though volume and plain commerce rather than critical effusions and auction-room frenzy have marked most of its wine history.

The biography of a small zone of coastal vineyards lying between Pézenas and the Etang de Thau lagoon is typical. In the 18th century, it was the *vignoble de la marine* (the shipping vineyard), its white wines traded out of Sète by Dutch sea hauliers to northern Europe and the Baltic. In the early 19th century, it specialised, dubiously, in imitation Madeira.

During the second half of the 19th and most of the 20th century, it provided the base wine for Sète's vermouth trade. That relationship collapsed with plunging vermouth sales in the 1970s and 1980s, so it had to make its own way as a white-wine zone.

Prospects looked dim: quality Languedoc wine was red and grew in the rugged balcony of hills under the Cévennes. Who wanted an unexciting seaside white discarded by the vermouth trade, produced in a nondescript little zone one-eighth the size of Corbières?

This once-ragged urchin is now a Languedoc princess: the region's greatest recent success story. It produces well over half of AOC Languedoc's white wine and accounts for 80 per cent of Languedoc-Roussillon's exported white wine - and it is particularly adored in Britain, which takes 57 per cent of those exports.

While many parts of Languedoc are asking the French government to distil their surplus stocks to make room for the 2020 harvest,



Illustration by Toby Morison

### Recommended Picpoul de Pinet

These were the highest-scoring wines in my recent tasting (\* = 91 points)

- 2018 Cave de l'Ormarine, Cuvée Etienne Farras (Selection)
- 2019 Ch de la Mirande
- 2019 Ch Petit-Roubié
- 2018 Ch de Pinet-Gaujal de St Bon, Cuvée Impériale (Selection)\*
- 2019 Ch St Martin de la Garrigue\*
- 2019 Domaine du Château, Cuvée des Comtesses
- 2019 Domaine Félines Jourdan
- 2019 Domaine des Lauriers, Prestige
- 2019 Font-Mars\*
- 2019 Gaujal
- 2019 Montagnac, Terres Rouges
- 2019 L'Ormarine, Duc de Morny
- 2019 Reine Juliette, Terres Rouges\*
- 2019 Tesco Finest Picpoul de Pinet\*

For stockists, see [winesearcher.com](http://winesearcher.com)

the princess has only six months' worth left and is hoping for as big a 2020 harvest as nature can provide. Not even Brexit and Covid-19 have sent her sprawling; sales roared ahead in the first half of the year. Step forward, twinkly Picpoul de Pinet.

Why so loved? I tasted 28 of them in July, so let me summarise the appeal. It's got more character than Pinot Grigio. It's delicious on its own, but works well with food, too, especially seafood. (The Etang de Thau brims with oysters, one 10th of French production.) It is fresh but not sharp; there's a width and a wealth on the tongue. So far, so good - but lots of white wines tick those boxes.

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**'This once-ragged urchin is now a Languedoc princess: the region's greatest recent success story'**

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Here's the extra. It's probably auto-suggestion, but you seem to taste the sea in the wine: the best, eerily enough, appear faintly salty, seaweedy, oyster. The fruits aren't obvious: lemon, but grapefruit too, and apple skins and early white nectarine. Its crispness seems almost textural as well as flavoury - crunchy. There's a soft bitterness behind; there's also that sinewy, structural, fermentative quality, so typical of French whites, called vinosity. The wine is lively and vivacious, clean-finishing, tidying up the mouth as it leaves.

The grape variety (Picpoul) is helpfully in the name, and it comes from somewhere in particular: a little place in the southern French sun by the sea called Pinet, easy to pronounce and to remember. The bottles are pretty. It sails on to shelves well south of £10 in the UK. Indeed, Tesco Finest Picpoul de Pinet, of which one-and-a-half million bottles are rumoured ▶

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**'You seem to taste the sea in the wine: the best, eerily enough, appear faintly salty, seaweedy and oyster'**

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◀ by appellation insiders to be sold every year, costs just £7.50 - not bad for "Finest". The 2019 vintage of this cuvée, crafted by the Costières de Pomérols co-operative, featured in my tasting, in which the identities of all the wines were concealed. It was one of the top five wines, scoring 91 points. Outstandingly good; amazing value. Twinkle on.

Behind every success there's a large dollop of luck, as is the case here. Few wine styles have been unquestionably improved by mechanical harvesting, but this is one: Picpoul tends to drop its grapes easily (indeed, its name refers to the delight of hens as they peck the fallen grapes) and its big-shouldered bunches fuse chaotically with each other as they grow. Swift, prompt mechanical harvesting in the cool night hours helped overcome harvesting losses and related oxidation from the 1980s. The use of cool fermentation and inert gas blankets at every stage of vinification saw quality rocket; likewise, more recently, with deft use of yeast lees. It doesn't need oak or the ultra-low yields obligatory for top Languedoc reds. This is a wine style at which co-operatives can excel; 82 per cent of production is in their hands.

And all these factors help keep costs down.

There's been canniness too, though, and the region has been well led - by former appellation president Guy Bascou and his successor Frédéric Sumien. Bascou's vision for a "rare and popular" appellation was very clever; he never forgot either part of the epithet. The rarity has been ensured by fighting to get the Picpoul variety excluded from other Languedoc appellations and IGP designations - so if you want Picpoul, you go to Pinet. The appellation is almost unexpandable, wedged between settlements, motorways and the Med. All the 25 individual bottling domains are owned by locals - and the big regional merchants can't get a foot in the door, though they are panting for the chance. The princess lives in a fortress, keeping all suitors at bay.

Just one challenge remains: getting on to restaurant tables. Over the past couple of years, the Picpouliers have turned their nimble minds to this, and the scheme they have come up with is as cunning as you'd expect. No sub-zone crus or *parcelaires*; no regulatory froth; no pretentious oak in the cellar. They've just

thrown down a challenge to growers via a "selection" charter that looks for certain qualities: aromatic intensity and power, volume in the mouth, complexity and finesse. If you wish your wine to be considered for the scheme, it has to go through three tasting hurdles requiring 70 per cent approval from the 10 tasters, all of whom are your winemaking peers; 20 per cent of postulant bottles have been rejected so far. You can push the style boundaries in any way you want; that's encouraged. I tasted five examples from the 2018 vintage. Upping the concentration via lower yields alone didn't seem to work: Picpoul can then seem a little laborious and over-chewy, almost sumo-like. Better to keep it light and look for new aromatic layers: liquorice, angelica, rose water. These wines have a bottle with darker-hued glass and the charter regulation requires obligatory experimental storage to see how they age.

Auction-room frenzy may be a decade or two away, but we might reasonably expect critical effusion before too long. The fairy tale continues. **FT**

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**FT Weekend**



# Restaurants

## Tim Hayward



BOKMAN'S BIBIM, TONGDAK CHICKEN, MANDU, PICKLED CONDIMENTS AND RICE ROLLS. PHOTOGRAPH BY TIM HAYWARD

### Bokman, Stokes Croft, Bristol

The next leg of the Lockdown Campervan Tour took me to Stokes Croft in Bristol, a less bucolic location than Bruton and broadly associated with a crustier breed of van-dweller. What brought me to the bottom of Nine Tree Hill was the whispered reputation of Bokman, a tiny, closed-up Korean restaurant.

It opened in October last year and got urgent and enthusiastic word of mouth out of all proportion to its minuscule size and tinier budget. Everything looks hand built, hard won and thus extremely promising.

Bokman didn't need to "pivot to takeaway" as bigger players have done - it was always part of their business. But what provoked my visit was the way their fame has grown unabated throughout lockdown. More people eating great things, more people talking about it.

I ordered takeaway via Instagram - it's the only way to reach them. It's also the unconventional means

by which I interviewed Kyu Jeon and Duncan Robertson, two chefs who met in Paris working at L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon, moved to South Korea, then Bristol and at some point managed to get married.

Spread out on a picnic table, the meal is frankly psychedelic. There are things I recognise: a *bibim*, but over cold rice noodles with kimchi granita; *soondae* blood pudding; the fat little rice-cake cylinders of *tteokbokki* but topped with deep-fried dumplings called *mandu* - but the rest is just entirely new to me, visually, texturally and with the kind of flavours that require rapid tactical brain rewiring. It's a packed lunch for the synaesthete. What on earth was the stuffing in the *mandu*? I thumb a message to Robertson.

"It's made from pork and beef mince, tofu, Chinese chives, onions and sweet potato starch noodles, seasoned with soy sauce, pepper, *yangpa chong* - that's fermented juice of macerated onions, which we make in-house and use as a substitute for sugar to season a lot of our food - and some sesame oil."

I suppose I could have been a bit more professionally blasé about



**'I could have been a bit more blasé about what was happening in my mouth but this is exactly why people are getting so worked up about Korean food'**

**Bokman**  
3 Nine Tree Hill,  
Cotham,  
Bristol, BS1 3SB  
@bokmanbristol  
Sides £3-£7.50  
Main courses £9-£16

what was happening in my mouth but this is exactly why people are getting so worked up about Korean food at the moment. We aren't equipped with expectations and as a result can be thrown into a joyous spiralling dive of new experience.

There are little pots of sauces, powders, sprinkles and pickles with everything individually ram-raiding your doors of perception. There was a six-pack of pickled things from which I was able to identify a kimchi and solve from first principles a pickle of radishes with rosewater... my thumbs blurred...

"The pickles are the only non-traditional/authentic thing we do - just using ingredients available in the UK but keeping in the spirit of Korean food. Originally, I wanted to do more 'creative' fusion-style food, but my wife really wanted to showcase real Korean food and I'm really happy we went down that route. We're kind of proud that we're doing something that even impresses Korean visitors."

The centrepiece is wrapped in foil the size and shape of an Easter egg. It's a poussin that looks like it's been given two coats of mahogany varnish and smells warm, inviting and a touch exotic - making the gentle unwrapping feel pleasantly indecent. This is *tongdak*, a bird stuffed with raw sticky rice, a red date and liquorice root. It's brined and then slow-roasted for three and a half hours over oak and ash wood.

It's been three months since I got out for interesting meals and you might argue that my judgement's warped, but I don't think so. I wasn't expecting to sit outside a van in Stokes Croft having my mental buffers blown by takeaway, but I think I may well have had one of my meals of the year off a folding table.

Back behind the wheel, on the long road home, my Instagram utters its weedy little ping...

"I really hope you can come back when we're open as a restaurant. I always feel self-conscious doing the takeaways - it's way better as eat-in food." I'm almost certain this can't possibly be true but I'm sure as hell going back to check. **FT**

.....  
tim.hayward@ft.com;  
@TimHayward. Tim Hayward will be speaking at this year's FT Weekend Festival, online September 3-5. For passes and programme go to www.ftweekendfestival.com



## FANTASY DINNER PARTY

KATRINA MANSON

An underground gathering of flawed iconoclasts muse on invention, audacity, the art of the possible – and salt

**‘Catherine the Great and Thomas Sankara, both coup-makers, brood over bruising moments’**

**T**homas Sankara arrives as every revolutionary should: with a guitar on his back and cheques that bounce.

The man who gave Upper Volta its post-independence rebrand – Burkina Faso translates as Land of the Upright People – has no truck with the idea that there has to be a chef or five courses to follow the FT’s rules for a fantasy dinner. I’m in no mind to do battle with Africa’s Che Guevara – on that front at least – and fortunately I don’t have to because Tinkerbell, who had signed up to chef, has flown off. Something about us not all applauding hard enough for the mischief-maker-in-chief.

We’re hunkered down in a theatrical version of Gordon’s Wine Bar – London’s oldest wine bar – deep in a cavernous cellar with water running up and down the dank walls, plotting over candlelight, when **Catherine the Great** shows up with several lovers in tow, who stop off to order drinks from Socrates at the bar. The Russian empress seems immediately taken by Sankara.

By the time Arts and Crafts hero **William Morris** settles in, his white beard coming perilously close to the dulcet flames, debate is raging among my chums. Morris, one of the

few men to confound the inevitable and grow only more radical with age, is urging us to throw out modern machined goods in favour only of that which is beautiful or useful, produced by artisans paid a fair wage. Charles Mingus, riffing in the corner, is nodding his head on his double bass – whether the beat or the argument is unclear.

It is time to eat. Catherine is ravenous for food and argument. She is pressing Morris to drop his romantic but wrong-headed obsession with the Middle Ages and embrace the Enlightenment. He is urging her that empire will come to no good and to free the serfs. They settle on having his bohemian printing press illustrate one of her beloved titles by Voltaire, her correspondent of 15 years, whom she never met in person – a relationship lived out in fantasy dinners that took place elsewhere.

In the absence of our chef, we survive on bread, cornichons and red wine from behind the bar. We glory in the additive quality of salt and pepper. A hunk of aged mimolette and some crottins are squirrelled in by **Barbe-Nicole Clicquot Ponsardin**, the widow better known as Veuve Clicquot. She takes her seat and starts plying us with bubbles from her

hand-turned bottles – Morris is delighted at tales of workers so loyal and well treated that they keep her innovation secret. “Act with audacity!” she cries, urging us to invent the things of tomorrow as she recounts smuggling her champagne into Russia and jump-starting a global consumer market. Catherine, who missed this by a few decades, catches up with appreciative toasts. “One does the best one can!” she clinks approvingly.

Catherine and Sankara, both tough coup-makers, brood over bruising moments. She deposed her husband; his best friend deposed him. (Sankara and Peter III were both killed into the bargain.) As the mood turns, everyone is close to giving up. The candles burn out, but we can still hear Queen, nay Empress, Victoria tittering at Benjamin Disraeli’s jokes at an intimate round table just beyond our view.

Suddenly a dancing light! Tinkerbell is back and she’s brought dessert. An enormous Eton mess. “Too right,” says Morris. Huge applause. The light dances. We are back. In the intervening moments, Morris and **Galileo Galilei** – who has broken out of house arrest to attend our soirée – have determined that his heretical astronomical treatise *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* could just as well apply to today’s hulking great fight looming between the US and China as to the contest between earth and sun for pole position in the universe. I implore Galileo to talk to me without stopping and get my wish. Telescopes and heresy. Lutes and stars. Tides and sunspots. Science and fiction. Courage and fear.

I am just exalting in the thrill that my supper of flawed iconoclasts is replete when I smell a rat. And sure enough I spy Roland Rat dining with Rita Hayworth at the next table, all bad laugh and ruining the decline of the 1980s. (I invited him to my sixth birthday party and received his polite reply in the negative after the date had elapsed; I thank him for his letter with the awkwardness of the hopeful-spurned. He blames his manager for the no-show and his half-smile putters out.)

But this is a night for conviction. By now, Galileo and I are dancing on the table; Clicquot and Morris are swapping notes under it; Catherine and Sankara are in peals of laughter. We order sherry for the many not the few, toast the crew, London, one and all. *A luta continua!* **FT**

*Katrina Manson is the FT’s US foreign policy and defence correspondent*

# Games



## A Round on the Links by James Walton



All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the link, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

**1.** Which former Folies Bergère dancer was a speaker at the 1963 March on Washington, where Martin Luther King later delivered his "I have a dream" speech?

**2.** In which film did Philip Seymour Hoffman play Lancaster Dodd, a religious leader based on Scientology founder L Ron Hubbard?

**3.** Who designed both the Queen's wedding dress (above) and her coronation dress?

**4.** George V's horse Anmer caused whose death on June 4 1913?

**5.** Which cocktail is made with vodka and orange juice (below)?

**6.** Which British singer-songwriter had a global hit in 2019 with "Someone You Loved"?

**7.** In Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, who is the youngest of the March sisters?

**8.** In 1986, the Labour party changed its official symbol from a red flag to what?

**9.** "Woman is fickle" is the English translation of the title of which Verdi aria?

**10.** What's the name of Pat Barker's first world war trilogy that concluded with the Booker-winning *The Ghost Road*?



## The Picture Round by James Walton

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



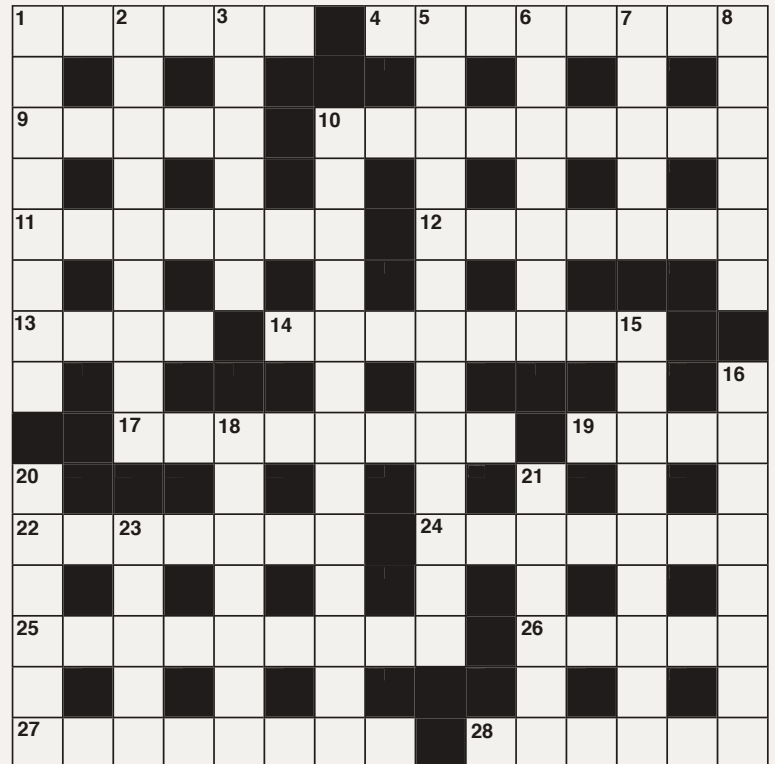
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Answers page 10

## The Crossword No 499. Set by Aldhelm



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

### ACROSS

- 1** VIP (6)
- 4** Befuddled (8)
- 9** Stoop, condescend (5)
- 10** Was victorious (9)
- 11** Out in public (2, 5)
- 12** Bland, inoffensive (7)
- 13** Light (4)
- 14** Refutation (8)
- 17** Song of lamentation (8)
- 19** William \_\_\_\_, Elder or Younger PM (4)
- 22** Anxious (7)
- 24** Look after, tend (7)
- 25** Public open area (9)
- 26** Eighth Greek letter (5)
- 27** Giveaway, revelatory (8)
- 28** Breakwater (6)

### DOWN

- 1** Sum up in best-selling book that's compliant (8)
- 2** Seabird's culpability grabbing wild mole (9)
- 3** Region's reorganisation is slight (6)
- 5** Tricky endeavour can incorporate a bit of budget surplus (13)
- 6** Disobey one time inside as quickly as possible (4, 3)
- 7** Woman's excursion (5)
- 8** Taking first of directions, it's more strange to walk awkwardly (6)
- 10** Unusual seabird caught in a trap with lure, perhaps (13)
- 15** Gentle current follows the French, without doubt (9)

- 16** Horrible Easter, say, going up to cheap accommodation for travellers (8)
- 18** Weed to grow in a straggly fashion in grass, perhaps (7)
- 20** Alter cuff to get discarded piece of cloth (6)
- 21** Sounds like one who corrects author (6)
- 23** Cancel yearbook – no second one (5)

Solution to Crossword No 498





# GILLIAN TETT

PARTING SHOT

## Silver linings for the silver surfers

Last week an 85-year-old friend of mine raised a new investment fund. No surprise there, perhaps: Alan Patricof has spent 50 years working in venture capital and remains determined to stay in the game in a way that reflects New York's hyperactive work culture.

But his latest initiative has a Covid-19 twist. The Primetime fund, launched with business partner Abby Levy, plans to invest in start-ups that are serving the "elderly" - defined as those aged over 65. (Never mind that this no longer looks so terribly "old" today.) Both Patricof and Levy think it is an underserved market since, they say, about 10,000 Americans turn 65 each day, the elderly already account for more than half of spending and the west has an ageing demographic. The US Census Bureau calculates that "seniors" account for 15 per cent of the population today, but will reach 21 per cent by 2050. "[This is] a sector that has long been ignored by venture capital money," says Patricof.

In a wider sense, what makes this move interesting is what it says about the potential behavioural impact of Covid-19. A decade ago, it was widely presumed that old people would head to nursing homes when they became infirm. As many of these homes have been a hotspot for the pandemic, it is likely that more people will now choose to "age in place" - ie at home - and they will need support. Nursing homes that do continue to operate will have to overhaul services considerably.

Moreover, Covid-19 has forced the elderly to embrace digital technology to an unprecedented degree, whether to shop, seek entertainment or simply see friends and family. This marks a striking shift from the past: in 2017, according to a Pew Research survey, "many seniors remain relatively divorced from digital life", since "one-third of adults aged 65 and older say they never use the internet, and 49 per cent say they do not have home broadband services". If seniors are rushing into tech, the leaders of the Primetime fund hope this will create demand for new types of elderly services, which entrepreneurs could tap.

It's too early to say whether this will actually happen on the scale they hope. Nonetheless, the move is thought-provoking - even cheering - for at least two reasons. First, it illustrates that Covid-19 is not just unleashing terrible economic pain (which I fear we have not seen the worst of yet), it is also opening pockets of entrepreneurial activity. While the latter is unlikely to offset the former, it is fascinating to consider how this may reshape the economy and create a spirit of adaptation.

You can already see this in a physical way in New York: when I returned to the city this week, I was startled to see restaurants operating out of hastily erected al fresco spaces in streets. Someone I know who used to work in the hospitality business has hustled his way into a job selling face masks; a former chef has become an expert on staging digital events; a teacher is doing online

lessons. Reinvention, though born of necessity, is the theme of the day.

The other reason Patricof's thesis is thought-provoking relates to productivity - and how digital innovation targeting an older demographic might boost this in an economic sense. One of the mysteries that has blighted the economies of the US and Europe since 2000 is that productivity growth has slumped: in the US, it fell from 2-3 per cent in the second half of the 20th century to 0.4 per cent in the five years up to 2016.

This looks strange, given that Silicon Valley has been churning out innovations that are supposed to make our lives more - not less - productive. Some economists blame the decline on the problems that statisticians face in counting all the "free" activity that happens online (such as using a search engine). If these activities were included,

### 'Covid-19 is unleashing terrible economic pain but it is also opening pockets of entrepreneurial activity'

real growth might be slightly higher, economists at the Fed have calculated, which would make those productivity statistics look better.

Another factor that might help solve the mystery is a time lag effect: the adoption of tech innovation in recent years has been very uneven among consumers and companies, as the OECD - and Andy Haldane, chief economist at the Bank of England - have pointed out. That gap between laggards and leaders may have contributed to dragging down the productivity statistics - on top of any inaccuracies in the data. Some (such as ride-sharing companies) have become hyper-productive with tech; others (nursing homes, say) have not. Meanwhile, seniors have badly lagged millennials in this arena, as the Pew data shows.

Until recently, it was hard to imagine this uneven picture changing rapidly. But Covid-19 may now force tech into all manner of unexpected places, from education to food and elderly care, of the sort Primetime is betting on.

It will not be easy to reap all the potential productivity benefits of this unless there is a greater effort to instil digital literacy and infrastructure too; rolling out good broadband to rich and poor populations will be key in this respect. But if digital innovation is suddenly spreading, productivity may rise too; or at least it could when the shock of the Covid-19 economic slump comes to an end. What this new cadre of "silver surfers" does next could be rather cheering in economic terms - never mind those sharp-eyed venture funds. **FT**

Gillian will be appearing at this year's FT Weekend Festival, online September 3-5. For passes and programme, go to [ftweekendfestival.com](http://ftweekendfestival.com); [gillian.tett@ft.com](mailto:gillian.tett@ft.com); [@gilliantett](https://twitter.com/gilliantett)





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