

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

*"The object of the Monitor is to injure no man,
but to bless all mankind."*

— MARY BAKER EDDY

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What we learn from chocolate

My journalistic interest in the world's favorite dessert was first piqued on a gloomy December day in 2009, when a friend and I toured a chocolate factory.

Taza Chocolate in Somerville, Massachusetts, makes stone-ground artisan chocolate. Its flavors are so rich and gritty, with bright, acidic high notes, that a bite-size square or two is enough.

It was the height of the farm-to-table trend, and many chocolate lovers, myself included, were curious to learn more about the bean-to-bar process. The tour was crowded. We learned how beans from cacao trees are fermented under banana leaves before being roasted. We watched an old Italian-made cocoa bean grinder, painted fire-engine red, do its work. And we heard something about the Taza founders that was advertised as unique: They personally knew the farmers who grew their cocoa beans in the Dominican Republic. They had slept on the mud floors of their homes and walked their jungle farms.

A brochure advertising "Chocolate Week" in Belize was on a table by the factory's entrance. Participants would spend a week at an eco-lodge learning firsthand where chocolate comes from. On a whim, I signed up.



By Kendra
Nordin Beato
Staff writer

By May, I was bouncing over dirt roads in a school bus on my way to visit Eladio Pop's cocoa farm in central Belize. I imagined some kind of plantation where the trees grew in neat rows like an apple orchard. Wrong. The only way

we knew we were on a farm was a small wooden sign. We had simply walked into the jungle. There were no rows, no fences, no barns. Everything was growing all at once, all over the place, blooming, withering, and crashing to the earth. We chewed on raw cocoa, sucking on the sweet, tangy pulp that protects the bean before biting into the bitter core.

Memories of my trip came to mind early last year when news headlines warned of a pending "cocoa crisis" as chocolate prices skyrocketed. How was Taza weathering this moment, I wondered? Could an international look – from Côte d'Ivoire to Oaxaca, Mexico, and yes, Somerville – provide an interconnected perspective on global chocolate? The moment felt right for a cross-newsroom collaboration. Monitor reporters and photographers set out to find commonalities and current challenges in the chocolate trade. In this issue, readers will see the outcome of this work, which spans continents. ■

From print editor Stephanie Hanes

We are introducing an expanded People Making a Difference section, which we are calling Endeavors. This section will profile individuals and the endeavors that animate them. This week's piece, on page 24, features Raphael James, a history buff determined to make sure Nigerians remember the past. Let me know what you think at haness@csmonitor.com.

Pentagon scales back joint exercises with South Korea

On the eve of annual U.S.-South Korea military exercises this month, President Donald Trump took to social media and said he was ordering the Pentagon to scale back on drills aimed at deterring military aggression by North Korea. He said it was too late to cancel them altogether, but that he was "not happy" with U.S. participation in routine military exercises that go back decades. The president also criticized South Korea for not joining the U.S. war against Iran.

Mr. Trump said his decision was "based on my very good relationship with Kim Jong Un," the North Korean dictator whom he met with three times during his first term.

"Trump has been clear about his desire to meet Kim again," says Victor Cha of Georgetown University, who also served as President George W. Bush's top adviser on North Korean affairs. "Scaling down of the [joint military exercises] is the latest signal."

The United States has more than 28,000 troops stationed in South Korea. Regarding the drills, one of the top U.N. commanders on the peninsula, Australian Lt. Gen. Scott Winter, said that this year's would be "bigger and better than ever." South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff report that exercises began as scheduled.

A statement issued Aug. 17 by South Korea's presidential Blue House said it was reviewing Mr. Trump's announcement and "hopes that the friendly relationship between the U.S. and North Korean leaders will lead to meaningful dialogue ... aimed at advancing peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula."

But some experts say South Korean leaders must be frustrated with the way this has played out, at a time when the alliance with the U.S. has come under strain.

"I think the announcement was a slap in the face for Seoul," says Rachel Minyoung Lee, a senior fellow with the Stimson Center's Korea Program and 38 North. Alongside the tariffs that President Trump has imposed on South Korea, Ms. Lee says this episode will end up further eroding U.S. credibility as a reliable security partner for South Korea.

The government in North Korea, meanwhile, has long complained that annual U.S.-South Korean military exercises demonstrate hostility toward Pyongyang.

— Matthew Bell / Staff writer

A new alliance emerges in the Middle East

As the U.S.-Iran war grinds to a stalemate, a new alliance is emerging in and around the Middle East.

Accelerated by the conflict – but not party to it – this new bloc says it aims to bring stability to a region at war.

The new defense and security alliance, among Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan, was cemented Aug. 8 in Mecca, one of Islam's holiest cities. What's been called the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement includes a NATO member, a nuclear power, and the world's

largest exporter of oil and a leader of the Muslim world. It declares an attack on one as an attack on all, though at least one prominent analyst calls the initiative more symbolic than practical.

The Mecca pact might not lead to a new front being opened against Iran, but observers and officials say it signals a deep shift in a region confronting shared threats and preparing for waning U.S. influence in the Middle East.

Under the terms of the pact, if one member is attacked, the alliance would provide intelligence, logistical support, and munitions – and consider the deployment of military units depending on the threat level, according to Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan.

The alliance – which straddles Europe, the Persian Gulf, and Iran's eastern and western borders – was formed, multiple Gulf officials say, after efforts to unite Gulf Arab states had until then failed due to internal divisions, despite the shared threat from Iran and its proxies.

Under the arrangement, Saudi Arabia is to import Turkish and Pakistani technology and manufacturing know-how to build up its domestic defense industry, with Saudi Arabia expected to ramp up its production of drones, interceptors, and missiles, say Saudi officials and observers, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

Turkey and Pakistan, in return, will receive injections of cash for arms purchases. The three are to act as a collective diplomatic bloc, combining their middle-power statuses on the world stage.

The pact was signed as Iran and its proxies increased their attacks against Saudi energy infrastructure, striking Saudi Aramco oil facilities on the kingdom's Red Sea and Persian Gulf coasts. Saudi, Turkish, and Pakistani officials have stressed that the alliance is not against one country nor is it inherently antagonistic toward Iran.

But the alliance is meant to protect against the expansionist aims and destabilizing activities of any regional power – particularly Iran and Israel.

Iran and its “Axis of Resistance” proxies have actively worked to collapse Arab states; in 2015, Iran boasted of having control over four Arab capitals, in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen.

Tehran has recently targeted Gulf Arab states' airports, economies, and residential areas in retaliation for the United States' and Israel's military offensive, and, by closing or endangering shared waterways and export routes, is threatening to plunge the region's economy into a deep recession.

The new bloc also rejects what its three members see as Israel attempting to establish regional primacy through military force, demanding the freedom to act against perceived threats anywhere, normalizing ties with Arab states on its terms, and extending its occupied border “buffer zones” in Syria and Lebanon.

Gulf states and Turkey have deemed these actions destabilizing to the region and their interests.

– Taylor Luck / Special correspondent

As war slows food imports, Saudis turn to hydroponics

Growing in water tubes across Saudi Arabia are the roots of the kingdom's Iran-proofed future.

In the August heat of the central Saudi desert, by all accounts, these vegetables should not be growing: cherry tomatoes, bell peppers, kale.

With daytime highs of 125 F, dropping only to 91 F overnight, growth slows at traditional farms. Cucumbers turn bitter, tomato flowers shrivel, and leaves wilt.

Saudi farmers need tens of thousands of gallons of water per day just for a fraction of their crops to survive – outside of date palms – so most farmers don't bother growing in the summer.

Not at Dava.

In the farm's cooled greenhouses an hour south of Riyadh, vegetables are growing, and fast, without soil.

“See how big and ripe these are?” Dava operation manager Lehyani Ali says excitedly, picking out an orange grape tomato from a recently packed carton. “Some people won't believe this is from Saudi.”

In the kingdom, farmers are increasingly turning to hydroponic methods, growing fruits and vegetables indoors without soil, by placing their roots in nutrient-enriched water.

In import-heavy Saudi Arabia, facing wartime blockades and disruptions on both its coasts, hydroponic farms like Dava and others are growing a green line of defense.

Saudi Arabia, a country of 35 million, imports the bulk of its food needs, including 70% of its fruits and vegetables, from India, Russia, the U.S., and Europe. That figure reaches near 100% during the summer months.

The perishable fruits and vegetables were long imported through the Strait of Hormuz to Saudi Arabia's eastern coasts, now closed by dueling blockades and Iranian demands to extract tolls.

With Hormuz blocked, Saudi Arabia has been redirecting shipments to its Red Sea port of Jeddah. Yet this route requires 10 to 14 more days of transit to reach distribution centers, and has become increasingly susceptible to attacks from Yemen's Iran-allied Houthi group.

But in the local market in Riyadh, one can frequently find a product immune to the wartime closures: Saudi-grown vegetables.

Since 2022, Dava has turned to hydroponic farming in a plot of land in Al Kharj, an arid area with nutrient-rich soil known for its date palms.

In its 210 acres of glass hydroponic greenhouses, Dava produces 135 tons per day of tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, lettuce, and herbs. After scaling up the past few years, the farm now provides Saudi Arabia with 13% of its tomato needs.

“The hydroponic systems allow us to grow fruits and vegetables when most farms can't, and save water,” says Wissam Abdel Samad, Dava deputy CEO, in a bustling office looking out at the nursery. “We are not only helping fulfill the Saudi vision for food security, but we are working in an extremely hot climate in a sustainable way that creates quality produce.”

The U.S.-Iran war exposed these dual vulnerabilities – reliance on imported food and desalination – with both blockades and attempts by Iran and its proxies in neighboring Yemen and Iraq to strike the kingdom's desalination and power plants. But, more

Saudis are catching on.

Saudi Arabia Hydroponics runs a farm in eastern Saudi Arabia, using floating systems and aeroponics to produce hundreds of tons of vegetables, fruit, and leafy greens, such as kale, cutting its water usage by 90%.

“Saudi Arabia has gone from importing produce from Europe to exporting Saudi produce to Europe,” says Mr. Abdel Samad. “It is a long path to food security, but our roots are growing.”

– **Taylor Luck** / Special correspondent

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

\$100
BILLION

The amount of tariff revenue the Trump administration said has been refunded to importers since President Donald Trump's “Liberation Day” duties were struck down by the Supreme Court this year. That figure represents about 60% of the roughly \$166 billion the administration says it collected from the sweeping tariffs imposed in 2025.

1ST

Lebanon is the first country in the Middle East to abolish the death penalty, after its parliament passed a law in early August. At the end of 2025, 85 people were facing death sentences; under the new law, those sentences will be replaced with life imprisonment or aggravated hard labor.

55%

The share of Americans who say they feel confident that the upcoming midterm elections will be handled fairly and accurately, according to a recent Pew survey. The confidence level has decreased from 61% going into the 2024 elections and 64% ahead of the 2022 elections.

24
MILLION

The number of trips Americans made to Europe in 2025, up from 22.7 million in 2024. Behind the rise is a strong U.S. economy, changing attitudes about travel, and more accessible foreign travel. American tourism has boosted European economies but has also sparked backlash from some local communities.

6
DAYS

The time it took for “Spider-Man: Brand New Day” to gross \$1 billion. It is the second-fastest film to reach this milestone, behind “Avengers: Endgame” in 2019.

– **Donald Keough** / Staff writer

Sources: CNBC, Al Jazeera, Pew Research Center, The Wall Street Journal, Variety

OUR WORLD

China cracks down on fake disaster videos

As typhoon season brings mass evacuations and flooding to China, authorities are working to counter a different threat: fake, AI-generated videos that can sensationalize events and risk causing public panic. In recent months, images circulated on social media have hyped natural disasters such as flooding, depicting floodwaters in areas where no flooding exists. They also falsely depicted human casualties, according to a BBC report. China's Cyberspace Administration has announced a crackdown on the fake disaster images, which officials attribute to digital-content creators looking to gain online followers.

– **Ann Scott Tyson**

“I will return to my people.”

That was the promise that ousted Bangladeshi leader Sheikh Hasina made during her first public speech after a 2024 uprising toppled her government. Last year, she was sentenced to death in absentia in Bangladesh for her role in a deadly crackdown on student protests and other alleged crimes against humanity. “They may try to enforce verdicts issued in fabricated cases,” she told the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of South Asia in New Delhi via an Aug. 5 audio address, “but fear cannot decide my duty to the people.” The former prime minister has been living in exile in India, straining ties between New Delhi and Dhaka.

– **Lindsey McGinnis**

‘Game of Thrones’ comes to Stratford-upon-Avon

“Game of Thrones: The Mad King” is being presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company this summer in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Opening night of the 3 1/2-hour prequel to the wildly popular HBO series was attended by none other than the author, George R.R. Martin, who’s apparently happy to see his fantasy epic reach a wider audience. A review in The Telegraph newspaper described the adaptation by Duncan Macmillan – with Dominic Cooke directing – as “a spellbinding spectacle.” Unsurprisingly, there’s speculation about a future run on Broadway or in the West End.

– **Matthew Bell**

Europeans treated to first-in-a-century solar eclipse

Millions across mainland Europe donned protective glasses Aug. 12 to witness a rare solar eclipse as the moon passed between Earth and the sun. In Spain and Iceland, spectators enjoyed a total eclipse that darkened the sky, while other countries saw only part of the sun disappear. The astronomical moment was captured from every angle with the help of drones and selfie sticks.

– **Dominique Soguel**

TULSA, OKLAHOMA

On Route 66, a dated Indian Country story gets a rewrite

Some Native communities, once caricatured for commercial purposes, now are using the road's popularity as a tool to help tell their own story.

By Harry Bruinius / Staff writer

On East 11th Street in Tulsa, Route 66 is hard to miss. Neon signs crowd the old highway through the Meadow Gold District. Murals, giant roadside figures, and the familiar red, white, and blue shield turn the block into a bright distillation of the Mother Road – nostalgic, playful, and designed to be understood through a windshield.

Inside Southwest Trading Company, however, David Bible refuses to sell anything bearing the highway's logo.

"We could do the Route 66 emblem and hang some feathers off of it," he says. People would buy it, too; nearly half the store's customers are travelers.

But the shop, run by Mr. Bible and his daughters, carries no such design. "That's not who we are."

That small refusal opens onto a larger Indigenous encounter with Route 66. More than half of its 2,400 miles cross Indian Country, often following older Native paths through communities that predated it.

For nearly a century, roadside businesses turned Indigenous identity into a reliable commercial trope: a generalized "Indian" assembled from headdresses, tipis, and Hollywood Westerns, detached from the nations whose lands the highway crossed.

Now, tribal governments and tourism groups are using the centennial to tell another story: Native nations as founders of towns, owners of land, and as sovereign governments, while directing travelers toward tribal museums and Native-owned businesses.

This is reclamation, but also commerce. Mr. Bible sees reason for caution. What connects these approaches is a demand for control over the story, the identity being marketed, and the money travelers bring.

"We were here long before"

On his father's side, Mr. Bible is Muscogee, of the Bird Clan, and on his mother's side Hopi, of the Coyote Clan. As a child in the 1960s and '70s, he rode Route 66 west nearly every year in his family's station wagon to visit Hopi relatives in Arizona.

Outside were giant chiefs, wigwam motels, and trading posts that made the American Indian one of Route 66's oldest roadside attractions.

Mr. Bible's family now sells work by Native artists, along with affordable, mass-produced merchandise bearing Native designs. Yet during the highway's centennial, as neighboring businesses lean harder into its mythology, Mr. Bible holds it at arm's length.

Pressed on whether he is merely indifferent, he concedes "a little bit of active hostility," even though "it would benefit our business,"

he adds.

Other people and tribal nations are embracing some of this year's centennial celebrations – but it's complicated and sometimes ambivalent.

"It's not so much the actual event," says Gail Chehak, a Klamath citizen and the community relations director of the American Indigenous Tourism Association. Native nations, she says, are using the centennial "to remind people, you know, we were here long before the route, and the route follows a lot of our traditional trails, and that we're still here."

Many tribe members have "both fond and not-so-fond memories" of the road. It crossed Native land and helped market a generic Hollywood Indian. But it also connected Native communities, carried families along the Powwow Trail, and opened new markets for Native artists, she says.

"I think people have decided that [Route 66] is a good way to get their story out," Ms. Chehak says.

Mr. Bible remembers the generic figures from his trips. "They were more caricature statues," he says. "Big headdress, big nose, big muscles."

His family sometimes laughed, but usually stopped only for gasoline or a restroom. More striking was what motorists could not see: Native lands were rarely marked.

"You didn't know you were going through it unless you had the non-Native stores that were advertising it," he says.

At the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City, an exhibit maps the highway across Oklahoma's tribal geography. John Hamilton, an assistant curator who helped install it, is careful about calling that reclamation.

"We're not claiming the road itself," he says. "We are claiming that it does run through Native land, and this has always been Native land."

Cherokee Nation leaders are more willing to use the language of reclamation. In a tribal video, Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. called the old roadside experience "a pan-Indian offering."

"The true origins of the Mother Road run far deeper than the pavement laid in the 1920s," he said. The nation is "proudly reclaiming our vital role in this narrative."

"The vibrant towns that dot this iconic route today – communities like Bonita, Claremore, Catoosa, and Chelsea – did not simply spring from the wilderness alongside the highway. They were founded by Cherokees decades prior," Chief Hoskin said.

His father, former Vinita Mayor Chuck Hoskin Sr., grew up on his grandmother's Cherokee allotment. As a boy, he'd watch license plates to see all the different states represented. "In my young mind, everyone came through Vinita, Oklahoma," the former mayor recalled.

Later he rode the entire highway twice by motorcycle. Chicago marks its beginning; near Santa Monica, California, a sign declares the "End of the Trail."

"This was the end of our trail," Mr. Hoskin Sr. said of Oklahoma, alluding to the infamous "trail of tears." "This was the end of our forced movement."

Two sides of commerce

Ms. Chehak says that tribes "definitely are taking advantage of the route and the business that it brings."

But the association will not advertise a destination until the tribe or business approves its description – a small reversal of the old roadside economy, in which outsiders invented Native identities

for signs and souvenirs.

Mr. Bible experienced that economy from both sides. His family sold beadwork through Lyon's Indian Store, a non-Native-owned Tulsa business. Decades later, he and his daughter opened Southwest Trading Company nearby.

His surname bears the history of the attempts to assimilate Native peoples into American ways of life. His mother was placed with a Mormon foster family in 1952 under the church's student placement program; his father, from Broken Arrow, also went through boarding school, joined the Marines, and met his mother in San Diego. His parents "just didn't talk about it," he says.

Mr. Bible, raised Mormon, later rose into church leadership, but left over teachings about Native people and the ways his children were treated as they grew up. Still, he emphasizes, there was opportunity alongside assimilation, generosity alongside injury.

His store occupies similar unsettled ground. The family does not want to become another Native American attraction. Yet travelers enter because they are following Route 66. They ask about the art-ists and the southwest focus of the store's offerings.

The store is in the final year of its lease. The Meadow Gold District has revived, rents have risen, and the family might have to move their business.

Mr. Bible believes customers will find them, should that happen. Then he acknowledges the loss. "We really enjoy the area and the people we meet," he says. "But we'll lose that Route 66."

The road does not define him. But it has become part of the place from which he tells his own story. ■

The future of chocolate

By Ryan Lenora Brown / Series editor

If you're a fan of chocolate, you have surely noticed a trend in recent years: Prices are up, way up. Behind that sticker shock is an industry in turmoil. In 2023, a global shortage in cocoa led to frantic speculation. Cocoa prices surged, then collapsed. That volatility has "made corporations very nervous and farmers very poor," notes industry watchdog Voice Cocoa Network.

All along cocoa's sprawling, transatlantic supply chain – from West African farmers to multinational chocolate makers – people and companies are grappling with what comes next.

This package of stories explores this moment of reckoning. In Côte d'Ivoire, where 40% of the world's cocoa originates, farmers and entrepreneurs are searching for ways to escape the boom and bust of commodity prices, and earn a bigger cut of the industry's profits.

In the United States, boutique chocolate makers are responding to growing demand from consumers for a product that reflects their social and environmental values.

Finally, as the industry churns, many communities in Mexico are simply carrying on, preparing and consuming cocoa in the ways they have for more than 4,000 years.

Together, we hope these pieces will help pull back the curtain on the complex worlds behind your favorite candy bar, stirring thought about the past and future of a dessert that many of us take for granted.

M'BRIMBO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE

In cocoa's heartland, African farmers reap new opportunities

By Colette Davidson / Special correspondent
and Albain Adé / Contributor

In the shade of a dense forest canopy, Odette Kouakou paces through her grove of cocoa trees, snapping off dead leaves and poking the ripe yellow pods hanging down from the branches with a stick.

Nearby, a group of men in olive-colored galoshes sits around a heaping mound of the pods, which are roughly the size and shape of footballs. A gentle popping sound echoes through the forest as they crack them open with machetes, scooping out handfuls of fresh, white beans and tossing them into plastic tubs.

Harvests are normally a celebratory time in this cocoa growing community. But Ms. Kouakou is fizzing with anxiety. She still hasn't been paid for the last 400 pounds of cocoa she harvested, a \$1,000 hole in her wallet.

"I always keep some money to the side in case of difficult periods," says Ms. Kouakou, who runs the farm with her nephew and supports a dozen family members on her income. "But now, that's all the time."

Nearly a quarter of Ivorians – between 6 and 8 million people – rely on the cocoa industry for their living. Many of the world's chocolate lovers, in turn, rely on them. Forty percent of the global cocoa supply originates in Côte d'Ivoire, and each year the country produces 2 million tons of it, enough for roughly 28 billion dark chocolate bars.

The price of chocolate has risen steadily in recent years – it is up by 23% in the United States since 2024, for example. But consumers paying more for chocolate doesn't necessarily mean Ivorian cocoa farmers – most of whom live in poverty – are earning more.

That is because the Ivorian cocoa industry remains tethered to the boom and bust of commodity prices. To escape that cycle, experts say the country needs to do more with its cocoa beans than just pick them and export them.

"Cocoa has the potential to build up this country," says Axel Emmanuel Gbaou, one of the country's few chocolate makers. "We have lost so much time. Now is the time to act."

Cocoa collapse

The global cocoa crisis began in 2023, when heavy rains followed by drought led production yields to plummet in West Africa, the region where 70% of the world's cocoa originates.

At the same time, the war in Ukraine caused fertilizer shortages, pushing up prices for Ivorian farmers who were already struggling to survive. Many let their plantations fall victim to rot; others abandoned cocoa farming altogether.

"Farmers are rational," says Jean Paul Aka, head of the sustainable development and climate change unit at the United Nations Development Programme in Côte d'Ivoire. "If cocoa is not bringing in any money, they're going to move onto something else."

As fears grew about a possible supply collapse, the global market went into a frenzy. In just over a year, the price of cocoa more than quadrupled to \$12,000 per metric ton in mid-2024. In response, the Ivorian government repeatedly raised the minimum price farmers

can be paid for their cocoa beans, also called the farm-gate price. Last October, during his reelection campaign, President Alassane Ouattara announced a price of 2,800 CFA francs (\$5) per kilogram – the highest on record and 200% higher than in 2023.

“We felt optimistic when the president set that high price,” says Marcelin Aka, a cocoa farmer. “Like the government finally valued what we’re doing.”

But then the price of cocoa on the global market plummeted. With Côte d’Ivoire’s farmers locked into a higher price, most international buyers refused to purchase Ivorian beans. More than 120,000 tons of cocoa beans piled up in ports and warehouses across the country.

In March, in an effort to salvage the season’s harvest, the Ivorian government abruptly slashed the farm-gate price by more than half, to 1,200 CFA francs (\$2) per kilogram. The government also promised to buy up beans that farmers couldn’t sell at the same rate, but growers here in M’Brimbo say it hasn’t happened yet.

That has left cocoa farmers forced to borrow money from family and friends and cut meat and fish from their diets. Some have begun pulling their children out of school at lunchtime because they can’t afford to pay the cafeteria fee of 100 CFA (18 cents) per child.

“We eat worse and less,” says Mr. Aka, whose land is surrounded by dense manioc forests.

The government has tried to provide protections to farmers, like its current buyback scheme and fertilizer subsidies. Yet even under ideal conditions, with good yields and functioning safety nets, most Ivorians who grow cocoa will never make it out of poverty. Experts say there just isn’t enough profit to go around for farmers, who are the weakest link in the chocolate value chain.

For every \$1 a customer spends on a chocolate bar, only around 6 cents goes to farmers, with the rest carved up among those who mill the cocoa, make the chocolate, and sell it to consumers. Currently, more than half of Ivorian beans are exported whole every year, without any processing at all. In fact, about 77% of the world’s cocoa is ground outside of West Africa.

That means that Côte d’Ivoire and its neighbors have historically watched international companies like Lindt and Nestlé earn the majority of the profit from their beans.

“There is definitely a sentimental value that ties cocoa farmers to their land,” says Pauline Zei, director of INADES-Formation Côte d’Ivoire, an organization that assists cocoa farmers. But if nothing is done to make cocoa farming more lucrative and “young people become uninterested in this field, we’re going to find ourselves in a complicated situation.”

Opportunities growing on trees

Experts often point to the need for Côte d’Ivoire to think broader – both in terms of what its farmers grow and in what it does with cocoa.

Cocoa farmer Cedric Tossavi kept hearing about this need to diversify, but he didn’t like what it seemed to imply – leaving Côte d’Ivoire’s cocoa industry behind.

“I thought, what can we do to diversify but keep going with cocoa?” says Mr. Tossavi, who owns a 540-acre industrial cocoa farm just outside of M’Brimbo. Seated at a long table overlooking his garden on a recent day, he pours a glass of an opaque, milky yellow liquid and takes a swig. It’s sweet and smooth.

“Fresh cocoa juice,” says Mr. Tossavi, smiling.

Instead of throwing out the white pulp that surrounds the cocoa beans, Mr. Tossavi started putting it to the side and draining the

juice. Now, he sells his cocoa juice to stores around the country, along with a homemade cocoa-based honey spread. He’s also working on small-batch cocoa ice cream and chocolate, with hopes of one day selling them on a large scale.

The Ivorian government is increasingly seeing the importance of processing cocoa into chocolate, cocoa butter, cocoa powder, and other products at home. In 2025, Côte d’Ivoire inaugurated two new processing factories, which the government hopes will help the country reach its goal of transforming 50% of its own cocoa in the next two years, up from 42% currently.

But entrepreneurs like Mr. Tossavi say the country needs to both move more quickly and think more radically about what to do with cocoa. For instance, he also creates biochar – a charcoal-like material made of biomass waste used to improve soil health – and he composts what he can. All these projects create an extra income for Mr. Tossavi’s 200 employees.

Industrial farms are one of the few ways cocoa workers can be guaranteed a stable income year-round in Côte d’Ivoire. On Mr. Tossavi’s farm, workers earn the minimum wage, which is 75,000 CFA francs (\$133) per month. But they remain few and far between. Around 90% of the country’s cocoa is produced on small family farms of 12 acres or less.

Meanwhile, despite being the world’s largest cocoa producer and boasting a population of more than 30 million people, Côte d’Ivoire counts only about two dozen chocolatiers.

An uncertain future

Since 2016, Axel Emmanuel Gbaou has been making 100% Ivorian chocolate bars and selling them out of his tiny shop, Le Chocolatier Ivoirien, in an upmarket suburb of Abidjan.

A former banker, Mr. Gbaou turned to chocolate after realizing that, despite the 2 million tons of cocoa beans the country produced annually, there were hardly any homegrown chocolate bars on Ivorian supermarket shelves. “I found it completely absurd,” says Mr. Gbaou, holding up a bar of cocoa butter in his shop.

Since then, he has gone further, training more than 2,000 women across the country to produce cocoa-based products like cocoa butter and soap to sell in local markets. He also buys the organic beans they grow to make his chocolate.

“Cocoa has the potential to build up this country,” says Mr. Gbaou. “I see the opportunities.”

However, getting Ivorians interested in chocolate is a larger challenge. For now, chocolate remains a luxury item and unaffordable for much of society. Most of the chocolate sold in supermarkets here is made in Europe – and sells at European prices.

Even if the cost of chocolate goes down, Ivorians largely view it as a children’s snack or a treat for special occasions. In the country’s year-round hot climate, most prefer fruit for dessert.

“Not everyone has the habit of eating chocolate, but we need to put more value into making it here,” says Nicolas Djabaré, a university student and an intern at Mr. Gbaou’s chocolate shop. “The rest will come.”

Back in M’Brimbo, however, most cocoa farmers still have little connection to the finished product that their beans create. Few see a future for their children in the industry.

On a recent day in harvest season, a handful of men lend a hand on Ms. Kouakou’s farm, sorting through cocoa beans and clearing leaves from the ground. A gaggle of children skips over fallen pods and 6-inch-long millipedes as the men work.

For months now, these neighbors and friends have been helping

out for free, waiting on the outstanding payments from buyers or the government. “We want our kids to stay in school, to have more than this,” says Ms. Kouakou’s neighbor Nestor Adroh Kouassi Aka, who is also the president of the Société Coopérative Équitable du Bandama, an organic cocoa cooperative. “But if it doesn’t work out for them, they always have the farm.” ■

BEDFORD, N.H.

Life is a box of chocolates for boutique chocolatiers

By Kendra Nordin Beato / Staff writer

In the brightly lit sales room of his chocolate store, David Mack swoons over a 72% dark-chocolate variety from the Semuliki Forest region of Uganda.

“I love this one, the complexity,” says Mr. Mack of his favorite variety from Loon Chocolate, the company he co-owns.

And he isn’t alone.

Business is booming at this boutique chocolate maker here, which Mr. Mack runs with his wife, Rachel. When the couple bought the business from the original founder in 2022, Loon Chocolate was sold in 30 regional shops. Today, that number has climbed to close to 700.

Loon’s rise is, in many ways, counterintuitive. Global cocoa prices hit record highs during the past three years, while new tariffs also raised prices on everything from the rubber gloves used in its production kitchen to the packaging around its bars.

In this moment of significant turmoil for the global chocolate industry, some boutique chocolate makers, including this one, have emerged as surprise success stories. That’s in part because paying higher prices for raw ingredients, such as cocoa beans and sugar, is already baked into their business model.

But their success also reflects another trend: Consumers are becoming more interested in the origins of their chocolate. A 2024 survey by the National Confectioners Association found 82% of buyers cared about a brand’s commitments to both people and the planet. Loon emphasizes its story everywhere it can – from its packaging to the three-dimensional map in its salesroom that traces the entire journey of its ingredients from “bean to bar.”

Many consumers want products that “identify with their values,” says Carla Martin, founder and board president of the Institute for Cacao and Chocolate Research. For them, “a meaningful story ... goes a long way.”

The global market of chocolate made from a single, traceable source of beans is worth roughly \$1.2 billion to \$1.6 billion annually at current market prices – between 5-7% of the total chocolate market, according to an estimate compiled by Dr. Martin and her colleagues. But demand for chocolate with a high cocoa content, a clear origin story, and attention paid to farmers and the climate is growing rapidly.

The pursuit of values is what inspired Alex Whitmore of Taza Chocolate to enter the business two decades ago. As an anthropology major in college, he became fascinated by chocolate’s history in Latin America, which dates back thousands of years. After getting laid off from the startup Zipcar in the early 2000s, he traveled through the region, experiencing its chocolate-making tradition firsthand.

The trip gave Mr. Whitmore the idea to make Mexican-style chocolate, including one product inspired by Mexico’s Oaxaca, back home in Somerville, Massachusetts. At the time, craft chocolate was a niche business. But the farm-to-table movement was gaining momentum among food entrepreneurs and consumers.

In 2005, Mr. Whitmore and his wife, Kathleen Fulton, began hand-grinding cocoa beans in the basement of their apartment. They named their company Taza – “cup” in Spanish – as a nod to chocolate’s roots as a beverage.

Their gritty-textured, intensely flavored chocolate products soon gained a following. As were the company’s efforts to educate its customers about where its cocoa was grown – and by whom.

At the time, the public was growing increasingly aware of the often troubling origins of their favorite dessert. “The price [of cocoa] has been heavily deflated for hundreds of years,” explains Dr. Martin. She says that is because when the beans were first traded in the West during the colonial era, cocoa was often grown by slaves and other forced laborers, allowing for an artificially low price that became the industry standard.

Journalistic exposés in the early 2000s then revealed widespread child trafficking and child slavery in major cocoa-producing countries such as Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire.

Momentum was also building around a fair trade movement in the industry, which promised, among other things, higher prices for growers and better labor conditions, enforced by third-party inspections.

Mr. Whitmore was inspired by the movement, but he wanted Taza to go a step further. Instead of relying on a middleman to check in on farmers, he decided to buy from them directly.

But he quickly realized the vulnerabilities in this new direct-trade model. The personal relationship between farmers and chocolate makers took significant work on both sides, and it was fragile. If either side went out of business, the other would be left without its business partner.

In 2016, Mr. Whitmore co-founded a second company, Uncommon Cacao. He wanted to scale the principles of direct trade in a way that would lower those vulnerabilities to farmers and businesses. Uncommon Cacao monitors every link in its supply chain – physically monitoring the beans to ensure quality and tracking how money is being exchanged. Every year, it publishes a transparent report detailing who its producers are, how much they are paid, and each step in their cocoa beans’ journey from farm to chocolate maker.

Uncommon Cacao is not the only company interested in making the bean-to-bar journey less opaque. For instance, Dutch chocolate giant Tony’s Chocolonely digitally tracks every cocoa bean in its supply chain in real time. But for small chocolatiers, which often have fewer resources to devote to tracing, Uncommon Cacao is an alternative to a global cocoa market that is “basically a race to the bottom on price,” says company co-founder and chief executive Emily Stone. Today, it works with 10,000 farmers and hundreds of chocolate companies – including Loon.

One of the key benefits for Loon is consistent access to beans from the same terroir, allowing the company to produce bars such as Mr. Mack’s favorite using beans from Uganda. “It has a maraschino cherry taste, it’s got that cinnamon note in there,” he explains. But that taste doesn’t come from any added flavoring. In fact, the bar has only three ingredients: cocoa beans, cocoa butter, and sugar. The source of the unusual taste is the beans themselves.

Keeping its bars consistent can sometimes mean Loon takes a

financial hit. This year, for instance, beans from a farm where Loon sources in Puerto Rico cost \$31 per kilogram, more than double what they paid for beans from other sources. That means Loon isn't turning a profit on chocolate made from those beans, Mr. Mack says.

"But we're a small business. That farm is a small farm," he says. "We want to support them."

Companies such as Loon and Taza are still distinct outliers.

This past spring, Uncommon Cacao partnered with Silva Cacao, a like-minded cocoa sourcing company based in Europe, to extend its global reach. Demand for responsibly sourced chocolate is also likely to grow in Europe. In 2020, the European Union's Deforestation Regulation banned the sale of cocoa grown on cleared land. Its first audit cycle will begin in December.

Dr. Martin notes that no form of "ethical" chocolate making has the ability to completely eradicate poverty among cocoa farmers, a problem with long, tangled roots.

Still, it's a mission that appeals deeply to Mr. Whitmore. His effort to show consumers where their chocolate comes from is "the most impactful thing I've done," he says while sitting in a classroom at Taza's chocolate factory, where the company offers tours to curious customers a few times a week. Today, the company has a staff of about 35 and roasts, winnows, and grinds chocolate from scratch at its factory in Somerville.

"If you're shining a light down those long dirt roads ... that you have to go to to reach cocoa farms, then you're shedding a light on an industry that has been incredibly opaque for basically forever," he says. ■

OAXACA AND SAN FELIPE DE LEÓN, MEXICO

More than a treat: Mexican chocolate culture has ancient roots

By Whitney Eulich / Special correspondent
and Lorena Ríos / Contributor

In a terracotta-painted room with burning candles and clay masks adorning the walls, a young Mexican tourist dips her fingers into a small gourd of coarse, brown nibs and pops one into her mouth.

She and her family, visiting from Cancún, discuss its flavors – like chocolate, but not as sweet – and all they've learned today at this workshop about indigenous cocoa varieties and their traditional uses. Ervit Hernández Hernández, founder of Chima Cacao, smiles approvingly.

Chocolate is the world's dessert. But many of its adoring fans have little idea of its origins, which reach back thousands of years to pre-Hispanic, Mesoamerican cultures in Mexico. That's true even in the cradle of cocoa, which imports more chocolate than it produces.

But in the southern state of Oaxaca, cocoa's history remains alive, passed down by generations and amplified by projects such as Chima Cacao, whose name uses the Spanish word for cocoa, which comes from the Indigenous Nahuatl name for the bean, *cacahuatl*.

"When you find the origin of things, you gain tools, understanding, and a sense of roots," says Diego Armando Contreras, a biologist

with Chima Cacao who leads regular trainings for the staff about the history and science of cocoa.

"Part of my roots"

On a recent morning, about 45 minutes outside of the city of Oaxaca, in the state's central valley, rays of sunlight are just breaking through the gray, fluffy cloud cover. But Carmen Martínez has already been working in her kitchen for hours, a black tin pot of heirloom corn boiling on a wood-fired stove as she gathers some of the oak ash and adds it to the pot for flavor.

This is the start of an hourslong and at times athletic process of making *tejate*, an ice-cold foamy beverage with a base of cocoa that Ms. Martínez has been selling on a folding table near the town square of San Bartolo Coyotepec for three decades.

In recent years, the global chocolate world has entered a period of unprecedented turmoil, punctuated by cocoa bean shortages and roller-coaster price fluctuations. From farmers in Côte d'Ivoire to artisanal chocolatiers in Massachusetts, almost no one in the industry has emerged unscathed.

But here in Oaxaca, all of that feels far away. Cocoa has been grown in Mexico for nearly 4,000 years. Traditionally consumed as a beverage, it is still shared by family and friends in many Indigenous communities during celebrations and to mark important life moments.

"Eating chocolate is different from drinking it," says Ms. Martínez, who is planning an upcoming baptism for two of her grandchildren, at which she'll serve at least three cocoa-based drinks, including a traditional water-based hot chocolate.

Tejate reminds Ms. Martínez of her own childhood, when she and her seven siblings would be assigned roles in the kitchen to prepare the nutrient-rich beverage for her father to take out into the fields for lunch.

To her, drinking cocoa signifies family, community, and love. A square of chocolate, meanwhile, is just a treat.

"To understand cocoa culture, you have to forget about chocolate," says Mr. Contreras, the biologist at Chima Cacao. "Chocolate is a product that is so dominant, so overwhelming, that it obscures the true origin."

A defining feature of Mexican society is the coexistence of the ancient and the modern. Cocoa reflects that, too, says José López Ganem, executive director at the Institute for Cacao and Chocolate Research in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"We have cocoa in traditional pre-Hispanic or ancient Mesoamerican drinks in Oaxaca at the same time we have some of the best ... European-style chocolatiers in the world," he says. "You can't get access to [both these extremes] in other places in the world."

Ms. Martínez makes her *tejate* using a recipe handed down from her grandmother. She toasts cocoa beans, the seeds of mamey, and the blossoms of the "flower of cocoa" plant before grinding them into a paste on a black volcanic stone.

Selling *tejate* has helped put her children through school, including her only daughter, Gladys, who now works as an engineer.

"My generation started to lose the connection with *tejate*," the younger Ms. Martínez says. But around age 16, she grew curious about the drink and ventured into her mother's kitchen asking to learn the family recipe.

"I've come to realize it's part of my roots," she says.

Cultivating tradition

Hours down a narrow, mountainous footpath, Reynalda García

Juárez is tending to those roots, quite literally.

“God brought me to this life to work,” says Ms. García, who was a child the first time she wielded a machete to chop firewood and to help her parents on their subsistence farm in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca.

She grows cocoa, heirloom corn, and tropical fruits in the small Indigenous community of San Felipe de León. The cocoa trees on these plots, passed down generations and buried deep in the jungle on uneven terrain, grow alongside other endemic plants that provide the shade they need to flourish.

Though cocoa was first domesticated in Peru and Ecuador, and has been grown across Latin America for millennia, the majority of the world’s cocoa now comes from West Africa. Mexico is responsible for just 0.5% of today’s global production.

Most Mexican cocoa farming takes place on small plots of land like this one. For the roughly 400 inhabitants of San Felipe de León, cocoa farming is one of the few ways to make a living. Nearly 80% of the people in this rural municipality live in poverty. Many leave for the United States or other parts of Mexico.

For those who stay, the challenge is finding a way to make cocoa profitable. Ms. García and her neighbors have formed a small cooperative to sell their cocoa at a better rate than the market price. Together, the four dozen farmers can earn almost triple what intermediaries pay. But they are still barely scraping by. Some members also make their own chocolate bars in hopes that the endeavor will bring in more money than simply selling raw or fermented cocoa.

“We aren’t saving the world or changing the farmers’ lives,” says Mr. Hernández of Chima Cacao, which buys cocoa beans from local farmers in communities similar to San Felipe de León. “If anything ... they are the ones changing our lives by producing high-quality cocoa.” ■

ENDEAVORS

LAGOS, NIGERIA

A history buff’s quest to keep Nigeria’s past alive

In a country where libraries and museums are underfunded, Raphael James wants residents to read – and learn from the artifacts he’s amassed.

By Ogar Monday / Contributor

At age 9, Raphael James began collecting a trove of Nigerian history.

Coins withdrawn from circulation during the Nigerian Civil War lay scattered across the boy’s village, Ahuwa-Oboro, in southeastern Abia state. He picked them up, intrigued that they had survived while so much else of his country was destroyed.

Ahuwa-Oboro’s elders who could not read summoned the boy whenever they received letters from beyond their village. He read the correspondence to them and was usually paid in dried fish. He was much happier when they gave him the postage stamps. “They carried faces, events, animals – each one made me ask questions,”

he says.

Five decades later, Mr. James remains transfixed by his country’s past. The coins and stamps are still part of his collection, which has grown into a compound in Lagos that houses a free public library and a private museum open to all. The site contains tens of thousands of books, photographs, and artifacts chronicling Nigerian history, from the transatlantic slave-trade era to the present.

“When tomorrow comes, this place should remind our children of today,” Mr. James says.

Addressing a shortage

Nigeria maintains a network of libraries and museums, but they have been underfunded for years. Experts also say public engagement with these institutions is low.

During his college years in the late 1980s, Mr. James began seeing the importance of his collection. “Every time I spoke to friends, I realized how little they knew about our history,” he says. “That’s when I saw the need to document Nigeria for generations yet unborn.”

After graduating in 1991, Mr. James built a career in journalism and research, beginning at the publication Newswatch before moving into other editorial and research roles across Nigeria. All the while, his collection grew. At times, he recalls, he and his wife went to bed hungry because he had spent their money on books and artifacts.

“Once you have interest in something, you get to a point where you don’t look at how much money is involved,” he says with a chuckle.

The idea for a free library came in 2000 while Mr. James was running a business center in Lagos. Almost every day, he says, young people came in carrying examination results that weren’t theirs. They would cover the original name on the paper, write down their own, and then photocopy the document in the hopes that it would help them secure a job or gain admission to college.

“At that time, there were only a handful of libraries, and even now, they are not enough for our huge population,” says Mr. James.

He decided that lecturing young people wouldn’t solve the problem; they needed somewhere to learn and pass the exams on their own. In 2004, he opened a free public library with fewer than 100 books. Today, it contains more than 50,000 publications and has served more than 22,000 visitors, according to Mr. James.

“I’ve found materials here that I couldn’t find at the state library,” says Michael Olaniyan, a history and international relations student in his final year at Lagos State University. “It’s worth the long journey to get here.”

By 2009, Mr. James had decades’ worth of newspapers, photographs, and historical documents. The collection was beginning to outgrow the room where he stored them, and he wanted the public to see it.

So three years later, he opened the Centre for Research, Information Management and Media Development Museum. Outside, a tree-shaped sculpture built from books rises above the compound. Inside, the museum is arranged as a journey through Nigeria’s past, containing more than 48,000 historical photographs, alongside thousands of books, newspapers, maps, and other artifacts. Much of the collection has been assembled through a nationwide network of local researchers and community contacts who identify historical objects. They then photograph the items, gather information about their origins and ownership, and send the details to Mr. James for verification before he acquires the items through donation or purchase.

"We do fact-checks on all [artifacts]," he says, adding that curators from other museums are sometimes consulted.

One gallery displays bird feathers, stones, and old clay pots. Another is filled with political campaign posters, portraits, and books from the colonial era. Elsewhere are a scale model of a slave ship for an interpretive display, guns from the Benin-British wars, samples of every currency Nigeria has issued, and relics from the civil war, including a typewriter that Mr. James says belonged to the secretary for Biafran leader Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. Nearby, old cameras, telephones, and cassette players trace the country's technological and cultural evolution.

"I'm not exaggerating when I say that if you're researching Nigeria's history, his museum is one of the places you should visit," says Nnenna Fakoya-Smith, a national tourism promoter who also collects stamps, postcards, and coins. "The breadth of the collection is remarkable."

Detective work

Apart from collecting, Mr. James is sometimes a sleuth. Over the years, for example, he noticed that books and websites credited different people, including civil servant Michael Taiwo Akinkunmi and military commander David Ejoor, with designing Nigeria's coat of arms. "The accounts didn't add up," Mr. James says flatly.

He interviewed Akinkunmi and worked with John Redhead, a British member of his research team, to examine records at the College of Arms in London. There, he says, they found documents showing that the coat of arms was commissioned before independence and designed by the London firm Messrs Beverley Pick Associates. Mr. James says the findings have yet to be formally acknowledged by Nigeria's government.

Nearly 50 years after preserving coins and stamps in his village, Mr. James is still collecting in the hope that future generations will better understand the country they inherited.

"I want a place where you can get every information you need" about Nigeria, he says. "We're not there yet." ■

RAPHAEL JAMES

- Has been collecting historical items for nearly five decades
- Opened a free library, and a museum chronicling Nigeria's history from the transatlantic slave-trade era to the present

REPORTERS ON THE JOB

SPRINGFIELD, ILL.



Kendra Nordin
Beato

When reporters travel to cover a story, we often keep an eye out for other stories to pitch. For instance, I was in Springfield in August covering the launch of a new women's professional baseball league. By chance, I met someone from the Illinois State Historical Society who offered to take me around to see various Abraham Lincoln historic sites.

She said we could also get a "horseshoe sandwich," a central Illinois specialty. It's an open-faced sandwich on Texas toast layered with meat, a pile of French fries, and smothered in creamy cheese sauce. I've spent a lot of time in Illinois, but I had never heard of a horseshoe sandwich. It was a perfect "hidden gem" of a story, and a filling lunch as well. ■



Henry Gass

CORPUS CHRISTI, TEXAS

One of the simplest ways to get different perspectives

in a story is to ask sources who they disagree with. On a trip to Corpus Christi in July, I put the question to City Councilor Roland Barrera after interviewing him about the city's efforts to build a desalination plant. "Gil Hernandez," he replied. He's wrong about the desalination plant, Mr. Barrera added, "but I respect him." I hadn't planned on talking with Mr. Hernandez, another city councilor, but I reached out the next day. With his reasoned fiscal case against the plant and account of how decades of neglect had led to a water crisis, it ended up being one of the most illuminating interviews of the trip. ■



Scott Peterson

KRAMATORSK, UKRAINE

The drone threat in eastern Ukraine has been growing

as Russian forces inch toward the city of Kramatorsk. I was surprised to see every avenue now covered with anti-drone netting – a big change from a few months earlier, when I saw only main roads protected. This time, there was heartbreak, too, for a Ukrainian soldier who is a friend of my translator. A small Russian explosive drone – tethered to a miles-long fiber-optic cable – evaded the nets, and targeted the soldier's parked vehicle. She is fine, but all her possessions burned, including a Ukrainian flag signed by comrades in arms, some of them already fallen in battle. ■



Dominique
Soguel

AARAU, SWITZERLAND

One thing readers don't see in a story: how much work goes into gaining sources' trust. Special correspondent Dominique Soguel has extensive experience covering refugees and knows their strengths and vulnerabilities. For a recent piece on Afghan women in Europe who fled the Taliban, finding sources willing to talk was slow work.

Eventually, she created an English-Farsi flyer inviting sources to speak with her and shared it on WhatsApp. Some wanted payment to talk; one nongovernmental organization offered help if we published its logo – both editorial no-gos. "Editors stayed patient, and we carried on chasing the story. In the end, through an Afghan interpreter I'd worked with in Greece and good Samaritans in the U.K. and Switzerland, I found the three characters in this story." ■

– Sara Miller Llana / International editor

Small nuclear reactors could be America's next power move

Amid high electricity costs and evolving U.S. energy needs, a utility that has long been an object of protest presents an alternative to fossil fuels.

By Donald Keough / Staff writer

As America's need for power evolves, nuclear energy is vying for a top spot.

AI data centers, extreme weather, intermittent renewable sources, and the electrification of vehicles and buildings all present complex challenges and opportunities for the power grid.

While politicians, utility executives, and industry groups squabble over rising electricity bills and a need for stable power sources, one resource is repeatedly cited as a solution: nuclear energy. Now, U.S. tech giants, from Amazon to Google to Meta, are jumping in, with billions of dollars in nuclear investments to power their energy-hungry data centers.

Despite lingering public angst around past nuclear accidents (Three Mile Island in 1979 and Chernobyl in 1986), nuclear power already provides roughly 18% of the country's electricity, ranking second only to gas as a single source of U.S. power generation.

This is partly because of new safety rules and processes. But it's also because nuclear has proven itself the ultramarathoner of energy sources: slow to get going but steady and efficient for the long term. About 70% of the cost of a nuclear plant goes toward construction, which can sometimes take years. Once that plant is up and running, only six uranium fuel pellets, which cost about \$25 each (or \$150 total) and are burned to make nuclear energy, are needed to power an average American household for a year. Experts say the same year of power would require 12,000 pounds of coal (\$300 to \$1,300) or 78,000 cubic feet of gas (\$212 for wholesale to \$1,500 for residential retail).

Now, thanks to advancements that have shrunk reactors from the size of concrete plants to that of shipping containers, nuclear energy is seeing a revival in interest, largely to help power data centers, remote military bases, and clean-energy communities.

That means that small modular reactors (SMRs) and microreactors are starting to move, albeit slowly, from blueprints to U.S. construction sites.

Q: What are these smaller, advanced reactors?

Small nuclear reactors operate much like larger models. Fission – or the splitting of atoms (usually uranium) – produces energy that heats a liquid (usually water) into steam, which then spins a turbine, generating electricity. But unlike large nuclear plants, which typically span a square mile, the smaller units use only 5% to 10% of that space. While SMRs produce less electricity than bigger models, their components can be manufactured off-site en masse and shipped directly by truck, train, or ship to a desired location. Factory assembly, experts say, could give nuclear power a better chance of competing in the energy marketplace; shipping reactor components to remote parts of Alaska, for example, should

be cheaper than building a new gas pipeline there.

"The goal is to build reactors more like airplanes than airports," said Katy Huff, chair of the department of nuclear engineering and engineering physics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Ideally, you bring things in mostly built and plug them together more like a Lego set."

Proponents say new cooling systems and safety measures mean that SMRs and microreactors are safer and more efficient than larger nuclear reactors. Detractors argue that the SMRs scattered around the country would be harder to secure, and that dealing with nuclear waste across 50 states, not to mention the SMRs' unproven scalability and possible cost overruns, makes them risky. Many SMRs are still in early stages of development. The U.S. has only two next-generation small reactors under construction, both by private firms: TerraPower near Kemmerer, Wyoming, and Koros Power in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Q: What are nuclear power's current challenges?

Input costs are considered the biggest hurdle for investors.

Large reactors can cost around \$10 billion to build and are more expensive upfront than coal, natural gas, solar, and wind operations. Small reactors are also expensive, typically costing between \$1 billion and \$6 billion per unit.

But mass production could drive down the cost per megawatt of SMRs. Experts and researchers say that achieving cost parity will require building at least 30, and perhaps several hundred, identical units. (Different models project vastly different electricity costs.)

Still, all nuclear reactors require a specialized supply chain. For example, reactor-grade uranium, the fuel needed for a nuclear chain reaction, is hard to obtain and secure. Though accounting for a small fraction of operating costs, it requires government licensing, contract agreements, and an extensive enrichment process.

Reactors can also require millions of gallons of water to stay cool, though advanced reactors can use other cooling materials such as liquid metals, liquid salts, or helium gas.

Finding a safe place to get rid of nuclear waste is also a problem. Without a permanent site for active nuclear waste, the U.S. currently pays private companies \$800 million a year to contain it on-site. Efforts to finalize Nevada's Yucca Mountain site as a spent-fuel storage location have been halted because of intense, bipartisan political opposition. The site is on federal land northwest of Las Vegas, next to the former Nevada Test Site, a 1350-square-mile desert reservation set up in 1950. With over 900 nuclear explosions between 1951 and 1992, it became one of the most radioactively contaminated places on Earth and has required an ongoing, multi-billion-dollar cleanup.

"We'll have to find a new location, and we probably shouldn't start somewhere in a community that has never benefited from nuclear power," said Dr. Huff, adding that the facility could be about the size of a Walmart Supercenter.

Reactor construction must also navigate local approvals. While many communities push back against new projects, public opinion on nuclear power is nuanced. A Gallup poll this past spring found that 71% of Americans oppose local data center construction over concerns about excessive water and electricity use, compared with only 53% who oppose local nuclear power plants.

Q: What is the future for nuclear power?

As commercial demand for electricity mounts, the market for nuclear power is expanding.

U.S. tech giants – from Amazon and Microsoft to Google (Alphabet) and Meta – are investing billions into nuclear, with Microsoft recently signing a \$16 billion agreement with Constellation Energy to help restart part of the Three Mile Island plant in Pennsylvania, and Amazon committing over \$1.15 billion to reactor developers and campus acquisitions. Google and Meta are also investing in SMRs.

The U.S. Department of Energy has meanwhile said it wants to quadruple nuclear energy output by 2050. To meet this goal, there will need to be both investment in reactors and reliance on new technology.

The department recently backed five new reactors with a \$17.5 billion loan and made a \$900 million commitment to SMRs.

Alison Krager Hahn, a senior director at the Nuclear Energy Institute, notes that while U.S. manufacturing capabilities are strong, advanced techniques and faster licensing processes are needed to build small reactors cheaply and in bulk.

Some large reactors, such as the Palisades Nuclear Generating Station in Michigan, are being recertified or revived. Meanwhile, smaller reactors are still working to demonstrate their viability. While no private company in the U.S. has completed construction of an SMR, startups such as Antares Nuclear, Valar Atomic, Deployable Energy, and Aalo Atomic are developing them.

Traditional nuclear licensing can take years, but the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is expediting certain processes to approve some SMR designs in 18 months or less.

Ms. Krager Hahn says the agency is not compromising safety priorities. “It is making the process more efficient.”

For now, NRC permit applications continue to come in. ■

EDITORIALS

A Mideast beacon for the sanctity of life

Change in the Middle East often comes more from violence than from virtue. Yet on Aug. 4, when Lebanon’s parliament abolished the death penalty – the first country in the region to do so – the action allowed the tiny Mediterranean nation to set an example by its commitment to the right to life.

“Lebanon is regaining its pioneering role in the region as a defender of human rights,” Justice Minister Adel Nassar said after the vote, adding that lawmakers chose “to combat murder rather than resort to capital punishment.”

At the least, Lebanon’s moral courage marks a sharp contrast to much of the Middle East.

Last year, Iran more than doubled its executions. Israel, whose last judicial execution was that of Adolf Eichmann in 1962, has approved hanging for those convicted of killing “with the intent to deny the existence of the State of Israel,” which appears targeted only at Palestinians. In June, Jordan resumed executions, carrying out its first since 2017. In Yemen and Saudi Arabia, the practice continues apace.

Lebanon’s last execution was 22 years ago, but courts have continued to issue dozens of death sentences. What helped lawmakers decide to end capital punishment was a new willingness to stand up to Hezbollah. The elected representatives of the powerful Iran-backed militant group opposed the measure. The group has been

weakened after its 2023 attacks on Israel that resulted in a military pounding by the Jewish state on the group in southern Lebanon.

This shift against the death penalty began more than a quarter century ago following Lebanon’s 1975-1990 civil war. Abolitionists worked hard to persuade lawmakers one by one, arguing that capital punishment “is plagued with arbitrariness, prejudice, and error.”

About three-quarters of the world’s nations have abolished the death penalty in law or practice. Lebanon has become the 129th, taking a stand even as it has endured a war within its borders and the Middle East awaits an end to the Iran-U.S. conflict.

There might be no better time to assert the sanctity of life. ■

Japan eyes nonartificial intelligence

As the global race to create the most advanced artificial intelligence continues to heat up, the list of concerns about AI’s predicted impact – from the wiping out of jobs to its potential to make planet-altering decisions without human intervention – grows long. Nations are rushing to decide which values to impose on what could be the 21st century’s greatest mold-breaking technology.

In trying to hatch their own artificial intelligence, many countries are playing catch-up to the two world giants: the United States and China. In recent months, however, Japan has taken a different course. It admits it cannot yet create the most advanced AI models. But Japan might be the first nation to put AI at the center of a new economic strategy.

In late July, Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae’s Cabinet approved a plan to inject \$2.3 trillion in public and private investment toward strengthening key industries by 2040, starting with AI and the computer chips that run it. The plan goes beyond merely automating current work, improving efficiencies, cutting costs, and boosting the economy.

It would also enhance human creativity and innovation by focusing on applying AI to real-world problems – starting in Japan’s existing world-class manufacturing industries. The plan even sets a high goal of building about 10 million AI robots by 2040.

Experts say the worldwide focus in AI has shifted away from the race to develop more powerful models and toward defining AI’s value in lifting human capabilities to once-unimagined levels.

“Organisations must ask not only how AI replaces tasks, but also how future professionals will acquire the judgement, intuition and contextual understanding that cannot be downloaded from a model or generated through a prompt,” wrote two Indian scholars, Anu Singh Lather and Tarun Agarwal, in the Asia Times.

Currently, only about 8.4% of Japanese workers use AI on the job, compared with 50% in the U.S. And more than 4 in 5 Japanese firms have yet to fully deploy AI. Deep cultural reasons, such as collective aversion to the reputational risk for companies that suffer an AI failure, have prevented rapid use.

Japanese firms have also long sought profits in hardware more than in software. Recognizing this, the government plans to invite 500 Indian AI professionals to help in applying the technology.

Japan’s hope is to master the non-language aspects of AI, using it to improve the tactile and spatial capabilities of physical machines. This might help expand humanity’s concepts of intelligence beyond

data and words.

“AI leadership depends not only on technology and investment,” wrote Maha Matsumura in Al Jazeera, “but also on developing researchers, innovators and the next generation of scientific talent.” ■

Helping wildlife roam, one safe path at a time

The old joke “Why did the chicken cross the road?” has a new, if serious, answer: Because it found a safe passage.

For much of the past century, countless species of wildlife have not been able to “get to the other side” when they needed to. Highways disrupted migratory routes and feeding ranges – and increased vehicle-wildlife collisions.

But now, things are changing, thanks to a shift in public attitudes to designing infrastructure in ways that enhance animal-human safety and longer-term coexistence.

From the Americas to Asia, government planners, Indigenous inhabitants, conservationists, and ordinary citizens are working together to build highway overpasses and underpasses, adapt drainage culverts, and weave together treetop bridges to allow freer movement of creatures large and small.

One such structure will open in Southern California this December, spanning 10 lanes of U.S. Highway 101. Ben Goldfarb, journalist and author of the book “Crossings: How Road Ecology Is Shaping the Future of Our Planet,” offers a perspective of what he calls “these giant, striking visual reminders” that humans inhabit a shared landscape.

“I love wildlife crossings,” Mr. Goldfarb said on a podcast in July, for “their ability to ... remind us that we’re sort of global citizens of a planet that we share with wildlife.” His 2023 book chronicles that the worldwide movement for such structures is not just feel-good environmentalism but based on verifiable research that demonstrates efficacy and benefits.

In the United States, some 1 million annual vehicle-wildlife collisions cost an estimated \$10 billion in repairs, medical care, and lost productivity. A 2026 study in Virginia showed that strategically positioned crossings reduce such crashes by up to 97%. In April, the state passed a bill to fund their construction. Utah, Idaho, and Oregon have enacted similar legislation to advance wildlife connectivity. A July 27 report showed that an overwhelming 81% of Americans – including 80% of hunters – support investment in wildlife crossings. Even in relatively resource-strapped nations, there is a broad recognition of humans’ responsibility toward the natural world.

In Southeast Asia, as in the Amazon rainforest, civilians and scientists are constructing woven bridges that can be used by langurs and other monkeys to safely cross busy roads. India has built 10 of the world’s largest wildlife underpasses and overpasses. In a 40-day period, researchers documented more than 40,000 animals – including elephants, primates, and big cats – using a single such underpass, which extended their feeding and breeding range while reducing potential conflict with humans.

Whether a simple sisal canopy bridge or a sophisticated multimillion-dollar structure, wildlife crossings are concrete symbols of people wanting to protect the intrinsic worth of nature. The answer to the chicken joke needs an update. ■

Joyful collaboration

A poet is inspired by how a composer and large chorus breathe connection into her work.

It’s one thing to write a poem. It’s another thing to hand it to 150 singers, and then hope they don’t decide your favorite line needs another syllable. Poets, after all, become attached to their words.

I had been paired with Ted Babcock, a composer and percussionist, for Joyful Abundance, a yearlong initiative of the 152-year-old Mendelssohn Chorus of Philadelphia. Under the direction of conductor Dominick DiOrio, the chorus has long looked beyond the traditional choral repertoire, collaborating with living composers and artists in ways that keep a historic institution engaged with the present. We were one of five pairings of poets and composers invited to create new works for ArtPhilly’s What Now: 2026 festival. Ted loved the poem. Then came the difficult part. He gently explained that a three-to-five-minute choral work simply couldn’t accommodate all the words I’d written. He apologized before suggesting that I might read the complete poem before the performance, while the chorus sang a shorter version. His message was gracious yet devastating. I believed every word had earned its place.

My mentor poet, Kirwyn Sutherland, understood that it wasn’t about trimming lines, but about learning a new language. “Give the poem a rhythm the voices can ride,” he encouraged. Ride, not merely pronounce. Ride. I was writing for breath, for cadence, for 150 people who would have to inhale together before they could carry a thought into the room.

Mr. DiOrio encouraged us to see collaboration not as surrendering our individual vision, but as inviting another artist to strengthen it. That required trust. I’d spent years learning to hear my own voice. Now, I was being asked to imagine what might happen when it encountered someone else’s.

My poem “Electric Bloom” asks a country approaching its 250th anniversary to examine itself. The poem remembers those who have invested their labor, imagination, sacrifice, and hope in America, especially those who were denied full participation in its promises. On the page, the words felt intimate. I had no idea what they would become in choral interpretation.

Having attended Mendelssohn Chorus performances for years, often alongside the Philadelphia Orchestra, I knew the extraordinary musicianship these singers possessed. I trusted that they would discover layers in my poem I hadn’t known were there. Even with that confidence, nothing prepared me for the first rehearsal.

Sitting beneath the great skylight inside Rodeph Shalom’s magnificent sanctuary, surrounded by luminous stained glass, painted walls, intricate mosaics, and soaring arches, I shifted in my chair. Then, the chorus began.

“Here we are, here we are, and who are we?”

One hundred and fifty voices transformed a refrain I had written alone into something both beautiful and urgent. The question no longer belonged only to me, but to everyone in the room. As the voices gathered strength, I heard not only the sing-

ers before me but also generations of people who had built this country while being denied its full embrace. I heard Indigenous voices. I heard enslaved Africans and their descendants. I heard women, immigrants, laborers, dreamers, teachers, artists. I heard everyone who had insisted, across centuries, about what America could become. Hearing my words sung revealed intentions I hadn't fully understood myself. That is a great gift of collaboration: Another artist discovers your meaning before you do.

As I watched the rehearsal unfold, I found myself studying the singers. Many were public school teachers, as I had been for over three decades. Their expressions revealed not simply technical excellence, but also emotional investment. Even more remarkable was their response to feedback from both poets and composers. A phrase would be adjusted, a balance reconsidered, an entrance refined. Somehow, the passage would emerge richer than before. There was no defensiveness or bruised ego. There were only artists listening carefully to become better together.

It struck me that this rehearsal embodied the very question my poem was asking of the country. What if we approached one another with the same willingness to listen, revise, and begin again? What if collaboration were understood not as compromise but as collective possibility?

On performance day, sunlight poured through the stained glass and settled softly over the audience. As the chorus began, Ted accompanied it on the marimba. The instrument, brought to the Americas with the African slave trade, echoed another history of endurance, creativity, and cultural inheritance.

When the final line, "This harvest belongs to us all," arrived, the chorus repeated it with such melodic force that the words seemed to fill every corner of that extraordinary space. For a moment, architecture, music, and poetry became indistinguishable. People often ask what it feels like to hear your own work performed. The truth is, it no longer felt like my work alone. The chorus had breathed life into words that, until then, had existed only in the solitude of my notebook.

A poet begins alone. A chorus reminds her that she doesn't have to stay there.

– Octavia McBride-Ahebee

■ *Joyful Abundance*, part of ArtPhilly's *What Now: 2026*, brought together and premiered the original works of five poets and five composers: poets Evan Wang, Naila Francis, Amy Beth Sisson, Haley Storm, and Octavia McBride-Ahebee, and composers Baldwin Giang, Barbara Lewandowski, Leigha Amick, Adelina DiGiacomo, and Ted Babcock.

POETRY

DRIFTING

*I can always
Tell when I
Begin to drift,
Fiddling with things
Inconsequential, losing
Myself in conversations
With the dogs,
My foot finding
One of their*

*Bellies to rub –
Talking while they
Listen and nod
In agreement as
The sun pours
Through the windows
And the clouds so
High and puffed white
Pull us away
Into the arms
Of the muse
And a poem
From which there
Is no escape.*

– William Young

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Does God take sides?

Have you ever felt wronged or misunderstood and found yourself wondering, Whose side is God on? It's a question that doesn't only arise in personal struggles. It can surface during times of conflict and division on every scale.

Scripture reframes the question, inviting us to see what God sees and to discern what divine Love is revealing for everyone involved.

A story from the Bible (see II Kings 6:8-23) brought this into sharper focus for me. By his spiritual discernment, the prophet Elisha was repeatedly able to warn the king of Israel about ambushes planned by the king of Syria. Frustrated that his strategies kept being exposed, the Syrian king sent a powerful army to capture Elisha.

When Elisha's servant saw the army surrounding them, he panicked. But Elisha remained calm. "Fear not," he said, "for they that be with us are more than they that be with them." He then prayed for his servant's eyes to be opened. Suddenly, the servant saw that the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around them – representing spiritual forces of divine protection.

It's tempting to read this story and conclude that God was "on Israel's side." But through the lens of Christian Science, we see something deeper: the impartial operation of spiritual law – the ever-present expression of Truth and Love – governing God's entirely spiritual creation. God, divine Love, upholds what is just, right, and spiritually true for all. "Love," as Mary Baker Eddy writes in "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," "is impartial and universal in its adaptation and bestowals" (p. 13).

Elisha perceived the presence and power of God, which dissolves fear and aggression. After the enemy soldiers had been taken captive, at Elisha's recommendation the king of Israel fed them and released them in peace. This ending shifts the narrative from military triumph to expressing God's all-embracing love. Elisha saw what was true spiritually, and the result was that the Syrian raids ceased.

Like many people, I've experienced moments during conflict

when I've longed for God to validate my position and prove me right. But as I pray in these moments, I begin to see that a better goal is to let spiritual understanding reshape my view of the situation. As my outlook is transformed, I feel a growing sense of calm and confidence that divine Love is governing everyone involved.

Mrs. Eddy writes, "Each successive stage of experience unfolds new views of divine goodness and love" (Science and Health, p. 66). That's been true for me. As I continue turning to God for spiritual clarity, I find more of Love's impartial care revealed, step by step.

So no, God doesn't take sides. God, Love, is all – and governs all. Divine law operates in the realm of spiritual reality, revealing peace where strife seemed entrenched, grace where judgment once prevailed, and unity where division dominated.

When we're faced with conflict – whether political or deeply personal – we don't need to persuade God to support us over others. We can let prayer lift our thought into clearer spiritual vision – to see what divine Love is already revealing and establishing: harmony, mercy, and justice that transcend sides and express Truth itself.

– Liesl Ehmke

BOOKS

When Native justice clashes with 'Anglo' law

A public defender's memoir recounts a murder case of two Alaskan Indigenous women that set their community at odds with the concept of due process.

By Mackenzie Farkus / Staff writer

When Rebecca Wright Stevens became a widow and an empty nester in her 40s, she found herself in need of a change. Enticed by the high salary for public defenders in Alaskan bush offices and a desire to be closer to nature, she moved to Alaska in the early 1990s to become a public defender for North Slope Borough, an area populated by the Iñupiat people.

In Utqiagvik – the United States' northernmost city – Wright Stevens found her Little House on the Tundra, with "one neighbor between [her] and the Arctic Ocean" and the scent of seal cooking oil in the air. Then, in August 1993, she took on the defense of an Iñupiaq man named Amos Lane, who was charged with sexually assaulting and murdering two sisters from an Iñupiaq family.

So begins "Sisters of the Midnight Sun: A Murder in Arctic Alaska," Wright Stevens' memoir in which she digs into the process behind her public defense of Lane, all while examining her life as a white *tanik* – Iñupiaq for "outsider" – in Utqiagvik.

The Lane case was important. Suspicions fell on him because he had a criminal record and the community considered him a drifter. In general, Indigenous women and girls face disproportionately high rates of sexual assault, domestic abuse, and homicide. Because of the complex web of federal, state, and tribal jurisdictions, many of these cases fall through the cracks, and the perpetrators are not

brought to justice. In this situation, the Iñupiat community wanted someone held accountable.

With 126 other clients in her caseload and a borough roughly the size of Wyoming to serve, Wright Stevens had to change tactics from her earlier work in Washington state. "To keep up with the caseload, I'd had to learn to ... accept the fact that I could touch only most of the bases, not all."

The case also involved an unusual challenge. The assault and murder of sisters Bernice and Wanda Ipalook took place during the region's summer of midnight sun, where continuous sunlight lasts for 84 days. Days blurred together, with witnesses unsure of when and where they last saw the sisters alive.

Most of the Iñupiat people in Utqiagvik believed Lane was guilty – including some of his own family members. People said that his past violent behavior was fueled by anger over his own mother's murder in a similarly brutal crime when he was age 14.

At the heart of the Ipalook case lay a tension between Iñupiaq laws and traditions and what Wright Stevens describes as "Anglo" law. Elizabeth "Liz" Kanayurak, Wright Stevens' close confidante in the public defender's office and an Iñupiaq woman herself, repeatedly shared her frustration with the case. "Iñupiaq law has been around for thousands of years before you guys came," she tells Wright Stevens early in the investigation. "Some people shouldn't be represented. They should be cast out."

"The grafted-on Anglo system was far from perfect, as were many of its players," Wright Stevens writes. "But it seemed to me that, worldwide, due process was the best way to go."

Eventually, Bernice Ipalook's fiancé, John Adams, was charged with the crime. Lane was granted immunity from prosecution for his testimony against Adams, though Wright Stevens grappled with growing evidence that suggested Lane had prior run-ins with the Ipalook sisters and was at their home the night of the murders.

In writing about her efforts to build the defense case, Wright Stevens takes frequent detours to paint a fuller picture of life in Utqiagvik. She begins a romance with Liz's cousin, Michael. She watches over her overwhelmed teenage client, Randy, whom she worries could become another statistic in Alaska's Native teen suicide epidemic. She observes an Iñupiat whale hunt, and narrowly survives a polar bear encounter in front of her home.

By the end of the book, Adams is found not guilty. Though Lane had immunity, the state charged him with perjury for lying about not being with the Ipalook sisters on the night of their deaths. He plead no contest.

No one has been successfully prosecuted for the murders.

Wright Stevens is, at times, unsparing in the details of the Ipalook crime scene, though her search for truth and justice prevails. Greater clarity around her writing process and sourcing would be appreciated, as there is heavy use of quoted dialogue.

Lane died in 2022 in a police shoot-out. Wright Stevens later discovered an earlier interview with him and his sister on a podcast about murdered and missing Indigenous women. When Lane was asked what would bring him peace about his mother's death, he said he would like to bury his mother and father side by side.

"In his last years, what Amos wanted was to put back together the family he lost at fourteen," Wright Stevens writes. "I cried for him." ■

What Monitor book reviewers like best this month.

FICTION

Children of Wolves

by Lawrence Osborne

Lawrence Osborne's fiction revolves around travelers losing their way in foreign lands. In his latest novel, an American private investigator gets out of his depth while on an assignment in Istanbul to locate a billionaire's runaway daughter. He befriends a group of young radicals and uncovers a dark conspiracy. It's a gripping psychological thriller rich in intrigue and drama.

Nearshore

by Steve Hawk

Steve Hawk's debut novel is a modern apocalyptic thriller, featuring an unlikely trio: a California surfer, an orphaned teenager, and a math genius. The mathematics doctoral student is trying to convince authorities that a Silicon Valley billionaire is plotting domestic nuclear terrorism. Featuring seascape settings and insightful dialogue, this coastal noir tale delivers important ideas with a courageous heart.

Sunlight Finds You

by Laura Moriarty

Laura Moriarty explores the stages of womanhood in a story set in Florida at the start of the Cold War. Main character Nora Chesnow reflects on her turbulent teenage years while navigating a surprise pregnancy. The harrowing experience teaches her lessons in love, trust, resilience, and forgiveness as she fights for the right to make decisions about her own body. Between moments of deep sadness and heartbreak, she does find sunlight and hope.

Astronaut!

by Oana Aristide

The absurdities and tragedies of daily life in dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania roar from the page in Oana Aristide's irresistible debut. Nine-year-old Lia – artistic, outspoken, and forever in trouble – hatches a plot to convince her country's Dear Leader to return color to their austere world. A stalwart police detective tracks a far-ranging serial killer, even as the media blames a fictitious bear for the (neither grizzly nor particularly grisly) deaths. Aristide deftly brings her parallel storylines ever-closer until lives converge in the satisfying finale. Truth, dignity, reason, individuality: All feel a bit more precious – and fragile – by the novel's close.

The Camino

by Anya Niewierra, translated by Eileen Stevens

In this Dutch bestseller, chocolatier and mother Lotte Bonnet heads to France to hike the Camino de Santiago in the wake of her husband's apparent suicide on the trail. Nearly as shocking as his abrupt death is the news that he had been lying to the family for decades; the real Emil Jukić disappeared after a Bosnian War massacre in 1995. While retracing his route, revisiting photos, and dredging her memories for clues to his distress, Lotte encounters dangers and pushes her limits. As the action alternates between Lotte's adventure and Emil's childhood in the former Yugoslavia,

twists abound. So, too, do insights into lives riven by ethno-religious antagonism. It's a winner.

Time to Burn

by Ellery Lloyd

This time-travel mystery takes ultra-wealthy "time tourists" back to 1941 London, at the height of the Blitz. When Phoebe Hunt, a documentarian for Tempus Tours, discovers that a real estate heiress who didn't return from a journey is actually a suspicious woman from Phoebe's past, Phoebe races to stop history from being rewritten. The stakes are high. People she knows are endangered. Ellery Lloyd's story cleverly examines ethical issues with smartly drawn characters.

A Stranger in Corfu

by Alex Preston

This thriller centers on disgraced or damaged agents of Britain's MI6 intelligence service who have been exiled to a remote Greek island. Young agent Nina is recuperating in Corfu after a botched mission in the Balkans, but the idyllic landscape darkens when an agent is murdered. As the past catches up with the present, secrets and betrayals emerge with dangerous consequences. The storytelling will keep readers rapt.

NONFICTION

Liberation Summer: The Moment That Changed the Women's Movement and the Future of American Politics

by Micki McElya

The 1968 Miss America Pageant and the concurrent Miss Black America Pageant are seldom thought of as critical to the formation of the modern women's movement. But historian Micki McElya delves into forgotten events that illuminate this vital story. Her research shows how the struggle to reconcile conflicting factions and form a collective challenge to oppressive beauty standards gained strength. The episode also gave rise to iconic figures such as Anita Bryant, Phyllis Schlafly, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem.

Mothers of Invention: A History of Creativity From the Greek Muses

by Moira McTier

At a time when many people value artificial intelligence more than the arts, and celebrity more than science, Moira McTier explores the annals of human innovation. Blending whimsy with historical accuracy, she examines innovative contributions through the eyes of the nine Muses, the divine daughters of Greek mythology who were once believed to inspire mortals. Drawing from the Muses' imagined journals, the book explores such cultural breakthroughs as Shakespeare, electricity, and jazz. It underscores what society would lose without inspired creative thought.

Daylight Come: Harry Belafonte and the World He Made

by Joshua Jelly-Schapiro

This admiring biography of Harry Belafonte captures the epic sweep of the long life of the entertainer and activist, who died in 2023. Born in Harlem to Caribbean immigrants, Belafonte achieved success in the 1950s – unprecedented for a Black singer and actor. Jelly-Schapiro demonstrates that the charismatic star, who shared a deep friendship with Martin Luther King Jr., was most interested in using his fame and wealth to advance the Civil Rights Movement.

The People's Historian: The Outsized Life of Howard Zinn

by Dave Zirin

Dave Zirin's rousing biography of Howard Zinn explains how the activist-historian, born to impoverished Jewish immigrants in Brooklyn in 1922, developed the radical beliefs that informed his bestselling 1980 classic, "A People's History of the United States." The seminal book presented a bottom-up view of American history, and Zinn, who lived well into his 80s, never lost faith that small acts of grassroots social struggle have the power to change the world.

The Rise and Fall of the Artificial State

by Jill Lepore

Inspired by Hannah Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism," a 1951 work in which the philosopher drew parallels between the rise of automation and totalitarianism, historian Jill Lepore points to a similar relationship between today's Big Tech industry and threats to individual liberty. Her book offers few specific solutions, but the range of her learning and her gift for historical anecdote prove engaging.

Courage Can Save US: Ten Extraordinary Americans and the Fight for Our Future

by Rye Barcott

Rye Barcott, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and co-founder of With Honor, shares 10 examples of current government leaders (most of whom are veterans) who have had the courage to choose partisanship under pressure. The book examines how dedication to good governance rather than personal agenda has resulted in cooperation across party lines. Published the year of the United States' 250th birthday and ahead of a potentially consequential midterm election, the book comes as a timely example and warning to a country that Barcott says needs saving from its own internal dissension.

IN PICTURES

Take me out to the really old ballgame

Story by Kelenna Onukwugha / Staff writer

NEWBURY, MASSACHUSETTS

They pitch lofty underhands instead of fastballs, wear no gloves, and follow the score scrawled on a big green chalkboard. Welcome to the competitive league of vintage base ball – note, two words – played according to rules used in Massachusetts in the 1864 version of the game.

For many years now, members of the Essex Base Ball Organization have gathered at Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm in Newbury to compete in period-accurate uniforms. The daughters of player Jason Andree enjoy being scorekeepers.

"It's pretty cool watching ... a game from the past come to life," says 12-year-old Tess Andree, who sits in a lawn chair shaded by the large scoreboard behind her. She talks between sips of flavored seltzer water as her 8-year-old sister, Piper, skips by.

Each team in the organization is based on an actual base ball

team that played in the Bay State in the 19th century. The league consists of the Lynn Live Oaks, the Newburyport Clamdiggers, the Lowell Base Ball Nine, the Essex Base Ball Club, and the Portsmouth Rockinghams.

On this day, Lowell faces Portsmouth in a doubleheader. There are no bleachers, so spectators set up lawn chairs encircling the field. A vintage base ball game can be played in roughly 90 minutes, compared with the average Major League Baseball one, which lasts about two hours and 45 minutes.

One player, Tom Soare, described the vintage sport as a cross between a softball game and a Civil War reenactment. He and some of his teammates have grown out what he calls "Civil War-era accurate" beards.

Sporting the most memorable beard of all was Jeff "Graybeard" Peart, the team's longtime official umpire. After his death in 2024, some players began wearing black pins with his silhouette on them to pay homage. They say he called a fair game, and remember him fondly for the vintage black suit and top hat he wore on the field, and of course, for his signature long beard.

Now, the game operates on an honor system. Players call their own outs and referee the game. They maintain a friendly energy, though some calls are lightly debated. Ultimately, the day isn't about winning or losing. "If you see a guy on a different team make a good play, you're going to clap," says Robert Nichols, who has attended nearly every game since 2013. "That makes it more enjoyable because you don't have any skin in the game," he adds, stroking his Chihuahua Ellie in the lawn chair they share.

The league's fans like the fun, relaxing atmosphere, says Brian Sheehy, a former history teacher who serves as president of the Essex Base Ball Organization. And it doesn't hurt that the price of admission tops off at just \$5 per person.

"You have your baseball enthusiasts; you have your history enthusiasts who come," says Mr. Sheehy. "It does feel like a community around the ballfield." ■

Crossword

ACROSS

1. Dish for frying
4. Bottom lines?
8. Dotty
12. Before this moment
13. Dashing style
14. Handel bars?
15. Grass over
16. 1970s coif
17. Man, briefly
18. Turned right
20. Baby branch
22. Afternoon brew
24. Hammer type
28. Emergence
32. Whale food
33. Mail HQ
34. ____ Largo
36. Chewing or bubble
37. Laundry units
40. Reads with care
43. Charm

45. Leader's position

46. Small numbers

48. Yard sale proviso

51. Other half

54. Flash ____ (impromptu gatherings)

56. ____-matrix printer

58. At any point

59. Amend

60. ____-di-dah

61. Storm centers

62. Cereal contents

63. ____ out (manage)

.....

DOWN

1. Dance step
2. Eager plus
3. Little bump
4. Soccer shot

5. Grimm shoe-maker

6. Shopping site

7. Winter blankets?

8. Footnote indicator

9. Exist en masse

10. Old Cadillac feature

11. Create knotted lace

19. And so on

21. Same kind

23. Definitely fine

25. Makes holes

26. Adhesive

27. Colonnade trees

28. Australian golfer Brett

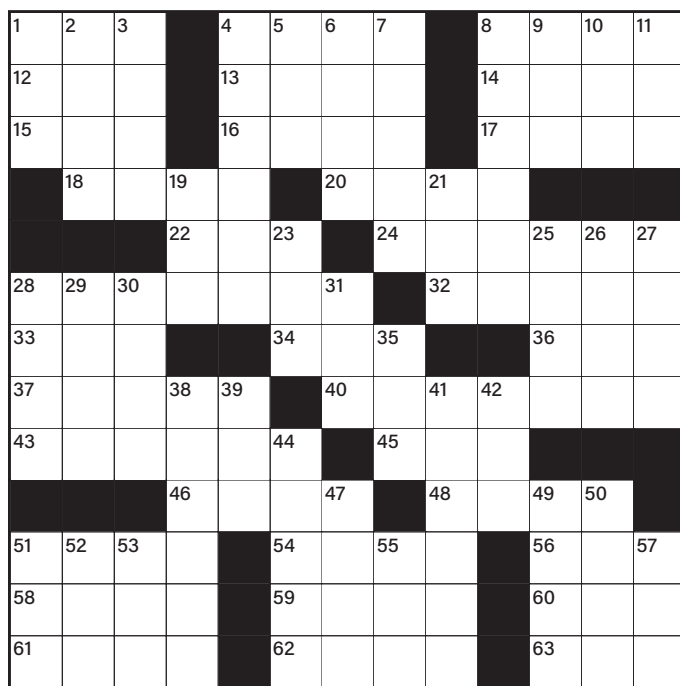
29. Once ____ a time

30. Creek croaker

31. High energy

35. Besides

38. Forestalls



© Lovatts Puzzles

39. Hand tool

41. Prepares marshmallows

42. Grown-____

44. Friend of Mercurio

47. Fizzy pop

49. Dillydally

50. Immerse in liquid

51. Teeny tiny

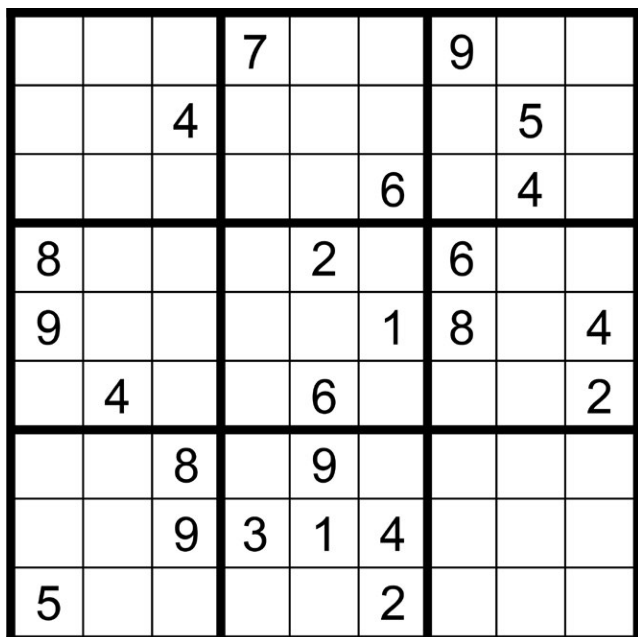
52. Princeton's League

53. Charge levied

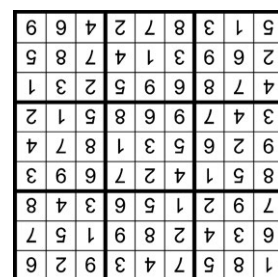
55. Drill insert

57. Common title start

Sudoku difficulty: ★★★☆



Crossword and Sudoku solutions



How to do Sudoku

Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once in each column, row, and three-by-three block.