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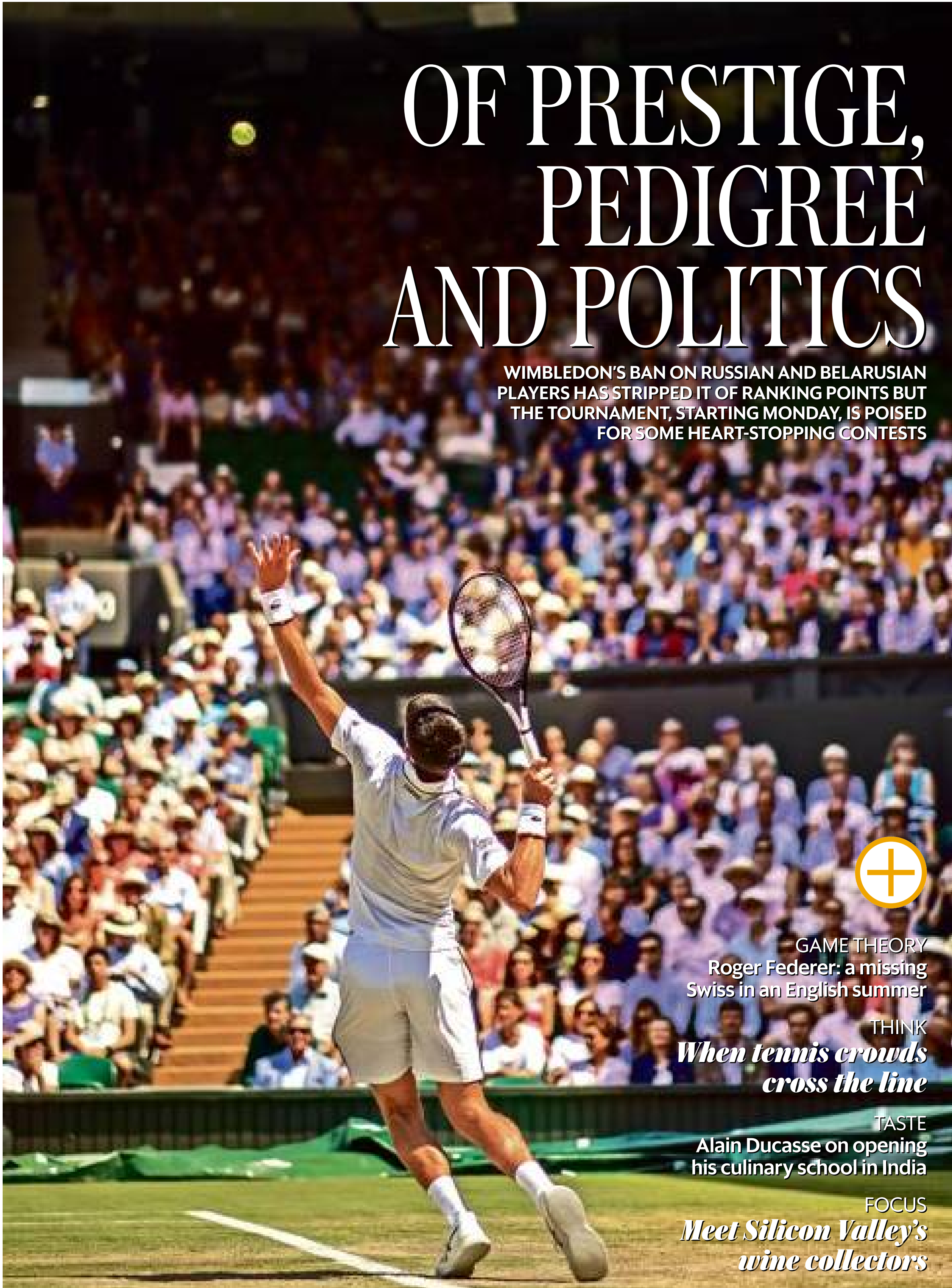
lounge

SATURDAY, JUNE 25 2022

LETTING BOTS DO THE TALKING

Aakrit Vaish, co-founder and CEO of Haptik, shares insights on the coming of age of conversational AI, backing from the Reliance Group, and sizing up the competition as the company plans for the future in what he describes as the 'scale-up' phase.

SEE PAGE 12



OF PRESTIGE,  
PEDIGREE  
AND POLITICS

WIMBLEDON'S BAN ON RUSSIAN AND BELARUSIAN PLAYERS HAS STRIPPED IT OF RANKING POINTS BUT THE TOURNAMENT, STARTING MONDAY, IS POISED FOR SOME HEART-STOPPING CONTESTS



GAME THEORY

Roger Federer: a missing Swiss in an English summer

THINK

*When tennis crowds cross the line*

TASTE

Alain Ducasse on opening his culinary school in India

FOCUS

*Meet Silicon Valley's wine collectors*



A NOTE FROM  
THE EDITOR

SHALINI UMACHANDRAN

It's Wimbledon,  
it's special



We have to admit it. We are a bit partial to Roger Federer at *Lounge*. Full-time writers, columnists or contributors, we tend to be Federer fans, and with Wimbledon set to start, it will be hard to go through the season without thinking about his many wins, and losses, and the sheer beauty of his game. As *Lounge* columnist and *Straits Times*’ writer Rohit Brijnath puts it, “Wimbledon is Federer’s surface and his tribe.”

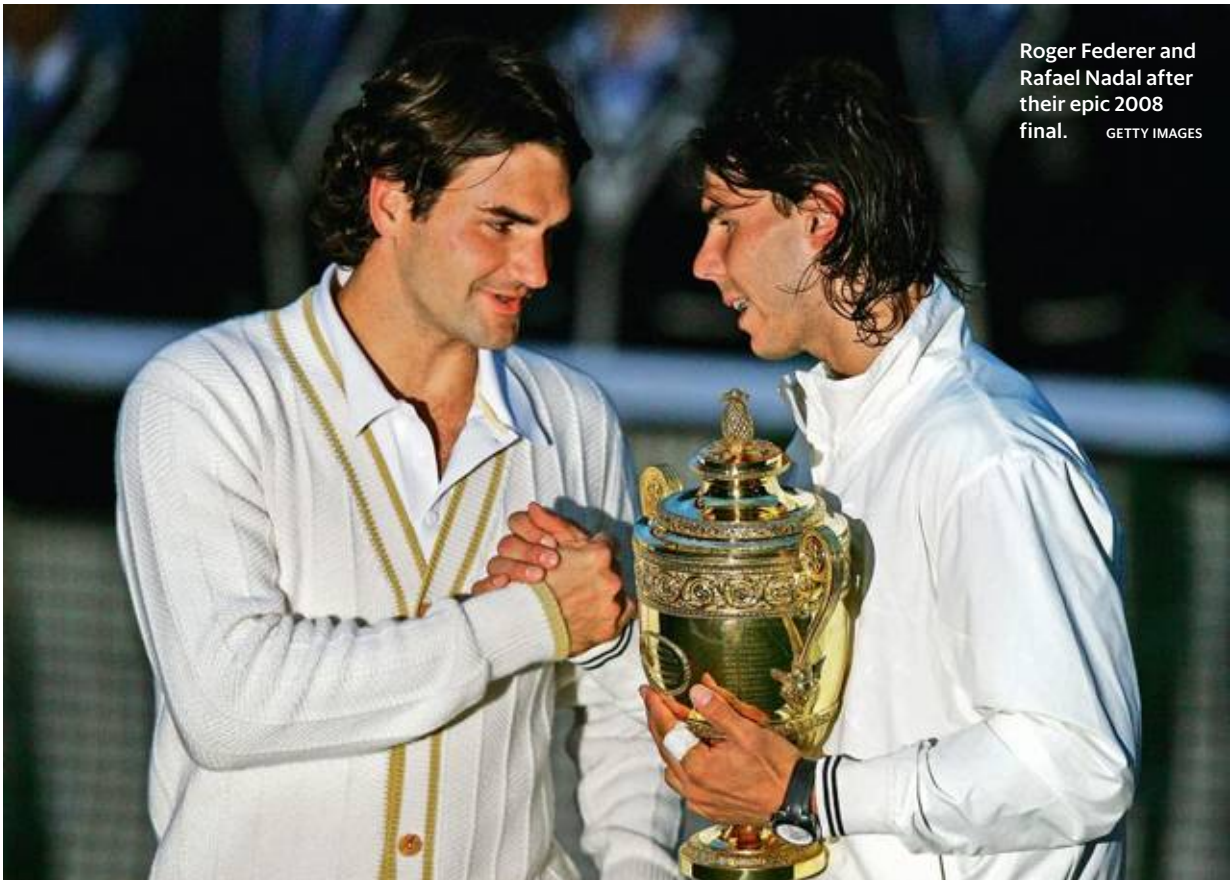
Federer may not be playing this year but Wimbledon is a fixture on any tennis fan’s calendar, much like the *Lounge* Wimbledon special is on ours. This year, Centre Court turns 100, making it even more special. The winners could be a surprise, too, since the era of the dominance of Federer, Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic and Serena Williams seems to be drawing to a close. Yet, in the men’s singles, Nadal and defending champion Djokovic might still be the ones to beat. Both are in their mid-30s, and Nadal is dealing with what could be a career-ending injury, but the younger players haven’t spent enough time on grass to understand it, as one of our stories observes. The women’s game seems beset with similar concerns: Overwhelming favourite and top-seeded Iga Świątek, who won the women’s French Open title earlier this month, will also be making the tricky switch from clay to grass. Serena Williams wasn’t expected to play but has made a wild-card entry—will she make an incredible comeback or could this be her farewell?

This issue is all about tennis—from fashion and film to the on-court action—but there is also plenty for those with no interest in the game. We have an interview with legendary chef Alain Ducasse, who recently opened the India arm of his Ecole Ducasse culinary institute. He’s known for his farm-to-fork practices and is hoping to teach the concepts to a new generation of chefs in India. We also meet Silicon Valley entrepreneurs of Indian origin who have turned wine collectors, building up cellars with thousands of bottles of the world’s most expensive wines.

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@shalinimib

A WIMBLEDON WATCHLIST

As Lounge’s favourite tennis Grand Slam starts, some streaming recommendations



Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal after their epic 2008 final. GETTY IMAGES

STROKES OF GENIUS, 2018

Whether or not he is playing, no current viewer of tennis can go through the Wimbledon season without thinking of Roger Federer, his many victories, and subsequent losses at SW19. The latter, mostly in the context of Rafael Nadal. *Strokes Of Genius*, directed by Andrew Douglas, came out a decade after their epic final in 2008, regarded widely as one of the best matches in tennis history. Based on a 2010 book of the same name by sports journalist L. Jon Wertheim, the documentary takes the match as a framing device to talk about the lives of two of the greatest tennis players of all time and their long rivalry—superb viewing for anyone even vaguely interested in tennis. It was on Discovery Plus for some time but now the only recourse is the many snippets of it on various accounts of the Tennis Channel online. If you look a little, there is a helpful user-made playlist of the snippets. (*YouTube*)



GIVING UP THE GUN, 2010

An unlikely inclusion in this list but this music video from Vampire Weekend’s 2010 album, *Contra*, not only begins with every tennis lover’s favourite sound—the resonant slam of the ball against a racket’s strings—it also features a fun, stylised indoor tennis match. In it, a young woman faces various opponents—cameos played by celebrities, including a dismissive Joe Jonas (of the Jonas Brothers) and a drunk Jake Gyllenhaal (the actor). Directed by the Grammy-winning duo Emmett and Brendan Malloy, the video seems to capture the message that most sportspeople keep in mind: the need to overcome all rivals—especially oneself. (*YouTube*)



TENNIS MOMENTS IN LEGO

It isn’t hard-court season yet but this is as good a time as any to revisit animator Jared Jacobs’ stop-motion videos for the US Open. Made entirely from customised LEGO sets, the five under-30-second clips (all compiled on the US Open’s Facebook Page) recreate iconic moments from the Slam’s history. This includes the match point in American doubles players’ Mike and Bob Bryans’ 100th career title (*shown above*) and Federer’s “tweener” shot against Novak Djokovic. Jacobs used the original commentary and on-court audio and ensured that the LEGO action was in sync with the briefest of sounds—including the stray second of a racket touching the ground. (*Facebook, YouTube*)



KING RICHARD, 2021

This is a no-brainer. A biopic based on Serena and Venus Williams’ initial days, when their father Richard coached them—as he says in the film—with a 78-page plan for their career. While we know about the sisters’ dominance of the game, the movie explores Venus’ trajectory more than it does Serena’s. Will Smith, who played Richard in this film, directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green and written by Zach Baylin, won the Academy Award for Best Actor for this role. Venus and Serena Williams, listed as executive producers on the film, are quoted as having said that the film is as close to reality as possible. (*Apple TV, Google Play Movies*)



‘IF’ BY RUDYARD KIPLING, READ BY FEDERER, NADAL

In 2008, BBC got Federer and Nadal to read a bit of this iconic poem. As they alternate stanzas, the famous lines, “*if you can meet with Triumph and Disaster/ and treat those two impostors just the same*”—engraved in the players’ entry to Wimbledon’s Centre Court—fall to Nadal’s lot. Federer ends the reading with the poem’s last verse: “*If you can fill the unforgiving minute/ With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run/ Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it/ And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!*” In retrospect, it seems poignant, given his loss after a four-hour, 48-minute marathon final that year. (*YouTube*)

Compiled by Vangmayi Parakala.

LOUNGE  
ONLINE

YOUR  
FAVOURITE  
WEEKEND READ  
NOW THROUGH  
THE WEEK

The best of **Mintlounge.in** from the week gone by and what to look forward to in the one ahead



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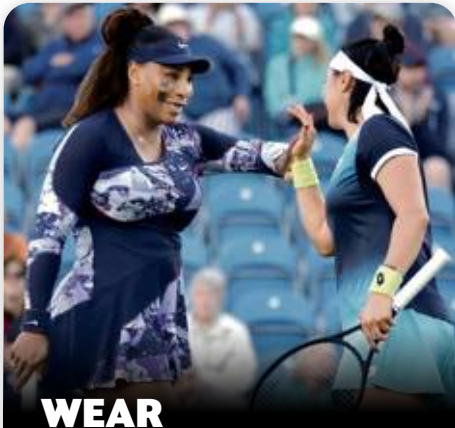
READ

Wimbledon: time for a new champion

As we edge closer to Wimbledon, it seems extraordinary that 16 of the last 18 men’s singles titles have gone to the Big 3 of tennis in this millennium—Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal. Federer and Djokovic have shared 14 titles, and Nadal snatched two, even though his preferred surface is the slow red clay of Roland Garros. Federer is not playing this year. Djokovic remains the favourite and Nadal is seeded second but it’s the best chance in two decades for a new champion to lift the trophy, writes Sumit Chakrabarty. The odds are on Wimbledon having a new winner, whether it is Alcaraz or Auger-Aliassime, Norrie or Berrettini.



In News >> Big Story



WEAR

The tennis skirt as a style statement

It’s not just the tennis that’s in focus at Wimbledon every year, fashion is too. And one of the outfits that has seamlessly made the shift from court to daily wear is the tennis skirt. Popular for its pleats and short hemline, it can be traced all the way back to the Victorian era. Designers love playing with the little pleats and the length, teens as well as young women find it an easy-to-wear, day-to-night outfit, and fast fashion brands capitalise on its popularity season after season. The tennis skirt has become an all-occasion staple and can be paired with strappy sandals, a mini bag and a crop top for a comfortable yet stylish look, writes Samridhi Raj.



In Fashion >> Trends



VIEW

Jennifer Lopez, the insider-outsider

Lo is striving consistently, even at 50, but not quite getting her due. A new documentary, *Halftime*, paints the actor and musician as a hard-working outsider still awaiting recognition. Director Amanda Micheli skillfully uses clips from talk shows, news reports and TV shows as well as Lopez’s own disarming frankness to prove that Hollywood cannot look beyond her image as a sexualised pop star. *Halftime*’s strength is its ability to create empathy for Lopez, one of the most successful artists in the world, showing that she is still fighting to be taken seriously despite all that she is; actress, singer, dancer, Latina, writes Angela Mathew.



In How To Lounge >> Movies & TV



LOVE

Pets can change your marriage too

Tired of fending off the constant nagging from their relatives to have a child, a young working couple, Atul and Aditi, decide to adopt—pets. What they hadn’t expected was the way their fur babies would impact their relationship. This is roughly the premise of *Pet Puraan*, a Marathi series on SonyLIV that touches on a question modern couples grapple with: What does “a complete family” mean? Rashmi Menon speaks to pet parents, including the show’s director, and learns how pets change the dynamics between couples. Most pet-parents do admit, however, that pets have brought positive energy into their homes



In Relationships >> Pets



# A missing Swiss in an English summer



This is a long time ago in Melbourne. A wedding reception is in full noisy swing. On a trolley in an alcove a TV is on. A man is playing tennis. The groom is enraptured. The father of the bride looks on. A question is occasionally asked: How far will you go for an athlete? Into the kitchen of a strange place evidently. My daughter picked the date of her wedding and only later did her partner, a tennis fan, realise it was the 2010 Australian Open men’s final day. So a little creativity was warranted. Staff was spoken to, a large TV found in the kitchen, and the set dragged into an alcove. Every set between whisky and dances we would sneak in—the reporter, he the fan—to watch a game. There is no point to this story except to say that my daughter is lovely. And also that she understood. Roger Federer was playing. Tennis was still Federer’s stage. He beat Andy Murray that Sunday but over the next six-and-a-half years won only a single other Slam. Decline is an idea, till it suddenly occurs. Now as Wimbledon begins, there is a hole in the draw. For the first time in 23 years, it will be summer without him. The sound of the tennis will be different. On grass his game sounded like a silenced gun does in the movies. I interviewed snooker champion Ronnie O’Sullivan recently and he, a natural himself, said he prefers tennis the Federer way and offered precisely that sound effect: “Pfft, pfft, pfft, pfft.” “Fast, quick, simple, elegant.” Wimbledon is Federer’s surface and his tribe. His game is built for “oohs”. His tidy conceit suits the place. His manners fit. He politely even sweats less. It is all past tense. Like nature, sport replenishes itself. Talent withers, Carlos Alcaraz comes. Everyone runs out of



Roger Federer plays a backhand in his semi-final match against Novak Djokovic at the 2016 Australian Open at Melbourne Park.

GETTY IMAGES

skill and is replaced. No one paints their TVs black in protest, but for genius there is a little yearning. It’s a one-year anniversary of the 6-0 set and imagine if it’s the last set Federer played at Wimbledon? The 6-0 score was what he doled out, his racket riffing like a jazz guitarist. Ten times at Wimbledon he had 6-0 sets and then last year a risotto-eating, over-tall Pole named Hubert Hurkacz does it to him. Hurkacz idolised Federer once but in sport awe doesn’t mean mercy. Federer played in the main draw of Wimbledon more times than any other Slam: 22 appearances, 12 finals, eight

titles. Built for grass, you would say, except three of his first four challenges ended in the first round. In his first year, 1999, he, No.103, met Jiří Novák, No.59, and the Czech uttered a line that should be preserved forever. When he discovered Federer was his rival, this was what Novák thought: “What a great draw.” But in 2001 it took a champion to recognise one. Defeat by Federer turned Pete Sampras into a believer. Five times in his post-loss press conference he said, “I give him credit.” A question was asked, “There are other Roger Federers out there, as you well know. Jim Courier says they’re coming out of the wood-

Federer, who did a fair bit of winning, was never only about winning. And what that something else was is undefinable really because beauty mostly is

work....,” and Sampras offered a clarification. “Well, sure, there are a lot of young guys coming up, and Roger is one of them. But I think he’s a little extra special than some of the other guys.” Federer confirmed that with grass-court titles in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, losing eight sets in those five years. Soon flattery littered the premises. A reporter started a question to Jonas Björkman by saying, “Looking for weaknesses in Federer is like looking for flaws in Mother Teresa...” Jimmy Connors would have snarled and sent spittle arcing towards Federer’s pristine shoes, but in Wimbledon even rivals shrug and joke about Federer because

they like him. Björkman gets four games in the 2006 semi-finals and has a question for his rival later. “I just asked him how he felt, if he saw the ball like a bowling—what do you call it—like a bowling ball or a basketball ball. He said, yes, it was almost like that.” Andy Roddick, who wins a set off Federer in the 2004 final, had made jokes about plumbing equipment—“I threw the kitchen sink at him, but he went to the bathroom and got his tub”—which led to this exchange at a press conference. Reporter: “If he hit you with his bathtub, do you have to go get like a water heater or something?” Roddick: “I was thinking fridge.” But then from 2008-21 Federer won only three Wimbledon titles and this decline was as telling. One year when he played Novak Djokovic, a grown man watched him from the stands with the crossed fingers of a child. It didn’t work. He couldn’t beat Djokovic, not once in three finals in 2014, 2015 and 2019, and it wounded him, made him cry, made him say in 2019 when he let go match points: “I don’t know what I feel right now. I just feel like it’s such an incredible opportunity missed, I can’t believe it.” As the years pass, we have gotten old with him. This year my son-in-law will be with me in Singapore during Wimbledon and we will laugh about his wedding day. Federer’s name will come up. Commentators will discuss his age (40). Cameras will linger on the winners’ board. Footage of past glories will appear on rainy days. Then a match will resume and the present will outweigh everything. The Swiss may return there but he will never win there. Now people don’t even say “you never know”. And yet Federer, who did a fair bit of winning, was never only about winning. And what that something else was is undefinable really because beauty mostly is. You need to see it and now we won’t.

Rohit Brijnath is an assistant sports editor at The Straits Times, Singapore, and a co-author of Abhinav Bindra’s book A Shot At History: My Obsessive Journey To Olympic Gold.

@rohitdbrijnath

## Medium Talk

More than small talk

## Learn to slow down

HEART OF THE MATTER

A fortnightly column about emotional well-being

When we slow down, we can give our body and our loved ones the gift of presence

Sonali Gupta

Over the weekend, my husband, who loves cooking, decided to treat us to *dal makhani*, which he slow-cooked for 12 hours. He says this is a dish that needs time for the flavours and the texture to set to the optimal level. The result does show. It’s one of those dishes we absolutely love and is so much richer than any restaurant-ordered *dal makhani* or one that’s prepared at home over an evening. When we were eating with friends and family, a friend asked, “What’s the secret ingredient for this delicious *dal*?” As we were telling the friend that it was slow-cooked, I realised that the entire process of slow simmering and cooking is a beautiful reminder of what makes friendships, relationships, even the process of therapy, work. Slow cooking requires patience, curiosity and a belief that the result will be worth the wait. Whether it’s our relationships or personal insights, if we allow them time to unfold gradually, allow ourselves to slow our pace and maybe let the feelings evoked marinate us, we find our own answers and the secret to what makes it work. This process of choosing to be intentionally slow is one of the most underestimated skills when it comes to personal growth, relationships, even professional success. Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, introduced us to the concept of immediate gratification and pleasure. Years later, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that we live in an age of instant gratification—whether it’s in the form of accelerated intimacy, food delivery options or even our patience when it comes to messages or



The need for speed can often leave us feeling overwhelmed and anxious.

ISTOCKPHOTO

emails. While fast and prompt services in the context of medical emergencies, ambulance access make sense, we need to ask if we have over-extended this to our relationships and personal insights in the name of optimising our lives. Our need to be productive, multitask and constantly be on top of things impacts the speed and pace with which we do various things on a single day. This need for speed can often leave us feeling overwhelmed, wired and anxious. Even when things are going right and one is peaking at a personal and professional level, there is still a risk of being overwhelmed and overstimulated. This can tire us out and stop us from savouring the moment. From a workplace perspective, I hear more and more clients tell me what a 38-year-old client mentioned: “At 11am, I get an email which is far from urgent, by 11.15am there is a WhatsApp message on my phone about it and now multiply this by 10-12 people on a daily basis, this leaves me dysregulated and I don’t know what can be done.” The constant availability myth is an extension of our need for quick turnarounds and shorter response times when it comes to others—and ourselves.

Social media and technology have added to this. We are confusing bite-sized Instagram posts about human behaviour with therapy. We are forgetting that the process of neuroplasticity and bringing about long-term change requires time, coming to peace with why old patterns don’t serve a purpose, and an emotional deepening of new insights, before one can embody the insights and live them. Learning to discern and recognise which areas of our life require us to be slow is the first step. Building trust is a slow process, our ability to share personal vulnerabilities with a loved one takes time and space. When you travel on vacation or spend three-four hours with a loved one, conversations deepen and are far richer than a quick coffee catch-up or an online catch-up. When we slow down, we can give our body and our loved ones the gift of presence. As American psychiatrist Bruce Perry says, “When you learn how to slow down, you go further.” Sonali Gupta is a Mumbai-based clinical psychologist. She is the author of the book Anxiety: Overcome It And Live Without Fear and has a YouTube channel, Mental Health with Sonali.



Manchester City have signed striker Erling Haaland.

## Time to be on the ball

Here are some reliable sources to follow for accurate updates on football player transfers

Nitin Sreedhar  
nitin.s@htlive.com

The summer transfer window for the Premier League, arguably the biggest football league in the world, opened on 10 June. This marks the frenzy period when teams around the globe—the window for some European leagues opens in July—get set for the new season. Players are sold, bought, sent out on, or recalled from, loan spells. Transfer records often get shattered, with billions of dollars spent in search of the next star. Some big deals have already been sealed. While Liverpool completed the transfer of Uruguayan Darwin Núñez, 22, from Benfica for a deal worth up to €100 million (around ₹820 crore), Manchester City have bought Erling Haaland, 21, from German club Borussia Dortmund for £51 million (around ₹480 crore). There’s still a long time to go before the transfer window shuts on 1 September. To help you navigate the transfer season, here’s a list of some reliable sources

known for their accurate updates from the footballing world. **FABRIZIO ROMANO** Italian journalist Fabrizio Romano’s expertise goes beyond just football player transfers. He also shares regular and accurate updates on managerial appointments and player contract extensions. Be it a mid-table club in Turkey, one of the powerhouse clubs in the Premier League or clubs from the Spanish La Liga, Romano has transfer updates from all across Europe. He has close to 8.6 million followers on his Twitter handle @FabrizioRomano and more than 945,000 subscribers on YouTube. Romano is also a regular contributor to *The Guardian*, where he writes behind-the-scenes stories on how a particular transfer shaped up. He also hosts The Here We Go Podcast with fellow sports journalist Francesco Porzio. When Romano says the three magic words “Here we go”, you know a transfer will definitely go through. **TRANSFER CENTRE LIVE** Sky Sports’ Transfer Centre Live is a scrolling feed that keeps getting updated. Breaking news transfer deals and updates are highlighted on bright yellow backgrounds. Different logos are used interestingly. A confirmed deal often car-

ries the logo of a handshake. If it’s just a news update—Sky Sports calls it “Paper Talk”—you see a newspaper logo next to it. Updates are also interspersed with analytical pieces, comments and opinion from Sky Sports journalists and regular polls for readers. That’s not all. You can also see transfer news roundups, compiled from different sources, and gossip about different clubs on this feed. **TRANSFER INTERACTIVE** If you like a combination of numbers and an interactive format to understand football transfers, then try *The Guardian’s* Transfer Interactive. You can find details on all the summer’s Premier League, La Liga, Bundesliga, Ligue 1 and Serie A deals and a club-by-club guide, everything in one place. You can look at deals league-wise, recency, or even sort them based on the transfer fee or price paid for a particular player. Right at the top of this section, you see a live count of the total number of deals completed and the value of money spent on transfers. When you switch to the club-by-club guide, you can see all the ins and outs of a team, plus a transfer balance figure. This is basically what you call a “net spend”—how much a club eventually spends after selling and buying players in the transfer window.



# Source

A compendium of beautiful objects for tennis season



**CROSS-COURT**  
**Cariuma OCA Low Green Canvas**  
Sustainable sneaker brand Cariuma's signature sneaker OCA is crafted from organic cotton, natural rubber and recycled plastics, with a vegan insole. Available on [Cariuma.com](#); \$79 (around ₹6,185)

**LOVE ALL**  
**EleVen By Venus Williams Victory Tennis Dress**  
Super stylish tennis dress featuring a zip-front closure, an open lower back detail and a side slit that provides four-way stretch, making it court-ready. Available on [Elevenbyvenuswilliams.com](#); \$148



**APPROACH SHOT**  
**Leather-trimmed Shearling Bag Charm**  
Take your style game a notch higher with Anya Hindmarch's bag charm, strung on a slim leather strap and made from plush shearling. Available on [Net-a-porter.com](#); \$366.54

*Curated by Shrabonti Bagchi.*



**MATCH POINT**  
**Tory Burch Convertible Stripe Tennis Tote**  
Canvas carry-all with a removable racket pocket and an interior zip pocket to store clothes or shoes to take you from court to after-party. Available on [Toryburch.com](#); \$398



**PASSING SHOT**  
**Hand-drawn Court T-Shirt**  
From the official Wimbledon merch store, a 100% cotton tee with a hand-drawn court graphic in classic Wimbledon colours of green and purple. Available on [Shop.Wimbledon.com](#); ₹3,500

**ADVANTAGE GREEN**  
**Wand Faux-leather Shoulder Bag**  
Stand studio's signature Wanda shoulder bag is characterised by a quilted design crafted from vegan leather. Available on [Farfetch.com](#); \$545



## LOUNGE LOVES

Things to watch, read, hear, do—and other curated experiences from the team

### ART THAT MAKES YOU THINK

It first came across the Instagram page Art of Resistance in May, when Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh was shot dead by Israeli forces. An acquaintance had shared powerful posts from it on her social media accounts. As I scrolled, I realised the page had a curated mix of memes, cartoon strips, paintings, illustrations, images of art installations and movements related to resistance worldwide. These ranged from an installation related to the school shootouts in the US to an illustration expressing solidarity with the Sri Lankan people, and an artwork related to the recent bulldozing of activist Afreen Fatima's home in India. One of my favourite works from Varunika Saraf's *We, The People* series, in which the artist uses embroidery to chart an alternative timeline for the nation, was there too. It is undoubtedly a page that makes you think.

—Avantika Bhuyan



### DISCOVERING NEW SOUNDS

I am a passive listener of music. On morning walks, I randomly select something on Spotify. For the past few days, though, I have been listening to Japanese-American pop star Hikaru Utada's album *Bad Mode*, which released in January. They have been around for over two decades but I discovered them after watching their studio concert, *Hikaru Utada: Live Sessions From AIR Studios*, on Netflix. Utada, who identifies as non-binary, switches effortlessly between Japanese and English. The lyrics touch on love and loss; the music has a dance vibe—the kind where you want to hum along. *Hope I don't f\*\*\* it up again*, they sing in *Bad Mode*. In *Face My Fear*, they say: *Breath, should I take a deep? Faith, should I take a leap?*—how can you not nod in agreement? Spotify is suggesting *Tokyo Super Hits* now. Yes, it's a rabbit hole.

—Nipa Charagi

### A PIECE OF TENNIS HISTORY

As Wimbledon's Centre Court turns 100, the All England Lawn Tennis Association & Croquet Club has launched 10 NFTs (non-fungible tokens), each capturing a decade's worth of moments on it. I have two favourites. *High Contrast* (1980-89) has an image of the 1980 final between John McEnroe and Björn Borg. Anne White's controversial catsuit, and Pat Cash's 1987 "celebration in the stands", the first such, after he defeated Ivan Lendl. *The New Generation* (2000-09) has Goran Ivanišević as the iconic underdog. Pete Sampras' graceful backhand, the retractable roof installed in 2009...and an image that breaks the green-white-blue palette: a golden trophy in the hands of Roger Federer. An online ballot, open till 3 July, will decide if you can purchase each £500 (around ₹47,800) piece. On [Wimbledon.glorious.digital](#)

—Vangmayi Parakala



### MAGIC COMES TO HOLLYWOOD

Following the success of the documentary series *The Last Dance* (Netflix), a number of basketball titles have popped up on streaming platforms. The pick of the bunch is the series *Winning Time: The Rise Of The Lakers Dynasty* (Disney+ Hotstar), created by Max Borenstein and Jim Hecht for HBO, with the pilot directed by Adam McKay. Season 1 looks at the start of a fabled era at the Lakers, with Magic Johnson joining the team and Dr Jerry Buss remaking the franchise in his own flamboyant image. Like most McKay projects, there's plenty of manic editing and fourth-wall breaking, but the real fun is watching a terrific ensemble cuss its way through the 10 episodes: John C. Reilly as Buss, Quincy Isaiah as Magic, Solomon Hughes as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, along with Jason Clarke, Adrien Brody, Sally Field and Gaby Hoffmann.

—Uday Bhatia



STREAM OF STORIES  
RAJA SEN

## Unmarrying a billionaire



Maya Rudolph in 'Loot'.

Break out the caviar. A truly lavish comedy has landed, fittingly enough, on the wealthiest of streaming services. *Loot*—streaming on Apple TV+ from 24 June—casts the fantastic Maya Rudolph as the wife of a tech CEO who has just divorced her husband. This leaves her marooned amid more money than she—or, truly, anyone—knows what to do with.

The premise is as immense as the parallel is clear. The story of MacKenzie Scott is unique and inspirational. Scott, who got \$36 billion (around ₹2.8 trillion now) following her divorce with Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, has since emerged as one of the world's most active philanthropists, giving away her billions so enthusiastically—*Forbes* estimates \$12.5 billion in donations in less than two years—that she may single-handedly make up for several of Amazon's misdeeds.

A comedy series is the right vehicle for this unlikely narrative, which would likely be painfully sanctimonious as a drama. *Loot* is created by Alan Yang and Matt Hubbard, who also made Rudolph's rather special 2018 Amazon comedy, *Forever*. More pertinently, both were writers on Mike Schur's superb *Parks And Recreation*, a series *Loot* emulates more than one would expect. Is this heroic philanthropic narrative best suited to a gentle, even generic, workplace sitcom? I am not so sure.

Rudolph plays Molly Wells, formerly married to tech tycoon John Novak, his name bringing to mind the recently disgraced tennis legend. After walking out on Novak—played by Adam Scott, who stars in the most superlative of Apple TV+ shows, *Severance*—she finds herself unmoored, partying in exotic locations, mistaking bartenders for Sting and falling into swimming pools.

She is an unflattering news item. The famed David Chang may be her in-house chef but Molly takes most meals alone in her mansion while ignoring overtures from men like Malcolm Gladwell (he sends her *New Yorker* articles; she replies with exclamation marks). Hers is a life devoid of purpose—until she realises that there exists a charity foundation in her name, striving to help the unhoused people of Los Angeles.

Thrilled by the idea of having an office—and, importantly, having her newly Novak-free name on the door—Molly starts going to the foundation regardless of the unambiguous discouragement from the foundation leader, the intimidating, no-nonsense Sofia Salinas, played by Michaela Jaé Rodriguez. Molly's friend/aide Nicholas (Joel Kim Booster) is right behind her, while other inhabitants of the office include accountant Arthur (Nat Faxon) and Molly's distant cousin Howard (Ron Funches).

As workplace comedies go, *Loot* has an excellent ensemble: Rodriguez is strong as the boss-lady unimpressed by wealth, Booster is highly entertaining as the obsequious assistant—a Birkin-only bag-man, if you will—and few comedians can deliver a line quite like the delightful Ron Funches. Surprised his billionaire cousin might be dating someone he considers beneath her, he says she can have anyone she wants. "They'll probably make you a whole new Hemsworth," he promises. "Give him a Gosling head."

"Never give a man too much money, especially a nerd," says a character, skewering all technology moguls. Another hears the term "Black Twitter" and trying to find a counterpart, regrettably comes up with "White Facebook". When Molly dresses up for a gala and starts trying out an acceptance speech on Nicholas, he asks if she wrote that herself. "Look at me in this dress!" she exclaims, aghast. "Do I look like a writer?" Fair enough. Despite the good lines, the writers may be the problem. *Loot* doesn't engage with the premise's ideas and questions. It is pleasant but unmemorable, which is criminal when Rudolph is doing such striking work. She makes empathy thrillingly palpable. Molly Wells is aggressively, desperately engaging with real people, connecting, trying to be one of them, trying not to judge them. This is a far cry from her mega-wealthy girlfriends forever trying to make the air around them more rarefied, their table more exclusive, their lives more out-of-touch. (In an early scene, when Molly says her yacht should have a full-time crêpe chef, it is suggested that they find one going through a divorce, likely to have more time to make pancakes at sea.)

The show does have meaty ideas—the seductive power of big-ticket causes over less glamorous ones, for instance, or the ineffectuality of simply throwing money at problems—and it all builds up to a big philanthropic idea in the season finale, one that could well make *Loot* an essential comedy in the future. However, even this potentially high-concept revelation isn't exactly breaking new ground. The show would have been far richer had Molly had stumbled upon this within the first two-three episodes.

I am reminded of the 1994 film *Richie Rich*, where Macaulay Culkin took a bunch of kids back to his cartoonishly rich estate only for them to freak out at the fact that he had his very own McDonald's. Watching Rudolph go from giga-yacht to private jet, from Corsica to a dreamy candy room, feels a bit like that. It's aspirational wish-fulfilment, and there are joys to be had in watching Maya Rudolph and her friends have a ludicrously grand time on Apple's dime. The ironic thing is that despite *Loot*'s budget, intent and credentials, it feels disappointingly generic. For now, it's an off-the-rack sitcom, one you have seen before. May next year be bespoke.

*Raja Sen is a film and TV critic, screenwriter and the author of The Best Baker In The World (2017), a children's adaptation of The Godfather.*

@arajasen

**STREAMING TIP OF THE WEEK**  
Joel Kim Booster, the breakout performer from *Loot*, was great in the *Fire Island* film a few months ago and has a new comedy special out this week. *Psychosexual* (Netflix) is an unapologetic, original and deeply personal special, with punchlines you will remember for days.



# How I got back on the reading wagon



CHEAP  
THRILLS  
NISHA  
SUSAN

I watch a lot of TV. I always have. The exact quality of my TV-watching fluctuates. Often it has been more radio than TV—familiar, talky shows playing in the background while cleaning house, cooking and writing. Sometimes it’s new TV that requires concentration and staying up late and reading blogs. Relatively recently, my TV watching has been all Korean, all the time, which needed subtitle reading and sitting in one place, something I absolutely never resented.

For most of my life, watching some TV and reading a lot of books lived side-by-side as happy roommates. Of late, not so much. I seemed to have very little room for reading that required more than three brain cells. And down-time was hence mostly just TV and pointless, unhappy scrolling. I love TV so it should have been okay, right? Apparently not. I had gone from being a two-three books a week person to a dozen books a year person. I missed reading but I wasn’t able to do too much about it. A few years ago, I even confessed elsewhere in writing that I had had stray thoughts of setting my bookshelf on fire—the unread

piles were making me feel oppressed and unhappy.

Then something shifted early this year. It began with some kind of difficulty watching TV. The difficulty remains unclear but I would like to keep it that way, touch wood. I read a couple of books with my old intensity and then a few more and then I was on a roll. I have now read close to 30 books this year and (for now) the streak is on. In case you, like me, have been wondering how to get back to reading or read a little more than you are currently, I did a little survey of what seems to be working for me and other people.

Randall Munroe, creator of the lovely, brainy comic *xkcd*, wrote long ago, “Like many geeks, I got a little more interested (in exercise) once I made the connection to levelling up.” A decade later, it seems everything (and exercise) is aggressively gamified. And the world is full of readers who have fallen off the wagon. I had never thought I would live to a point where I would think about reading as something that is good for me and something I should be doing more of—much like exercise and salad. Instead of being the endlessly delicious way of spending time that adults tried to curtail.

I remembered that old Munroe strip recently. Champaca, one of Bengaluru’s phalanx of stunning book stores, put out a superb reading challenge encouraging people to increase the diversity of their bookshelves. Alongside suggestions to re-read a childhood favourite or



Reading is so much more fun when done en masse.

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read a book that has been turned into a movie, it suggests that you read a book by a Nigerian author, a trans author, a book written in the language of your state, a book with an animal Main Character, a book about a fisherman and so on. It immediately pinged my “levelling up” neurons and with the avidity of a Sunday *Tambola* addict, I began to think of ways in which I could cross off books from the list. This, in turn, led to one of the important factors in my reading streak. I now have a rough reading

list for the year which still leaves room for diversions and distractions and shiny objects that attract a magpie mind. Rereading *Pride And Prejudice* for the “childhood favourite” led to trying out Katherine Chen’s *Mary B: An Untold Story Of Pride And Prejudice*. But I am on the lookout for an animal character book and have several Nigerian options lined up.

The *Tambola* approach is helped by my reading in all formats. I already read new books, second-hand books, hard-

back, paperback and digital. It makes purists blanch but I read all four books of Elena Ferrante’s *Neapolitan* set on my Kindle app on my phone screen. To this, I added audiobooks this year. I listened to Rosamund Pike’s narration of *Pride And Prejudice* and giggled a lot. The week Elif Batuman’s sequel to *The Idiot, Either/Or* came out, I wanted to get my hands on it. I was hesitant because of the price but then I discovered I had scored some free credits on my audiobook app and had the delightful experience of listening to Batuman reading her second new novel. It has been slower than when listening to a familiar book but thoroughly enjoyable. Most importantly, having a book loaded and ready to go in some format prevents me from spending 45 minutes doomscrolling/ thinking about annoying people while sitting in traffic.

Which brings me to the most helpful thing if you want to level up your reading. Non-annoying friends and acquaintances who read. Sisters Saudha and Serene Kasim are only two of my formidable reader friends. Saudha turned me on to *Longbourn*, another *Pride And Prejudice* retelling. Serene and I recently rejoiced over news of a new Jokha Alharthi novel set in Oman, where we grew up. She then recommended a podcast about contemporary Arab fiction, which led me to adding *Hot Maroc*, a comic novel about Moroccans online, to my TBR (to be read) list. The sisters and I meet perhaps once in a decade but I always follow their reading

recommendations. Two academic friends, T and P, regularly recommend authors that become addictions—Kevin Kwan, Kelley Armstrong, Jacqueline Rose and more. I send them all my “read immediately, many exclamation marks” messages. I asked T whether she had read *Tomb Of Sand* the week after the novel won the International Booker and she said with satisfaction (unlike everyone else I know who was still thinking about it), “Yes, I went through it like a knife through butter.”

Having friends to complain to that you are struggling with *Piranesi* or that *Station Eleven* is haunting-lite is necessary. Reading may seem like a solitary activity but is so much more fun when done en masse, like Zumba.

And the thing that helps most with your TBR is, oddly enough, to stop reading. My friend AB, who has great taste, recommended a prize-winning novel. I just couldn’t get into it. I tried hard because many people I know had loved it but after a while I had to admit that it wasn’t working. I girded my loins and put it away. I have since returned that and other books to the book store and bought many delightful things with the store credit. And got a library subscription to make dropping books even more guilt-free. Life is too short for dull books.

Nisha Susan is the editor of the webzine *The Ladies Finger* and author of *The Women Who Forgot To Invent Facebook And Other Stories*.

# WHEN TENNIS CROWDS CROSS THE LINE

Tennis was considered a refined sport but its spectators now seem more gladiatorial than gentlemanly as they gang up to heckle players



Rahul Jacob

Daniil Medvedev had just lost the Australian Open final on 30 January after surrendering a two-set lead in a bruising five-setter against Rafael Nadal. He ought to have been monosyllabic. Instead, he began by telling the media of how, as a 12-year-old, he had dreamt of being at the big four Grand Slam tournaments, and had been overawed at being seated in the same dining area as the big stars at the US Open when he began playing there a few years later as a junior. Then, in a bittersweet shift worthy of a play by Anton Chekov, Medvedev said his reverence for Grand Slam events had ended at this year’s Australian Open. It was clear this was the result of the crowd booing him with monotonous regularity after he beat home-town favourite Nick Kyrgios in the second round.

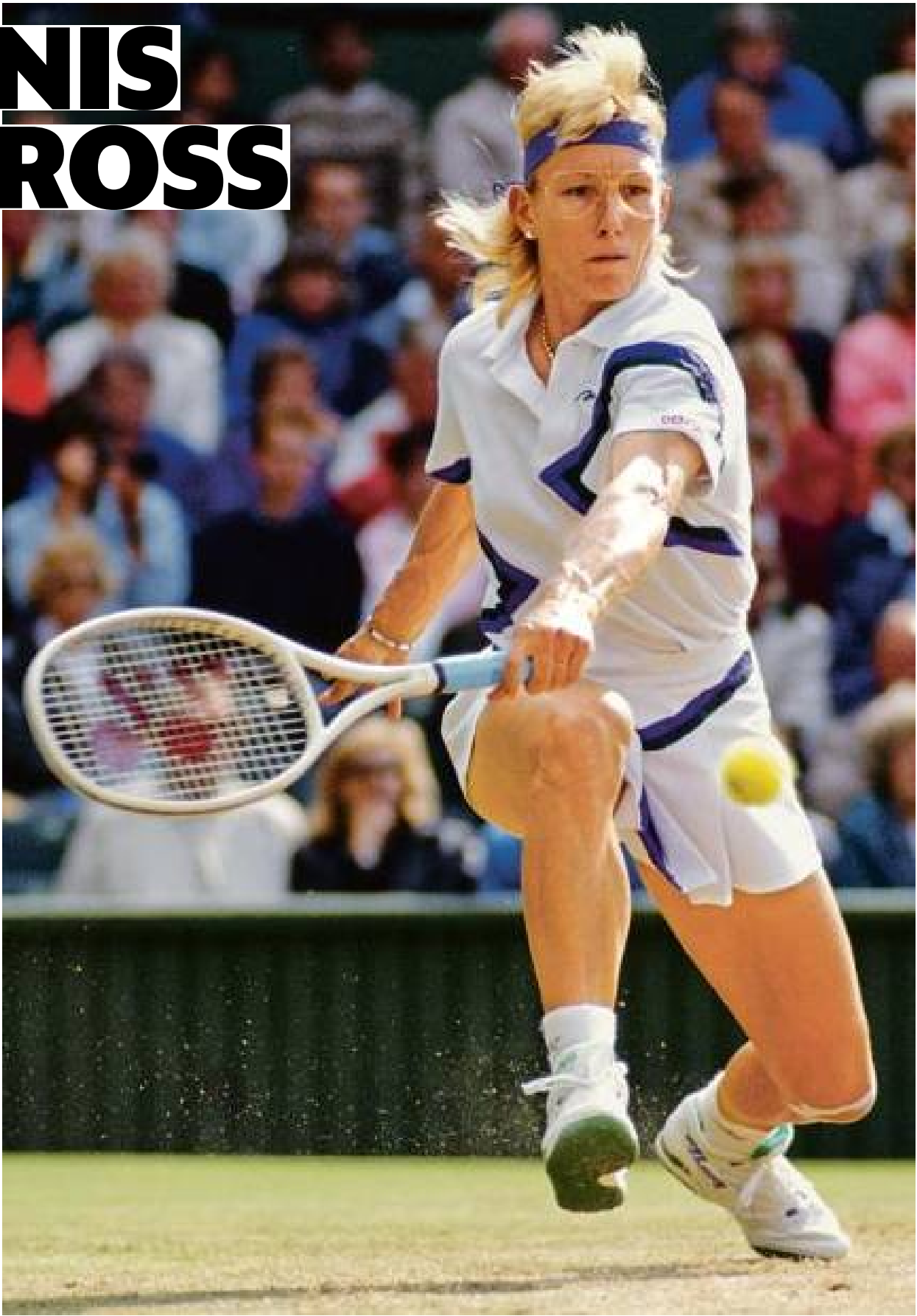
The crescendo of catcalling climaxed in the final, in which his service faults were cheered and drop shot errors booed in a display of crowd bullying that was difficult to watch on television. The crowd’s hostility played a role in turning the tide of the match in the third set even though Nadal stepped up his game and changed tactics brilliantly. “I’m just talking about a few moments where the kid stopped dreaming, and today was one of them,” Medvedev said. “From now on I’m playing for myself and to provide for my family.”

In May, it was the turn of Novak Djokovic to be the target of repeated booing at the French Open. He was subjected to it in

his first round, merely for trying to pump himself up against a little-known Japanese opponent. In the most awaited rematch of the year, Djokovic was booed almost from the start of his quarter-final with Nadal. The crowd reaction was criticised by John McEnroe, whose temper often turned crowds against him even in his native New York. “No other player has had to deal with more adversity (than Novak),” McEnroe said on Eurosport. “It is unfair, I’ve got to say that.”

A sport that has long described itself as being a “gentleman’s sport” is increasingly anything but. On the evidence of the past few years in Melbourne, London and Paris, fans’ treatment of Medvedev and Djokovic, arguably its greatest player ever, shows tennis crowds have succumbed to the extreme polarisation seen on social media. They no longer subscribe to the protocols of not cheering double faults and errors in what is a much more intimate sport than, say, football.

Increasingly, this looks like discrimination by the followers of an elitist sport against players from Eastern Europe. Tennis fans who followed the sport in the late 1970s and 1980s have seen this movie before. The Czech-born Martina Navratilova’s great rivalries with Chris Evert and Steffi Graf were marred by crowds overwhelmingly cheering for her opponents. Navratilova had a much more inventive game and did more entertaining post-match interviews but that made little difference. As with Djokovic, Navratilova was put down for “trying too hard”—and for being too muscular. If one is East European in a sport whose Grand Slam crowds



are dominated by Anglo-Saxon crowds for the most part, you can’t win public support—even if you win tournaments time and time again.

The All England Club’s ban on players from Russia and Belarus at this year’s Championships, as the Russian player Andrey Rublev says, amounts to “complete discrimination” and thus is part of a pattern. Instead of allowing players from these countries to play without their national flag, the All England Club has followed UK government guidance and banned them, without seeking a consensus within the tennis community. In response, the men’s and women’s players associations have stripped the tournament of its points, meaning that this year’s event will be a lucrative exhibition tournament that will not count towards players’ computer rankings. The dubious argu-

(left) Novak Djokovic (left) with Daniil Medvedev at the 2021 Australian Open; and Martina Navratilova at the Wimbledon Women’s Singles final in 1990.

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY IMAGES

Tennis crowds have succumbed to the extreme polarisation seen on social media and no longer subscribe to the protocols of not cheering errors

ment from the UK government, repeated as if it were handed down from the gods rather than from a government mired in scandal, by All England Club committee member Tim Henman, has been that a win for a Russian or Belarusian would somehow have amounted to a “propaganda” victory for Russia.

The logic is hard to follow any way you present it, but especially from a government and a tournament located in what the UK business press routinely calls London because it is one of the world’s premier money-laundering centres, notably for Russian oligarchs. Last month, *The Economist* bemoaned the fact that while money-laundering in the UK runs to about £100 billion a year, the budget for investigators fighting this was just £40-50 million.

Still, this year’s ban at Wimbledon,

when set against the longer narrative of a routine bias against East European players, is something of a sideshow. The tragedy for tennis is that its partisan crowds have cast Djokovic repeatedly as the bad guy in a sport he has dominated as no other player in recent memory—latterly, Medvedev has been treated in similar fashion. Not only has Djokovic twice come closer to a calendar Grand Slam (in 2011 and 2020) than Nadal or Roger Federer, he leads them in career head-to-head matches and has consistently beaten them in encounters at the big four Grand Slam tournaments over most of the last decade.

Although Nadal now has 22 Grand Slam victories to Djokovic’s 20, the Serb has a superior record on almost every other metric. Djokovic’s Grand Slam wins have been more diverse, whereas Nadal’s total is disproportionately boosted by his 14 wins on clay at the French Open. For all the talk of the great Big 3 rivalry, one has to scroll back to 2013 to find the Spaniard prevailing over the Serb in a Grand Slam event that was not the French Open. In further proof of Djokovic’s all-court dominance, he has won the so-called fifth Grand Slam, the end-of-year ATP World Tour finals, five times. Nadal has never won this, the premier tournament on fast indoor carpet.

To recount these statistics is somewhat beside the point because Djokovic’s denigration has little to do with performance and a lot to do with prejudice. Repeated criticism of his being “entitled” because he chose not to get vaccinated does not square with the difficult childhood he endured in war-torn Serbia, a marked contrast to the upper middle-class childhoods of Federer and Nadal. Djokovic is also insufficiently given credit for his efforts to raise incomes for lower-ranked players.

What the sport’s greatest player has craved, arguably, is merely what in a fairer world would be his anyway: the respect and love due someone at the pinnacle of his sport. As he routinely encounters a stadium of fans cheering for his opponent, it is hard to blame Djokovic for sometimes seeming calculated, even occasionally insincere, in his desire to win them over. Both Djokovic and Medvedev are warm and witty, but regrettably both display this more naturally in post-match press conferences than they do on court.

Have long been a Federer fanatic, frequently moved to tears by the balletic beauty of his game and charmed by his easy-going personality, a condition made more acute by having interviewed him. Even so, I would have to be blind not to admire Djokovic’s incredibly elastic retrieving ability and steely determination to snatch improbable victories when his opponent has him on the ropes.

At the recent French Open, McEnroe said the booing often made Djokovic more determined to win, but acknowledged that “if you don’t think it bothers him, you’re nuts!” Indeed, in the last laps of his career, as he chases records, Djokovic wants to be loved even more than before. Instead, as at the French Open, he finds himself fighting his opponent and a wall of hyper-partisan chanting and booing that sometimes breaks even his superhuman concentration and resolve. Tennis loses too, as its once “gentlemanly” spectators increasingly seem more like those at a gladiatorial contest, intent on metaphorically feeding to the lions one of the greatest players to have graced the sport.

Rahul Jacob was the travel, food and drink editor for the Financial Times in London and is the author of *Right Of Passage, a collection of travel essays*.



# ALAIN DUCASSE, THE REVOLUTIONARY CHEF

A pioneer of the farm-to-fork movement in haute cuisine, the legendary chef recently launched the first Ecole Ducasse for culinary arts in India

Avantika Bhuyan  
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Chef-entrepreneur Alain Ducasse is not given to verbosity. But there is a sparkle in his eye and a flow to his words when he starts talking about sustainability—a subject he is passionate about. Ducasse believes there's a need to design menus that are in harmony with nature. He had, in fact, outlined “the power of food as a tool of activism” in his 2017 book, *Manger Est Un Acte Citoyen*, and is a pioneer of the farm-to-fork movement in the haute cuisine space.

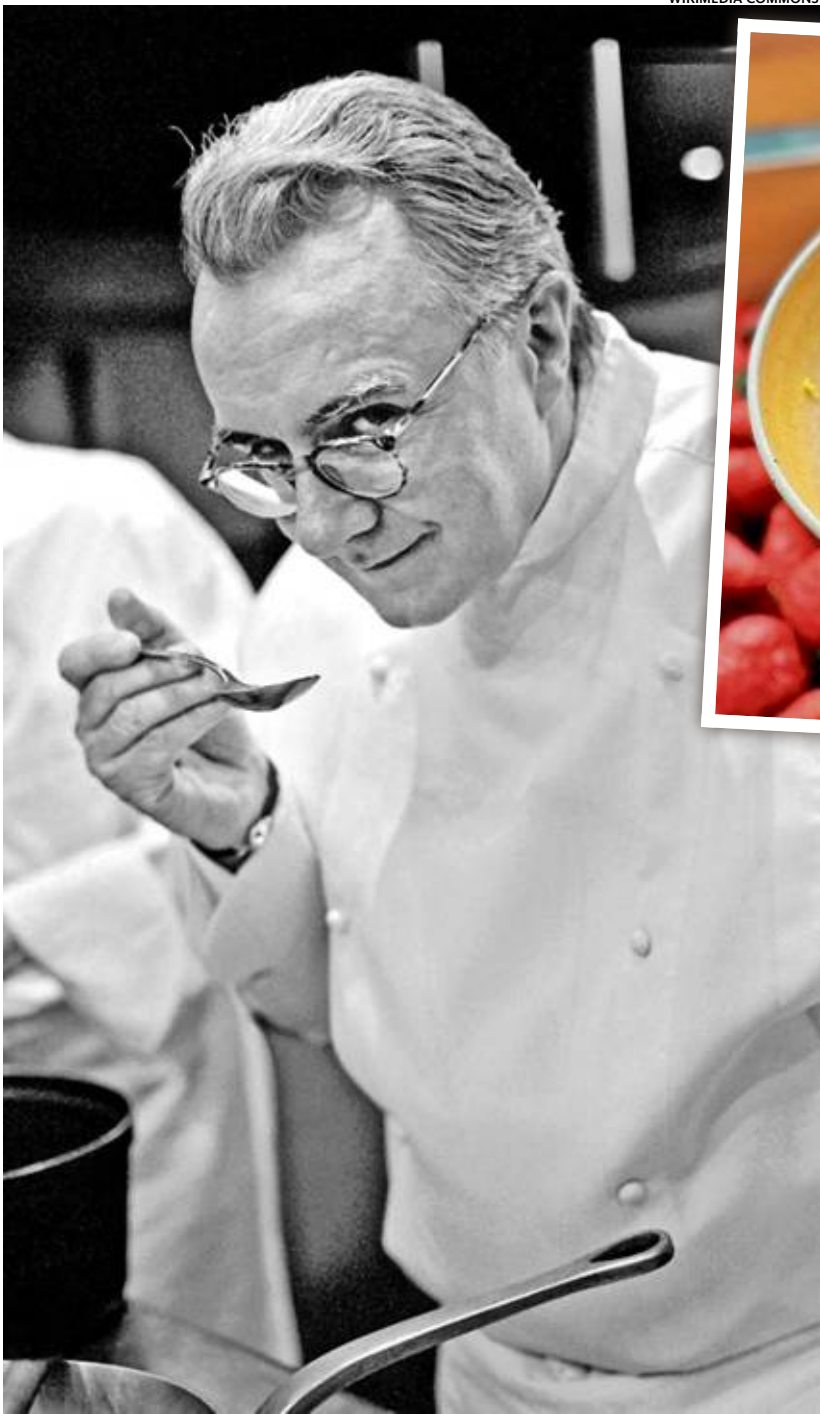
Ducasse, who was in India earlier this month for the launch of the first Ecole Ducasse campus in the country, showcased his commitment to plant-based menus by launching Sapid in Paris last year with a 95% vegan and low-carbon menu. This April, he started a vegan burger kiosk, Bural, in Paris' Bastille district, with a focus on local ingredients such as zucchini, parsnips, carrots and lentils. In the Ducasse culinary universe, these are part of the New Earth Food segment, which respects both the soil and the producer of the ingredients.

Ducasse, who helped create food for astronauts in 2006 and is now supervising the cuisine of the first ice-breaking ship, terms his philosophy “naturalité”. “Sustainability is a must-have. It is important to understand the need to eat less animal protein; or that you need to take into account the period of reproduction of fish species while creating a menu. If we don't incorporate these ideas, the future of our planet is bleak,” says Ducasse, who is French by birth and is now a naturalised citizen of Monaco.

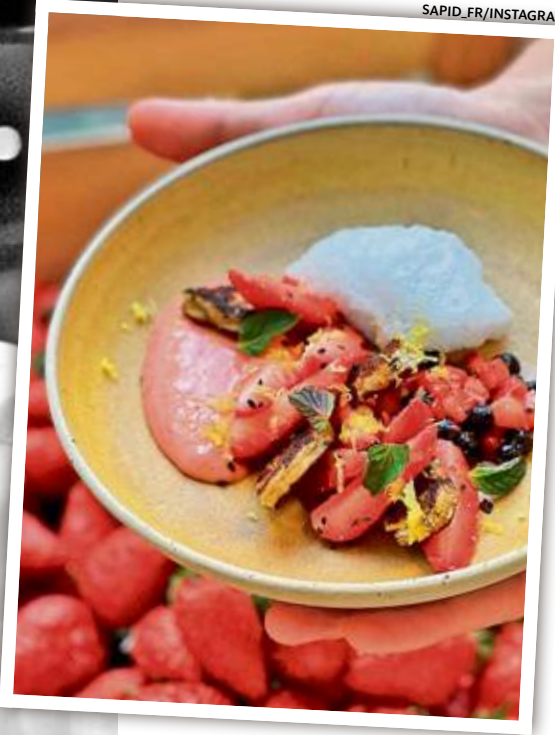
It is this notion of conscious cooking that Ducasse hopes the next generation of chefs will learn at the Ecole Ducasse campus in India. Launched this month in collaboration with the Indian School of Hospitality, the culinary institute in Gurugram, Haryana, offers undergraduate degree, diploma and certificate courses for aspiring chefs, entrepreneurs and managers in the hospitality industry.

It will be part of the network of schools founded by Ducasse in 1999, with campuses in France, Philippines, Brazil and Thailand. Ducasse, who has been reflecting deeply on the shared heritage of India and France, maintains India has one of the greatest culinary traditions and hopes to give it a greater global voice. “The idea is to create the hospitality professionals of tomorrow,” he notes.

Last year, he prefaced a cookbook, titled *Les Routes Des Epices* and written by colleagues Hisanobu Shigeta and Ikhlaf



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Ali-Cherif, about the centuries-old spice trade between Europe and India. “Those links have sustained through the years. This trip to India is a memorable one, as I have travelled back on the spice route to its origins in India,” he says.

The chef has interpreted these connections at his Paris restaurant, Spoon, in the Palais Brongniart that offers a flavourful journey inspired by the spice route. “Don't expect to find traditional recipes there. The menu is an interpretation of all that our chefs learnt from their trips to India. In 2013, we sent one of our team members to learn from chef Hemant Oberoi. And we want such conversations to take place more frequently. Now, we will have exchange programmes between campuses in India and France so that the students can learn from one another,” says Ducasse.

The legendary chef doesn't harp on his laurels—which are both numerous and significant. Ducasse received his first three-star Michelin rating at the young age of 33, for Le Louis XV in Monaco. “He

(above) Alain Ducasse describes his philosophy of sustainability as ‘naturalité’, and strawberry salad, red fruit tartar and kefir mousse at Sapid.

The chef-entrepreneur hopes the next generation of chefs will imbibe the notion of conscious cooking at the Ecole Ducasse campus in India



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## Bengal's version of cheesecake

The popular ‘mishti doi’ is rarely made at home as it needs time and the perfect kitchen conditions

Rajyasree Sen

Across India, with the notable exceptions of Bengal, Goa, and the north-eastern states, meals are usually accompanied by a bowl of curd, which is often set at home. Growing up in Bengal, I'd never witnessed this practice. Curd was the backbone of our meals—our vegetables are cooked in it, as is our fish, mutton, and chicken—but we never served curd separately to complement a meal. It's odd that in Bengal we don't have an affinity for ‘tauk doi’ or sour curd despite the obsession we have for mishti doi or sweet curd.

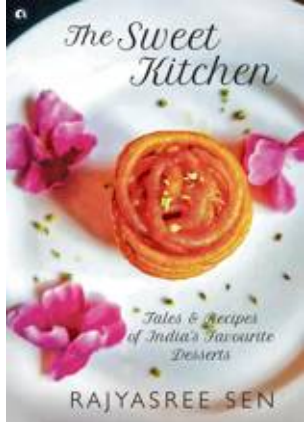
There is nary a single Bengali sweetshop within and beyond the border of Bengal which will not have clay urns of varying sizes, filled with perfectly-set and caramelized curd covered with thin paper and held together by a rubber band around the urn. Originating in West Bengal, mishti doi is made by reducing full cream milk over heat till it is half its quantity and then sweetening it with sugar cane or palm jaggery. After the milk has reduced and is sweetened, yoghurt is added to the bowl and left in a cool, dark place for the temperature and the yoghurt to work wonders.

Mishti doi is always served cold. But despite this and the limited ingredients, mishti doi is very rarely made at home. This is for two reasons. The first has to do with the fact that it takes a long time, and perfect conditions, to prepare. You need a cool, dark room in which to store the mixture to allow it to set. If you aren't careful, the mixture will either curdle or split. The second reason is pure laziness, reinforced by the fact that sweetsshops have been selling delicious mishti doi for over 150 years. And so, the less troublesome option is to stop by your neighbourhood sweetshop and pick up an urn of mishti doi.

Some references suggest that the Dutch East India Company brought mishti doi to Bengal in the seventeenth century. Another theory suggests that mishti doi was a late nineteenth to early twentieth century creation. According to this theory, which finds favour with many culinary historians, a dairy farmer named Gouro Gopal Chandra Ghosh, from the Sherpur area of Bogra in present-day Bangladesh, created the recipe for mishti doi and began selling it as dessert. Legend has it that the then nawab of Bogra, Altaf Ali Chowdhury, bestowed Ghosh with land where he and two of his siblings set up a small cottage industry, which today produces about sixty thousand containers of curd every day across approximately fifty factories. ...

Bhapa doi is one of the more recent versions of mishti doi, which is found in very few sweetsshops because it requires a double boiler to prepare, one that isn't of much use in other Bengali sweets. This was also the only Bengali dessert my grandmother used to bother making at home. Bhapa doi is a steamed version of mishti doi, which isn't as sweet and has a cheesecake-like consistency to it. Bhapa doi, or Bengal's answer to cheesecake, is often flavoured with saffron and cardamom, and sometimes topped with mango puree.

Excerpted from *The Sweet Kitchen: Tales And Recipes Of India's Favourite Desserts* by Rajyasree Sen, published by Aleph Book Company.



**The Sweet Kitchen—Tales And Recipes Of India's Favourite Desserts:** By Rajyasree Sen, Aleph Book Company, 128 pages, ₹399.

## Kitchen experiments with tofu and other stories



DOUBLE TESTED  
NANDITA IYER

The year was 2006. I had started posting my kitchen experiments on my blog, Saffron Trail. I am consciously choosing the term experiments because I was still finding my feet in the kitchen, putting together ingredients, trying out dishes and testing these on my sole volunteer, the husband.

I had just read about home-made soy milk and tofu on another food blog and the new food blogger in me was raring to give this a try. We used to live in Vile Parle in Mumbai. Those were the days of calling your neighbourhood *kirana* shop on your landline (you remember?) and asking them to deliver something you needed urgently. I ordered soybeans around 10 on a weeknight so I could soak these overnight and get started with my preparation of soya milk and tofu at home. I knew I was taking this “making from scratch” and “experimenting in my kitchen” too far, but chemistry was my favourite subject in high school and I felt I could do this.

Long story short, I did end up making the soy milk and the tofu. It was a learn-

ing I still remember 16 years later. What was even more memorable was the clean-up operation of my tiny Mumbai kitchen, and being the zero-waste person I was, the large quantity of soybean residue I had to use up over a week. The bigger lesson was that with a mix of curiosity, patience and elbow grease, almost anything can be made from scratch.

These days in Bengaluru, I have access to the best tofu (*dubu*) from a Korean restaurant, Arirang, located in Kammanahalli. If there is a large enough demand from a particular locality, they deliver to other parts of the city. This tofu has the cleanest flavour, no weird smells or tastes, and the texture is to die for. My fridge is never without a few blocks of their firm tofu and tubs of soft tofu. The firm tofu is used in stir-fries, pan-frying, salads, rice paper rolls and fried rice. The soft tofu is delicious in ramen bowls or in Korean stews (*jjigae*).

Another thing that makes you wonder how something that's good for you can taste so good, is smoked tofu, which can be eaten as is or added to salads. If you love smoky flavours, this is additively good. I can imagine a nice pairing with a smoky single malt like Ardbeg or Compass Box. There are quite a few brands that make this, so check out what is available locally in your city. Staying true to my latest book, I am almost tempted to buy my own smoker



(left) The Best Tofu Stir-Fry; and Slurpy Tofu Noodle Curry Bowl. PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANDITA IYER

so I can have a constant supply of smoked tofu for snacking at home.

### THE BEST TOFU STIR-FRY

Serves 4

**Ingredients**  
400g tofu  
1-2 tbsp oil  
8-10 leaves basil (Italian or Thai)  
1 tsp sesame seeds  
**Marinade**  
2-3 tbsp soy sauce  
2 tbsp tomato ketchup  
1 tbsp vinegar  
1 tsp sesame seeds  
1 tsp crushed dried basil



Half tsp black pepper  
1 tsp ginger-garlic paste  
2 tsp honey

### Method

Wrap the tofu in a clean absorbent kitchen towel and place a weight on it (like a mortar pestle or a heavy utensil) for 15-30 minutes. This is so that all the water in the tofu is extracted. Cube the tofu into one-inch pieces. In a wide bowl, combine all the ingredients for the marinade. Place the tofu in the bowl and toss gently to coat with the marinade. Refrigerate for 15 minutes. Heat the oil in a pan. Drain the marinating tofu with a slotted spoon and add

it to the hot oil. Stir gently on a high flame. For a golden crust, allow the tofu to sear in the pan on medium-high heat under supervision. Flip and cook similarly on other sides. Once the tofu is golden, remove to a serving dish. Garnish with finely chopped basil and sesame seeds. Serve with plain steamed rice along with a curry or greens or serve as an appetiser.

The leftover marinade can be used as a salad dressing or to dress steamed leafy greens.

### SLURPY TOFU NOODLE CURRY BOWL

Serves 2

**Ingredients**  
1 pack hakka noodles  
1 medium onion  
1 medium carrot  
1 green bell pepper  
1 tbsp coconut oil  
200g firm tofu, diced  
200ml coconut milk  
2 tbsp roasted peanuts  
1 stalk spring onion greens  
**Curry paste**  
Half inch piece of fresh turmeric\*, sliced  
2 tbsp chopped lemongrass stalk  
2 green chillies  
2-3 tbsp chopped coriander stems  
3-4 shallots (or use *sambal* onions)  
1 tbsp coriander seeds  
4 cloves garlic  
Half-inch piece of ginger, sliced

Half tsp salt

### Method

Cook the noodles as per pack instructions. Drain, toss in a few drops of oil to prevent sticking and keep aside. Place all the ingredients for the curry paste in a spice blender and blend to a fine paste using two-three tablespoons of water or coconut milk. Keep aside.

Thinly slice the onion, Julienne the carrot and cut the bell pepper into thin strips. Heat the oil in a pan and stir-fry the veggies on a high flame for one-two minutes. Add the diced tofu and the curry paste to the pan. Stir for one-two minutes until the curry paste is mixed well with the veggies and tofu. Stir in the coconut milk over a low flame.

Once the curry has come to a gentle simmer, take the pan off the heat. Divide the cooked noodles between two bowls. Pour the curry over the noodles. Garnish with crushed roasted peanuts and chopped spring onion greens.

\*Or use half teaspoon of turmeric powder

*Double Tested is a fortnightly column on vegetarian cooking, highlighting a single ingredient prepared two ways. Nandita Iyer is the author of the newly released book This Handmade Life—7 Skills To Enhance And Transform Your Everyday Life.*

@saffrontrail



# A facelift for the mouse and keyboard

Ergonomics, design customisation and accessibility are big on the agenda. Sustainability has become key too

Nitin Sreedhar  
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In 1981, IBM released its first personal computer. Five years later, it came equipped with the Model M keyboard, which became an instant hit with users, thanks to its tactile feedback, sturdy design and accuracy.

We have come a long way since the traditional mouse—yes, the rolling ball one—and heavy keyboards. Everything has gone wireless, thinner and lighter. But accessibility, ergonomics and design customisation are big on the agenda as independent designers or consumer technology companies re-imagine the mouse and keyboard.

Ergonomics is perhaps the biggest USP here. Take Logitech, for example, which has over the years worked on how the mouse looks and feels. One of its recent devices, the MX Master 3S mouse, has a unique tilt angle to ensure a more natural and comfortable posture for your arm. In fact, the MX mouse inspired an Indian designer to come up with an innovative mouse design concept, the Dial project.

Next comes sustainability and customisation. Razer is known for its gaming mice and other PC peripherals. Earlier this month, it unveiled the Basilisk V3 and DeathAdder Essential mice, which obtained “green certification”. They are also customisable. The Basilisk V3, for example, has 11 lighting zones which you can customise with over 16.8 million colours and multiple lighting effects.

Keyboards are not too far behind. Apple, for instance, was recently granted a patent for a futuristic MacBook with a touchscreen keyboard that could all but eliminate the traditional, physical keyboard. Could clicks and keystrokes one day be replaced by gestures? Would we even need a mouse?



## ◀ RAZER ECO LOGO GAMING MICE

The Basilisk V3 and the DeathAdder Essential became the world's first gaming mice to achieve Ecologo certification—they meet strict environmental performance industry standards. The Basilisk V3 has also been tested for dermal biocompatibility. It has 11 programmable buttons, a scrolling wheel that offers a four-way scroll, and a switch life cycle of 70 million clicks.

Available on Amazon.in; ₹7,999

## ▶ MICROSOFT ADAPTIVE ACCESSORIES LINE

This new Adaptive Accessories line is designed for people with disabilities who may find it difficult to use a traditional mouse and keyboard. While there are many devices in this line, which is yet to be released, a key component is the Microsoft Adaptive Mouse. It can connect wirelessly to up to three devices or via USB-C. The mouse can be used by itself or users can add an adaptive mouse tail and thumb support to personalise the mouse further.



## ▲ KWUMSKY K2 MECHANICAL KEYBOARD

The mechanical keyboard comes with a 12.6-inch IPS touchscreen. According to the Kwumsky website, the touchscreen will help cut dependence on the mouse and improve efficiency. It's a plug-and-play device that comes with 3 USB ports and is compatible with tablets, desktops and laptops. The keyboard also has 71 keys that are swappable. Available on Kwumsky.com; ₹31,092.93



## ▲ LOGITECH MX MASTER 3S MOUSE AND MECHANICAL KEYBOARDS

The MX Master 3S mouse features an 8,000 DPI optical sensor that tracks on most surfaces. Both the MX Mechanical, MX Mechanical Mini come with dual-coloured keycaps and six backlight options.

Available on Logitech.com; prices vary



## ▲ THE DIAL PROJECT

A project by Munich-based designer Ashwin Suresh, the Dial is a concept which imagines a mouse with a scroll wheel on the third axis. Suresh says adding a simple dial-turn interaction to a mouse enhances the user experience of adjusting something on a PC—like increasing the volume or changing brush size on Photoshop.



## LOUNGE REVIEW | VIVO X80 PRO SMARTPHONE

# Features that match the flagship feel and price

The X80 Pro has a sharp display, good battery life and strong processor. The one niggle: there is too much bloatware

Tushar Kanwar

Over the past few years, Vivo's flagship X series has earned a reputation for class-leading camera performance, to the point where last year's X70 Pro+ was widely considered among the best camera phones. The X80 Pro takes up where its spiritual predecessor left off, packing in everything you would expect from a modern premium flagship, albeit with a few tweaks to the company's proprietary gimbal stabilisation system and a noticeable bump in price (₹79,999) that lines it up right alongside the competition from Samsung and Apple.

Pulling the X80 Pro out of its well-accessorised box—the wired headphones, fast charger and case are somewhat of a rarity in this price segment—the phone fits the bill for what you have come to expect from a high-end Android device. You get a large, glass-metal sandwich design with the massive 6.78-inch display

that gently curves to the sides and lends the 9.1mm-thick/219g device a luxurious, though rather slippery, hand-feel. Turn it around, and a raised glass window that houses the camera modules dominates the rear panel—though odd design decisions, which see three of the four lenses contained within a circle and the fourth, periscope-style telephoto relegated to an oddball position below, might be polarising for some. Look past this and there's little to fault the phone's fit and finish. There is Schott Xensation Up display protection and IP68 dust/water rating for added peace of mind. Just don't ask for it in peppy colours—Vivo has launched only a Cosmic Black variant in India.

Under the hood, the X80 Pro has the specifications to match its flagship look and feel (and pricing), with a top-shelf Qualcomm Snapdragon 8 Gen 1 chip and 12GB of memory and 256GB of non-expandable storage. Vivo has added its latest dedicated imaging chip, the V1+, to handle some of the heavy lifting in photography and gaming. Expectedly, the X80 Pro is a brisk performer not only in everyday use but even under heavy multitasking and gaming on the expansive display.

The AMOLED display—as long as you can deal with one this size—ticks all the boxes: tack-sharp 1,440x3,200-pixel QHD+ resolution, the latest LTPO 3.0 tech which allows the screen to go all the way



A raised glass window, with the camera, dominates the rear panel.

from 120Hz down to 1Hz for better power efficiency, and 1,500 nits screen brightness that fares well both in the bright outdoors and while watching HDR content. Coupled with a capable loud stereo speaker setup, watching movies and TV shows is quite the experience.

However, our favourite element of the display isn't so much the screen as the 3D ultrasonic in-display fingerprint reader, which offers a much larger scanning area

and unlocks the phone without needing to hunt for the sweet spot on the screen—easily the best on a smartphone.

Battery life is no slouch either, with the 4,700mAh cell lasting well past a day with the always-on display, high refresh rate and maximum resolution switched on. A lighter workload with one or more of these settings turned down

would squeeze out more. The 80W fast charger tops up the battery in under 45 minutes; there's also 50W wireless charging support and even reverse wireless charge to top up your TWS earphones.

But you are interested in how well the X80 Pro's camera performs, aren't you? Well, there's a 50MP Samsung GNV main sensor, with a 12MP 2x portrait lens, an 8MP 5x periscope lens and a 48MP ultrawide (plus a 32MP selfie shooter). It's familiar territory if you have used the X70 Pro—but in the X80 Pro, the gimbal stabilisation has been moved from the ultrawide to the 2x portrait lens. The primary camera captured excellent images with good detail and impressive dynamic range in all light conditions, and it impressed with its use of HDR in low-light conditions to handle tricky bright lights in otherwise dark scenes. Colours are slightly oversaturated out of the box but the phone's Zeiss mode can rein in that habit. Even without the gimbal

stabilisation, the ultrawide handles itself well, really coming into its own when the light dims. Portraits of human subjects are captured well, with the edge detection and exposure on point.

Both zoom lenses impress as well but the 5x periscope camera falls a bit short of the results on the Samsung S22 Ultra. With the addition of gimbal stabilisation, Vivo has been able to pull off some impressive low-light portrait video shooting from the 2x zoom camera, and there are a bunch of added tricks in the video department that make this one of the most versatile video shooters across the Android landscape.

If there is a chink in the armour, it's the software. The phone ships with FunTouch OS running on Android 12, and while Vivo has promised three generations of Android OS updates and three years of security updates, it comes with a ton of bloatware. No phone this expensive should feel this “sponsored” the moment you set it up, but it's hard not to get this impression when your app drawer is packed to the brim with third-party apps like BYJU's, Josh, Mok and the like. Not to mention ads for “Hot Apps” and “Hot Games”, which sit among your apps and can't be uninstalled.

Tushar Kanwar, a tech columnist and commentator, tweets @2shar.

## THE WEEK IN TECH



## 1 BACK TO THE FUTURE

Adobe has been experimenting with advanced neural filters in Photoshop to make photo editing easy for amateurs, and its latest Photo Restoration Neural Filter has been generating quite a bit of buzz. Created for digitising and processing old photographs, it is an AI-powered tool to retouch grainy images, reducing a complex workflow to a single click. Other neural filters include those that can change a subject's expression (by adding a smile, for instance), create a skin-smoothing effect, colourise images (see picture), add make-up, and do a “style transfer”—take the look of one image, including colour, hue or saturation, and put it on another. Neat!

## 2 FROM EYE TO EAR

Indian lifestyle tech brand Noise has launched its first pair of smart eyewear. The Noise i smart glasses double up as Bluetooth earphones, with a guided audio design, noise-cancellation capabilities and around nine hours of playtime on a single charge. Other features include motion estimation, motion compensation, a mic for calling, magnetic charging, and hands-free voice control, for an affordable ₹5,999.



ISTOCKPHOTO



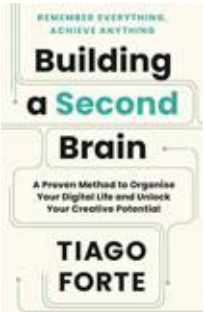
## 3 MICROSOFT DITCHES 'EMOTION-READING' TECH

Microsoft announced updates to its Responsible AI Standard recently, including the decision to retire “facial analysis capabilities that purport to infer emotional states”. The company said its evaluation of face-recognition AI techniques prompted it to look at emotion classification and raised important questions about privacy, the lack of consensus on a definition of “emotions”, and the difficulty of attributing emotional states to facial expressions across individuals and cultures. A smile isn't always a smile, you know!

## 4 DOUBLE YOUR BRAIN

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the amount of information we consume. In *Building a Second Brain: A Proven Method To Organise Your Digital Life And Unlock Your Creative Potential*, productivity expert Tiago Forte lays out a methodology for not only saving and systematically reminding us of the ideas, inspirations, insights and connections gained through experience—a second brain, so to speak—but putting them into action as well.

—Compiled by Shrabonti Bagchi





# Of prestige, pedigree and politics

Wimbledon's ban on Russian and Belarusian players has stripped it of ranking points but it's poised for some heart-stopping contests: the Novak Djokovic-Rafael Nadal rivalry, Serena Williams' bid to claim the crown, Iga Świątek's pursuit of a rare 'Channel Slam'



Rafael Nadal.

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY IMAGES  
Deepti Patwardhan

Andy Murray, the great British hope come Wimbledon time, is not a man to mince words. On 25 May, almost a month before this year's Championships, the 35-year-old took to social media to state his position.

"In a few weeks' time wouldn't know or care about how many ranking points a player gets for winning a 3rd round match," he wrote on Twitter. "But I guarantee they will remember who wins. @Wimbledon will never be an exhibition and will never feel like an exhibition. The end."

It came to this—Murray defending Wimbledon's prestige, in the centenary year of Centre Court no less—because before the battle on its grass courts could resume, Wimbledon was turned into a diplomatic turf war.

Taking a cue from British politicians, who have imposed sanctions on Russia owing to the war on Ukraine, the All England Lawn Tennis Club, which governs Wimbledon, decided to ban players from Russia and Belarus, which is supporting Russia. It didn't want to entertain the possibility of a Russian, including the current men's World No.1, Daniil Medvedev, ending up with the trophy on the final Sunday.

"In the circumstances of such unjustified and unprecedented military aggression, it would be unacceptable for the Russian regime to derive any benefits from the involvement of Russian or Belarusian players with The Championships," Wimbledon stated on 20 April. "It is therefore our intention, with deep regret, to decline entries from Russian and Belarusian players to The Championships 2022."

Wimbledon, which begins on 27 June, is the only Grand Slam to have taken this view. Tennis governing bodies—the International Tennis Federation (ITF), the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) and the men's Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP)—had banned Russia and Belarus' national federations. But they allowed individual players to compete under a neutral flag.

Wimbledon's unilateral decision saw these associations withdraw ranking points from The Championships. In the normal course, the winner of a Grand Slam event earns 2,000 ranking points, the maximum on offer. Rankings are not mere numbers in a meritocratic sport like tennis. They decide seeds, and players' eligibility for tournaments.

Not many players may subscribe to Wimbledon's politics but none of the marquee names has pulled out of the tournament.

#### STAYING IN THE GAME

"Nobody wants to miss Wimbledon," Rafael Nadal said after winning his 14th French Open, which saw him take his Grand Slam singles tally to 22. After playing the second week of French Open with a numb foot, Nadal sought further medical help to keep his calendar Grand Slam quest alive. The 36-year-old has won the first two majors of the season—the Australian Open and French Open—for the first time and is keen on continuing the hot streak.

At the start of 2022, the odds were heavily stacked against Nadal. He had called off this 2021 season early due to a foot injury and tested positive for covid-19 in December. But he exceeded all expectations by winning the Australian Open, his least successful Grand Slam till then, in January.

The foot injury resurfaced at the Italian Open (2-15 May) and persisted through the French Open (22 May-5 June). Though he had to inject anaesthetics and painkillers to stay in the tournament, a vintage Nadal battled to his 14th title at Roland Garros. Just

a few days later, he underwent radio-frequency ablation (RFA) treatment, a minimally invasive procedure that uses heat to destroy nerve tissue and thus prevent pain.

It remains to be seen how his creaking body will hold up on grass, where the ball skids off the surface and low bounce can be taxing on the knees. The last time Nadal won Wimbledon was in 2010. This is his first crack at The Championships in three years and he arrived at Wimbledon after a week's practice on Mallorca's grass courts and only an exhibition event in Hurlingham, UK. The way 2022 has shaped up so far, the "Spanish Bull" will take some stopping.

At the other end of the spectrum is Novak Djokovic, whose downfall after unsuccessfully chasing a calendar Grand Slam last year has been dramatic. Djokovic, who topped the year-end rankings in 2021 for a record seventh time, won the first three Grand Slams of 2021 and made it to the finals of the US Open. But he faltered at the final hurdle, against Medvedev.

Earlier this year, Djokovic's trip Down Under to defend the Australian Open title turned him into an international figure of hate. The Serb's anti-vaccination stand saw him being deported from Australia ahead of the Grand Slam after a long legal drama. Though Djokovic gained some momentum ahead of the French Open, he looked off-colour during his quarter-final defeat to Nadal.

Like Nadal, 35-year-old Djokovic entered Wimbledon without playing any of the competitive events on grass. The Serb is a three-time defending champion at the tournament, which has been of singular importance to his career. Growing up in war-torn Serbia, Wimbledon was the one event he always dreamt of winning.

Each of the six times Djokovic has won the title, he has celebrated by tearing off a few blades of grass and chewing them. In 2018, after spending more than a year in a confused daze, Djokovic resurrected his career on the famous grass courts of SW19. A year later, he scripted a stirring comeback win, from match points down, to beat Wimbledon's darling, Roger Federer, in an epic contest.

It is just the kind of inspiration Djokovic, a 20-time major winner, will be looking for as



Andy Murray; and (right) Iga Świątek.

he aims to get his Grand Slam run back on track. The Serb will also be aware of the fact that the US Open has a vaccination mandate which makes him, as of now, ineligible for the hard-court major. Wimbledon, then, might be his only chance to win a Grand Slam title this year and narrow the gap with Nadal.

Of the players competing this year, Djokovic has the highest winning percentage on grass: 85%. At Wimbledon, he has won 89% of his matches—79 of the 89 matches he has played at the Grand Slam. Despite being in their mid-30s, Djokovic and Nadal, the top two seeds, will be the ones to beat at Wimbledon yet again. The men's draw will be without the top two players in the world. While top-ranked Medvedev, a Russian, is banned, World No.2 Alexander Zverev suffered a brutal fall during his French Open semi-final against Nadal.

Zverev underwent surgery for torn ligaments in the ankle earlier this month. Though the 25-year-old played some of the best tennis of his life in Paris, he wasn't quite as serious a contender at Wimbledon. Grand Slam five-setters are not his forte and Wimbledon is by far his least successful major—he has never reached a quarter-final in London.

#### RETURN OF THE QUEEN

Even though French Open champion Iga Świątek has cemented her place as the leader of the women's tour, Serena Williams remains the queen bee. Not surprisingly, Williams' announcement that she will compete at Wimbledon 2022 created quite a flutter.

Rumours had been swirling that the Williams sisters—Serena and Venus—had retired without telling anyone. Ranked 1,208 in the world, Serena was given a wild-card entry. Though she has not played for a year, the 36-year-old poses a real threat to the rest of the field. Grass enhances her attacking, powerful game. And having won seven titles on these courts may just re-awaken the competitor in her.

Williams will resume her bid for the record-equalling 24th singles Grand Slam title. Though the American has the most number of singles majors (23) in the Open Era (since 1968), she is one short of Margaret Court's all-time record. Her last Grand Slam win came at the 2017 Australian Open, right before she took a maternity break.

Since her comeback in the spring of 2018, Williams, possibly the most dominant women's player, has struggled to win the elusive 24th. She reached four Grand Slam finals after coming back from childbirth but couldn't win a set in any. Losing speed was understandable, but it was the first time the American lost her nerve. Being away from the big stage for over a year may help take off some of the pressure. As she prepares to play her 21st Wimbledon, Williams will be an emotional favourite to claim the crown.

Along with Williams, veteran stars Murray and Stanislav Wavrinka are also defying age and injuries. Murray and Wavrinka have won three Grand Slams each and are the only ones who had consistently challenged the Big 3 (Federer, Nadal, Djokovic) in men's tennis before injuries halted their march. In their bid to return to top form, both had to start at the very beginning this year.

Even though grass is not his favourite surface—Wimbledon is the only Grand Slam he hasn't won—Wavrinka had an encouraging result at the Queen's Club ATP event (officially called Cinch Championships). "It takes time to be back at my age after more than a year off the Tour," he said after a win against World No.27 Frances Tiafoe. Wavrinka, who has dropped to 290 in the world, was handed a wild card for Wimbledon and will be playing there for the first time since 2019.

Murray opted out of the French Open, and most of the clay season, to prepare for grass. In Stuttgart, he defeated Stefanos Tsitsipas in the quarter-finals to score his first top-5 scalp since 2016. He then beat Nick Kyrgios, one of the trickiest players on the surface, in straight sets to reach the final. Despite suffering an abdominal injury during the final at Stuttgart, which he lost to Matteo Berrettini, he will again lead the British charge in the men's singles.

Carrying the burden of expectations in the women's field will be teenager Emma Raducanu. The London resident burst on to the scene last year by reaching the Wimbledon fourth round on her major debut. A few weeks later, she won the US Open and became the first player ever to win a Grand Slam after entering it as a qualifier.

Raducanu hasn't been able to sustain that level of success—she has compiled a win-loss record of 10-13 since the US Open breakthrough. Quickfire changes in coaching staff, injuries and intense scrutiny haven't helped. The 19-year-old will once again be in the glare of the spotlight at her home Slam.

**SURFACE SWITCH** One of the reasons pedigree players have endured at the most traditional of tennis tournaments is the sport's move away from grass courts. There was a time when three of the four Grand Slams—the Australian Open (1905-1987), US Open (1881-1974) and Wimbledon (since 1877)—were played on grass.

While Europeans and South Americans persisted with clay courts, the easier-to-maintain and more cost-effective hard courts took over most of the world. Today, the grass-court season lasts a mere five weeks—including the fortnight of Wimbledon.

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#### DEFYING AGE

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The US Open and Australian Open have switched to hard courts. The result is, younger players haven't spent enough time on the only living surface in the game to understand its whims.

The surface switch is particularly tough because it comes on the back of a long European clay swing which begins in the first week of April and ends in the first week of June. While the ball bounces higher and travels slower on clay, it skids off slick grass and tends to stay quite low.

In a tennis season, the switch from clay to grass is one of the most challenging tasks. That remains the case even though Wimbledon's grass has slowed down considerably since the 1990s, when it was a haven for the big servers. The last true serve and volleyer to win the trophy was Goran Ivanisević in 2001, when he went from wild card to champion during one crazy, emotional run.

Of the younger lot, last year's finalist, Berrettini, and Kyrgios, when he is in the mood, are the only ones who have enough expertise on grass to derail a Nadal or a Djokovic. While the Italian has a big serve and bigger forehand, Kyrgios has a varied skill set, cheeky and explosive, to call upon if he wants to. Berrettini has been the performer of the grass-court season so far. After being forced out for more than three months due to a hand surgery, he made a comeback earlier this month and has been unstoppable, picking up back-to-back titles in Stuttgart and Queen's Club, London.

Even though Tsitsipas and Carlos Alcaraz are among the top five seeds, the dangerous floater in the men's draw may well be Hubert Hurkacz. The Pole's claim to fame was beating Roger Federer in the quarter-finals of 2021 and handing him a bagel (6-0) in the last set.

Federer, recuperating from a third knee surgery in two years, will miss Wimbledon for the first time since his debut in 1999. Meanwhile, Hurkacz has picked up some momentum at the ATP event in Halle, where he dismantled World No.1 Medvedev 6-1, 6-4 in the final to win the title.

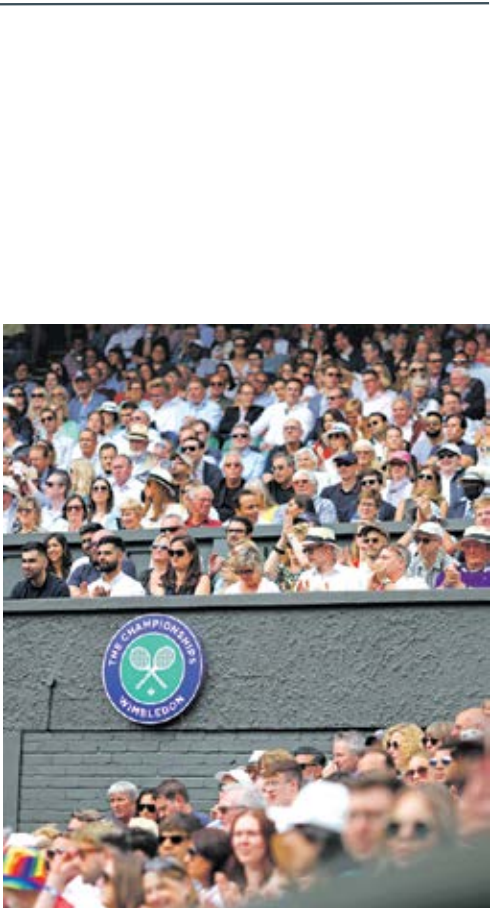
The women's draw is likely to throw up more surprises. All eyes will be on Świątek, who has separated herself from the rest of the pack. The Pole, who won her second French Open title earlier this month, is on a 35-match winning streak. Though grass is not her strongest surface, the 21-year-old has grown in stature in the past few months and her opponents will be wary of the damage the best forehand in the women's game can wreak on grass.

"I hope she (Serena) draws Iga," joked Ons Jabuer, who won the WTA title in Berlin and teamed up with Serena Williams in doubles at the Rothmans International Eastbourne (19-25 June). "At least somebody should stop Iga a little bit."

Świątek is pursuing a rare "Channel Slam"—Serena Williams is the only one to have achieved it in this century—but will come to Wimbledon cold; she hasn't played any tune-up event on grass. Her best finish at Wimbledon was a fourth round in 2021.

Ready or not, Świątek is set to make the switch like the rest of her peers. The Grand Slam move from clay to grass is not just technically tricky, but visually striking. The sea of red dirt gives way to the pristine lawns of Wimbledon. Granting gladiators don pure whites and bask in polite applause. And the best players in the world will vie for the oldest Grand Slam trophy in the tennis cabinet. If not for points, at least for prestige.

Deepti Patwardhan is a sportswriter based in Mumbai.



## Centre Court turns 100

The All England Lawn Tennis Club is celebrating 100 years since the opening of the Centre Court.

This is the first time in two years that a capacity crowd will be welcomed at the grounds. Wimbledon was the only Grand Slam to be cancelled in 2020 due to the pandemic, and only 50% of the crowd capacity was allowed last year for the first 10 days of the tournament.

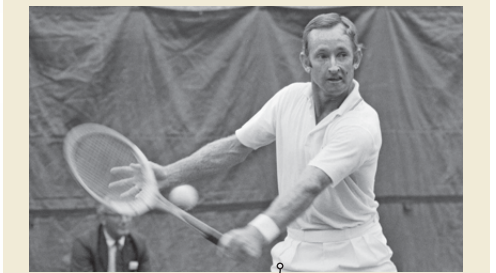
One of the distinguishing features of Wimbledon was that the tournament would take a break on middle Sunday to let the grass breathe. But this year will see play on Middle Sunday (3 July) featuring as a permanent part of the tournament schedule for the first time.

**£40.35 mn**  
Total prize money announced by Wimbledon for this year

**£2 mn each**  
What the men's and ladies' singles champions will receive

#### CHANNEL SLAM

Players who have won French Open and Wimbledon in the same year (Open Era—1968 onwards)

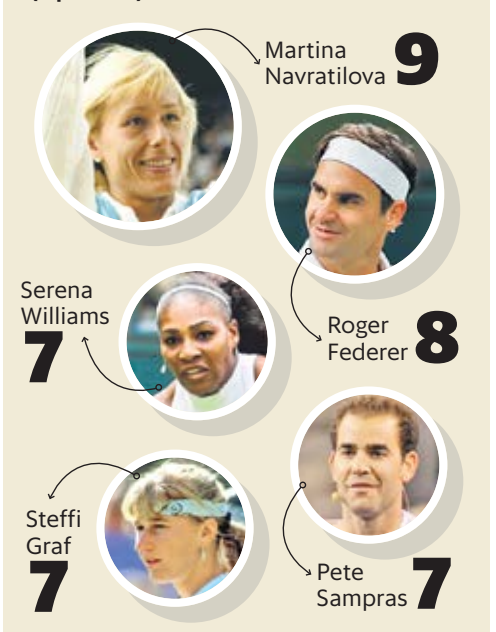


**MEN**  
**Rod Laver** | 1969  
**Björn Borg** | 1978-1980  
**Rafael Nadal** | 2008, 2010  
**Roger Federer** | 2009  
**Novak Djokovic** | 2021



**WOMEN**  
**Margaret Court** | 1970  
**Evonne Goolagong Cawley** | 1971  
**Billie Jean King** | 1972  
**Chris Evert** | 1974  
**Martina Navratilova** | 1982, 1984  
**Steffi Graf** | 1988, 1993, 1995, 1996  
**Serena Williams** | 2002, 2015

#### MOST WIMBLEDON TITLES (Open Era)





# Meet the Indian wine geeks of Silicon Valley

A trip inside the world of collectors who have the time and money to study and celebrate Burgundy wines and more



Jayaram Bhat at his 5,000-bottle home wine cellar in Los Altos Hills; (below) Krishna Tamanna (left) tasting a 1982 Bataud Montrachet at his home in Beaune; and Tamanna at a DRC dinner in Los Angeles.

Shoba Narayan

Jayaram Bhat is an opera lover, a bicyclist, pizza chef, bread maker, and passionate collector of fine Burgundy wines. He also happens to be an entrepreneur who has built and sold companies in Silicon Valley. Originally from Karnataka, Bhat now lives in Los Altos Hills, California. His wine cellar has bottles oenophiles dream of—celebrated names from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (DRC), La Tâche, Dujac, Armand Rousseau, Georges Roumier, Fourrier, Arlaud, Coche-Dury, Roulot, Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey and Maume. He has over 5,000 bottles of different vintages, some dating back to 1952. Did I mention that Bhat, 67, only buys wines from Burgundy, the most expensive region in France, and the world? He is a self-confessed Burgundy wine geek. “I do buy a few sweet wines from Alsace and Austria,” he allows. If you tell wine-loving Indian collectors you are going to Burgundy, there is usually one response: “Drink a DRC 1961 for me.”

DRC, or Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, is the most storied of all the Burgundy vineyards, a tiny patch in the Vosne-Romanée region. In this 9.43 hectare vineyard grow the world’s most expensive grapes, broken by soil, slope of mountain and sun into seven parcels.

The average bottle prices of DRC’s seven labels, according to Wine-searcher.com, are: Montrachet (\$8,600, or ₹6.7 lakh), Echezeaux (\$2,500), Grands Echezeaux (\$2,800), Romanée-Saint-Vivant (\$3,000), Richebourg (\$3,600), La Tâche (\$5,000) and the crown jewel, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (\$21,000).

All this is assuming you can lay your hands on these bottles, most of which have been snapped up “*en primeur*” by collectors. Buying “*en primeur*” means buying the vintage while the wine is still in barrels. Technically, this means you are taking a risky bet on their future quality; nevertheless, buyers unhesitatingly pay upfront for wines like these.

But then buyers don’t really call the shots in the top Burgundy and Bordeaux vineyards. If you want to buy a case, you have to apply for an “allocation”. If approved, you get on their waiting list and



beg and plead periodically to see if your name can inch forward.

Those lucky buyers who claimed allocations in the late 1990s, when Burgundy wines were still affordable, are laughing their way to the bank. The prices of the bottles they own have tripled and quadrupled, handily beating the stock market. Not that the true wine collector will ever dream of selling their Burgundy wines.

Why do people get into wine? When I asked collectors, the answers were similar. Wine is a combination of history (the Romans took wine to most European countries), geography (terroir is essentially about how the land influences the wine), geology (how limestone, chalk and soil influence the flavours), people (the winemakers), chemistry (the fermentation process, the sulphites you need to add, the barrels you need to use), all resulting in a product that the ancient Greeks and Romans attributed to the God who was a giver of ecstasy: Bacchus/Dionysius.

For me, and most collectors echo this, the allure of wine is to figure out whether

I can memorise aromas.

We live in such a visual culture. The fact that some people—like Rajat Parr, a sommelier turned winemaker—can smell a wine and say it is from Volnay, name the year of production (1988) and the producer (Lafarge), is a feat. I aspire to emulate it—I am not even close—hence the search for the scent-memory.

That said, in order to pursue wine seriously, you need two things that are in short supply for most: time and money. Collecting Burgundy wine is not for the faint of heart or wallet. Most of the collectors tend to be men, at least for now. The number of women winemakers is growing, though—soon, perhaps, women will become wine collectors too.

## THE WINNING TASTE

Krishna Tamanna, 57, is a collector. Originally from Hyderabad, he now lives in the Valley, working for a technology company. He has investments in a few restaurants, and plays golf and listens to music in his free time. His greatest passion, however, is wine. He stores 1,000 bottles at home. The rest of his collection is in a storage facility in Napa. “After 4,000 bottles (over there), I stopped counting,” he laughs.

What does he buy? Largely Burgundy wines, the big names like DRC, but also some emerging producers. Unlike Bhat, Tamanna’s collection includes old-world wines from Italy, Spain and Germany.

There is a culture in Silicon Valley that is unique to the US, and perhaps the world. It is a culture not so much of consumption but of passion. Men—and it is mostly men—get into stuff in a deep way, whether it is mountain-biking, bread-making, collecting art or wine. They read, study, travel and practise their interest. They become experts.

Tamanna is a typical example. Once he drank his first bottle, a 1994 Chianti, he got so interested in wines that he spent three weeks in Europe and then enrolled in a WSET (the London-headquartered Wine

and Spirit Education Trust) diploma course. It was hard because he was working full-time, had young children, and had to drive every weekend to Napa for classes. His wife, fortunately, was supportive.

Today, he owns an apartment at Beaune—the centre of Burgundy—and sponsors a wine and music festival there in late June. The oldest wine he has had is an 1894 Madeira.

“Passionate wine drinkers are always chasing that experience that got them hooked,” Tamanna says. “We are on a quest to chase that singular moment out of many such moments that delivers that same pleasure. (We are chasing) a memory that makes us continue on this journey, on this quest.”

For Bhat, the wine that started him on the journey was a La Tâche, in 2001. He still remembers the aromas and flavours: a profound layered wine with subtle yet distinct aromas and a mouth-feel that was plush without being fulsome. Like luxury, fine wine is about restraint, to the right degree. There is nothing you can subtract or add.

Since then, he has become what friends call a “Burgundy evangelist”. Several years ago, he started a Burgundy wine tasting group in the Valley that meets every week or so for a blind tasting. The group consists of six people—Tamanna is part of it.

The format is specific and repetitive. “One person provides all the wines for each meeting and we cycle through everyone in turn,” says Bhat. “As an example, Krishna would provide wine in week 1, then I would provide wine in week 2 and so on. We would cycle through all six and then back to Krishna. Wines are served blind and we have to guess the village, vineyards, producer and vintage. There are points awarded for correct guesses. But this is just for bragging rights. We usually don’t invite anyone else as we are all Burgundy geeks with deep cellars. Tastings are usually held at one of our houses and we order food from a local restaurant. Someone pays for all the food for each dinner and it goes around in a round-robin fashion. There are no other payments or sharing involved.”

What is the pull of old wines? And what is the pull of Burgundy? The Cistercian monks who inhabited the area used systematic and precise methodologies to collect data on which “*climats*”, or plots of land, grew the best vines. This body of knowledge gave Burgundy winemakers a leg up in terms of techniques.

Cut to the early 2000s, when the late Becky Wasserman, described by *The New York Times* as the “great sage of Burgundy”, began promoting its wines in the US and UK. Within a few years, the prices of Burgundy wines began to rise—and they have not stopped since.

However, today’s winemakers, such as Alec Seysses of Domaine Dujac, wonder whether the region can continue on its trajectory, partly because France’s inheritance laws make it difficult for continuing generations to carry on the business and partly because of the astronomically high prices of Burgundy wines.

Which begs the question: Which region in the world will become the next Burgundy? Will it be Piedmont in Italy, where Giacomo Conterno is called the DRC of Italy, or Rioja in Spain?

## A DELIVERY OF BRAGGING RIGHTS

Wine clubs abound all over the world. Tamanna is part of two: one with Bhat and another, more formal one he was introduced to by an Iranian-American friend. A large one in the West is the Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin, one of those elite institutions everyone likes to gripe about and secretly wants to belong to. Established in 1934, and headquartered in the venerable Chateau Clos de Vougeot, their stated goal is to “defend the reputation of France’s great wines in general and those of Burgundy in particular”.

There are also wine forums, ranging from small WhatsApp groups to giant online communities like the now dissolved “ebob”, run by wine critic Robert Parker. Today, Wine Berserkers describes itself as the “largest and most active” online wine community.

Much like in any community, wine too can be competitive. In my birding groups, there are those who have seen the most number of species. In wine, there are those who have tasted legendary wines and vintages. We all collect bragging rights, and this happens in every wine group as well. All this gets amplified on Wine Berserkers.

A recent article on the blog *Vinography* describes a Frenchman with an amazing collection of old wines who opens them for a price and hosts dinners all over France for those who can pay for the privilege of sampling them. He is admired and scorned, often in the same thread.

The man in question is a retired CEO of a French steel company. François Audouze, whose internet presence is benign and whose tasting notes are enthusiastic, has amassed a collection of old wines, bottled in Napoleon’s time and earlier. He is known for holding wine dinners in France where old and grand wines are poured for a fee. Bhat, who has attended a few of these, says it costs “\$2,000-5,000 per person and sometimes more”. For Bhat, drinking these aged wines in the company of wine geeks from around the world is the high.

## WHERE ATTRACTION LIES

The Valley has other collectors like Bhat and Tamanna. Arvind Sodhani is listed in the Festival of Music and Wine (an annual event in Burgundy) as a member of the board of directors. The chairperson is Aubert de Villaine, who ran DRC for decades. Others, who didn’t want to be named, tell me that Burgundy is an expensive hobby. One says, “Thankfully, my kids are through college and I can engage with this.”

All of them have similar advice for those embarking on this journey. “Be true to yourself and your palate,” says Tamanna. “Don’t try to like something somebody else told you to like. Trust your palate, know that it will evolve.”

To Tamanna, palate memory (remembering the taste) and olfactory memory (remembering the aromas) are key. Some are more natural at it than others; women tend to be better at it. But, he says, “you can definitely cultivate your palate and your olfactory senses too”.

Bhat’s tips include visiting the local wine store, joining a tasting group, wine bulletin boards and Facebook groups, reading community tasting notes at Cellar Tracker (an app with reviews and scores), subscribing to newsletters like Burghound.com, buying and tasting as much wine as you can afford and comparing your tasting notes with others.

Currently, the world of fine wines is almost exclusively inhabited by men. But India has Sonal Holland, who passed the tough Master of Wine exam. Tamanna has some more good news for me. He tells me an Indian woman whose name he can’t remember is the youngest person ever to pass the very tough Master Sommelier exam. At age 21, he says, marvelling at how she cultivated her palate and olfactory memory at such a young age.

Looked her up. It is true. In the wake of the sexual scandals that rocked the sommelier fraternity in 2020, she gave up her title. Her name: Alpina Singh.

So what are we to do, sitting here in India? I think a trip to Bourgogne (as a first step, maybe pronounce it like the French instead of saying Burgundy?) makes a lot of sense if you like these wines. Travelling there, as I did recently, shows you the *climats*. It helps you visualise the producers and the wines. It teaches you that all these fabled wineries are, at the end of the day, family run businesses that cultivate expensive farmlands to produce a liquid that has been imbibed by humans since the dawn of Roman civilisation.

And of course, cultivate your palate. Buy wines. Engage with wine clubs. Join the club.

Shoba Narayan writes the Bangalore Talkies for Hindustan Times and has been a long-time contributor and columnist for Mint.





# I am seeking an intense drama: Pankaj Tripathi

The actor on his new films and web series, the difference between the two, and why he's looking for an urban, intense character after playing a series of lighter roles



Pankaj Tripathi in 'Laali'.

Udita Jhunjhunwala

For a while now, Pankaj Tripathi has been one of the busiest actors in the Hindi film industry. Besides acting in films such as *Bareilly Ki Barfi*, *Newton* and *Stree*, he pivoted early to the streaming space, first playing Guruji in *Sacred Games* and later creating the iconic gangster Kaleen Bhaiya in *Mirzapur* and lawyer Madhav Mishra in *Criminal Justice*.

At the time of this interview, he is juggling shooting for *Fukrey 3* and promoting his new film, the Srijit Mukherji directed satirical drama *Sherdil: The Pil-ibhit Saga* (released in cinemas on 24 June), and *Laali* (streaming on Disney+ Hotstar since 17 June), a high-on-atmosphere short film about loneliness directed by Abhiroop Basu. Edited excerpts from the conversation:

**'Laali' opens with a nine-and-a-half minute one-shot. How did that come about?**

That shot was meant to be much shorter. Abhiroop is a film school guy and he did a master shot where you can see the entire ironing shop. My character is going along with his routine. I am a trained actor who does not stop until the director calls "cut". And as I am a trained actor it is also not possible for me to go blank.

The scene has no dialogue. His life is going on, so I am performing his routine in

silence. It was night. We were shooting in Kolkata at a shop on the street corner. Finally, I was done and I downed the shop's shutter. I hadn't even realised that it was an almost 10-minute-long take. When the director finally called cut, I was inside the shop with the shutter down but I could hear loud applause, which surprised me because it was a very tight crew. When I went out and looked, I saw that even passers-by were watching and they were all applauding.

**How did you internalise the man's loneliness, which manifests in his interaction with a red dress?**

That man's loneliness, his solitude and his profession as an iron man reminded me of an ironing man I saw during the shooting of *Bareilly Ki Barfi*. We had a set in Lucknow and in this adjacent shop I noticed an older man ironing all day. He had been ironing for so many years, with his head bent down, that he had begun to stoop a little. That became his posture. When I heard this story, I remembered this visual and decided to experiment. There is a lot of improvisation and a great deal of imagination, especially in terms of the symbolism of the red dress coming into a lonely man's life. I believe two different viewers might interpret the story and the symbolism differently.

**The film 'Sherdil' is based on a true story, but uses satire to touch on important themes.**

There are many themes, including nature, the jungle, man-animal conflict,

greed, poverty, systemic problems, etc. The topics are serious but the take is a little satirical. Srijit took this route—of taking a serious subject, which should have a serious impact, but making the screenplay and treatment engaging and satirical. My character, Gangaram, going into the jungle to give his life to a tiger is based on true incidents, but thereafter there are many cinematic liberties.

**Bringing humour and mischief has become a trademark of yours.**

My purpose is to make every scene engaging and I think that if I bring a smile to your face, you will listen to my words carefully. Keeping the backstory of the character in mind, I build on that, keeping his innocence intact, his reaction must look natural. I like to retain and

“My purpose is to make every scene engaging and I think that if I bring a smile to your face, you will listen to my words carefully.”

keep alive the innocence of characters. In life, I try to keep my own innocence alive as well.

**Do you enjoy recurring roles such as Madhav Mishra and Kaleen Bhaiya or do you prefer a one-time movie role?**

When it comes to series, I have to be the same person in season 3 that I was in season 1. Sometimes the directing team will show me old scenes as a reference to remind me how I was doing something. After playing some parts repeatedly, I do start getting bored, but as long as there are new incidents, new characters in the season, new character traits for me to explore, then the interest increases.

**What else is on your slate?**

After *Laali* and *Sherdil*, there will be *OMG 2—Oh My God!* 2, which was a lot of fun. It's a very well-written script by Amit Rai, who is also the director. Then will come the web series *Gulkanda Tales* and the next seasons of *Mirzapur* and *Criminal Justice*. I am currently shooting for *Fukrey 3*.

**Is there any kind of role you wish you were being offered?**

I do wish to do an intense drama. I have done quite a few lighter roles, so it would be exciting to play an urban, intense character in a drama or thriller. I am seeking an intense drama so that I can reduce my stamp of humour.

Udita Jhunjhunwala is a writer, film critic and festival programmer. She tweets @UditaJ.



'Medium Spicy' is Takalkar's most accessible production yet.

## The angst of urban living

Mohit Takalkar's 'Medium Spicy' tackles complex relationships and urban loneliness

Deepali Singh

Mohit Takalkar's *Medium Spicy* has been a long time in the making. It was sometime in 2012-13 that the director, founder of the Aasakta Kalamanch, conceived the storyline of his Marathi film. His debut feature, *The Bright Day*, had finished its run of film festivals and after repeated viewings of it, Takalkar had understood what it was lacking. Without mincing words, the movie's writer and director says that probably the lamest part of his debut was the writing. If he wanted to make another film, he knew he would need another writer.

For *Medium Spicy*, the director and playwright roped in friend and writer Irawati Karnik, who was impressed with the urban, contemporary storyline focused on the hospitality industry. They only started looking for producers a year and a half later; finding one proved more difficult than they had thought. "I come from an experimental theatre background and I am always trying to push boundaries with form and content. So, there is a prelude to me that whatever he does is difficult to grasp," he says.

Takalkar admits he fought back the urge to drop the idea but it was Karnik, production designer Ashish Mehta and actor Sagar Deshmukh who kept urging him not to give up. Finally, they found a producer in Vidhi Kasliwal—but the pandemic again put a spanner in the works in 2020. The movie, starring Lalit Prabhakar, Sai Tamhankar and Parma Pethe, finally saw the light of day on 17 June. Takalkar couldn't be more excited.

For someone who admits to making plays that are slightly difficult to grasp, Takalkar believes this is his most accessible production. "*The Bright Day* was also about strong family values and complex relationships. There was no direct effort to make *Medium Spicy* more accessible but it just unfolded in a very friendly way. It has a larger scope and a lot of relatable themes, such as family, dreams, aspirations and urban loneliness. Anyone watching the film will identify with something of it. It has some beautiful romantic moments as well," he says. The director, who is an alumnus of the Institute of Hotel Management, Mumbai, and owns two restaurants in Pune, says quite a few moments in the movie are inspired by his first-hand experience of the hospitality industry.

Takalkar directed his first play, *Yayati*, in 1999, when he was working in a media company, but the dream of directing for the big screen had taken shape earlier. "Stage and screen are two different mediums and different things are possible with both. Even before I started directing plays, making films was always on my mind. There has always been a very clear-cut demarcation about what I want to do on stage and what I want to do in movies," says Takalkar. Although he will continue making movies, theatre, he assures us, will not take a back seat. "My latest play, *Hunkaro*, which has already been staged at various festivals, will be shown at Prithvi Theatre in Mumbai in July," he says. Shows of *Mathemagician*, directed by Takalkar and first shown in 2017 at Prithvi Theatre's festival, will also be staged soon. "Theatre," he concludes, "will very much be hand in hand with films."

Deepali Singh is a Mumbai-based writer.

# Wandering through the world of Jacques Tati

## WORLD VIEW

A look at what's making waves on the global cinema scene

French actor-director Jacques Tati's singular but finite filmography affords the chance to take in the whole thing in one go

Uday Bhatia  
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Last week, on a whim, I decided I would watch all the films of Jacques Tati. I had only seen *Playtime* in full, and parts of *Mon Oncle*. I had time on my hands, a fever having deposited me on the couch, and a beautiful set of Blu-ray restorations courtesy a Criterion Collection box set. And there was that temptation cinephiles know well—the opportunity to knock an entire filmography off the list.

To better appreciate the evolution of Tati's style, I decided to proceed in chronological order: *Jour De Fête* (1949), the four Hulot films—*Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* (1953), *Mon Oncle* (1958), *Playtime* (1967) and *Trafic* (1971)—and the made-for-television *Parade* (1974). The first shot in *Jour*

*De Fête* is of wooden horses being transported to a fair in the French countryside. Then we see actual horses, and an annoyed dog—two animals Tati favoured in all his films. He plays François, a postman who has a crisis of confidence when he sees an exaggerated documentary about postal services in the US, and starts to work American efficiency into his routine, with predictably unhappy results. Here, from the start, is Tati's enduring theme: the relentless march of modernity and the comic failures of those who try and keep up with it.

Tati's next film was his first as Monsieur Hulot, the character he would forever be associated with. With his hat, pipe, beige coat and just a bit short pants, Hulot is a distinctive figure, but what really marks him out are his movements, alternately graceful and uncoordinated, an exaggerated slalom through the obstacle course of 20th century life. *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* may be nothing more than a series of sketches set in a lazy seaside town but it's a remarkably relaxed and warm film, more directorially accomplished than *Jour De Fête*, less programmed than the ones that would follow. There are the wonderful elaborate physical gags—Hulot inadvertently launching a fireworks attack on the hotel is a showstopper—but also perfect small moments, like an infant buying two ice-cream cones, walking barefoot across the sand and up the stairs, through the door, handing a cone to his friend, and



A still from 'Mon Oncle'.

both sitting back to watch a banner being hung up.

Tati took a turn after this, not only switching to colour but developing a new kind of obsessiveness in his film-making. *Mon Oncle*, which won the best foreign film Oscar in 1959, satirised the drive towards ultra-modernity, with the boastful Arpels and their fussy futuristic house. Hulot, beloved uncle of the young Arpel

boy, is a bumbling rube among their sophisticated, almost sentient appliances but he takes the boy on adventures as funny and loose as his home life is sober and controlled.

*Mon Oncle* onwards, Tati's cinema becomes, to my mind, one to admire, not revel in. The gags are brilliantly constructed, yet I found myself laughing out loud much less than in the first two films.

This is not a criticism: The comic visions of *Mon Oncle* and *Playtime* are unrivalled in cinema. "It was as if the world had been created so Tati could turn it into a film," screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière once said. In those two films, Tati didn't just react to the world as it existed but created his own off-kilter one. *Mon Oncle* had the forbiddingly advanced house—you half-expect a Hal, the sentient computer from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, to speak up. In *Playtime*, he went even further, constructing a slice of ultra-modern Paris from the ground up: Tativille.

The first half of *Playtime*—with Hulot stumbling through soulless, gleaming offices and chic apartments—is a formidable, visionary thing. But in this, my second viewing of the film, I found my spirits lifting after the restaurant set-piece starts: a painstakingly choreographed accumulation of slapstick chaos. After the pristine comedy of the first half, the chaos of the second brings the film to rude life. Even when it's over, the remnants of this energy spill over into the colourful, musical final 10 minutes.

*Playtime* was shot on 70mm and Tati fills the screen with several layers of movement and action. In most of the scenes, your gaze will flit across, picking up gestures and stray words (Tati dialogue is never fully audible; his are silent sound films). I would dearly love to see *Playtime* on the big screen but even then I would never catch all the little things unfolding

at once. "He wanted to see everything, all the time," Pierre Étaix, director and assistant to Tati, said. It was his challenge to the viewer: He would show them everything but they would have to strain to see it.

Like so many visionary films, *Playtime* never caught on. You can see the fallout in Tati's next film, *Trafic*, which is less elaborate and on a visibly tighter budget. An awkward rock music score suggests that it's not just Hulot but Tati who may be out of step with the times. Yet, *Trafic*, a road movie in which Tati helps transport a typically ingenuous "camper car" from Paris to Amsterdam, has moments of great charm and is arguably the spiffiest-looking of his colour films. It's the last Hulot outing—and the last real Tati film, with *Parade* a curiosity at best, the director fronting a circus act for Swedish TV, performing the mime routines that first brought him fame.

Tati was a unique figure in cinema history: a comic's comic and a director's director. He was as deft a physical comedian as anyone since the silent greats, but as a performer he was never central to his films, and his most famous work pushes him to the margins. He had a singular directorial eye, which placed modern life under a microscope to reveal all the awkward wriggling around. *Mon Oncle* and *Playtime* are unlikely to be displaced as the cornerstones of his art. But when I return to Tati next, it will be to the warm embrace of *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*.



Aakrit Vaish

# LETTING BOTS TALK

The co-founder and CEO of Haptik on the coming of age of conversational AI, the backing of the Reliance Group, and sizing up the competition as they enter the 'scale-up' phase

Illustration by Priya Kuriyan

Leslie D'Monte and Prasad Banerjee

Aakrit Vaish, co-founder and CEO of conversational Artificial Intelligence (AI) startup Haptik, has kept away from the media over the last two-three years. This seemed strange, given that the startup has been part of the Mukesh Ambani-owned Jio Platforms for over three years. "We were not sharing much about our journey. But now we believe this is a good time to start talking about what we have accomplished," admits a relaxed Vaish, 36.

He has good reason to sit back and enjoy his success. In April 2019, Jio Platforms announced it was buying an 87% stake in his startup for \$100 million (around ₹780 crore now). The deal made many industry observers sit up and take note for a couple of reasons. The first was the way Jio Platforms was breaking out of the mould of telecom services provider. Second, the deal heralded the coming of age of conversational AI in India.

For Vaish, it marked the close of a six-year period of "struggle and experimentation" to make his product a "market fit".

Building an AI-powered automated chatbot that can also make money has been an uphill task for Haptik. "When we started out in 2013, the timing of the idea was wrong," says Vaish. The idea was that chatbots could perform all the tasks that assistants, concierges and customer care staff could. "People had great expectations but the technology was not quite there," he adds. But Vaish and his team never lost sight of their core mission "despite pressure on us to pivot and even dabble in areas like e-commerce".

What helped was Vaish's familiarity with the struggles associated with entrepreneurship. His father was a serial entrepreneur who had dabbled in everything from steel to textiles. "Hence, I grew up in an environment that was constantly

Close to 300 brands across 12 countries subscribe to its service. About 50% of Haptik's revenue comes from India, 25% from the US

entrepreneurial but also familiar with struggle," says Vaish nonchalantly. His parents "chose to make their biggest investment when they wrote their biggest-ever cheque" to send Vaish to the US for undergraduate studies. He did industrial engineering from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Once he graduated, he got a job with Deloitte in San Francisco but soon realised that "the consulting stuff was not made for me. So, within six months, I started looking for something else". Vaish's life changed when he joined a listed startup in San Francisco, in the space of mobile advertising and mobile analytics. "I joined as employee No.20 and those two-and-a-half years that I spent there were my startup education—how to grow a business, how to become a leader, how to run a team, etc.," he recalls.

It was at this point that Vaish roped in his "college buddy". "He (Swapan Rajdev, a co-founder and chief technology officer at Haptik) studied computer engineering. We got together and decided to make it big by starting Haptik."

That was easier said than done. Haptik had to go through many iterations in its business model. From 2013-17, for instance, Vaish and his team were trying to build a direct-to-consumer (D2C) mobile assistant chatbot. "You had the Haptik app. You could download the app and get a concierge or butler service. We did that for four years, and raised about \$15 million between Kalaari Capital and Times Internet," says Vaish.

Somewhere in 2017, though, they learnt that "sometimes products are a vitamin but not a painkiller". Vaish reasons that while search engines and social media sites existed before Google and Facebook made it big, these two succeeded because they "made it a lot better and easier to access and create the consumer distribution". In Haptik's case, there was no distribution platform on which to build conversational AI or chatbots. So, Haptik began building an app and organising its own distribution.

It was challenging. "People's expectations were very high from the chatbot—this is my butler, my Alfred, my assistant, my everything. Look, it can do everything for me—I can order food. I can order groceries. I can book a flight. Unfortunately, that was not the case back then. And it is

still not the case," says Vaish. Moreover, they knew fully well that tasks like ordering food, groceries or paying bills could be done on a normal mobile app or website—so the Haptik app was "not a must-have".

They continued experimenting in phase 2. "We experimented with a business-to-business (B2b) chatbot, a conversational advertising chatbot, and also a content app," he recalls. The third phase began when the B2B chatbot idea seemed to click. "We have since been building a B2B SaaS (software-as-a-service) platform for conversational AI," says Vaish.

By early 2019, Haptik had about 10 customers, giving them hope that the idea "has legs". Money, however, was drying up. The Haptik leadership "thought of value recapitalisation (restructuring a company's debt and equity ratio); bring in a PE (private equity) player on board; or have a large corporate acquire our business," recalls Vaish.

Jio was not on their mind. In March 2018, however, Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) acquired music company Saavn, signalling its transformation from a telco to an entertainment, software and internet services company. Even then, Vaish did not see much synergy with Jio. But in June 2018, when Jio acquired AI edtech Embibe, Vaish realised RIL was committed to diversifying in the internet space and would be the apt strategic partner.

Reaching out to it, though, was a challenge. A determined Vaish pulled out all the stops. "It took a month or so to make it (the introductions) happen. When we met them, we simply told them that you (Jio) want to become an internet company and

we have great technology to make that happen. The chairman's office and key persons at Jio gave us a lot of confidence. Besides, they were very gracious in terms of the commercials too, besides being very open to all our ideas," recalls Vaish.

The funding has helped Haptik acquire firms and grow. It bought Buzzo.ai—a Mumbai-based conversational commerce startup—in September 2019 and acquired the founding team of Los Angeles-based AI startup Convrg in July 2019. Vaish maintains Jio gives Haptik the right "amount of autonomy, freedom to do things.... We meet them (the Jio board) roughly three-four times a year. They reiterate at every single meeting that you guys know this business—we are merely here to support you. That has been the most refreshing part of this relationship."

Haptik, which now provides AI chatbots that can automate customer conversations on the internet, in apps, and on social media channels like WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook, also got a boost with the Facebook investment in Jio in 2020. Haptik, he says, has "entirely built the JioMart-WhatsApp experience. Later, we were the ones who drove the entire experience of how the shopping on JioMart within WhatsApp would look like, etc".

Since Jio also has a large enterprise sales team in India and other countries that engages in enterprise solutions like fixed line broadband, etc., Haptik's products can now be bundled. There is no need, then, to build a sales team. And on the infrastructure side, "when it comes to things like cloud hosting with Azure, you get very good support and competitive

## How far are we from building predictive bots?

Will you not be spooked by bots that are predictive? We have the technology but not many use-cases because we need the right product to solve.

## How do you manage gender diversity?

In the last two years, women have comprised 50% of all our new hires. As a company, the women to men ratio is about 30:70. At any given point, about 30% of our leadership team too comprises women. Our goal is to get to 50:50.

## Your thoughts on work-life balance.

I believe it's very difficult to achieve balance if you want to be successful at both. But if there is a way to achieve harmony between both, then you have a shot at being successful. If I find an open slot in the day, if a meeting is delayed or cancelled, I will go pick up my kid from school. On the other hand, if there's a big customer call that comes up at night, I think it's fine to take it. I also believe in eight hours' sleep and a daily workout for one hour.



The target is that within 18-24 months, we will have at least operational breakeven across all markets.



pricing because of their (Jio's) scale and leverage", Vaish explains.

Having tasted success, Haptik is now entering "phase 4, which I call the 'scale-up phase'", says Vaish. Currently, close to 300 brands across 12 countries subscribe to its service. About 50% of its revenue comes from India, 25% from the US and the remaining from other parts of the world. Part of the Reliance Group, Haptik is now a deemed listed company, or a private firm that is a subsidiary of a public one. "We are hoping to surpass \$25 million in ARR (annual recurring revenue) by end of March 2023," insists Vaish, adding that the company is "targeting \$1 billion over the next five-seven years".

But what about profitability, which is a pain point with most startups? Vaish says Haptik's core India business could be profitable "but we are expanding to other markets and also investing in regions like South-East Asia, Middle East, Africa, and now we are going to start investing in Europe. As a result, investments are going to continue for the next two-three years. Yet, the target is that within 18-24 months, we will have at least operational breakeven across all markets."

That said, Haptik does face stiff competition from unicorns (private startups valued at over \$1 billion) such as Uniphore, Gupshup and Yellow.ai, even the smaller Gnani.ai. These firms are flush with funds and offer similar products and services.

Gupshup, for instance, raised \$100 million from investment firm Tiger Global Management in April 2021. Over the past year, it has also acquired other startups, including AI firm AskSid and cloud-based

telephony firm Knowlarity. Uniphore raised \$400 million in a funding round this February, bringing its valuation up to \$2.5 billion. Like Gupshup and Haptik, the Chennai-based startup also deals with conversational AI and has raised over \$610 million till date. Yellow.ai leverages its NLP (natural language processing) platform to provide voice and chat-based bots. It raised \$78.15 million in a Series C funding round last year, from investment firms WestBridge Capital, Sapphire Ventures and Salesforce Ventures.

Haptik, though, does enjoy an early-mover advantage and the backing of the Reliance Group. "It is one of the early NLP AI companies in the country, which has given it a chance to fine-tune its solution(s) to be market-ready with a relatively high amount of accuracy. Their early entry and relatively-stable platform is what attracted a player like Reliance Jio to acquire Haptik," says Jayanth Kolla, founder and partner of deeptech research and advisory firm Convergence Catalyst.

Vaish doesn't take the competition lightly. "Many companies are doing similar tasks. My field is NLP, and this too is getting commoditised," he admits. He believes the world is moving towards "verticalisation of software", which means you must customise NLP and integrate it with the existing systems of a firm that wants to implement it—"a big challenge today". Vaish considers this "domain-specific NLP" to be Haptik's main strength. The only way to grow, he says, is to "continuously disrupt ourselves".

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