

THE SUNDAY TIMES *magazine*

November 10 2024

Susan
Sarandon
on still being
the talk of
Tinseltown
at 78

Hollywood rebel



STEVE



STEVE - THE DEVOTED COOK
The perfect family feast has taken days to prepare. Kitchen maestro Steve is busy with the turkey and all the trimmings. But his intense focus on the meal raises questions. Is his passion for cooking hiding something sinister? Could he have swiped the dessert to ensure his Christmas main is unforgettable?

GAMMA



GAMMA - THE MATRIARCH
Assigned to cranberry sauce duty instead of making the dessert, Gamma isn't pleased about being demoted this year. Normally in charge of the dessert, she's keeping a close watch on everything. Perhaps her desire to be at the heart of the action drove her to sabotage.

THEY'VE ALL



SAMIRA



SAMIRA - THE PERFECT HOST
She thrives on providing the ideal Christmas, with every detail curated, so the day needs to be flawless – notwithstanding Uncle Phil's unpredictable presence. Samira's annoyance with him runs deep and may have pushed her over the edge. Did she decide to eliminate the one thing he contributed?

FIG THE CAT



FIG THE CAT - THE CON ARTIST
The family cat is known for causing mischief and feigning hunger after being fed. Annoyed by the holiday chaos and the disruption to his usual routine, Fig may have seen that pudding as his just dessert. The sneaky feline could well be a key suspect in this festive mystery.

UNCLE PHIL

UNCLE PHIL – THE MISFIT

He's the eccentric guest who brought dessert but forgot the presents. Or could his absent-minded charm be masking a calculated move? Since Uncle Phil is always eager to joke and eat a mince pie, his seemingly guilt-free actions might hide a plan to keep the dessert all for himself.

MAY

MAY – THE REBEL

This free spirit is ready to relax and unwind. May's rebellious streak and nonchalant attitude have marked her out as the family's rule-breaker. She said she was peeling parsnips when she was secretly indulging in the Reuben Rarebit. Did May take the dessert just to shake things up on Christmas Day?



GOT GOOD ALIBIS

SONNY & NAYA

SONNY & NAYA – THE STICKY FINGERS

Nine-year-old Naya overflows with Christmas excitement, bouncing from one game to the next. Her sweet tooth and playful antics raise suspicions when the dessert goes missing. Was she simply pinching treats from the tempting gingerbread house or is she hiding something bigger behind her adorably mischievous smile?

Six-year-old Sonny is a clever strategist, always a few steps ahead. Could his brilliance have led him to orchestrate the disappearance of the dessert, using his older sister to reach the shelf?

Might they have hatched a plan to steal the dessert together?

WAITROSE
food to feel good about

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The detective
DAVID

SWEET SUSPICION A WAITROSE MYSTERY

Welcome to a Christmas like no other with Waitrose. This year, the family celebrations take a thrilling turn as a festive whodunit unfolds in the Christmas TV advert. When the showstopping Waitrose No.1 Red Velvet Bauble Dessert mysteriously vanishes, it's up to David, the family's quick-witted detective, to crack the case.

Amid laughter, delicious food and family gatherings, the mystery deepens. Could Uncle Phil's absent-mindedness

be an act, or has Gamma's frustration with being demoted to making the cranberry sauce pushed her too far? Join the investigation as the family navigates their festive day, with twists and turns around each corner.

Stay tuned as we unravel this crime of food passion and look at each character's motives to help you crack the case...

WAITROSE
food to feel good about

**CAN YOU CRACK
THE CASE?**



**MEET THE
SUSPECTS**



THIS WEEK IN 1918

Nurses outside the London Hospital in Whitechapel, east London, celebrate Armistice Day on November 11. Some of the first casualties of the First World War brought back to Britain were taken to the hospital, which provided up to 500 beds for wounded servicemen. Photograph colourised by Jordan J Lloyd.

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My spider-eating years are over

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I'm a terrible shepherd. So why have I bought more sheep?

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After a seizure at the wheel, I was diagnosed with epilepsy at the age of 50, writes

Alison Kervin. Plus, exercise swaps to beat injury

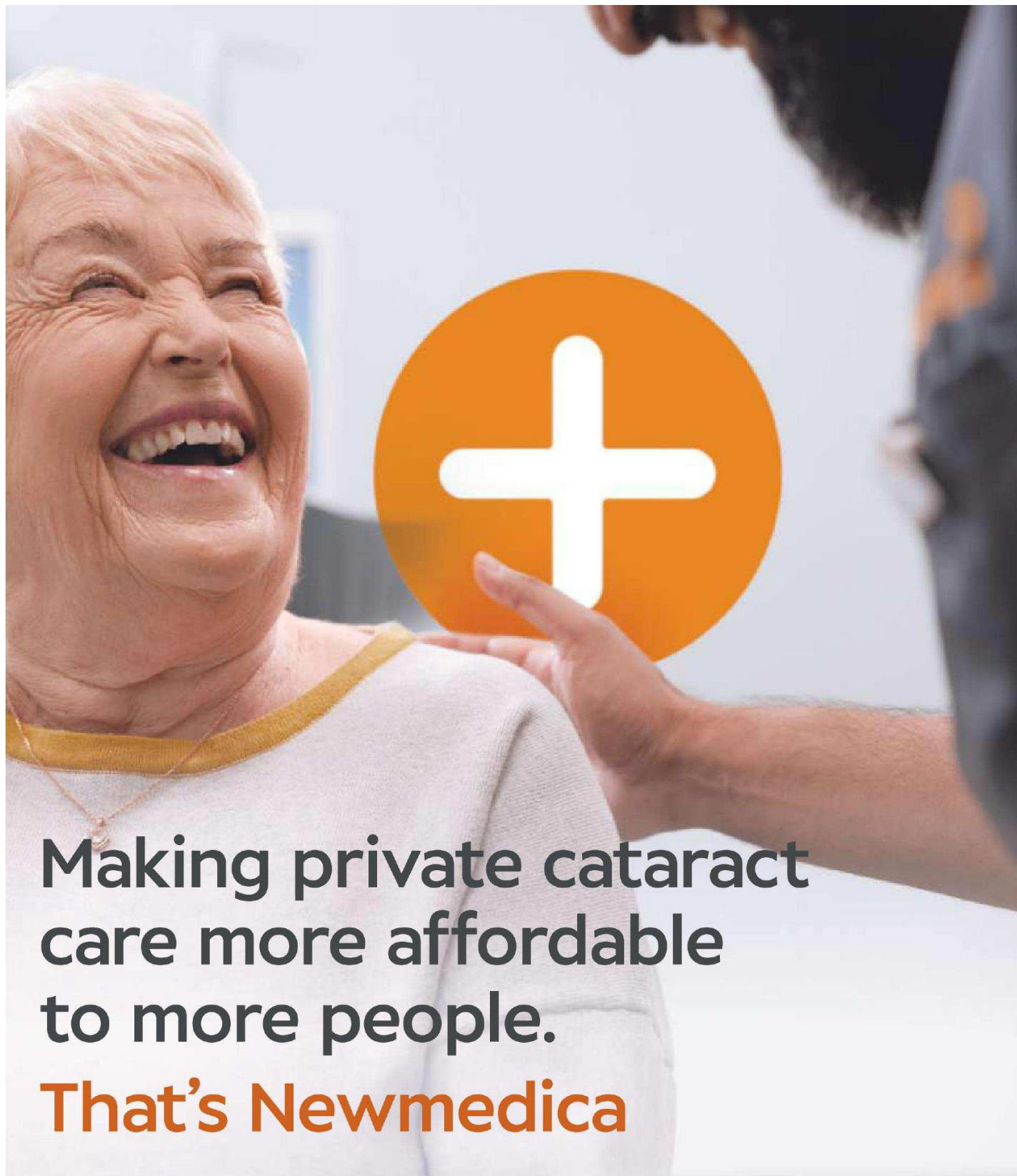
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The comedian and actor *Asim Chaudhry*

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MATT RUDD

I've become totally stuck in my ways. Same time again next week?

I wake up, step into the slippers I set out the night before and go downstairs. I cross my legs while I fill the kettle — it's a high-risk, low-reward way to test the prostate. Then the dog and I go for a pee and we're both back in time for the kettle to click. Same cup every morning. Same teabag. Same sugar and milk. Same same same... oh God, I'm stuck in my ways.

I don't know when it happened but it has. I have a morning routine, a lunch routine, a bedtime routine (not quite with a spreadsheet but not far off). It's all, as far as the eye can see, routine.

I didn't used to have routines. I was open to new experiences and new people. If a stall in a Cambodian street market was selling deep-fried tarantula, I'd tuck in. If a Danish girl suggested cliff-diving, I'd (very nearly) agree. If a friend of a friend said a band I hadn't heard of was playing at a venue I'd never been to, I'd go. Even if it was Tuesday. Even if it was at the other end of the Northern Line. But all that was a quarter of a century ago.

And now? Fish pie from Cook on Friday. Roast on Sunday. M&S G&T on the 18.47. Coldplay next September but only if we can get good seats and the last train home. Twenty pairs of identical socks. Three pairs of identical trousers. A full understanding of how our boiler works. Let me just check my pension. Oh Christ.

It was the thirties that did it — and by thirties I mean children. That first brutal trimester of parenting and suddenly routine becomes the most desirable thing on earth. Instead of tarantulas and Tuesday gigs, it's incomprehensible nappies and inexplicable tears, and please, no more surprises. Please just let us sleep. And anyone wonders why the birth rate is down.

Then came the forties — and by forties I mean the children can do their own shoelaces, and that really should have been the point where some of the old spontaneity returned. As in, "Rome for the weekend, darling?" Didn't happen — the thirties had been too traumatic. Let's just keep going while the going's good. I'll do the cricket lifts, you do the rugby. I'll do

drop-offs, you do pick-ups. From there, there's no return. I have become that man who always puts the dishwasher on before bed. Worse than that, if I get into bed and realise I've forgotten, I'll get out of bed again. Even in the winter. Oh hell.

"What about squash club," says Harriet, who remembers with some fondness the old spontaneous me. "Or life-drawing classes? Or Sam's dad says you're welcome to join him and his friends for their Saturday cycle?"

No, no and definitely not. I like my ways. Or, more specifically, I prefer my ways to other, unidentified ways that might be better but might not be. As Confucius says, a cup of tea in the hand is worth two in the bushes.

This will change, won't it? We're already one third of the way to the fabled empty nest. In just a few years, we'll be sad, possibly, but free. And then I'll definitely start eating tarantulas and jumping off cliffs again, won't I?

"But you should find something you're passionate about now," says Harriet, who can turn into a self-help guru in an instant. And I shrug and say, "Not yet. Too soon. Next year."

Except there's a reason I've troubled you with all this midlife angst. You've been judging me just as I've been judging my stuck self, but this month I had a startling breakthrough, and it turns out I'm still the wild and spontaneous buccaneer that I always was.

Some time in the summer, Child B — the one who is taking after me — suggested that Yorkshire Tea was better than PG Tips. I reacted to the suggestion of change like I always do — I hid my panic by scoffing. He persisted. I railed. He pressed. I blocked. And then, after several weeks of resistance, I found myself in aisle 12 reaching for the wrong box of teabags. Mind-bogglingly, Child B was right. I now have Yorkshire Tea in the morning. I wasn't set in my ways, I was just stuck in a rut, which is, I think, different. I might even go cycling with Sam's dad next Saturday. Or the one after. Oh no ■



GOOD NEWS!

A lost, ancient Mayan city has been discovered in Mexico by a team of archaeologists. The huge urban settlement has amphitheatres, pyramids and

sports fields and may have been home to 50,000 people at its peak, from AD 750 to 850. Named Valeriana by the team, it was hidden in the jungle in

the state of Campeche, and uncovered with mapping technology called Lidar, which uses lasers to make highly accurate 3D maps.

RELATIVE VALUES

Art Garfunkel and Art Garfunkel Jr

The singer and his musician son on performing together — and a reunion with Paul Simon

Art

For a long time, my career got in the way of my life. I was worrying about the next album, the next tour, my own selfish needs. All of a sudden, I was in my late forties and I had lost sight of what really mattered. I had always imagined myself as a father. I come from a very loving, close family and assumed I would get the chance to experience what it was like to bring new life into this world. To think about someone other than me.

Junior arrived when I was 49 years old. He's 33 now and, I'll be honest with you, my memory is getting a bit rusty. I just remember this overall feeling that my whole point of view was about to change. Your child has arrived and it's your job — along with my wife, Kim — to take care of him. I had spent 49 years taking things from life. It was time to give something back.

For the first couple of years I moved away from music. I wanted to be there. I wanted to see who this little guy was. I'm not gonna lie to you, we did have help. We had nannies, which is not something that everyone can afford. I spent most of my time just looking at him; watching his face as he slept. Did I sing him to sleep? Yeah, I'm pretty sure I gave him a few renditions of *Scarborough Fair*. I guess I wanted to show him how the voice can bring a sense of peace.

I wasn't a strict father. Even if he did something I didn't approve of, I would never scold him or try to show that Daddy knew best. My job was to love him, to reward good behaviour and give him a hug. Obviously, I kept him out of danger. Everything else, I just let it be.

That was how I remember my childhood. I was an intense kid. I spent a lot of time thinking about the world. Asking all kinds of questions. I probably did things that my parents didn't want me to do, but I was never criticised. They waited for the good stuff, they listened to me sing at the synagogue and they gave me love.

I was crazy about music. Early doo-wop; rock'n'roll heroes like Little Richard. As Junior got a little older, I started making him a series of cassette tapes, all my favourite songs, like the Turbans' *When You Dance*. But don't make the mistake of assuming I was trying to influence him. I don't think that's a parent's job. You can't press your own hopes against your child's life. Of course, it's wonderful that Junior has decided to pursue his music, but that had to be his own decision.

Kim and I did take Junior and his younger brother, Beau, on tour. And I wondered what they'd make of Dad's job. I remember a show in Japan when Junior was about three years old. He was on stage as we were doing soundcheck. I handed him the microphone and told him it was a toy. You talk into this bit and, wow, listen how your voice rings through the theatre. It must have

felt natural for him because he's spent most of his life up there on the stage and he sings better than me!

He does occasionally ask about my career. He was there for some of those big Simon & Garfunkel reunion shows in 2003 and 2004, after we'd split in 1970, and he wanted to know how the two voices — Paul and mine — worked together. I actually had lunch with Paul a couple of weeks back. First time we'd been together in many years. I looked at Paul and said, "What happened? Why haven't we seen each other?" Paul mentioned an old interview where I said some stuff. I cried when he told me how much I had hurt him. Looking back, I guess I wanted to shake up the nice guy image of Simon & Garfunkel. Y'know what? I was a fool!

We've made plans to meet again. Will Paul bring his guitar? Who knows. For me, it was about wanting to make amends before it's too late. It felt like we were back in a wonderful place. As I think about it now, tears are rolling down my cheeks. I can still feel his hug.

Art Jr

One of my strongest memories is Dad and Paul Simon playing a reunion show in front of the Colosseum in Rome. It was 2004 and I must have been 13 or 14. I stood on the stage and looked out at this wave of

Paul mentioned an old interview where I said some stuff. I cried when he told me how much it hurt



Main: Art Jr, 33, and Art, 82, at Art's house in New York. Right: father and son performing at the Supper Club in New York, March 1999



humanity. More than 600,000 people dancing and singing along. I felt the vibrations through my feet and in my chest. I was taken aback by the power of this music.

Not long after that I said, “Dad, does everyone in the world know you?” He smiled and said, “No, of course not. Maybe half the world, but not the whole world.”

That was the point at which I started to get an idea of what Paul and Dad had achieved. I was surprised; my dad is a humble guy. He doesn’t sit around recounting rock’n’roll stories. He was always reluctant to talk about himself or the past. I had to tease things out of him.

One time he told me that Janis Joplin had thrown up on him at the Monterey Pop Festival. Just dropped it into the conversation like he was talking about the weather. I asked what happened. He simply said, “I had to change my pants before I went on stage.”

I suppose I did get to see some of the craziness of Dad’s life as I was growing up. I spent a lot of time with Jack Nicholson, David Crosby. Paul Simon, of course. And Paul McCartney. There was one party where he started playing *Baby Face* — the old standard — on the piano and I started singing along with him. Me and the guy from the Beatles!

People always want to know why the hell I decided to be a singer when my dad is Art Garfunkel. With all due

STRANGE HABITS

Art on Art Jr
He can sing higher than I ever could. He goes for a high G-sharp and it lasts forever

Art Jr on Art
Every night at 6.30, he turns on the TV and watches the news. No matter what else is happening in his life, everything stops for the news

respect, I say to them, “I don’t care what my dad does.” I’m incredibly proud of Dad and there is no way that I would try to be the “new” Art Garfunkel because there can never be another talent like him. Dad never pushed me towards music but he never steered me away either. All he ever said was, “Find what works for you.”

We’ve sung together many times, but this new album is the first time we’ve done a full-on collaboration. There were moments when we were together around one mike, a spark of electricity between father and son. Music means as much to him now as it did when he first recorded with Paul Simon back in the Fifties.

Did Dad mention that he had lunch with Paul? They’ve had their ups and downs over the years, but after the meeting, Dad was so happy. He called me and said, “Paul’s my brother; he’s family.” I do think there is a possibility of them getting together musically. I’m speaking hypothetically here, but maybe a big TV/charity event. And with a bit of encouragement from their peers in the music industry, that could lead to some new material. A new generation discovering the beautiful music they make together ■

Interviews by Danny Scott.

Father and Son, the new album by Garfunkel & Garfunkel, is out now on BMG



Official Fuel Economy Figures for the Range Rover Sport 25MY Plug-In Electric Hybrid range in mpg (l/100km) miles (kilometres) 45.7-48.9 (28.4 – 30.4). CO₂ emissions (weighted combined) in g/km: 17 - 20. Equivalent all-25MY range (excluding PHEV) in mpg (l/100km): Combined 39.4-36.1 (7.2-7.8). WLTP CO₂ Emissions 188-205 g/fully charged battery. For comparison purposes only. Real world figures may differ. CO₂, fuel economy, energy load, wheel fitment, accessories fitted, actual route and battery condition.

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(weighted combined): 385.6-328.8 (0.8-0.9). Electric energy consumption (weighted combined) in kWh/100 electric range in miles (kilometres): Up to 73.9 (119). Official Fuel Economy Figures for the Range Rover Sport km. The figures provided are as a result of official manufacturer's tests in accordance with EU legislation with a consumption and range figures may vary according to factors such as driving styles, environmental conditions,

No trespassing. Are you bulletproof or stupid?

Never mind the hardman act. *Decca Aitkenhead* ignores the warning sign and joins Vinnie Jones down on his farm to talk about sobriety, widowhood and finding love again

PORTRAIT BY PEROU

Jones on his 100-acre farm near Petworth,
West Sussex, the setting for his reality
show, *Vinnie Jones in the Country*





either Vinnie Jones nor his new girlfriend has any memory of partying together more than 15 years ago. Both were too drunk to remember anything. Until a friend found old photos of them taken in his Los Angeles home and the Beverly Hills Hotel, the pair thought they first met in 2022 when he hired her to be his PA.

Jones had recently returned to the UK a widower, bought a 100-acre farm outside Petworth, in West Sussex, and needed someone to organise his new life. Emma Ford had recently returned after modelling, acting, PA-ing and partying in LA for more than a decade. Both were sober by then, and both for nine years. Ford's best friend in Sussex happened to know an old friend of Jones, and "they kind of put us together". They suggested he employ her — but had a secret hunch they'd fall in love? "Exactly."

No one who watched season one of *Vinnie Jones in the Country* on Discovery Plus last year will be surprised that the hunch proved right. The reality TV show documented the renovation of Jones's 400-year-old farmhouse, his restlessly explosive site management style, and tireless lad banter — "Lovely jubbly!", "Fackin'ell!" etc — with a revolving carousel of builders and craftsmen and farmers, all deftly shepherded by the unflappable and foxy Ford, now 48. Or, as he called her, "Blondie". Quizzed on camera about the nature of their relationship in

the final episode, both were coy, but it was blindingly obvious. Reality television could not hope for a more charming love story.

I find them in the yard when I arrive. Weaving through production crew trailing cables and props, they show me into a barn converted into a common room for his army of TV, farm and construction workers, fitted out with a full bar and kitchen, pool table and dartboard, stuffed foxes and comedy signs: "NO TRESPASSING. ARE YOU BULLETPROOF OR STUPID!" In another life, the couple could have run a country pub. He banters with the crew but no longer seems quite so strained by frenetic energy, so after we adjourn to his reading room I ask when he realised he was in love.

"I mean..." he begins, "you know, um, it wasn't this big boom, it was a steady burn." Then, as if a switch in his head flicks, he

"I don't believe in moving on. I believe in moving forward... I couldn't imagine being without Emma now. My life is so different"

leans forward. "She said to me that she had had a chat with [his late wife] Tanz and said, 'I'm going to look after him for you.' That was kind of a defining moment for me." Looking pleased, he leans back. "I think that was the moment you were looking for."

My heart sinks. This sounds suspiciously contrived, like a made-for-reality-TV line, which is not what I am looking for.

It's not that everything Jones will say to me sounds untrue. It's just that it sounds like what he thinks I want to hear. His shtick of cartoonish sincerity makes him a gift to the tabloids, and having been in the headlines all his life he knows how they work. But they seem to have shaped his own internal voice to the point where I wonder if his well-worn tropes may also be what he wants to hear. At 59, he has been playing a character called Vinnie Jones for so long that I can't tell if he knows where it ends and he begins. He sells a three-act story of his life so well, I think he has bought it himself.

Act one opens with a boy's own tale about a promising young footballer in rural Hertfordshire who went off the rails at 12 when his parents divorced. After wasting his teens labouring and boozing in Watford pubs, against all odds at 19 he signed for a non-league club, Wealdstone. First Division Wimbledon FC paid £10,000 for him two years later, he scored the winning goal against Manchester United in only his second club appearance, and won the FA Cup at the end of the 1987-88 season.

An iconic photo from that season of Jones squeezing Paul Gascoigne's testicles catapulted the midfielder into celebrity status, the First Division's "human rottweiler", an image he did nothing on or off the pitch to disabuse. In a squad nicknamed the Crazy Gang, notorious for boozy mayhem, no one was crazier than Jones.

He holds the record for the fastest yellow card in professional football (within five seconds of kick-off), and got sent off a total of twelve times. Five years into his career, in 1991 he had a son, Aaron, with his girlfriend at the time, Mylene Elliston, and three years later married his childhood next-door neighbour, Tanya, becoming a stepfather to her daughter, Kayley. Jones was a devoted family man but also a raging alcoholic. He bit a reporter's nose after a football riot in 1995, was convicted in 1998 of assaulting a neighbour, and again in 2003 for assaulting a passenger on a flight to Japan.

"I always had good intentions, and it always got out of hand, you know. I was never a sneaky bastard, I was never an 'orrible bastard. I would just be easily led, kind of thing."

After retiring from football in 1998, a role in *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* produced a second iconic image — two shotguns crossed behind his shaved head — and a second act: the Hollywood film



Jones with his late wife, Tanya, in 1996. She was diagnosed with skin cancer in 2013 and died in 2019, aged 53



Outside his home in Leeds, having signed for Leeds United in 1989 Above: his infamous assault on Gazza during a match between Wimbledon and Newcastle United in 1988



star years. Cast by Guy Ritchie as a gangster, the self-caricature he played proved so popular that Hollywood couldn't get enough of it, and the feeling was mutual. To date he has played variations on a heavy in more than 80 movies and more than a dozen TV series, and was the life and soul of the LA party scene until he surprised everyone in 2013 by getting sober.

His strategy was pleasingly simple. It took him just four AA meetings and four sessions with a psychologist to quit, and he likes to quote something Ritchie once told him while he was still drinking: "Everybody's got a dog, which is your ego, and you've got a bloody big one and he keeps getting out the kennel, and you've gotta control him." He credits his sobriety to it. "I have a very big dog that I have to control, and I can't do it when I've had a drink."

In 2013 Tanya was diagnosed with skin cancer and died in 2019, just 53, with Jones at her side. He completely fell apart. Lost in grief, "I'm just hanging around, half-living," he said the following year, "until I get to see her again." A YouTube video taught him to handle grief by getting up early and making the bed, so that's what he did: "Still do." He kept acting and became a passionate advocate for men's mental health, with his own catchphrase — "I've always had this saying, 'Keep swinging. Just keep swinging.'" He tells me he has a formula for widowhood. "I don't believe in moving on. I believe in moving forward."

The celebrity economy loves reinvention, and act three — the Sussex country squire years — has delighted it again. Jones's happiest childhood memories were in the countryside with his father, Peter, a part-time gamekeeper, fishing and shooting and ferreting, and his new life on the farm is "me doing a 360". He is even playing this self in another Ritchie vehicle, the TV spin-off from his crime movie *The Gentlemen*, in which Jones plays not a gangster this time but a gamekeeper. The hardman act and nightclub mayhem, he says, "were never really me. This," and he gestures outside to rolling fields, "is me."

It's a well-trodden narrative, and always feels implausibly neat. The longer I'm with him, the clearer it seems there is someone more three-dimensional stuck inside the cartoon occasionally trying to get out, if only his talent for fame didn't keep getting in the way. Like Jones, I used to go ferreting as a child, he in Hertfordshire, me in Wiltshire; we would net all the holes of a rabbit warren and send a ferret down. Talking to him reminds me of waiting to see where a rabbit might pop up.

At one point, for example, he tells me he knows I was widowed a decade ago, asks if I've found a new partner and looks genuinely troubled when I say no. "In grief," he offers, "we're so upset because you only remember all the good things. That's ►"

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your mind telling you that. Because it wants you to be unhappy; it wants you to be sad. It doesn't want you to go on a date or have a wonderful time. So the f***ing guilt — you're feeling guilty all the time. But you've got to tell your brain, 'Wait a minute, it wasn't all roses and bells. Sometimes there were bad arguments.'"

His usual breakneck delivery has slowed as his face fills with a boyish impulse to say something uncontrived and actually connect.

"So what I try to do is tell my brain, 'We're good now,' because I'm not going to feel sorry for myself. The way she's looking down on us and feeling about us, and the way I'm feeling back, and the way I'm conducting myself here now — yeah, I'm at peace. Because does she want you to be on your own? No, because you're not going to be happy. Human beings, most human beings, are supposed to be with somebody. It's the breed we are. It's like the swan. That's nature. That's how it's supposed to be."

Jones is keen to talk about nature. "All people have heard from me for the last 30 years is what a f***ing lunatic I am, and thick. If you have a lot of bar fights, people think you're thick. People look at you as an imbecile and a thug. But actually it's not like that. And I wanted to show them that in your specialist subject, we're all highly intelligent, and my specialist subject is wildlife and nature and the countryside."

Six years ago he pitched a three-minute video of himself communing with nature on a quad bike to all the big broadcasters. "And they were, like, 'Oh, we love it, but you know, we'd rather see you with Bradley Walsh or wrestling a bear.' And I'm, like, 'That's not where I'm going. I want to show people that I could leave most people behind on my knowledge of the countryside.'"

He presented a YouTube show instead, called *The Crafty Countryman*, "and it went nuts". Then *Clarkson's Farm* came out on Prime Video. "I'd beaten *Clarkson's Farm*!" He looks and sounds indignant, so I ask if he was annoyed that Jeremy Clarkson's show about farming was a smash hit. "Yeah, I was." Then quickly, "Not annoyed, no." He doesn't want "any negativity whatsoever to come out from me to *Clarkson's Farm*, because I am the biggest fan of it. Sure, sure, sure. But I was f***ing pissed off, because I'd already had the idea."

TV executives excited by Clarkson's success, he says, soon came racing down to his farm. "They hurtled through these gates — never even bothered to open them, just drove through, bam." Really? "And they went, 'We want this! We want the farm!' Bastards. Can you imagine? And I went, 'I told you this two years ago. I was before my time.'"

Right: as Big Chris in Guy Ritchie's *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. Below: with his father, Peter, at a clay pigeon shoot in Berkshire, 2001



He wasn't very happy about how season one turned out. He's pleased that it turned his builder, a friend called Wobbly, into a TV personality, but it was basically a building-site renovation show ("The clock is ticking. Will Wobbly and the boys get the stables finished in time?" etc), and a bit boring, so he refused to make another season — "I walked away" — until they promised it would be "much more about wildlife".

All I've been shown of season two is ten minutes of clips, in which Ford is no longer Blondie but Em, now living in the farmhouse and gently weaning Jones off his blokey widower's diet of sausage and chips. Jones says he told the producers, "You've got to push the nature." I imagine their problem is that this isn't really, as far as I can see, a working farm. Jones doesn't grow crops or keep livestock.

His motives for making another season remain stubbornly opaque. "I wasn't going

Guy Ritchie once told him: "Everybody's got a dog, which is your ego, and you've got a bloody big one and he keeps getting out the kennel"

to do it. Four months of hard graft, it is. Every time I come out of my kitchen, they're there — and it's eight or nine of them — and they go [he mimes lifting a camera] 'Bang!' I said to them, 'I do not want a reality show. I'm not making that f***ing show.'"

Ford is a reality TV pro, expertly showcasing the trick of thinking out loud for the cameras, but Jones tells me, "I say to Em, 'Don't do the cheese; cut down on the cheese. You're f***ing hamming this up.'" She must have been a godsend for the producers, because Jones says he was forever "banging heads with them, telling them, 'We're not scripting this. You've got to just ask me what I'm doing each week and film what I've got on.'" Yet only the day before I arrive he had laid on a Vinnie's Wild West barbecue for 60 guests, furnished with a vast props wardrobe of cowboy hats and stick-on moustaches to deliver a set-piece spectacle for the season finale.

Season one had closed with Jones declaring that he wanted his private life to be private from now on. "When I go out these gates I am public property," he explains to me. "People expect me to be the court jester and entertain them, putting it out, putting it out." It is, he sighs, exhausting. If he or Ford have to go to any sort of function, they get into "a right pickle" of social anxiety. "Sometimes you want a 50ft wall around the farm to keep me in and people out. I'd be happy with that." ►



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On the farm with his girlfriend, Emma Ford, and Pip the dog. Jones insists the second season of his reality show will be “much more about wildlife”

Why, then, invite the cameras back? “Well,” he suggests, “I feel I’m helping people.” He thinks his life story is inspirational to the public, because “I *am* the public. A boy from Watford. So I love being kind of the people’s champion.” The thrill of pleasing fans never wears off, so even though he is much happier in his Land Rover, when he goes to watch Watford FC, “I have to take the Bentley. It’s a persona, isn’t it?” How does he square the Bentley with his new image as a conservationist and protector of nature? “Er, well, we walk a lot. And we eat a lot of salad.”

Jones calls the tabloids “maggots and eels”, but in the very next breath admits to being hooked on feeding them stories. “Yeah. You want to be famous.” He says he loves rural life because “here no one cares how big your house is. At the end of the day you only need somewhere to boil an egg and sleep, don’t you?” But that didn’t stop him buying up not just one neighbouring farmhouse but two. When I ask why he needed two extra houses, he looks thrown. “Er... legacy?”

I couldn’t care less that this is obviously not the reason. Jones wants to pretend he left all trace of his old ostentatious self in LA, but everyone knows that media narratives of celebrity reinvention are always a fiction. He is fluent in the pop-psychology register of mental health “journeys”, new chapters, emotional breakthroughs and so on, but what’s less clear is whether or not he knows it.

Towards the end of the interview, he goes unexpectedly off script. His farm doubles as an informal community centre,

a “sanctuary” for “hundreds” of local men who drop in for a cuppa and learn from Jones how to lower their guard and really talk. “They sit around,” he tells me proudly, “and talk about all their problems.” Then, suddenly, anger darkens his eyes and his voice becomes a growl.

“And that’s bad. Because a lot of them, they’re going, ‘Oh God, this problem,’ ‘Oh God, that problem.’ And I think,” and his lip curls, “Oh God, oh God? I’ll take you to the cancer ward down in f***ing Chichester if you want, man. Because I’ve



been there and I’ve done the appointment and there ain’t no ‘I don’t fancy it today’. You’ve got to f***ing be there. I had a whole life of that with Tanz.”

This flash of raw emotion is electrifying. I ask what he does with all that pain and anger inside him. But he is already back on script, brushing it away with a smile. “Oh, I’ve learnt how to control it.”

I don’t doubt a word Jones says about his new relationship with Ford. Every time her name comes up, an air of calm settles over him. “I couldn’t imagine being without her now. And it’s so different from my other life that I had. It’s so different.” In LA with his late wife, “there was people around all the time. There was family, there was the kids, there was the animals. Here, when everyone goes home, when you go home, when she goes home,” he nods to the TV company PR — “when the photographer’s gone, that gate’s shut and it’s just me and Emma.”

We rejoin Ford back in the imitation pub, and after what sometimes felt like an imitation of a conversation I see him transform by her side into thoughtful, engaging, relaxed company. This version of Vinnie Jones seems a lot happier than the three he has played in public. His easy intimacy with Ford is more compelling to watch than anything seen on the show. I come away wishing he’d just turn off the cameras ■

Season two of *Vinnie Jones in the Country* streams from Monday November 18 on Discovery Plus

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Britain's biggest property fraudster, Achilleas Kallakis, made off with £95 million. *Steve Boggan* meets the serious fraud officers going after his luxury homes, sports cars and even his jewellery

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THE £740 MILLION

that Achilleas Kallakis had conned out of the banks was gone, as was the private jet, the 57-metre superyacht, the trophy houses and all the other trappings that Britain's biggest property fraud had brought him. He had watched in despair as a seven-year prison sentence imposed in 2013 was increased to eleven years on appeal, and he served half of it. His character had been excoriated, his reputation dragged through the mud. Even a plaque bearing his name had been taken down from the theatre he'd paid for at his daughter's school near Sloane Square in central London.

They had made him cough up £2 million — the equivalent of his share of the family home in Knightsbridge — and told him their eyes were on his Andy Warhol artwork, his sumptuous villa on Mykonos, the jewellery collection, the Ferrari, two Mercedes and two Bentleys. Now, in November 2023, they were coming for him again, this time for the £250,000 debenture membership he had acquired at his beloved Queen's tennis club in 2007, when the world was a different place, when everything he touched turned to gold and royalty came to his parties. Would it never end?

"They" are the men and women of the Serious Fraud Office (SFO), a little understood — and often controversial — branch of law enforcement that investigates some of the country's most complex and high-profile white-collar cases.

After being convicted on two counts of conspiracy to defraud in 2013, Kallakis was found to have personally benefited from his crimes to the tune of £95,026,935.62. The assets that had been identified as recoverable resulted in a confiscation order



**Achilleas Kallakis
outside Southwark
Crown Court in
January 2013 for his
trial on fraud and
forgery charges**

for £3.25 million being imposed. Confiscation orders issued by courts rarely equate to the size of the crime. Two figures are established: one for the amount by which a criminal benefited from the criminality, and one for the remaining assets that can be recovered. So, a crook may have spent £10 million on renting a mansion or £10 million on buying one. The first sum is a benefit that cannot be recovered by a confiscation order. But the second can, from the sale of the mansion.

But, as Kallakis was to find out with his Queen's debenture, whenever fresh assets come to light, new orders can be issued, constantly increasing the recoverable figure. It's a bit like looking over your shoulder, for ever.

Achilleas Michalis Kallakis was born Stefanos Michalis *Kollakis* in Ealing, west London, in September 1968. He changed the "o" to an "a" after pleading guilty with a friend, Martin Lewis (later to become

"Alexander Williams"), to a charge of conspiracy to commit forgery in 1995. The two, who met at the University of Buckingham, had conned about £85,000 out of gullible Americans and Australians by selling bogus heraldic titles. They were fined and sentenced to 160 hours of community service.

Using their new names, taken in 1997, the men set about getting into the property business. Operating out of an office in Mayfair as "the Pacific Group of Companies" — of which a judge was later to say, "There was no such entity, at least of substance" — the men created a staggering commercial artifice propped up by lies, deceit and forgery. For five years, between 2003 and 2008, they conned bankers — primarily from Allied Irish Banks (AIB), but also the Bank of Scotland and Bristol & West — into granting them huge property loans without conducting proper due diligence.

Kallakis, the main instigator and the face of the operation, claimed to be from a wealthy Greek shipping family that wanted to diversify into property. His uncle, Pantelis "Lou" Kollakis, was indeed a shipping magnate — but he knew nothing about his nephew's business activities.

In common with other large-scale frauds, the premise was simple enough to attract the interest of bankers anxious to lend ►

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LIES, THE USE OF ACTORS — IT
WAS A VERY AUDACIOUS FRAUD"**

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at a profit, but complicated enough to bamboozle them. As chief executive of the Pacific Group of Companies, Kallakis told AIB that he was in partnership with the subsidiary of a real Hong Kong-based company, Sun Hung Kai Properties (SHKP). He told the bankers that SHKP wanted to get a foot in the booming London property market, but needed to avoid the attention of the Chinese government, which might not approve. Kallakis's companies would buy the properties with SHKP becoming the tenant and guaranteeing to take long-term leases above market rate.

These guarantees were attractive to the bankers because the higher rental income would make the properties more valuable. As compensation for the inflated rents, Kallakis would pay SHKP "reverse premiums" (sums paid by a landlord to induce a tenant to enter a lease) and the cost of these would be included in the bank loans. Once the value of the properties had increased, they could be sold and the profits shared between SHKP and Kallakis. The banks would benefit from interest paid on the loans.

In reality, nobody from SHKP, one of Asia's largest property companies, knew anything about Kallakis's scheme. The money intended for the reverse premiums, amounting to tens of millions, was going straight into the conspirators' pockets.

During negotiations with the bank, Kallakis would emphasise the need for secrecy — insisting nobody contact SHKP directly. If any kind of proof of contracts or other paperwork were requested by the lender, Kallakis would provide documents created by his partner, Williams, a prolific forger. One of these was Kallakis's mother's death certificate, altered so

Kallakis fraudulently acquired loans to buy buildings including the Daily Telegraph offices, left, and India Buildings in Liverpool

that her name was the same as his new one.

In March 2007, when AIB finally insisted on a face-to-face meeting in London with a treasury official from SHKP, an SHKP "executive" named Jonathan Lee was produced. Lee told two AIB officials that his company was very happy with the leases and wanted to sign up to more of them.

Later, in a related High Court case judgment, Mr Justice Andrew Baker wrote, "No trace of 'Jonathan Lee' has ever been found... the probability is, and I find, that he was an impersonator engaged by [Kallakis and Williams] to play a part."

Ronan Duff, 52, the SFO lawyer in charge of the investigation, believes the pair used actors to play roles on more than one occasion. "The level of deception was quite extraordinary," Duff says, "the forgeries, lies and use of actors — plural." He says the SFO found "research into individuals, and a biography with a sort of script" on a hard drive at Kallakis's Mayfair office, "suggesting someone was being primed to pretend to be a particular employee of a particular company... It was a very audacious fraud."

Over a five-year period, the fraudsters' portfolio grew to 16 major buildings, worth £740 million in total, including the offices of the Daily Telegraph at 111 Buckingham Palace Road (£224 million loan); nos 7 and 8 St James's Square, Duke of York Street, and 7 Apple Tree Yard (£152 million); India Buildings in Liverpool (£47.5 million); the offices of Network Rail at 355 Euston Road

(£18.8 million); and Lunar House in Croydon, the Home Office's asylum processing centre (£100 million).

The men also tricked the Bank of Scotland into parting with a £26 million loan to convert a disused ferry into a luxury superyacht. This never happened, and the Kallakis-invented guarantor, the Oregon Finance Corporation — which produced forged accounts suggesting it was worth \$2 billion — turned out to be a hollow shell.

Riding a wave of crooked success, Kallakis lived a lifestyle to match. He would use his £27 million private jet to fly to Monaco, where his leased superyacht, Lady KII, with its vast staterooms and polished teak decks, was moored. Today, similar yachts cost £200,000 a week to charter. He owned a £6.5 million helicopter and a fleet of cars that included a Ferrari Scaglietti and a Bentley Azure.

He was, and is, a talented poker player, calling himself "the Don" on trips to Las Vegas. You can see him on YouTube channels devoted to the game. In business circles he claimed to have an ambassadorial role for the Republic of San Marino. I asked the tiny state if this were true; it did not reply.

Other connections were more impressive. During a court hearing in 2012, it emerged that the Duchess of Cornwall, Camilla Parker Bowles, now Queen Camilla, once attended a party to celebrate the sensitive renovation by Kallakis of a building in Grosvenor Square that had once housed the HQ of Revlon. Conservation groups had praised Kallakis for his efforts. The property was bought for £6 million in 2003 and sold for £40 million in 2008.

His world came crashing down in 2008 when private investigators working for the German bank Helaba, which had been approached by Kallakis for a refinancing loan, uncovered his change of name and previous conviction. Helaba tipped off AIB, which finally contacted SHKP — which knew nothing about the lease guarantees it was supposed to have extended to Kallakis.

Without the inflated leases, the buildings were worth less than AIB's £710 million ►

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loans on them. AIB put the loans into default and sold the buildings Kallakis had bought with them to another property company for £654 million. Court documents show that AIB ultimately lost £156 million because of the way the portfolio sale was structured and the impact of the global financial crisis on property prices. At Kallakis's trial, Judge Andrew Goymer said AIB had acted "carelessly and imprudently".

The rented offices of the Serious Fraud Office, off Trafalgar Square in central London, are tired and drab. It has a small staff of about 650 and a surprisingly tiny budget of about £95.5 million — roughly eight times less than Kallakis's £740 million mortgage fraud.

In the next couple of years the staff will be moving to offices in Canary Wharf where they hope to enjoy a new lease of life. Who works in a place like this? Forensic scientists have no place here, but forensic accountants are like superstars.

"You have to have a particular kind of mind," says Nick Stroud, 61, the head of forensic accounting. "You start with an allegation or a hypothesis about a company's potentially illegal activities, then you go in and seize documents, computers, phones, and end up with a big mass of information about a group or corporate structure that we're trying to make sense of. Then it's a case of drilling down into transactions and who knew what about them — and whether anything was wrong with them in the first place.

"People tell us, 'Our accounts have been audited, so we must be clean.' But we have to find out whether they have lied to those auditors, and we have to follow complex money trails, often to international tax havens that can be less than cooperative.

"I've always thought of it as a three-dimensional jigsaw, where I'm not quite sure what the picture will be when we've put all the pieces together."

The SFO is independent of government, and none of its staff are serving police officers — they are civil servants on civil service pay grades. They don't have to refer cases to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) because their own staff lawyers decide which to take to court. It was set up in 1988 in the wake of an inquiry chaired by the retired High Court judge Lord Roskill, which recommended this way of working, in which investigators and lawyers liaise on cases from start to finish, rather than involving the CPS once an investigation is complete.

The 1987 Criminal Justice Act created the SFO in law and gave it swingeing powers to tackle fraud, bribery and corruption. Section 2 of the Act requires any person or entity to hand over all information thought relevant to an inquiry, even if it is regarded as "confidential". Significantly, the Act



Apart from his business activities, Kallakis is a noted poker player, calling himself "the Don"

KALLAKIS WOULD USE HIS £27 MILLION PRIVATE JET TO FLY TO MONACO, WHERE THE SUPERYACHT WAS MOORED

makes it an offence for a person under investigation to refuse to answer questions.

These powers are used when victims, whistleblowers, the media, or sometimes companies themselves tell the SFO that something isn't right. The information garnered is assessed by the SFO's Intelligence Unit, which is made up of lawyers, forensic accountants, data experts, analysts and investigators (often former police detectives).

Only after this process is complete will the director of the SFO — Nick Ephgrave, 58, a former assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and chief constable of Surrey — decide whether to take a prosecution forward, drop it or accept a "Deferred Prosecution Agreement" from the offending party — essentially a huge fine plus compensation where possible.

Ephgrave was appointed SFO director just over a year ago in the wake of devastatingly critical reviews into two high-profile prosecutions that had failed under his predecessor, Lisa Osofsky, a former FBI deputy general counsel. In the first, involving allegations that the public service provider Serco had been overcharging the government for prisoner electronic tagging — even for criminals who were dead — the trial of two former executives collapsed when it emerged the SFO had failed to disclose vital evidence to the defence. A review of the case by Brian Altman KC concluded that SFO staffing and resources were inadequate, with large and complex cases being handled by temporary and inexperienced officials.

In the other case, three executives from the oil and gas consultancy Unaoil had their bribery convictions overturned, again over

failures to disclose information to the defence. Sir David Calvert-Smith, a former director of public prosecutions, who reviewed the case, said there had been "fundamental failures" among managers, and he was particularly critical of Osofsky for having had inappropriate meetings with a private investigator-come-fixer, again without disclosing them to the defence.

Failed SFO prosecutions were the stuff of legend for years. The organisation used to be based in Elm Street, near London's West End. When investigations crumbled or court cases were lost, headline writers had a field day with the nightmares on Elm Street.

It would be unfair not to highlight some of the SFO's victories. Under Osofsky, 29 convictions were achieved over five years, and deferred prosecution agreements from eight companies brought in more than £1 billion, money that goes straight into Treasury coffers. This included the successful prosecution of Glencore Energy UK on seven counts of international bribery, resulting in the biggest penalty so far for a corporate criminal conviction: £280 million.

"We're good value for money," Ephgrave says. "For every £1 spent on us, we bring in £3. That means we're not just cost-effective. We bring in cash."

Ephgrave is the first SFO director to come from a police background. All eight previous incumbents were lawyers. Already he has introduced a more proactive investigative model that is being seen as the "police-ification" of the SFO. His first year was a busy one. More than 100 new staff were employed and there was a fivefold increase in the number of suspects' premises raided.

"Let's be clear, the SFO has a long history of going through people's front doors," ►



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Paul Napper, head of the Proceeds of Crime Division at the SFO, is the man chasing Kallakis's assets



“OUR PEOPLE WILL NEVER GIVE UP.” LAST YEAR KALLAKIS TWICE LOST MONEY TO THE SFO — TEN YEARS AFTER HIS CONVICTION

he says. “But I am the first police officer to be in charge, and that obviously brings a different perspective. I come from a culture where a ‘golden hour’ is everything. You strike early, you strike hard, you get as much as you can, and then you ask the questions at an early stage and put people up against it. I bring that sense of urgency.”

Controversially, he has also called for whistleblowers to be offered financial incentives to come forward, and for US-style plea bargains to be offered to offenders in return for their cooperation.

“Providing incentives for whistleblowers isn’t a tradition we’ve had in this country,” he says. “A very high proportion of the successful corporate convictions in America are initiated by whistleblowers — more than 80 per cent. Here, it’s about 5 per cent.”

Ephgrave’s chief investigator is Mick Gallagher, a former Met detective chief superintendent who had arguably the widest brief in the force, overseeing cyber and economic crime, modern slavery, international money laundering, historic sexual abuse, Flying Squad operations, bribery and corruption and murder cold cases. He and Ephgrave are focusing on strengthening links with the National Crime Agency (often described as Britain’s FBI) and on improving discovery processes so trials don’t fall apart because one needle-sized piece of information isn’t found and disclosed from the often giant haystack-sized amounts seized.

Ephgrave says one of his top priorities is the recovery of as much money as possible for individuals and investors who have been conned out of money and savings. One of the cases the SFO is currently investigating, involving an allegedly fraudulent car leasing

scheme, involves 46,000 potential victims — many of them first time investors — who have lost £88 million. Two directors of Buy2Let Cars are facing fraud charges.

The SFO claws back ill-gotten gains using the 2002 Proceeds of Crime Act. When investigators identify an asset acquired with funds from criminal activity, they can apply to a judge for a confiscation order to its value. The asset is not literally taken — the criminal must pay an amount equal to its value, which usually means selling it.

Since 2020 the SFO has recovered £1 billion from confiscation orders and Deferred Prosecution Agreements.

“We have a very successful and very innovative Proceeds of Crime team,” Ephgrave says. “They are relentless and they will use every opportunity to recover assets or cash for people who have been defrauded out of them. The Kallakis case is an example of that. Our people will never give up.”

Kallakis found this out to his cost last year when twice he lost money to the SFO — ten years after he was convicted and five after being released from prison. In 2005 he had donated £250,000 to the Francis Holland independent school for the construction of a theatre at its Sloane Square site in Chelsea. At the time his daughter, Erinoula, was attending the school, which counted Cara Delevingne and Sienna Miller among its alumni. The school put up a plaque naming the building “The Kallakis Theatre” — but quietly took it down after Kallakis was convicted. When his wife, Pamela, found out, she was furious and demanded the £250,000 back, with interest. The

family sued and, after costs, the school settled for £92,500.

In March 2023 the SFO won an application to have Kallakis’s confiscation order of £3.25 million increased on account of this settlement. The lawsuit against the school had been brought by Kallakis’s son, Michalis, who argued that the £250,000 donation came from a family trust beyond Kallakis’s control and so not generated from his crimes. The court disagreed, the SFO won, and the money was surrendered.

Last November a similar extension of the confiscation order was granted to include the £250,000 debenture at Queen’s. This was perhaps the final ignominy for Kallakis.

“The debenture is like a loan that gives the lender special membership and their name on a board in the club. We noted that it was due to mature after 15 years and the money would be returned to Kallakis,” says Paul Napper, 52, the SFO’s acting head of Proceeds of Crime division, which first had its eye on the debenture 15 years earlier. He says his continuing pursuit of Kallakis’s assets isn’t personal. It’s just part of his job.

“A key element to this case is the fact that you have an individual who gets caught and convicted of [the heraldic title] fraud,” Napper says. “He is punished and changes his name. He then starts a new fraud under that name. And as part of that fraud, you start seeing him buying into society. So you have the debenture being paid to the sports club. You have a private school getting funding for theatres with his name on it. From the perspective of a financial investigator, it smacks of someone who’s laundering their reputation.”

So, back to that question: “Will it never end?” Kallakis had satisfied the original 2014 confiscation order of £3.25 million by March 2015. After the school theatre case, it was increased to £3,342,500. After the Queen’s Club case, it was increased by a judge again to £3,592,500. And it could keep rising each time the SFO finds cash or assets it can get its hands on, right up to the sum by which Kallakis is judged to have benefited from his crimes: £95,026,935... and 62p.

Kallakis pleaded not guilty at his trial and has said he doesn’t believe he did anything wrong. After some to-ing and fro-ing, I met the convicted fraudster, who lives in Athens, at a hotel in west London to discuss the possibility of an interview. It never happened: Kallakis subsequently told me he wanted to give his side of the story but legal restrictions prevent him from divulging the information that could prove his innocence, something that may or may not be true. I asked his solicitor to provide details of these restrictions. None was forthcoming.

Several weeks earlier, I had asked Napper for a single adjective to describe Kallakis. He had paused and said, “Plausible.” I found him to be that, and affable too. I quite liked him — assuming it was Kallakis who turned up, and not an actor ■



“I was dropped by
my agency, my
projects were pulled”

Susan Sarandon thought
her politics would never
harm her career. Now she
tells *Will Pavia* she may
never act in a big-budget
Hollywood movie again

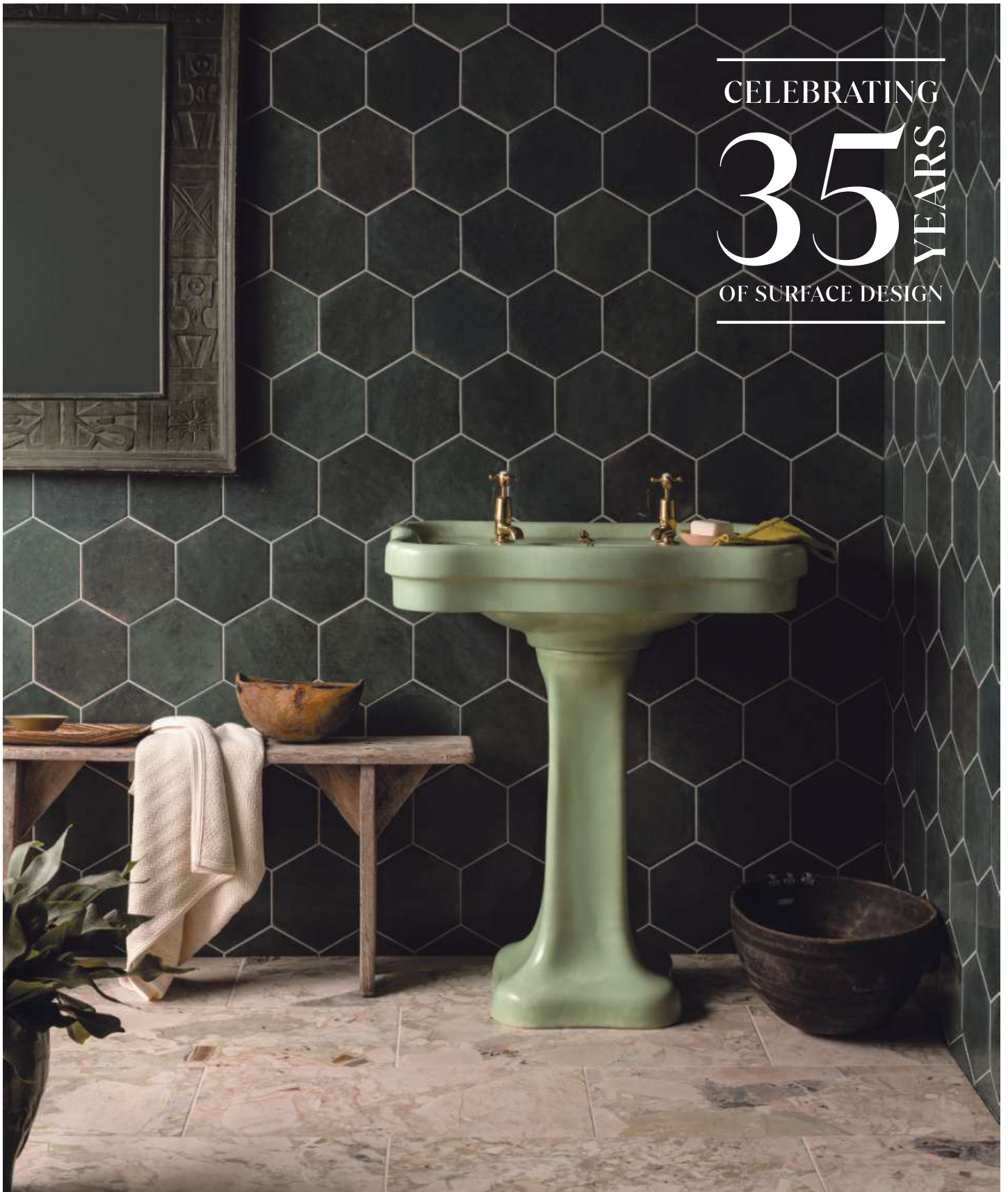
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Sarandon, 78, in New York last month. She is starring in a low-budget film about bowling



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"IT'S DIFFICULT TO FIND AN OLDER GUY WHO'S STILL CURIOUS AND NOT TRYING TO HOLD ON TO THINGS THE WAY THEY WERE"

From left: playing a retired bowling champion in her new film, *The Gutter*; with Jack Nicholson in *The Witches of Eastwick*, 1987

"ou wanna hear a story about Brando?" asks Susan Sarandon, her bouncy auburn hair sprayed out across her shoulders; those potent eyes of hers looking at me over Zoom from behind a pair of thick, grey-blue-framed glasses. It's a gorgeous day in New York City's West Village, sunshine warms the wall behind her and a tabby cat named Ida sprawls at her side.

Who wouldn't want to hear a story from her about Marlon Brando? She shrugs her grey cardigan off her shoulders and gives me a look that says: hold on to your hat.

Jack Nicholson lives, she says, in a little house on Mulholland Drive, crammed with priceless works of art. "You would just see these extraordinary paintings worth millions, just hanging on the wall next to each other," she says.

For years, Brando lived next door. The two houses shared a gate, their gardens merged. At any moment Brando could wander like a deer into Nicholson's yard.

"Sometimes Brando would walk right in to Jack's house and take things out of his refrigerator," Sarandon says. "Jack put a lock

on it. They had this big thing. But Jack had always said: 'If you're ever going to sell your house please let me know.' So Brando calls one day and says: 'All right. I'm gonna sell my house but this is the thing. You have to have \$15 million in a bag at the end of my driveway in three days.'"

It may not have been \$15 million, she says later. But it was a sum in the millions, and it was a Friday afternoon. "Jack says, 'But you know the banks are gonna be closed. How am I gonna have it there by Sunday night?'"

Nicholson began working the phone, she says, calling businessmen he knew, organising wire transfers. "He goes crazy and he starts finding money," she says. "He goes through all the machinations."

By Sunday, he had several million dollars in cash in a bag. "He calls Brando back. He says, 'OK, I got it, I got it. I'm going to put it at the bottom of your driveway.' And Brando says, 'Hey Jack. What is today?'"

"April 1," Sarandon says. "Those are the kind of jokes these guys play on each other."

She nods, approvingly. "Things that get set up months in advance. Robert ►



Redford and Paul Newman were like that too. Sawing people's desks in half, filling trailers full of chickens in the heat. Just crazy, big idea jokes."

Now 78, she is regarded in the same light. She does not go around filling people's trailers with chickens. But she, like them, is Hollywood royalty. She has a career that stretches from the golden age to the gilded plastic of the DC and Marvel Universe, from Billy Wilder to Ben Stiller.

Lately though, Sarandon feels she has been blacklisted in Tinseltown following remarks she made at a pro-Palestinian rally last November. Standing on the back of a lorry at the protest in New York City, and apparently speaking off the cuff, she said a lot of people were "afraid of being Jewish at this time, and are getting a taste of what it feels like to be a Muslim in this country, so often subjected to violence".

She quickly apologised, saying that she had intended to express concern over antisemitic attacks and made "a terrible mistake" in the way she phrased it, by implying that "until recently Jews have been strangers to persecution when the opposite is true".

The fallout was immediate. "I was dropped by my agency, my projects were pulled," she says. "I've been used as an example of what not to do if you want to continue to work."

Sarandon is not alone. Another actress, Melissa Barrera, was dropped from the cast of *Scream 7* for sharing posts on social media that accused Israel of genocide, while a prominent agent at Creative Artists Agency was demoted but kept her job, according to *Variety*, after her client, Tom Cruise, indicated that she had his support.

"There are so many people out of work right now [since] November of last year... who have lost their jobs as custodians, as writers, as painters, as people working in the cafeteria, substitute teachers who have been fired because they tweeted something, or liked a tweet, or asked for a ceasefire," Sarandon says.

She is not unused to causing offence. There is still a cohort of liberals who have not forgiven her for declining to back Hillary Clinton in 2016 and for supporting Jill Stein, the Green party candidate, who would then be blamed for chiselling away enough voters from the Democrats in three swing states to help Donald Trump over the line. We are speaking 12 days before the 2024 election. When I ask how she feels this time, she suggests that neither the Republicans nor the Democrats would get her vote.

"I think there's a revolution happening among unions and among young people who are not born into a party," she says. "I'm feeling that both parties are owned corporately. I think there's a great difference culturally — in what they talk about — but not in policy, and so I'm supporting humanity."



"YEAH, GEENA AND I ARE STILL FRIENDS. WE THOUGHT WE WERE JUST MAKING A COWBOY MOVIE WITH WOMEN AND TRUCKS"

From top: her breakout role in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, 1975; with Geena Davis on the set of *Thelma & Louise*, 1991. Right: with David Bowie c1983. They met when they both starred in *The Hunger*

I've seen her say in the past that Hollywood would not penalise her over her politics. Now she seems less sure.

Not all her work has dried up, however. We're here to discuss a low-budget bowling movie she's starring in, called *The Gutter*. It has been written by an American comedian called Yassir Lester, who has also directed the film with his brother, Isaiah. Sarandon did not know either of them but she liked the script. "It was outrageous," she says. It reminded her of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, another independent film that was her first big hit nearly 50 years ago. *The Gutter* is similar in that at times it seems "to invite the audience to throw something at the screen", she says.

It's about a young black man named Walt who discovers by accident that he is a fabulously gifted bowler. He gives himself a bowling name featuring the N-word and insists that it is written on the large cheques that he is given for winning tournaments. The Lester brothers wanted Sarandon to play the part of Linda Curson, a retired bowling champ who returns to

the game to crush him. Curson at times feels like an amalgam of characters Sarandon has played in the past: imperious, sexy, spouting plumes of cigarette smoke as she talks. “She’s a narcissist and a racist in that kind of unconscious way, and obviously a horrible mother,” Sarandon says. “All of those things are so much fun to play.”

Before filming, she went to meet the directors. “They were sweet and I thought, well, first of all, thank God they are black,” she says, given the racially charged script. At one point her character says derisively: “Walt could be something some day, like a garbage man or a janitor in Wakanda.”

They brought in a lot of stand-up comedians for the smaller roles. I wonder what it was like for all these people when Susan Sarandon walked on set.

“They all claim they were nervous before I came, but it was perfectly fine,” she says.

Sarandon was once a shy and dreamy girl but this was more or less knocked out of her by growing up as an eldest child with eight siblings. She had to look after them. Her father, Phillip Tomalin, had been a big band singer and then, during the Second World War, became head of entertainment for troops stationed in Italy. After the war he came back, “knocked up my mom right away”, and went to work in television and then in advertising.

The Tomalins lived in Queens and then moved to New Jersey to a ranch house set in a field full of rocks, which the children were tasked with pulling from the ground. Her father commuted into the city to work and “my mom was always pregnant and overwhelmed”. Her siblings remember that “I was the one to bathe them and put them to bed and it took me a long time not to bring that... into my relationships.”

She had a tendency to mother people. “It’s really reassuring for me and it’s, you know, the curse of the competent woman. You get used to doing it and you do it well.” It was only much later, wondering what went wrong when a relationship came to an end, that she would think: “Oh, yeah... maybe I should have just backed off and let him do more for me.”

Susan Tomalin, as she was then, wanted to study literature and ended up at the Catholic University of America in Washington DC aged 17, lodging with her grandparents and paying her way by working on the telephone switchboard of the drama department. The department put on a lot of Shakespeare and one of its stars was a graduate student named Chris Sarandon. She never considered being in those plays herself. “My voice was not seen as something that



DO HER CHILDREN FIND IT HARD TO HAVE A COOL MUM WHO DATED DAVID BOWIE? “IT’S HARD FOR THEM NOT TO BE HIS CHILD,” SHE SAYS



would even qualify to be on stage in a Shakespearean show,” she says. “I am still intimidated by thinking of myself as being able to handle that language.” Also, “I don’t find the women’s parts in Shakespeare very seductive, honestly.”

But she read a lot and learnt “about all the great writers” and about the theatre. She fell in love with Sarandon and married him in 1967, aged 20, taking his surname. After he finished college she accompanied him to see an agent who wanted to represent them both. The agent sent her to audition for a film called *Joe*, by a company that was branching out from making soft porn films.

“They asked me to improv,” she says. “The first thing I had to do was pretend

I was on some undesigned drug and trash a store on 14th Street,” she says. “I was, like, ‘This is so fun.’” More parts followed. “I think maybe because I didn’t want it so badly. I just thought it was really funny, that I was very lucky, and after a while I thought, well, I guess this is clearly what I do.”

She and Chris divorced in 1979. They had no children — a doctor had told her she could not have them. But six years and several relationships later, at the age of 39 and to her great surprise, Sarandon became pregnant while dating the Italian filmmaker Franco Amurri. They had a daughter, Eva, who is now 39 and also an actress. Sarandon would go on to have two sons — Jack Henry, now 35 and a film-maker, and Miles, 32, an actor — with her longtime partner, the actor Tim Robbins, whom she met in 1987 on the set of the baseball film *Bull Durham*.

Sarandon and Robbins were together until 2009. Each had their own Academy Award, she for *Dead Man Walking*, which he directed, and they were thought to be uncommonly sane for a Hollywood couple. “I still run into people who were devastated when we broke up,” she says. “I feel so bad for them.” She’s still friends with him. “You have kids... you don’t have any choice.”

Would she still work with him? “If he brings me something I like, yeah,” she says. “Imagine if people in Hollywood didn’t work with the people they slept with.”

The whole place would cease production tomorrow.

I ask if she ever thought of dropping the name Sarandon after separating from Chris. “He was a very kind man and he kept me alive, you know, so I’m happy to have that name,” she says. Her only regret is that she did not change her first name. “Sigourney Weaver, Tuesday Weld and Stockard Channing all started out Susans and they had the sense to change that name and I’m stuck with Susan,” she says. ➤



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"It's kind of nice to do a rechristening as you start to realise who you are."

She mentions David Bowie, who was born David Jones. Sarandon shot a horror film with him called *The Hunger* in 1983 and dated him for a while. With Bowie, I presume the name change allowed him to separate his persona as a superstar from his life as a normal human being.

She shakes her head. "I think he was always pretty amazing," she says.

I ask if her children ever find it hard to have a cool mum who once dated Bowie.

"It's hard for them not to be his child," she replies.

Before Bowie and *The Hunger* came two big films that she made with the director Louis Malle. The first, *Pretty Baby* in 1978, caused a terrific controversy as it starred Brooke Shields, aged 11, as a pre-teen growing up in a brothel whose virginity is sold off in an auction. Sarandon played her mother. I interviewed Shields a few years ago and she recalled a chaotic set.

"It was a war zone," Sarandon says. The crew were rowdy and the coolers were stocked only with alcoholic drinks. She remembers opening her hotel door one evening to see crew members racing naked down the corridor, shooting each other with fire extinguishers. The cast was not much better. "Malle, in his hubris, had picked out most of the actors from Mardi Gras and those gals didn't really understand continuity," she says.

Sarandon thinks that "*Pretty Baby* just made people crazy, even though [Shields] is not touched in the movie, even though she's not naked in the movie, because she's really the only one that's not a victim... There was something about that that was unacceptable and maybe stirred up some feelings in people that they didn't like. Because Brooke had a kind of mean sexuality — at 11. She was really strong."

Sarandon began a relationship with Malle and appeared in his next film, *Atlantic City* (1980), alongside Burt Lancaster. She played a young waitress working in a casino; he was the much older boy next door, a former small-time gangster in his twilight years.

Malle had considered Robert Mitchum for the part "but he thought Mitchum wouldn't go there, in terms of looking older". Lancaster would. "He was a pretty ballsy guy," she says. "They made his hair even whiter and, you know, leaving his pot belly out." It was a big deal at the time. She remembers gawkers staring when they were shooting outside, and crying: "What happened to Burt Lancaster? He's old!"

SARANDON AND TIM ROBBINS WERE TOGETHER UNTIL 2009. "I STILL RUN INTO PEOPLE WHO WERE DEVASTATED WHEN WE BROKE UP," SHE SAYS



More worrying to Lancaster, apparently, was a scene where Sarandon comes towards him, unbuttoning her shirt, and he does not immediately jump on her. Lancaster felt he had a reputation to keep up. "He said to Louis, 'People expect that I should just take her and throw her to the ground, you know?'"

Malle, the director, did not like talking to actors, so she told Lancaster the scene was powerful and that he looked extraordinarily charismatic in it. "And to his credit he did it the way it was written, which was just [being] still and... me bringing myself [closer] and offering myself with no obvious culmination. That was a big step for him."

After Sarandon became a mother, she would bring her children with her to work. "Most of the time those big films — *The Client*, *Thelma & Louise* — were shot during the summer," she says. "Then when they got to be teenagers they wanted me to leave and they wanted to stay home. But up until then I dragged them everywhere."

I like the idea that she shot *Thelma & Louise* — a film about two self-reliant women taking control of their lives, leaving various dreadful men behind — with kids in the trailer.

At the start of the shoot she asked the director, Ridley Scott: "Am I definitely going to die?" Or would he perhaps decide to let them live? "He said, 'Well, you will definitely go over the cliff. We'll see about her.'" Meaning *Thelma*, the Geena Davis character. "Maybe you push her out at the last minute."

He left that final scene, the two women trapped by the police on the edge of the Grand Canyon, for the final day of filming. In the late afternoon, the "golden hour" when everything looks fabulous, Davis and Sarandon sat in their Thunderbird, staring over the cliff. They only had time for one take. It was "a little worrisome", she says. By then "we had kind of earned the right to go over together", Sarandon says. "Then I said, 'I'd like to kiss her... What do you think?' And Scott was, like, 'OK.'" And then they did it. "It felt like a stunt," she says. "Because we only had the one take."

To hear her talk about it, you'd think she and Davis actually went on that road trip. "Yeah. Geena and I are still friends," she says. "We thought we were just making a cowboy movie with women and trucks, you know. It wasn't supposed to be a liberation of any kind and, actually, when it came out... very few critics picked up on the rape" — the fact that Louise, who kills a would-be rapist, was raped herself in Texas years earlier and so does not think that anyone will believe them if they go to the police. "That kind of slid by, you know, until fairly recently," she says. ➤

With Tim Robbins and her children in 2005; and her ex-husband, Chris Sarandon, 1975



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I ask if she thinks she'll be offered any more big films now. "I don't know," she says. Not, she suspects, "anything in Hollywood". She's working on another low-budget film.

She no longer lives, as one writer put it, like Gertrude Stein, in a vast two-floor apartment with artists and other lodgers.

"When all my kids left and Tim and I split we sold our huge loft, which wasn't too far from here," she says. Her new place is in a smart, doorman building. "It's a tiny little apartment filled with cats, but it has a nice terrace, and on the street there's lots of writers and painters," she says.

How many cats in the apartment?

"Three," she sighs. "Which is kind of *Grey Gardens* adjacent."

Ida, an elderly and slightly feral tabby, she got after her dog died during the pandemic. She adopted another female to keep Ida company but Ida tried to kill her, so she introduced a third — a young male — to see if this would shift the dynamic. It did, "but just not exactly the way that I'd hoped".

One of her sons, who also has cats, recommended that when looking for a man she should focus on cat owners, who are better able to "adjust to independent women", she says.

She is currently single — "unattached" is how she would rather put it.

I ask her about age and whether it matters in relationships — she has dated much older men and also much younger ones. "There are different people who are, you know, younger, but have lived a very full life that are more mature, more interesting," she says. "It's very hard to find a much older guy who's still curious and not just trying to hold on to things the way they were."

Occasionally she has suggested that she would be perfectly happy dating a woman. "It has to be somebody who has curiosity, a sense of humour, intelligence and appetite for life," she says now. "So God bless you if you manage to find somebody who fulfils any of those things, whether they're younger, whether they're older, whether they're female or male, whether they're gender-fluid, whatever. Those are just details. I think the big thing is finding someone with an open heart and open mind who's still curious."

She's fun to talk to and seems willing to discuss anything. Though maybe it's just that she tells great stories, like a proper Hollywood star, while at the same time giving you the idea that she is still holding something back.

I ask why she has not written a memoir. "I have sworn never to do that. The things that are really interesting I just can't talk about," she says. "I'm pretty private, actually."



Susan Sarandon photographed in New York last month

When a memoir was mooted in past, she shut it down. "I said, 'What about a book about all the people I could have slept with and didn't?'"

The world, according to Sarandon, needs the love of the Sixties. "I think that the Beatles were right," she says. "What is the line? 'The love you take is equal to the love you make.' I think it's very hard these days, when we're being assailed by so much negativity and selfishness and greed, to hold a place of love and possibility that people can find when the dust settles." ■

The Gutter is out now

Young customers clamour for
mint choc chip ice creams in
New Brighton on the Wirral,
c1984. By Martin Parr





**A new photography exhibition
takes a long, hard look at the lives of
ordinary people in the Thatcher years**

If looks could chill



Above left: Charanjit and Raj took this self-portrait in Handsworth, Birmingham, in 1979, in a studio set up by the photographers Derek Bishton, John Reardon and Brian Homer

Above centre: barbers at work in the borough of Brent, northwest London, 1989. By Roy Mehta

Left: shopping for army-themed wallpaper in B&Q, Newport, south Wales, 1988. By Paul Reas



Left: fizzy drinks and crisps on the beach at New Brighton on the Wirral, c1984. By Martin Parr

Below: Geoffrey, Sharon, Susan and Joanne in marching band regalia at home in North Shields, Tyne and Wear, 1981. By Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen





Above: Nidge and Laurence kiss while a building burns during the poll tax riot, Trafalgar Square, March 31, 1990. By David Hoffman



Left: eggs vie for honours at the Pool Poultry Show, Cornwall, c1987. By Jem Southam

The 1980s are seen as a hinge decade in modern history — one of civic upheaval, industrial decline, unemployment and the rise of free enterprise under Margaret Thatcher's premiership, which began in 1979 and ended in 1990. An upcoming exhibition, *The 80s: Photographing Britain*, explores this transformative time through images taken by 70 photographers. The pictures, which include colourful domestic and everyday scenes and gritty black-and-white reportage, span the years 1976 to 1993 — a period the curators call "the long 1980s", to include the years just before and after the Thatcher era ■

***The 80s: Photographing Britain* is at Tate Britain from November 21**



Left: two anti-racist skinheads in Hackney, east London, 1979. By Syd Shelton

Above: a joint rally by Tower Hamlets Defence Committee and the Anti-Nazi League, Commercial Street, east London, 1978. By Paul Trevor

Top: browsing for meat in Newport, south Wales, c1987. By Paul Reas

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As the nights draw in, swapping woollen scarves for sandals and grey skies for glittering blue seas sounds pretty tempting, right? That's just what you'll get in Qatar over the winter. From November to February, the Gulf state shrugs off the uncomfortable heat and humidity of summer, leaving it with vast cloudless skies and temperatures where the mercury hovers at a glorious 25C and below.

Throw yourself into everything from kayaking through mangroves and camping under the stars to sipping coffee at pavement cafés, inhaling the scents of Doha's street food markets and soaking up rays on mile upon mile of pristine white sands.

CROWD-FREE BEACHES

Since Qatar has more than 560km of coastline, you can stroll the shores in comfortable winter sunshine with no crowds in sight.

Without the stifling desert heat of summer, the Unesco-recognised Khor al Adaid (Inland Sea) is pure magic. Take a refreshing dip in crystal-clear waters where the desert meets the sea with a backdrop of golden sand dunes.

South of Doha's artificial island, The Pearl, lies Al Safliya Island where you can swim in aquamarine waters with enchanting views of the city skyline.

For beachside fun, Doha Sands Beach Club lays on music, dancing and dining while West Bay Beach has an outdoor cinema and food trucks.

Katara Beach provides a playground and private huts for hire alongside parasailing, waterskiing and paddleboarding for watersports enthusiasts.

CULTURAL DISCOVERY

Qatar's winter arts and culture calendar unfolds like a captivating treasure hunt. Wander the pastel-hued, Venice-inspired Qanat Quartier with its canals and gondola rides or delve into Qatar's maritime heritage in the Mina District.

Cruise aboard a dhow from the sweeping promenade of the Corniche on a sunny day trip or an evening jaunt beneath glittering city lights. Later this month, the Katara Traditional Dhow Festival (November 27-December 7) sails into town.

Explore immersive exhibits at the National Museum of Qatar, striking architecture and artwork at the Museum of Islamic Art and outdoor street art at the Fire Station gallery.

For lighter entertainment, Doha Festival City has state-of-the-art cinemas, more than 400 shops and an indoor snow theme park that features an igloo.

Major annual celebrations that fall in the winter months include Ajyal Film Festival (November 16-23), Qatar National Day (December 18) and the Qatar International Food Festival (February 7-17).

BROWSER'S PARADISE

Shopping experiences in Qatar run the gamut. Start with the intoxicating souqs, where you can haggle for hand-crafted textiles, rich spices and exotic fragrances at the Souq Waqif, seek out high-quality custom-made clothing and bespoke tailoring at Souq al Deira and browse a range of (tax-free) jewellery at the Gold Souq.

There are innovative concept stores such as Sole Avenue for footwear, the Doha Design District for global and local designers, and Maison 21G to blend your own perfume.

Don't miss the plethora of epic modern malls. Try Mall of Qatar for more than 500 shops and an entertainment multiplex or go for the ultra-luxury of Venetian-styled Villaggio Mall. For speciality stores and lifestyle – including Las-Vegas-style dancing fountains – Place Vendôme is your spot.

OPEN-AIR FEASTS

With blue skies and balmy weather, alfresco dining is a must. Head to Bayt el Talleh in Katara Hills for panoramic views and Lebanese and Middle Eastern cuisine on a rooftop terrace. Scale the heights to Jiwan, rooftop restaurant of the National Museum of Qatar. Chill out in the bohemian lounge and terrace of Boho Social, above Katara Beach Club. For high-end dining and opulent decor, Yasmine Palace has a choice of three sweeping terraces.

In vibrant Msheireb Downtown Doha, the O'Glacée Restaurant has a third-floor swim-up pool bar and a sunny terrace for lunch. L'wzaar Seafood Restaurant does an ocean-to-table experience on the waterfront – think local catches in dishes like steamed hammour, lobster thermidor and tuna sashimi. For street food, make a beeline for Tasty Street (on Shakespeare Street), which is open daily, 3pm to midnight, serving local delicacies amid neon signs and light installations.



“The arts and culture calendar unfolds like a captivating treasure hunt”

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

Milder winter climes make for great adventures. Kayak the serene waterways of the Al Thakira Mangroves and spot flocks of flamingos on their annual migration (November-April).

Nearby Purple Island is ideal for hiking. To camp out under Qatar's inky, star-studded skies, try Al Ghariya Beach or Al Adaid Desert. Embrace the dawn with a hot-air balloon ride to see the sun's golden glow and shadows dancing on the dunes.

For pedal-to-the-metal action, the Formula 1 Qatar Airways Grand Prix runs from November 29 to December 1. If you prefer thrills on the waves, Fuwairit Kite Beach is an adrenaline junkie's paradise. For a calmer kind of outdoor escapade, why not tee off at Education City Golf Club?

FAMILY FUN

Qatar's landscaped green spaces, such as Crescent Park and MIA Park, flourish in the cooler months, with bougainvillea, desert rose, hibiscus and ixora. Don't forget to take a picnic.

For festive fun, Lusail Winter Wonderland on Al Maha Island is a dazzling spectacle of more than 50 rides and attractions for all ages, plus an ice rink.

Showcasing Qatar's rich maritime history, Hamad Port Visitors Centre features an interactive museum, 4D cinema, virtual simulators and Qatar's first oceanic aquarium. For more firsts, visit the black-and-white residents at the Panda House and wonder at the moonlike glow of 40m-deep Dahl al Misfir (also known as the Cave of Light).

Forget queuing for the 56 slides and rides at Desert Falls Water & Adventure Park in the winter months, as you skip between go-karting, laser tag, spinning rapids and the surf simulator.

On the waterfront:
MIA Park beside the
Museum of Islamic Art;
Al Thakira Mangroves

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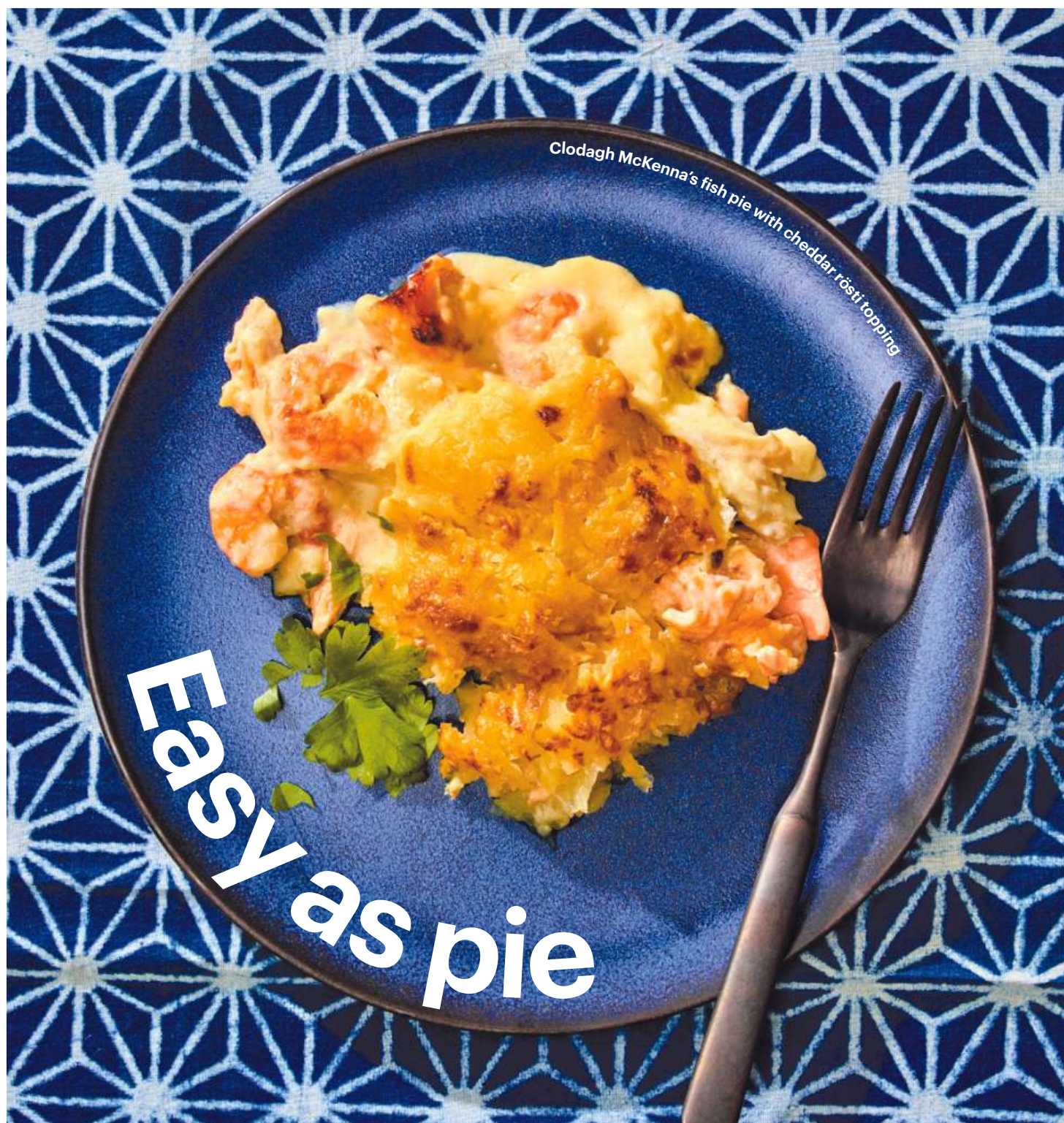
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CLODAGH McKENNA

Sometimes nothing but a pie will hit the spot, so here are three recipes for these wintry evenings. I'm all for making things simple for myself, so I'll always use ready-made pastry — or just skip it and add a crispy potato topping to my fish pie instead.

Fish pie with cheddar rösti topping

You can swap in any meaty fish that you like and leave out the cheese in the potato rösti if you are not a cheese fan. Just make sure the grated potatoes are well drained of any water and dry, so they become nice and crisp once cooked.

Ingredients

Serves 4

- 450g floury potatoes, such as Maris Piper, peeled
- 50g mature cheddar cheese
- 250g smoked haddock fillets, skinless
- 250g salmon fillets, skinless
- 400ml milk
- 1 onion, cut in half
- 1 tsp black peppercorns
- 1 bay leaf
- 100g prawns
- 75g butter
- 50g flour
- 2 tsp Dijon mustard
- 2 tbsp fresh dill

1 Heat the oven to 180C fan/gas 6. Grate the raw potatoes with the larger part of a box grater and pop into a bowl of cold water to stop them from going brown. Grate the cheddar using the same side of the grater and set aside.

2 Put the smoked haddock and salmon in a saucepan, pour over the milk and drop in the onion, peppercorns and bay leaf. Cook over a low heat for 5 min then drain, holding on to the milk but discarding the onion, peppercorns and bay leaf. Flake the fish into large chunks and, with the prawns, add to an ovenproof dish.

3 Melt 50g of the butter in a saucepan then stir in the flour and cook for 5 min to make a roux. Add the milk that you poached the fish in as well as the mustard, then whisk until the sauce is smooth and thick. Season, then add in half the dill and pour over the fish.

4 Drain the potatoes and pat dry with a clean tea towel. In a bowl, mix the potatoes with the cheddar, the rest of the dill and a little salt, then scatter over the fish and the sauce.

5 Melt the remaining butter in a saucepan and brush over the top of the pie. Bake for 20 min or until golden brown.

Beef, Guinness and chocolate pie

You might not expect to find chocolate in a beef and Guinness pie, but it gives a silky-smooth texture and deep richness to this sublime pie filling, and cuts across the bitterness of the stout.

Ingredients

(Serves 4)

- 650g beef steak, chopped
- 2 tbsp flour
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 6 shallots, peeled and diced
- 2 carrots, peeled and diced
- 1 celery stick, finely chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 1 tsp fresh thyme, finely chopped
- 4 field mushrooms, sliced
- 400ml Guinness

- 50g dark chocolate
- 20g butter
- 35g flour
- 430g puff pastry
- 1 egg, beaten

1 Heat the oven to 180C/gas 4. Put the beef in a large bowl, sprinkle with the flour and season. Toss to coat.

2 Put a heavy-bottomed saucepan or casserole dish over a medium heat and pour in 1 tablespoon of the olive oil. Add half the beef and cook for 5 min or until browned. Transfer to a plate. Repeat with the remaining oil and beef.

3 Stir in the shallots, carrots, celery, garlic, fresh thyme and mushrooms, cook for 5 min, then add the browned beef and stir. Pour in the Guinness and add water or beef stock if required to cover all the ingredients. Stir in the dark





chocolate, bring to the boil and simmer for 1½ hours or until the meat is tender.

4 Make a roux by melting the butter in a small saucepan with a spoonful of the liquid from the cooked meat and stir in the flour. Strain all the liquid off the meat and slowly whisk into the roux. Pour the sauce over the meat and leave to cool.

5 Roll out the puff pastry on a floured surface. Fill the bottom of a square ovenproof dish (about 20cm x 20cm) with the meat filling. Lay the puff pastry over the dish and pinch the excess into the edges of the dish to seal.

6 Brush the top with the beaten egg, then bake the pie directly on the bottom shelf of a heated oven for 35-40 min, until the pastry is cooked, puffed and golden.

Chicken, mushroom and kale pie

You can make the filling a day ahead and then just assemble the pie with the pastry a couple of hours before you wish to serve it. Instead of kale you can use spinach, cabbage or chard. Opt for all-butter puff pastry as you get a much better finish.

Ingredients

(Serves 4)

- 30g butter
- 4 skinless chicken fillets, diced
- 1 leek, finely sliced
- 80g button mushrooms, quartered
- 200g kale, sliced
- 1 tbsp flour
- 250ml milk
- 100ml single cream
- 500g pack of puff pastry
- 1 egg, beaten

1 Heat the oven to 180C fan/gas 6. Set a large saucepan

over a medium heat and melt the butter. Add the chicken, season and cook for 5 min. Stir in the leek and cook for a further min.

2 Add the mushrooms and kale and cook for 3 min. Sprinkle over the flour, stir and cook for another min, then pour in the milk and cream and cook until the sauce has thickened.

3 Roll out the pastry and cut it into four pieces big enough to cover four small pie dishes. Spoon the chicken mixture into the pie dishes and brush the rims with beaten egg.

4 Lift the pastry on to the pies, trimming off any excess. Press down and crimp the edges with a fork. Cut a few slits and brush with the remaining egg.

5 Bake for 20 min or until the pastry is golden brown ■

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500g, 79p

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Essential Corn Flakes

Waitrose, 500g, £1

Apart from these, which had a much thinner crunch and went soggy very quickly **4/5**

Hannah Evans

The chowder's a bit rich — and so are the customers



THE CREAMERY CASTLE CARY, SOMERSET



The biggest news in Somerset right now is the Creamery: a new restaurant from the owners of the Newt hotel, plonked next to the town's train station like the world's poshest Upper Crust. The arrival of this most bougie of railway cafés

is quite the event. Guest of honour at the launch party was the transport minister Lord Hendy, who presumably had nothing else on, given the railways are working perfectly.

To be fair to him, the team at the Creamery is providing a public service: caffeine. There used to be a little old man selling coffees at the station but he's gone, one local told me, misty-eyed with nostalgia. Now your only option for pre-journey caffeine is from the Newt — one of the country's most fashionable luxury hotels.

In my short time in the area (truly, I barely left the train station), I somehow encountered multiple locals who were a bit narked with the whole thing. The problem is, this sleepy part of Somerset has become the must-weekend location of the super-rich. Stella McCartney has a place here; so does George Osborne. It started when Hauser & Wirth brought its fancy art gallery to nearby Bruton. No one really minded because the owners were nice and got the local community



This looks like the countryside, designed by someone who has never left Notting Hill

involved. But more posh places popped up, squeezing out local favourites.

This peaked with the Newt. The South African billionaire Koos Bekker and his wife, Karen Roos, acquired a country house from some crumbling arm of the British aristocracy. They built a big wall around it and now charge £780 a night (or more) to get past it. Moneyed twits from London zoom down each weekend, and none of the locals can afford to walk down the high street.

Wild rumours abound locally. For example, that the Newt initially planned the Creamery to be only for hotel guests, so they would not have to associate with the huddled masses using the station for dubious reasons such as “living nearby”. Then, that they looked into buying an entire carriage of the train from London to utterly eliminate the risk of pleb contact.

I don't believe these rumours in the slightest, and neither should you. But they do give some insight into how vexed

THE DAMAGE

Mozzarella with focaccia	£12
Mushroom parfait	£10
Fish of the day	£22
Roasted squash	£17
Seasonal vegetables	£5
Spiced poached apple	£7
Diet Coke	£3.50
Americano	£3.10
Raspberry fizz	£3.50

Subtotal	£83.10
Service (12.5%)	£10.38

Total (for two) £93.48

some locals are with their luxury neighbours. Not knowing any of this, I (one of those twits from London) wandered in on the promise of food “fresh from the market gardens and butchery at the Newt”, and ice cream and mozzarella made from the milk of their very own buffaloes. How rustic. How delightful.

The Creamery has a very specific look, like Daylesford, or Soho Farmhouse. I think of it as the countryside, designed by someone who has never left Notting Hill. Soft-toned Farrow & Ball, artfully distressed flooring, gleaming Agas, vast farmhouse-style tables that have never been near a farmhouse. It is themed around an imagined fantasy of an olde worlde railway station, and also — inexplicably — the Titanic. Our waitress cheerily explained that “the owners of the Newt like the Titanic”. OK. Why not? This passion manifests itself in exhibits of clothes worn by passengers. How often have you sat eating your sourdough and thought, “You know what this is missing? The nightgown of a doomed seafaring maiden.”

The sourdough is excellent. Mine came with a scoop of creamy mushroom parfait and splendid little rings of pickled onion. We got a viscerally cheesy mozzarella too, courtesy of the buffalo. It came with focaccia, described by our lovely waitress as “the best batch so far”. I hope not. It was awful: thick and dry, the only moisture coming from an unnervingly congealed crust.

“What’s the fish of the day?” I asked the waitress, who didn’t know. “It’s probably haddock or hake,” she added. Great — roll the dice. If the chef doesn’t care, neither do I. It turned out to be hake. Probably. The fish was rather overpowered by the smoked bacon chowder it came swimming in. Still, it was a good chowder — maybe a little rich. As a whole, it was deeply fine. We finished with poached apple, granola and ice cream, also via the buffalo. All fine.

Still, it’s better than most railway cafés. That’s praise, of sorts. If you’re caught waiting for the train, you should pop in. Don’t tell the locals I sent you ■



WINE • Will Lyons

No need for food with these light wines

French vigneron may balk at the suggestion, but much as we like the thought of pairing our chablis with a warm goat’s cheese salad or our pinot noir with roast lamb, there are times (perhaps more than we would like to admit) when we just want to enjoy a glass without food. It could be an evening drink with friends, a snatched spell in front of the telly or the golden hour after a busy week. On all these occasions you want wines that are lighter, fruitier and don’t overplay the acidity. Whites and rosés tend to be a safer bet as reds can often be too weighty and astringent to drink on their own (although these are transformed with food).

For both colours, the warm climate of the southern hemisphere provides a happy hunting ground as the wines tend to have more fruit and ripe, approachable flavours. For lovers of white, the wave of tropical fruit you get from New Zealand sauvignon blanc makes it a banker. You won’t go wrong with Sainsbury’s zesty 2023 Yealands Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough (£10.50), which has enough luscious green notes to awaken the most jaded of palates. Pinot grigio, unoaked chardonnay, dry riesling and the vinho verde of Portugal are other inviting options. If you want to dial down the fruit a notch, Piedmont’s gavi is a great choice. The Wine Society’s 2023 Gavi (£10.95) is a textbook example, marrying white apple with a zesty acidity.

If it has to be red, opt for something with a soft, juicy texture such as the easy-drinking and well-crafted 2022 Kendall-Jackson Vintner’s Reserve Pinot Noir from the Central Coast of California (Majestic, £19.99), with its strawberry and vanilla aromas.

Other red options include a light-bodied beaujolais, pinot noir from the southern hemisphere, valpolicella and dolcetto. Here are a few more suggestions ■

2023 Sorcova Feteasca Regala Romania (11%) Waitrose, £8.99

Native to Romania, the feteasca regala grape produces a crisp, light white with a herbaceous kick and hints of tropical fruit.

2023 Irresistible Gavi Broglia Italy (13%) Co-op, £9.50

One of the Co-op’s leading whites, this bursts with white fruit and peachy flavour, delivering lively, zesty acidity on the finish.

2023 Palataia Pfalz Pinot Noir Germany (13%) M&S, £10

A great-value pinot that slips down easily. Packed with ripe summer berries, it’s medium-weight, soft and smooth.

2024 Elephant in the Room Pinot Noir Australia (13.5%) Sainsbury’s, £10

Juicy and fruity, this has gentle notes of cherry and raspberry, finishing with a cushion of blue fruit.

2023 Chosen English White England (11%) Majestic, £11.99

Made for Majestic by Denbies in Surrey, this blend of lesser known grapes is bright, light and fresh, with uplifting acidity.

2023 Pegasus Bay Riesling New Zealand (13%) Tesco, £18

Riesling can be a lovely white and this melds lime, tropical fruit, acidity and a touch of off-dry sweetness on the finish.



Bargain of the week

2020 Taste the Difference Barbera d’Asti Italy (14.5%) Sainsbury’s, £7.25 (down from £8.75) This deep ruby barbera has juicy notes of raspberry and a silky finish.





F A R M I N G • Jeremy Clarkson

Designer sheep that shed their own wool? Shear bliss



I first tried my hand at sheeping five years ago and it didn't go well. They escaped constantly, they developed hideous weeping sores and I had to spend every night throughout the spring, on my own because of Covid, helping them to give birth to their dead babies.

To try and cut the workload, I fitted a drone with a speaker that played barking noises to help me round them up, and for ten minutes it worked well. Then it didn't work at all. And they went back to kicking over the drystone walls, trampling the barley and generally being more of a nuisance than some snot-nosed kid with a modern-

day acronym illness. Except with a sheep, you can't restore order by smacking its bottom, because its bottom, as often as not, has either rotted off or been eaten by maggots.

After just 12 months, I gave up on the whole sheeping idea, and in a foghorn-level orgy of Kaleb saying "I told you so", handed them over to a local shepherd. I'd provide the equipment, the grazing and the animals, he'd do all the work, and we'd share the losses.

I vowed there and then that I'd never have sheep again. Especially as the whole enterprise had cost me money. But last month, I bought a small shoulder of lamb and it cost £27. So I looked into the

market, found that lamb prices are quite high at the moment and, much to Kaleb's disgust, immediately bought a new flock of my own.

Many people trying to get sober reach a point where they forget just how miserable life was when they were drunk all the time. But it's not like that with me. I haven't forgotten how difficult sheep can be because as I write, I can see the old flock in the field in front of my house. The shepherd has put them there to graze the grass that wasn't topped this year (I don't know why). But instead, they are all eating the bit I mow each year to make a path. Yup, they're only eating the stuff that



doesn't need grazing. How belligerent is that?

And it gets worse, because a sheep eats and shits simultaneously. Which means that the pretty path that meanders through the field and past the pond and through the woods is now, basically, a river of faeces. Which the dogs roll in all the time.

So, the new herd, as Lisa calls it — what's my thinking? Why have I done it? Well, I read a lot about farming these days and one evening I was reading about a now-deceased farmer in Anglesey who had developed a new breed of sheep called "EasyCare".

It's not a romantic name. It doesn't speak of the horny-handed son of the land toiling away on a cliff in all weathers to bring his flock home. It sounds like a self-cleaning oven in fact. But the idea of a fire-and-forget sheep appealed. Especially as they cost no more than a normal sheep. About £155 a pop. So in I plunged.

Obviously, it's too early to say how they're shaping up but the theory is sound. Because what Iolo Owen, our hero from Anglesey, did was ignore all the

usual breeds and wonder what would happen if he did a bit of splicing here and there.

Think of it in terms of dogs. Nobody in their right mind would want a poodle. They are either idiotic to behold or extremely vicious. But what if you mated one with a labrador? Sure, you'd end up with an extremely barky skeleton wrapped up in a 1970s bathmat, but it would be called a "labradoodle" and who wouldn't want a dog with that handle? I did. And bought one straight away. He's dead now but when he wasn't, he was a tremendous dog.

Someone decided that this idea had legs, and pretty soon we had the cockapoo, the goldendoodle, the yorkipoo, the schnoodle and a million more. It was a festival of sweetness that lasted until everyone suddenly decided that they'd rather have a one-eyed flea magnet from Romania.

Well that's what Iolo Owen did. Only with sheep. He noted

a sheep if it's gone bald all on its own. And there are more advantages. No thick coat means fewer places for maggots to live and that means fewer diseases. There are fewer dingleberries as well and less chance the animal will get stuck in a bramble bush. Plus, there's no need to dock the tail so this can be used to keep the flies at bay.

All good then except they don't make particularly good eating, so that's when Mr Owen introduced the meaty Wiltshire breed into the mix. Then over many years, he seasoned his recipe to create a breed that doesn't have horns and has a triangular face.

This is important. Because if your head is shaped like a chunk of Toblerone, it can slide out of your mother's vagina more easily. Which means the farmer doesn't have to be there during lambing and there are fewer stillborns.

It's important to stress that while this may sound like some kind of *Boys from Brazil* rural

"EasyCare" isn't a very romantic name for a new breed of sheep. It sounds like a self-cleaning oven in fact

that in the olden days, when wool was the powerhouse that propped up the British economy, everyone wanted sheep that looked like the love child of Phil Lynott and Bonnie Tyler. Everyone wanted a lot of hair. Back-combed, permed and extensive. Back then, we behaved as oddly as the Greeks do today with vines. They eat the leaves and throw the grapes away, choosing to make their wine from creosote instead. In a similar vein, we sheared the sheep and then gave the meat to our servants for their dogs.

Wool is all that mattered. But not any more. Now everyone wears football shirts, which are made from petrol, and as a result wool is virtually worthless. It costs three times more to shear one of my sheep than I get by selling its coat.

So Mr Owen took a long hard look at sheep that moult. Yul Brynner Kojak sheep. And a lightbulb went on. There's no need to pay someone to shear

freakery and that Iolo was a mad, eugenics-obsessed Bond baddie, it's not like he's mated a water beetle with a horse. The sheep are no more weird than a mule or a Murray Grey.

There is one downside. I've been told that it's unwise to put cows in a field where EasyCare sheep have been because they will eat the discarded wool, which does terrible things to some of their stomachs.

However, even on this front, I have found a nugget of gold because I'm certain Kaleb doesn't know this. So when the sheep move on from their field and he puts the shorthorns in there, I can pull an incredulous face and wonder out loud how he can call himself a farmer if he didn't know that. It'll be my first ever farming win.

Of course, you might think that by writing this here, I've given the game away. Not so. Because that's the other thing I know about Kaleb. He doesn't read the newspapers ■



HEALTH

My shock epilepsy diagnosis at 50

Alison Kervin dismissed her mild symptoms for years — then she had a seizure while driving



It was six years ago that I first noticed something was amiss. I was in Lisbon, in the middle of an interview with Eric Cantona, the footballer turned actor. He was standing on a sun-dappled terrace, shouting at me in Chinese to illustrate his competence in the language. As he performed his monologue, I felt a tingling in my right hand, a bit like the feeling you get after sitting on your hand for too long. It was strange, but not life-changing.

Or so I thought. In fact, this episode turned out to be the beginning of a long series of events that would lead to me sitting in a hospital room a year ago while a gentle but determined neurologist told me I would have to surrender my driving licence and take drugs morning and evening. I was also warned about everything from not taking baths alone in the house to always using the ring at the back of the hob.

"You have epilepsy," she said. I resisted the urge to tell her that I'd googled the symptoms and believed Google was right when it suggested that my symptoms would pass in time. In fact, after a tranche of scans and tests the results revealed the neurologist was correct. Medicine 1, Dr Google 0.



It seemed peculiar to have developed epilepsy aged 50, but anyone can develop it at any time. There are many different types, although all have one thing in common: a tendency to have seizures that start in the brain. I have focal epilepsy, which means it originates in a specific area — or lobe — of the brain. The doctor

was unable to say why I got it.

My visit to the neurologist last year came after the tingling feeling I'd first felt in Lisbon progressed alarmingly. It was always on the right side of my body — sometimes in my hand, sometimes my foot. When my toes tingled, I'd stamp like I was auditioning for *Riverdance* and it would disappear.

The incidents didn't stop me from doing anything, but they started to get worse. The odd tingling in my hand became so pronounced that I couldn't hold my pen properly. The tingles travelled up my arm and down my leg, leaving me feeling quite paralysed. The pins and needles felt like shaking and pulling as if my muscles were contracting

and spasming. Then I'd be discombobulated and confused about what had happened. The right side of my body was limp.

The worst was the exhaustion afterwards. I'd sit back in my chair at work, shrouded in an overwhelming tiredness that seemed to have penetrated my bones. Even so, I didn't visit a doctor. I was busy with a job as a writer that I loved. Anyway, I was sure it was nothing serious.

I could never predict when the tingling would start. I'd be out with friends, writing, attempting a Zumba class or watching a film when suddenly the familiar fizz in my hand would start and I'd brace myself for the onslaught. But I still didn't tell anyone.

In 2020 I had an unrelated significant health incident: driving home, I collapsed at the wheel with heart failure. I put the shaking down to this and still didn't mention it to any of the medics who swooped around me. I focused on recovering for 12 months and decided the shaking would pass.

Until one day, while driving again, I felt tiredness sweep over me. Before I knew what was happening, there was a big bump. I had ploughed into the back of the neighbour's car. I don't remember doing it, only coming round to find myself wedged into the back of the car.

I had an uncomfortable conversation with the neighbour, then went home to sleep for hours. The next day I made an appointment with my GP. He wasn't surprised that it had taken me so long to seek help: many people with epilepsy can take years to report their symptoms because they can be easily dismissed.

I was given blood tests, an electroencephalogram (EEG), a CT scan and an MRI. Once they were sure I had epilepsy, I was prescribed an anti-seizure medication called lamotrigine to take twice a day and told to surrender my driving licence.

I miss driving, although I understand the importance of staying off the road. Even on the medication, I still get very tired. Working and socialising are difficult. When I was diagnosed,



I don't know whether a day will be one where I can write and walk, or be prostrate on the sofa

the neurologist told me to think of myself as having ten pennies at the beginning of the day. If you go for a dog walk, that's three pennies gone; if you go to the gym, that's six pennies. When the idea was first mooted, I realised I'd been spending about forty quid a day. I had to slow down.

I'm in a better place now but it's still difficult sometimes. I don't collapse in the street and find myself unaware of my surroundings. But I do have moments when my limbs give way, and friends have to help me to the floor and sit with me until it passes. I have memory blanks and moments of confusion. The drugs help but they can make me feel drowsy and a little dizzy, and my vision is slightly blurred some days.

The problem is my illness is

so unpredictable. I don't know whether a day will be one with the opportunity to write, walk my dog and head out for drinks in the evening, or one that leaves me prostrate on the sofa. That said, an epilepsy diagnosis is not the end of the world. It's just a new world: of caution and where every night out requires a good rest afterwards. If you live alone like me, you rely on friends. Mine are wonderful: supportive and mocking in equal measure. The last time I had an incident, a friend sat beside me and shook her head.

"You're a huge disappointment, you know."

"Am I?"

"Yes. Can't you come round and speak Chinese, or think you're an alien or something? You're exactly the same as before. Very disappointing." ■

Epilepsy: the facts

Epilepsy is a neurological condition that causes seizures — episodes of abnormal electrical signals, which can be due to damaged brain cells.

How common is it?

There are more than 600,000 people in the UK with epilepsy and about 80 are diagnosed every day. The condition affects approximately 50 million people worldwide.

Why do some people get epilepsy?

There are several main reasons. In some, it can be traced to genetics, brain trauma or a structural change in the brain from a stroke, autoimmune disorders, metabolic issues or infectious diseases. For others, there is no identifiable cause.

Who gets epilepsy?

It is slightly more common in males than in females. The disorder can occur at any age, although most frequently it begins in childhood or in later adulthood. People over the age of 65 have the highest incidence of new-onset epilepsy, accounting for about a quarter of new cases.

What are seizures?

There are more than 40 different types of seizures, or episodes of involuntary brain activity. Most happen suddenly, without warning, last a short time (a few seconds or minutes) and stop by themselves. Not all sufferers shake and jerk: many notice changes in awareness, muscle control, sensations, emotions and behaviour. Only 5 per cent of epileptics experience photosensitivity.

KEY STEPS FOR A BETTER RETIREMENT



Two-fifths of Britons are saving too little to enjoy a healthy retirement. Could regular independent financial advice sessions make a difference?

Many Britons expect to be worse off in old age than their parents, according to a YouGov survey commissioned by The Times and Phoenix Group. Just 22 per cent of workers anticipate a more comfortable retirement than previous generations.

"Wherever you look, the data says the same thing," warns Catherine Foot, director of Phoenix Insights, set up by Phoenix Group to support better outcomes for people as Britons enjoy longer lives. "Huge numbers of us are set to retire on less income than we expect – and less than we'll need to live happily and healthily."

This is just the latest warning that the UK faces a major pension savings gap. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) says 38 per cent of working-age people are not on track to maintain their current standard of living in retirement – that's 12.5 million people who need to save more.

How, then, to close this gap? The survey suggests Britons are ready to take responsibility – but also that they need more help. While 51 per cent of people say they recognise the imperative of doing more themselves, 37 per cent think the government also has a role to play – and 24 per cent say the same of their employers.

Gail Izat, workplace managing director at Standard Life, part of Phoenix Group, believes updating the UK's auto-enrolment system would help. "It's been

"Britons are ready to take more responsibility – but they also need more help"

**Making pensions fit for the future.
Find out more**



Phoenix

All figures, unless stated, from YouGov plc. Total sample size 2,058 adults. Fieldwork undertaken Sept 30-Oct 1, 2024. Survey carried out online. Figures are weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+)

brilliant at sweeping more people into saving by default, but it still excludes the youngest savers and those on very low incomes," she says.

Izat believes there is a case for increasing the minimum contributions required through auto-enrolment – currently 5 per cent and 3 per cent of pay for employees and employers respectively. Low earners, or those experiencing financial hardship, could also be made exempt from contributions.

Foot thinks people need far more support and advice as they plan for retirement. Research from the Financial Conduct Authority in 2022 suggests fewer than one in 10 Britons work with an independent financial adviser who regularly reviews their progress towards their retirement targets. "Part of the reason people aren't seeking professional help is the barriers created by financial services regulation," she warns. "Advice is often too expensive and inaccessible."

Ensuring people can access their pension information would help, but the DWP's Pensions Dashboards Programme – in development since 2019 – has hit delays.

There are no silver bullets. Pension experts believe closing the pension gap isn't possible without government, the private sector and individuals working together. But with more than 12 million Britons at risk, the need for consolidated action could hardly be more pressing.

FITNESS

Exercise swaps to beat injuries

There are no quick fixes for aches and strains, but switching to a different activity can help

If you're working out regularly, injuries are inevitable. In the short term, rest is the answer. But if you come back too soon, you might end up in a boom and bust cycle: rest, recover and return to your sport, only to end up with the same injury again.

If this happens, try a "swap-out" sport — one that shifts the load onto different muscles and allows the injured area to recover — while keeping your fitness levels up. The trick is to pick complementary exercises to swap in and out.

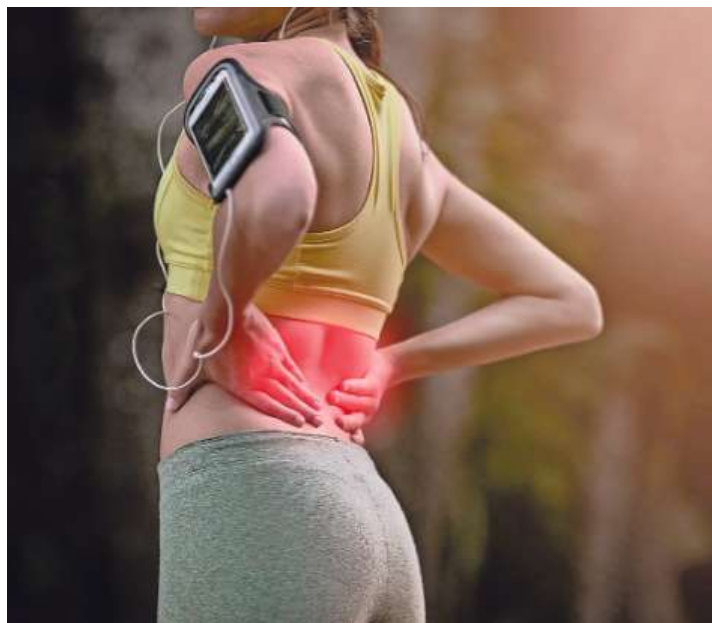
For tight hips, get in the pool

Hip pain can lead to pain in the back and legs too. "A very common hip injury is bursitis — inflammation of the cushion between the muscle and the hip bone," explains Chris Antoni, founder of Tailor Made Fitness. "The main symptom is pain at the hip joint, and it occurs due to overuse or repetitive motions that put pressure on the bursae around the joint, as in running, football or even playing hockey."

Antoni recommends switching to swimming. An aquatic standing hip abduction — standing on one leg as you raise the opposite knee in front of you then out to the side to open up the hip joint — can help. The water simultaneously provides useful resistance while also assisting with your balance.

Runner's knee? On your bike

Chondromalacia patellae or "runner's knee" is a generic term for pain around the kneecap and the front of the knee. "It isn't caused only by running, but everything from climbing to cycling or



Choose something that shifts the load onto different muscles and allows the injured area to recover

squatting," says Ollie Weguelin, director of Sustain Performance. "As with a lot of injuries, it's probably born out of a sharp increase in training volume or intensity."

In other words, it's likely you've gone in too hard before building up the supportive muscles around the knee joint. Exercises such as lunges, leg presses and leg raises can help to counteract knee issues in future. As can hopping on a bike. "Cycling is much lower-impact than running and shouldn't irritate the kneecap too much," Weguelin says.

A brisk walk helps a bad back

A blown-out back is a routine injury, especially as we age, and

pain in the lumbar area — the part of the back that runs from below the ribs to the top of the legs — is common, especially for those who spend all day behind a desk. "A lumbar back strain is caused when muscle fibres are abnormally stretched or torn," Antoni says.

Try walking instead. "Until your back injury improves, a brisk walk is an ideal thing to do."

Stop neck pain with strength training

"I see a lot of neck pain that relates to postural issues, muscle strains or trapped nerves," Weguelin says.

Weak upper back muscles might be exacerbating the problem. "If you avoid

hunching over a laptop all day, it can go a long way towards helping pain to settle," Weguelin says.

Don't run: it puts stress on the trapezius, the large muscle in the upper back and neck. Instead, focus on strength exercises that will build stability and endurance in the upper back. In the gym, lat pull-downs, pull-ups and bent-over rows will develop the upper back and shoulders, taking some of the tension off your neck.

Swap racquets for rowing

Whether tennis, squash or padel is your sport, all that rotator cuff action can take a toll on your shoulder. "The rotator cuff is made up of four muscles and tendons that help move the arm and stabilise the shoulder," Weguelin says. "Generally, injuries to these areas come from overuse, overloading the muscles or from weaknesses, which can cause pain and restrict movement in the arm."

Weguelin suggests using resistance bands. Tie one around a gym machine and then, with your elbow tucked into your side, grip the band in front of you. Move your lower arm out to your side at a 90-degree angle without letting your upper arm and elbow move away from your body. Avoid overhead presses and heavy weightlifting while your shoulder is recovering.

To break a sweat, try rowing, which works the upper and lower back and arm muscles, while allowing the shoulder to recover. Take it slow to start. "Rebuilding strength in the shoulder is a vital part of recovery," Weguelin says ■

By Tom Ward



DRIVING • Nick Rufford

All the best bits of a full-size Range Rover for £30,000 less



REVIEW RANGE ROVER SPORT

There are lots of reasons to buy a Range Rover. It's comfortable and quiet and excels at getting you, your family and a bootful of luggage to where you want to be without any fuss. And when you run into the inevitable traffic snarl-up, it's a relaxing place to be.

"You feel like the world's OK, like every bump is kinda

smooth," said Joe Rogan, the US talk show host, explaining his love for Range Rovers. "The sound system's amazing, Bluetooth synced up like that, listening to my tunes, just driving around Park City."

Park City, Utah, is a long way from the Solihull factory where they're made, and Range Rovers sell just as well in Beverly Hills, Bel Air and Beijing. Since the first Range Rover appeared in 1970 it's become a global brand, like Apple and Manchester United, that needs no introduction. Richard Branson credits one with saving the lives of him and his family when he was in an accident on the M40, 30 years ago. Jeremy Clarkson, who owns two, gave it his highest endorsement. "Often, over the years, I've been asked by passers-by in the street to

name the best car in the world," he said. "I've never known quite what to say because my mind has swum with all the options. The fact is, though, there aren't any options at all. There's just one island of brilliance in a sea of also-rans."

The only gripe is the price: from £104,025. Which brings us to the Range Rover Sport, a sub-brand dreamt up in 2004. The idea is that if you can't afford the full-sized version you can still have a Range Rover on your drive for nearly £30,000 less — the cheapest trim, the Sport S, starts from £75,255. So what's the catch?

To some, the "Sport" badge means poor man's Range Rover. So it's worth taking a look at what you don't get. You don't get four and a half more centimetres of legroom in the

back. You don't get an extra 215 litres of boot space, rather you'll have to make do with 835. You don't get the option of a third row of seating. And you don't get a split tailgate to sit on when you need a break from selling chutneys at a country fair.

What you do get is the same basic vehicle, built on the same underpinnings — technically known as Jaguar Land Rover's MLA-Flex platform — and the same range of engines, including three six-cylinder mild hybridised turbo-diesels; two plug-in hybrids that pair a six-cylinder petrol engine with a 38.2kWh battery, producing up to 74 miles of electric-only range; and the range-topping SV, which has a 4.4-litre V8.

Performance is every bit as good as that of its bigger sibling,

You're unlikely to see it driven by a chauffeur but I liked its more utilitarian feel



so is ride comfort, while handling is arguably a tad better. The important thing, though, is that it gives you a unique feeling of being in charge of your surroundings. You ride high in city traffic with a certain imperiousness. On motorways it glides so smoothly it feels as though you're reeling in the road. You can hustle it along a twisty B-road without fearing everything will go sideways when you arrive at a tight bend. At speed it's so hushed it brings to mind that old story about Jaguars — the walnut-lined and carpeted ones — that were so quiet you could hear the tick of the dashboard clock.

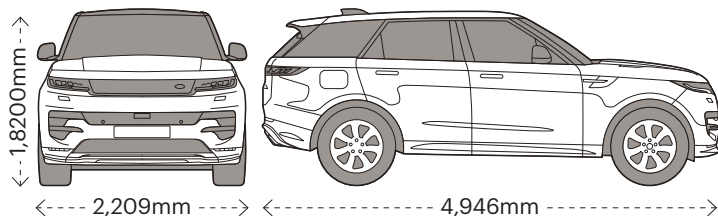
Inside, the touchscreen interfaces work well and there are useful shortcuts to, say, heated seats and recirculation, though arguably it might have been easier still if Range Rover had stuck with physical controls, as with the previous model. There's something else too. You have the feeling of sitting in moving space rather than being squeezed into a machine. Other SUVs are available: Audi's Q7, the Porsche Cayenne. But there's a reason that Range Rover has become a byword for luxury.

You can draw a direct line from the Sport to the 1970 original, which was sold as

a working vehicle, one level of comfort up from the spartan Land Rover. In those days, its utilitarian credentials included four-wheel-drive, coil springs, vinyl seats and a V8 engine licensed from Buick. Unlike its bigger and pricier sibling, you're unlikely to see a Sport being driven by a chauffeur but I liked its more utilitarian feel.

Is it a poor man's Range Rover? It may be £30,000 cheaper but it's not £30,000 light on equipment. It's got the pick of the powertrains, the same clever suspension and four-wheel-drive technology, all at a more competitive price. The main thing I missed was a split tailgate, which is not only a must-have for country folk on a pheasant shoot or fishing trip but also a godsend when you're packing and unpacking for a camping trip or a children's party. Range Rover's designers have loaded the Sport with features that bring it within a whisker of its bigger sibling, shrewdly aware that there are plenty of customers willing to stump up £30,000 for the absence of the Sport badge. View them as philanthropists whose generosity allows Sport customers to enjoy the Range Rover experience at a generous discount ■

The Ruffometer Range Rover Sport Dynamic SE



Engine 2,997cc, 6 cylinders, diesel hybrid **Power** 296bhp @ 4000rpm **Torque** 479 lb ft @ 1500rpm **Acceleration** 0-62mph: 6.6sec **Top speed** 135mph **Fuel** 36.4mpg **CO₂** 203g/km **Weight** 2,390kg **Price** £86,925 **Release date** On sale now

Nick's rating ★★★★★

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Q Are premium fuels better for my car's diesel engine than standard fuels?

JW, Manchester

A It depends on the vehicle you drive, its age and how many miles it has covered. Both grades of fuel come from the same stock, either from a UK refinery or imported. The main difference is premium fuels have a cocktail of chemicals blended into them.

The most important additives in diesel are cetane improvers. These increase its ability to ignite under compression, and the speed at which the fuel burns. Premium diesel has a higher cetane number — 47 to 52 — than standard diesel, likely to be in the low forties. The net result is a faster, cleaner burning fuel, potentially delivering slightly more power per cc.

But improvements in power and fuel economy can be realised only in engines that are at peak performance. In older engines they are likely to be absorbed by the overall lack of efficiency. I would suggest using premium fuel in every fourth tankful or so. That way you should get the benefits of the system cleaners it contains without wasting too much on cetane boosters, which may cost more than they save in terms of fuel economy ■



Greg Carter,
technical
specialist, the AA

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Often feel fatigued? Try **magnesium**

Feeling tired and don't know why? You're not alone. According to a recent study, less than half of us consume our recommended daily amount of magnesium, a mineral that helps turn the food we eat into energy.

Best known for helping to reduce tiredness and fatigue, magnesium is also vital for our health.

Deficiency can cause mood swings, migraines, eye twitches and muscle cramps.

If you have low magnesium levels, you are also less likely to get a good night's sleep.

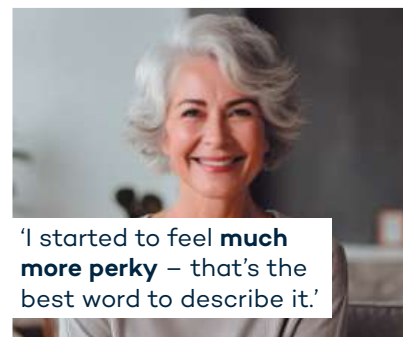
Magnesium is present in foods such as black beans, bananas and pumpkin seeds, but to get the benefits we need to absorb it into our bodies.

One way to ensure we consume a consistent level of magnesium is by taking a daily supplement – but not all supplements are equal.

Your body's ability to absorb the magnesium depends on the way that the supplement is made.

'Most supplements use magnesium oxide – it is the most common form, as it has a high concentration of magnesium but it's not easily released into the body,' explains Dr Miriam Ferrer PhD, head of product development at FutureYou Cambridge.

'Taking more magnesium to try and make up for the problem isn't the best approach, as too much can cause an upset stomach so we created Magnesium+ using magnesium lactate which is twice as absorbable as a standard



'I started to feel **much more perky** – that's the best word to describe it.'

magnesium oxide supplement. This means you need much less per capsule to deliver the same amount, making it a much more efficient way to take this essential mineral.'

Reviews gathered on independent website Trustpilot speak of its effectiveness. 'It gives your body a magnesium boost without upsetting your digestive system,' writes Robert.

And Nicole, 57, says: 'I genuinely started to feel different within a couple of weeks. I started to feel much more perky – that's the best word to describe it.'

Trial **Magnesium+** for just £5

Leading Cambridge company to offer scientifically proven energy range supplements for just £5 (including delivery).

FutureYou Cambridge a nutraceutical company known for its well-researched nutritional supplements, is offering trial packs of its flagship energy product for just £5. The offer is aimed at helping people who commonly suffer with low energy and fatigue. It comes after the Cambridge firm received a flurry of positive reviews for its best-selling energy product on Trustpilot, the independent online review platform.



'I am a woman of 74, and a few months ago I realised that I had no energy at all. I put it down to my age, but it was really impacting on my life in so many ways.

My husband read an ad for Magnesium+ and I thought I would give it a try. Within two weeks I was a different woman, with energy to spare,' says Anne.

'Within two weeks I was a different woman, with energy to spare'

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A LIFE IN THE DAY

Asim Chaudhry

Comedian and actor, 37

Chaudhry was born and raised in Hounslow, west London, to Pakistani parents. While studying media at West Thames College, he met Hugo Chegwin, Steve Stamp and Allan Mustafa, with whom he went on to write and star in the BBC mockumentary *People Just Do Nothing*, which first aired in 2014. In 2017 he won a Royal Television Society award for best comedy performance for his hapless character Chabuddy G. He has also appeared in *Barbie*, *Industry* and *Inside No 9*. He lives with his wife, Sevana, in west London.

I'm quite an insomniac and all my best ideas come to me late at night, but I now have a rule to get up by 10am no matter what. I used to sleep a lot, snoozing my life away, but no more!

I lived in a two-bed flat in Hackney, but now me and Sevana have done the whole house thing. We've no kids yet, but we might pop a few in the oven soon. I've built a studio in my garden, which was the dream. That's where I do my gaming, make up silly songs, write, do my business.

I'm not a big breakfast guy, so it's just a little espresso and a granola bar. What is important to me is my morning poo. If I don't have time for it, I can get quite discombobulated for the rest of the day, because I'm not a big public shitter. I have high standards of hygiene. After we did the *People Just Do Nothing: Big in Japan* movie, I bought a Japanese toilet for my home. I just thought: we have smartphones, smart TVs. Why not a smart shitter? You don't



need toilet paper! And it's not even that expensive. It's, like, two grand all in. That's not bad considering you use it — what? — two, three times a day.

I'm currently filming season two of *The Completely Made-Up Adventures of Dick Turpin* with Noel Fielding, and I've just completed this very sweet Norwegian film called *Listen Up!* I had to speak in Urdu for it, which was difficult for me. It's my mother tongue, but if you don't use it, you lose it, and I'd lost it. I'm also writing a horror film for the BBC, so I'm in my studio for 10 and write at least five pages every day.

I am quite ambitious but, growing up, my parents didn't have much ambition for me.

My sister was the golden child. They sent her to private school for a while, even though they couldn't really afford it. My dad was a bit of a wheeler-dealer and my mother was a therapist, a very academic woman. Me, I was just the clown, always doing silly things: making music videos or horror films. I was left to my own devices. They now tell me how proud they are of me.

Lunch is a lovely piece of grilled chicken, spicy, with rice or salad at one o'clock. I could go vegan if it wasn't for chicken.

I bonded with the cast of *People Just Do Nothing* through a love of music — I used to do rap battles — but they were also funny, so we started doing funny things and filming it. Chabuddy G is 70 per cent based on my father, but all his best qualities. I am not mocking my dad! If you met him, you'd fall in love with him. Don't get me wrong, he's no angel, but wins everyone over.

I've been gradually losing weight over the past few years by getting in 15,000 daily steps, and so at 5 o'clock I put my headphones on and go for a walk. I might stop to have a selfie with somebody. It's all good. The fame that's come from the show has been really nice. I get recognised a lot. Comedy is the great uniter, isn't it? It's my job now to make sure I don't get typecast and show people what else I can do.

My wife cooks me a lovely meal at around 7 o'clock. Maybe sea bass. She's a PA and is also doing a lot of work in the house, feathering the nest if we do go for a baby. Prepping, you know?

In the evenings, I'll get in some gaming. I'll play Pro Evo 2021, a football game. I can play for a long time, which means I have to tiptoe when I finally do go to bed. My wife is a light sleeper and very jumpy. The other night I was creeping in, silent like a samurai, but she heard me, jumped up and screamed. I screamed back. We needed a good five minutes to calm down before sleeping ■

Interview by Nick Duerden.

***Listen Up!* is streaming now on Viaplay via Amazon Prime**

WORDS OF WISDOM

Best advice I was given

Relationships are like waves — never always up, never always down. Try to find the middle

Advice I'd give

This is predominantly for British South Asians. Your parents are not gods. So, in capital letters: BOUNDARIES!

What I wish I'd known

That nothing really matters that much, not really. Don't put too much importance on things career-wise

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