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TRADITION IN SIGHT

My usual response to the word “tradition” is a whiplashy gag of nausea and dread at its connotations of unthinking obedience and ritualized conformity but, no lie, I actually love the way it sounds when applied to our Focus on Nevada photo contest. I’m rolling with it: Now in its 10th year, Focus on Nevada isn’t just an annual magazine feature, or a fun contest, or a cool party, or an awesome touring exhibit — though it is all of those things. But in the way those distinct components snap together to Voltron into something bigger, it’s truly become a community tradition — and I mean tradition in the best way, one that connects and inspires people, and recognizes them as the source of the tradition, not as subjects of it. What I’m thinking of specifically as I philosophize flailingly at the keyboard is the gushing volcano of giddy excitement that explodes in the room whenever we announce a winner at our annual Focus on Nevada showcase bash. I’m always down for that kind of tradition! (If you missed the party, no biggie: You can celebrate by turning to our showcase of winners on p. 53 and wooting heartily at your discretion.)

Another thing I love about the party is less obvious: The eager chatter among our honorees as they nerd out and congenially trade intel on craft and technique — in other words, hearing visual artists talk shop about how they got the shot, percolating ideas and inspiration on the fly. This is culture happening in real time, and it’s as precious as any prize. As valley home prices continue to soar and rents continue to tick greedily upward — slowly transforming Vegas into something decidedly different than the town whose cost of living has made it historically friendly to working-class artists and creatives — I certainly hope our radiant city isn’t bled of the crazy color our artists bring. Some traditions, after all, should be preserved.

Andrew Kiraly
EDITOR
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I
f my hasty English major napkin math is correct, Desert Companion’s Focus on Nevada photo contest has had about 12,000 entries over its 10 years. That’s hella photos and hella photographers vying annually for the contest’s top honors. Now, while we harbor no illusions that taking home a Focus on Nevada award is some kind of life-changing Megabucks event, a killer camera, a beautifully published photo, and artistic validation are nothing to sneeze at prize-wise.

But we were wondering: What happens to winning photographers after they win? Do they notch their strap and bow out of contest life? Are they inspired to perfect their craft with renewed enthusiasm? Do they take the plunge to pursue a pro career? We caught up with a handful of winners from previous years and picked their brains via email on these burning questions and more.

Way back in the day — 2014 to be exact — Julie Hamill took first place as an amateur/student entrant in the Smartphone category — with a uniquely moody, cloud-layered shot of Valley of Fire, a
decidedly different image than its usual sun-soaked portrayal. At the time, Hamill had a long bucket list of shots, and Valley of Fire was one of them. “The Valley of Fire photo is a great example of how I went to every photo opportunity in a 500-mile radius,” Hamill writes. “I had a list of places to go. These days I try to just take one, be in the moment and present. I feel like I’ve got ‘the shot’ from most places. I am not as obsessed with going everywhere all the time as I used to be.” In other words, Focus on Nevada totally helped Hamill achieve mindfulness! More seriously, Hamill notes that the contest did serve as a timely invitation to explore a city she didn’t necessarily love. “I lived in Las Vegas for five fun-filled years,” she writes. “I was less than thrilled to move there, but I fully embraced the city, learning everything, going everywhere, and experiencing it all. I explored every nook and cranny of the city and surrounding area. It was the beginning of social media and a place to put my photos. I loved it. Crazy filters and cell phone pics. I’m really embarrassed looking back at those. My style is more natural now.” She’s certainly in the place for it: She now lives in St. George, Utah.

Honestly, we’ve lost count of how many times Warren Lee has landed a placement or honorable mention in Focus on Nevada over the years, but his landscape and wildlife photos — at once gorgeous, dramatic, and mysterious — have practically become a contest hallmark. If you miss his pics this year, it’s because we conscripted him as a judge. That’s not the only change. Lee happily reports: “Winning in the Wild Nevada category encouraged me to explore more of the opportunities (especially wildlife and night photography) in our state. I had been contemplating extending my hobby to a semiprofessional level in retirement (about two years away, Lord willing). Winning Focus on Nevada and new opportunities from the pandemic rapidly accelerated that timetable, especially over the past 12 months. I’ve since advanced to professional status. I have developed introductory classes to wildlife and night photography, and I now take and process images into large, fine art prints at warrenleeartistics.art.”

Matthew Carter — whose first-place image of lake swimmers graced the cover of our 2014 photo issue — has also since been inspired to expand his horizons. “Ten years ago, I was a full-time photographer working at a wedding chapel on the Strip. Now I shoot a broader range of subjects, ranging from sports and events gigs to landscapes to glamour models for fun.” He notes that “photography is a side hustle and only a small part of my ‘day job,’” which turns out to be a positive in a post-COVID reality. “Good thing I didn’t leave my full-time job,” he writes. “I know so many great photographers who nearly lost everything and left Las Vegas when everything shut down.” Musing more broadly on photography, Carter, an electric sign designer, loves how far cameras have come, too. “I loved the Nikon D700 I was using 10 years ago, but the new DSLR and mirrorless systems are amazing. They are faster, lighter, are much more sensitive, and have two to four times more pixels to play around with. It does bite me sometimes when I return from a shoot with four times as many images as I used to. But, dang, the images are amazing!”

Chris Pflum, another first-place winner, agrees — but is leery of increasingly complicated camera tech. Sporting a Nikon D2X, he took first in the Amateur/Student category in our inaugural 2013 Focus on Nevada issue with an
instant-classic shot of an eerie, abandoned ranch in rural Nevada. He’s since upgraded cameras, but he’s not sure that newer is necessarily better.

“Most people can now take technically superb photos without knowing much about photography,” he observes. “Nikon and Canon are rapidly losing market share to Apple and Samsung. Their professional-level cameras have become too complicated with useless variables. (My Nikon D850 came with a 900-page instruction manual). As a retired engineer, I’m fascinated by the technology, but it lures me into buying lenses and gadgets that I rarely use. Most people prefer the cell phone’s cost and simplicity.” What’s also simple is his approach to sharing his work these days. “I no longer sell my photos,” he writes. “Instead, I just give them away.” As with all our winning photographers over the years, our eyes are grateful for his generosity.

COMMUNITY

Want Not

Food waste hurts everyone. These Las Vegans are doing their part to lessen the damage

BY Ganny Belloni

It was a balmy 75-degree Monday. The grills were hot, kids running around, and parents sat quietly as teenagers waited in line for food. It’s a scene I’ve witnessed several times before, but today I marveled at the sheer quantity of food on display: miles of hot dogs, mountains of pizzas, piles of donuts, and enough chips to dehydrate an elephant. Like most people, I live life on autopilot — not always cognizant of the fact that my choices have consequences. My half-eaten donut will eventually end up in a landfill, and the unopened bag of hot dog buns will never touch the lips of a child struggling with food insecurity. What makes food waste so insidious is that — unlike issues such as deforestation, rising sea levels, and droughts — it is completely within our control.

The topic hasn’t gone unnoticed by the media, which seems to prefer covering it by

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the numbers: “The U.S. wastes more than 108 million pounds of food annually” … “Food waste contributes to six percent of global CO2 emissions” … “We waste enough food to feed the world two times over,” etc. Although this type of coverage has its place, treating food waste as an insurmountable obstacle neglects the efforts being made to whittle it down.

Enter Las Vegas Livestock, a nondescript pig farm 20 minutes north of Las Vegas. Before anyone was talking about methane gas emissions or sustainability, the Combs family saw this city's buffet scene as an opportunity to bring their traditional food scrap agriculture to town. For more than 50 years, the Combs family has been upcycling food waste from casinos, preventing millions of pounds of food from reaching landfills each year. Although operations like LVL make up less than 1 percent of today’s animal agriculture, Sarah Stallard, the company's farm manager, believes we will eventually see a resurgence in sustainable methods.

“We are probably one of the first pig farms to showcase that it can be done on this large of a scale,” Stallard says. “And we have essentially created all the equipment that we use for ourselves and learned how to feed pigs a full and nutritious diet. I think that sustainable agriculture will eventually catch on, considering how much food waste is going to be a problem in the future.”

Much of the food we waste never reaches our plate. For commercial food waste, organizations like food banks fill that gap. When most people think of food banks, they think of a small warehouse filled with canned chili, some near-expired apple sauce, and cartons of milk. In reality, food banks such as Three Square, off North Pecos, operate less like vaults and more like Amazon distribution centers. For the almost 400,000 Southern Nevadans who are food insecure, Three Square is a lifeline that they depend on to stay fed. On an average day, the 31,000-square-foot facility turns around more than 1 million pounds of produce, meat, and cereals. Those are figures that Maurice Johnson, director of operations at Three Square, is proud of. “If you look at our fiscal year to date,” he says, “a little over 11 million pounds has been rescued from Walmart, Albertsons, Costco, Sam’s Club, and Smith’s.”

Despite these efforts to tackle the problem, it’s hard not to come back to the numbers. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that almost 40 percent of food in the United States goes to waste. It’s a discouraging problem — but one with a simple solution, according to environmental officials: source reduction. Consumers would only need to be mindful of their habits and reduce the volume of food they consume to put an end to food waste. The EPA advises consumers to avoid buying food they already have, take more trips to the grocery store instead of buying in bulk, and — most importantly — only cook and serve what will actually be eaten. The crusade against food waste doesn’t have to be a losing battle. If everyone pitched in, a world with food waste could be a thing of the past.
He recalls the impact of the “tsunami of customers” that came on July 1, 2017, when dispensaries that had previously been open to medical cardholders began allowing anyone over 21 to purchase. “I think we had 50 to 55 team members in the entire organization — that was two dispensaries, a cultivation, and production facility,” he says. “When (recreational marijuana) hit, it was like a 500-percent increase in business.”

“We figured everything was about to explode — and it did,” says Evan Marder, who is currently president of Fleur but opened Matrix cultivators during Nevada’s legal medical market phase. “We had two million-dollar months, I believe, in July and August of that year. There was so much we were growing that we weren’t able to sell in the medical period, but as soon as recreation started, we were able to unload that.”

While the industry is now moving from its growth boom to a more mature phase, it’s still innovating. And lucrative: Last year, cannabis sales in Nevada amounted to more than one billion dollars.

As the stigma of stonerdom wears off and more states sign up for legal use, the customer base has expanded; marijuana has become an item on the Vegas bucket list for tourists and a relaxation option for locals. Jon Marshall, COO of Deep Roots Harvest, explains, “We sort of have three different customers: The one that knows exactly what they want, the ones who want to know what the new brand or product is, and those never-ever consumers that have probably never been to a dispensary.”

Jessica Judd began as a budtender before progressing to senior marketing associate at Curaleaf Nevada and has seen the client evolve with the industry. “I think the knowledge of the customer has increased,” she says. “As a budtender, it was important for me to teach customers about the different products, the test results, and terpenes. It’s more than just sativa, hybrid, and indica.”

Of course, it’s bigger than just buds: Shops carry edibles from truffles to seltzer, wax and dabs, vape pens and infused pre-rolls. Marshall of Deep Roots Harvest is excited by the increasing variety of products. “Nanotechnology is super popular, the fast-acting (product) where you eat a gummy and you’re feeling it 15 minutes later,” he says. “Live resin, that’s a huge category — the distillate pens are really great, but you miss some of that organic flavor. The jury’s still out on the beverage market a little bit.”

But creating all of these new ways to catch a buzz hasn’t been easy. Marder of Fleur recalls that developing their formulas and processes for extracts was “expensive, time-consuming, you had to build a whole staff to do it. I was a flower guy, and concentrates were new to me. There was a lot of R&D,” he says with a laugh. “Learning the nuances to creating an extract through hydrocarbons, through butane — there’s definitely a learning curve there, and an artistry.”

Building grow facilities, engineering production, opening and staffing dispensaries, and developing a line of dozens of products take major investment. Thus, the past few years have seen the rise of the multistate operator, an entity that holds licenses for and operates dispensaries, grow facilities, and production sites across several states (and sometimes Canada). It’s why you see the same brands in California that you see in Nevada — even though each product is grown/produced within the state where it is sold — and why the names on dispensary storefronts seem to be perennially changing. Most multistate operators work in a vertically integrated format, growing marijuana that they turn into product to be sold at their own stores, an advantage that can make it harder for individual operators and smaller businesses to get a foothold.

That corporatization is a development that budtender and medical marijuana advocate Rob Ruckus saw coming long ago. “When the
first round of licenses went out, they went to old Vegas families,” he says. “If you didn’t have a park or a street or a school named after you, you probably didn’t get a license. And within five years, they turned around and quadrupled their money to sell out to a corporation. That’s why they got into this.”

Ruckus notes that there have been positive developments despite “everything going McWeed.” For instance, he says, “More people have access (to quality cannabis). There are some better products on the shelf, though it hasn’t gotten to where it should be.”

One major impact on the industry that no one saw coming was COVID-19. During the time when everyone was staying home on their couch and watching TV, cannabis, not surprisingly, found even more customers.

Wiegand, of The Source, says, “The pressures forced us to be more innovative, in terms of building e-commerce, building the omnichannel shopping experience, giving customers the ability to view the menu and make a decision prior to coming to the store.”

Another big change is also hovering on the horizon: the long-delayed consumption lounges, which will finally give tourists a place to legally consume the cannabis they buy. However, there’s still a lot of hesitation and uncertainty as everyone tries to figure out what consumption lounges should be.

Marshall muses, “Will it be like an adult arcade with pool and shuffleboard or bowling? Or is it more food and entertainment? Or is it more like a hookah lounge, where you come and hang out a little bit with some friends?” As the regulations are written, it could be any of those things or all three at once, offering the potential for not just a new marijuana market, but also a new form of nightlife.

It’s just one of the newest developments in an industry that has grown like the proverbial weed and, like many industries before it, is creating precedents even as it’s being created. “That’s one of the things I love about our industry,” Wiegand says. “It’s still malleable, you can get your fingerprints on it.” However, Ruckus hopes that those who are newer to the world of legalized cannabis don’t forget about the medical patients who started it all. “Don’t just look at the money; look at the good you’re doing in the world, look at the changes you can make in people’s lives,” he says. “Do that, and we can all win.”

Marder agrees that, while the cannabis industry is expanding, it doesn’t have to be about world domination. “When I first got into this, I was like ‘Yeah, we’re gonna take over the world! We’re going to be the next Coke!’” he recalls. “Now, I just want to be the best in Nevada. That’s good enough for me.”

**ALL THINGS**

**HIGH & MIGHTY**
Weed by the numbers

<table>
<thead>
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<th>21</th>
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<td>States with legalized medical cannabis only as of 2021</td>
<td>States with legalized recreational and medical cannabis as of 2021</td>
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15,936
registered cannabis sector employees in Nevada
(55% male, 39% female, 53% white)

761
dispensaries statewide

$1,003,467,666
Taxable gross statewide revenue from cannabis sales FY 20-21 (FY 17-18: $529,851,245)

$157,751,596
Statewide tax revenue from cannabis sales FY 20-21
(FY 17-18: $69,759,784)

$791,100,017
Taxable gross revenue from cannabis sales

$122,542,373
Tax revenue from cannabis sales

Clark County
FY 20-21

Compiled by Lissa Townsend Rodgers

Sources: MJBizDaily, Nevada Cannabis Compliance Board, Nevada Department of Taxation
The NEVADA PUBLIC RADIO fundraising team - along with President and CEO Mark Vogelzang - recently hosted an intimate evening of wine and charcuterie to thank our generous 2022 Spring Challenge Sponsors.

Our Challenge Sponsors collectively raised $115,500, which we leveraged into an additional $105,000 from members during our Spring Pledge Drive.

Thanks to Garagiste Wine Bar | Merchant for creating a wonderful evening, and thanks to our Challenge Sponsors for believing in our mission to inform the public, empower the communities we serve, and improve the society we live in.
In early February, weird droplets began falling on an east Las Vegas neighborhood near Charleston and Hollywood.

The oddly shaped drops splattered homes, cars, and outdoor furniture.

Residents were nervous. Was it from planes — maybe Nellis Air Force Base? A factory?

Or something more sinister...

Scott Jelinek and Camon Liddell, Clark County air quality experts, took samples and had them analyzed.

The lab’s conclusion:

“Bee frass.”

In other words, poop from a swarm of bees.

Results: Pollen grains ... from various plants?

Residents were relieved.

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Optum endowment helps address local doctor shortage

A foundation of excellence
In 1972, Dr. Tony Marlon came to Las Vegas, establishing a practice that would later become Sierra Health Services, the predecessor to what is now Optum and Southwest Medical.

Recently, Optum, working with the Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine at UNLV, established the Optum Dr. Tony and Renee Marlon Endowed Chair in the Department of Orthopaedics, with a pledge of more than $1.2 million over five years. Dr. and Mrs. Marlon generously donated a match to those funds, for a total donation to the school of $2.5 million.

Meeting a critical need
Many of the school’s students want to specialize in orthopaedic surgery. However, southern Nevada rarely has enough residency spots to provide graduate-level training, and students would have to leave the state to complete their residencies. Now, more UNLV medical students can receive excellent training here, and, upon finishing their residencies, may decide to stay here, helping ease the local doctor shortage.

Optum physicians doing their part
Dr. Michael Daubs, medical director of Optum Care Orthopaedics and Spine, is the recipient of the first endowed chair. Dr. Daubs designed and launched the school’s orthopaedic surgery residency program, and as chair, will guide the program through further growth.

Optum Care Orthopaedics and Spine has played an important part, and relied on the support, participation, and feedback of physician colleagues including Dr. Sukanta Maitra, Dr. Brock Wentz, and Dr. Erik Kubiak.

The medical school’s impact
This public-private partnership is the first endowment chair for the school, and it will be instrumental in supporting and promoting the department of orthopaedics, as well as orthopaedic education and research in Nevada.

The school has many excellent residency programs that supply our community with well-trained physicians. Optum and its team members believe we all deserve quality health care delivered right here at home, and our medical education system is the key. Supporting and improving the health care education system in Nevada improves the health care system overall.

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Optum Care Orthopaedics and Spine medical director, Michael Daubs, MD, with graduates from inaugural class, Tyler Kent, MD; Brandon Romero, MD; Aaron Gray, MD, PhD; and Sean Davis, MD; and UNLV Orthopaedic Residency Program director, Brock Wentz, MD. The Optum Dr. Tony & Renee Marlon Endowment will help fund training of future orthopaedic specialists.
he guide watches me knife the cold Colorado River with my oar. Knifing the water is a violent way to describe this peaceful interaction. But knifing invokes the image of what he needs me to do. I plunge the broad tip of the oar into the river. In unison with my son, who is at the bow, I push past the oar’s buoyancy and the water’s resistance. Working together, we should place the gunwale first, then the bow in the direction of Hoover Dam. This performance is done out of sheer vanity — to show the guide that we know what we are doing. So, of course, we veer into a circle near pylons with signs saying, “Do not enter.”

“You're in the wrong spot!” the guide yells over the voices of day kayakers coming up from Willow Beach. Perhaps he senses the obviousness of his statement. He clarifies: “Your son should be in the back of the canoe.”

My son beams with validation. He’s grown up in a time where billionaires talk of colonizing nearby planets, perhaps as a Plan B to ours. He’s seen me place order after Amazon order of stuff I will use a few times and forget about. Still, I need my son to have a connection to nature, even if I do not exemplify the behavior. And especially to the Colorado River, the lifeblood of the Mountain West.

I think I am late to do this. I only started thinking of my role in climate change during the pandemic, when we were holed up in our houses. The Colorado River saved our sanity during the first few months, when we would watch the pandemic death scroll on the nightly news and there were more arguments than togetherness. That should have caused us to cherish our time, but instead, it made everything irritating. The direction one person placed spoons in the dishwasher sparked a huge argument. But the magnificence of the Colorado River squashed those arguments. We didn’t have a kumbaya moment where the kids listened and my husband started picking up his socks from the bedroom floor. The river just reaffirmed for us the power and beauty of nature and how responsible we are for keeping it that way.

I worry my son, a city kid, will view nature as a philosophical adventure without ever recognizing our responsibility to it. People view rivers as salves that heal, nourish, and inspire. But the Colorado River is actual life. It’s the main supplier of drinking water to 40 million people in seven states, 30 tribal nations, and Mexico. The river enables us to eat because it irrigates 5 million acres of farm and ranch lands. It is possible that, in a few years, we will have to curtail much of our water use in Las Vegas.

On April 18, the conservation nonprofit group American Rivers published a report on the 10 most imperiled rivers in the U.S. Topping the list is the Colorado. Outdated water management, hotter temperatures, a prolonged drought caused by climate change, and the overallocation of limited water supplies have caused the river to flow at historically low levels. Brad Udall, a senior scientist at the Colorado Water Institute, says in the report that what we are facing now is the permanent warming and drying of the American Southwest.

“Scientists have a new term for this, called aridification. What we are seeing here is anything but normal, because normal implies predictability, and unfortunately, we don’t have predictability — climate change has ‘change’ in it for a reason.”

If you doubt him, then believe your eyes. The ring marks in Lake Powell and around Lake Mead bear witness to this climate catastrophe.

The guide is satisfied we’ve synced our paddling and are back on track. He goes off to help another straggler. My son and I paddle along, passing ducks and grebes diving for food. This is only my second time in a canoe and my son’s first. It’s a bonding trip, though I didn’t sell it as such when I asked my son if he wanted to go. Instead, I asked if he wanted to see nuclear-looking green water near Emerald Cove.

Previously, I had canoed from the base of Hoover Dam to Willow Beach. Unbothered, bighorn sheep greeted my canoe group from above the boulders. We filled our caps with the cold water and poured it over our heads to keep cool in the above-100-degree heat. This was 2016, a year after the Animas River ingested 3 million gallons of toxic wastewa-
ter from a defunct mine in southwestern Colorado. The heavy-metal stew spread to rivers in Arizona and Utah. Parts of the Colorado River near Lake Powell turned a freakish orange-yellow. Even though I knew this when I was in the water, I felt like it would sort itself out, like the ozone layer or acid rain. But it hadn’t sorted itself out. I just grew inured to any news about it. I do not want this for my son.

I first encountered the Colorado River in a children’s book about a girl who wanted to raft the river from its start in the Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of California and into the Pacific Ocean. Later, Christopher McCandless, the subject of the movie and book, *Into the Wild*, would go on to use the river to cross into Mexico undetected. McCandless was the well-to-do kid with a bright future ahead of him who opted out of society to live a solitary life. He later died alone in the Alaskan wilderness. My teenage son mostly tunes out my voice. He tells me I don’t get things and that we don’t have much in common. I wonder if I feel the same as McCandless’ mother did. Still, I believe it’s not too late to pass on my newfound and urgent value.

My son and I are each lost in our own thoughts as we navigate toward the queue of kayaks and canoes leading into Emerald Cove. Along the way, I point out what I think are fault lines set deep into the rock face. A light breeze comes off the water. The pale desert sky stretches out above us. I marvel aloud at the High Scalers, the men who drilled into the canyon while suspended on ropes to build the Hoover Dam. My son shrugs. I don’t know if he is listening or feigning interest.

Because the guide is nearby, watching, I make sure my oar strikes the surface of the water at the same time as my son’s to keep us near the cave. It took us the time of two whole podcasts to reach the cove. We will probably stay for a few minutes. That’s how long the line is to get in and get a picture for the Gram. For a few leaden moments, I feel the opposite of calm. My son may never experience this river as I have in the last decade.

But what do I know? His is a generation that can stretch their thinking to actually inhabiting Mars. They’ve lived through a pandemic and figured out online school. They’ve bonded together over pivotal times in history. I plan to do my part. Who knows — if we strike at the problem with the same intensity and at the same time, we ought to turn this ship around. ♦
FROM RENOWNED CHEF GUOMING “SAM” XIN.

Featuring his famous dumplings, spicy wontons and hand pulled noodles!
FOOD + DRINK

MELT FOR YOU
Cream Me’s Mint to Be, Rocky Road, and honey lavender ice cream flavors

PHOTOGRAPHY: Christopher Smith
delicacies, while ardent foodies outside the industry know who to follow for the inside scoop. Food writers spend their careers consuming untold calories, so everyone else can benefit from their expertise, whether they’re in the mood for pho or foie gras.

Neon Feast is the culmination of this institutional knowledge, made available to the public online. Veteran food journalist Al Mancini conceived of the dining app as a place where the city’s most plugged-in gastronomic enthusiasts would share, for everyone’s benefit, the dining recommendations that they give to people they know.

“Now, I want to make it clear: I’m never saying that these are the best restaurants in town,” Mancini says. “I’m just opening it up with the people that I know and trust, where they send their friends and family. And I think that makes it a very niche market.”

Mancini boasts a buffet of food journalism bona fides. He was most recently a food and beverage reporter at the Las Vegas Review-Journal, and he has written for national and local publications including Las Vegas Life, Las Vegas Weekly, Luxury Las Vegas, Vegas magazine, Vegas Seven, and this publication. He also co-authored the first three editions of the dining guidebook Eating Las Vegas: The 50 Essential Restaurants. In creating Neon Feast, he employs the same practices he used in his decades-long reporting career.

“I’m really just trying to take the same model that journalists have always used, which is you interview experts. You create lists of their recommendations that are highlighting certain aspects of the local food scene,” Mancini says. “We’re not trying to say that we’re the authority 100 percent, that this is the best and we gave it our award, and it’s better than every other place out there. What we’re trying to say is, Las Vegas has a vibrant food community that understands the benefits of talking with each other, sharing the news on what’s good.”

Neon Feast is a communal labor of love, and that’s what makes it fun. Mancini began the curation process by surveying (without compensation) his most trusted friends — local and national food writers, chefs and other foodies — about the places they would recommend to their inner circle. The app now includes almost 500 curated restaurants that can be searched via filters, such as cuisine type or location.

As a food writer and editor in this town, I can attest to the industry’s convivial spirit: We love nothing more than to talk about the dishes we’re passionate about. And the food aficionados here are equal-opportunity

nowhere is Las Vegas’ penchant for excess more apparent than in our seemingly limitless choice of restaurants. From the tourist corridor’s celebrity kitchens, to the Arts District’s gastropubs, to East Charleston’s taco shops — not to mention the mom-and-pop joints dotting all corners of the valley — we revel in our embarrassment of culinary riches.

For the layperson, this can prove both boon and bane. Heck, even seasoned food writers in this town (like me) have to work to keep up. But here’s a secret: We media industry folks have an informal whisper network through which we share obscure finds and must-try

‘Psst! Have you tried ... ?’
The Neon Feast food app puts food critics’ whisper network in the palm of your hand

BY Genevie Durano
boosters: The arrival of a marquee-name chef garners as much excitement as a local chef doing a pop-up at Vegas Test Kitchen downtown.

Diana Edelman, founder of the website Vegans, Baby and a Neon Feast contributor, says the celebratory spirit in which the app was founded distinguishes it from other guides.

Neon Feast “is curated by experts in the industry who have spent a good portion of their career writing or sharing their food and dining knowledge and expertise in the media. If someone is having a bad day, etc., there isn’t an opportunity to damage a business,” she says. “Rather, this app celebrates the best of the best and offers an expert review by thought leaders and those who are trusted in the community when it comes to dining in Las Vegas.”

Mancini says the app, for as long as he is at the helm, will be free of charge; restaurants can’t “buy” their way onto it. The only way to get listed is to be recommended by one of the experts, but once listed, chefs and restaurateurs have the option of paying for premium features, such as uploading their own photo gallery, listing specials, or linking to a reservation system.

“Getting an insider tip — that’s very much a part of the experience,” Mancini says of Neon Feast. “Here we are — we’ve got 50 insiders sharing their tips, written up by seven or so of the top food writers in Las Vegas and managed right there in the palm of your hand, and it’s free. What else can you ask for?”

Vegas PBS is excited to take you on a journey around the world beginning June 13, 2022. The new Vegas PBS WORLD Channel 10.4 offers world news, documentaries, and fact-based content covering public affairs, culture, science and more. Rescan your antenna to receive this channel and get access to stories not heard anywhere else.

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It’s hot out there! But it’s cool in this magazine spread about chilly treats. We recently scoured the valley to find our new favorite spots for cold, creamy goodness.

**DESSERT**

The Latest Scoop

**ICE CREAM**

Vanilla? So vanilla. Try the Guinness stout

When it comes to cups and cones, Las Vegas has both fine franchises and homegrown flavors. Bringing the Ohio old school is Handel’s (handelsicecream.com), where flavors include banana cream pie with chunks of graham cracker, and peanut butter parfait studded with peanut butter cups. In Downtown Summerlin, Mora Iced Creamery (moraicecream.com) keeps its flavors more focused, with a Mexican chocolate spiked with spicy cinnamon, and a swirly dulce de leche. Vegas’ own Cream Me (icecreamlv.com) is a kitschy pastel parlor where flavors range from circus animal cookie to Guinness stout; the honey lavender has a Willy Wonka color but an elegant Downton Abbey flavor. My top pick: Secret Creamery (secretcreamery.com), which uses GPS coordinates instead of an address. The flavors are high-concept comfort food, like toasted marshmallow boasting a melted-cloud texture and an ube brownie, with blue sweet potatoes as a base for brownie chunks baked by Carl’s Donuts. Lissa Townsend Rodgers
GELATO

A creamy punch in your mouth
Concentrated flavor is the trademark of gelato. Churned slowly and thus less airy than ice cream, gelato packs a punch on your palate. I started in Lake Las Vegas at Bellalinda Gelateria (lakelasvegasgelato.com), where the lake and lavender flowers floating above you make for a romantic setting. Loved the cotton candy gelato because being here is as girly as it gets. Next stop: Il Gelato at Eataly in Park MGM (eataly.com). From the flat scooper to the traditional flavors such as stracciatella, this gelato reminded me of frozen treats in Rome. Gelato Bar in Chinatown (gelatobarlasvegas.com) boasts a cornucopia of cone possibilities. Sampling the caramel popcorn and the piña colada felt like eating Cracker Jacks on a tropical island. My top pick: Solo Qui on Lake Mead and Buffalo (702-749-3904). A local couple owns the spot, offering a taste of Grandma’s gelato recipes from northern Italy. Every bite from the rotating selection is sublime. And a bonus for animal lovers: a scoop for pets made with almond milk and peanut butter. Dogs and gelato, my perfect pairing! Lorraine Blanco Moss

FROZEN YOGURT/CUSTARD

Simple classics with some tasty twists
The self-serve options at Island Frozen Yogurt (islandfrozenyogurt.net) are standard — think cake batter to peanut butter to Euro tart — and you’re in luck if you’re craving some old-school Dole Whip. Next, I tried SomiSomi (somisomi.com), which serves ah-boong, a goldfish-shaped waffle cone stuffed with a choice of filling (get the custard!) and soft serve. Is it custard? Is it ice cream? I don’t know, but it was tasty! Nielsen’s Frozen Custard (nielsensfrozencustard.net), a facsimile ’50s soda fountain, boasts a menu of simple classics (vanilla to apple pie), whereas Luv-it Frozen Custard’s list of treats (luvitfrozencustard.com) nearly covers the facade of its small building. For its broad menu and no-frills, neighborhood feel, Luv-it comes out on top as my fave frozen custard joint in the valley. Frozen with indecision over Luv-it options? Can’t go wrong with the fudgey, caramel-drenched, pecan-sprinkled Western. Nicholas Barnette

PLANT-BASED

It’s all about the “milk”
The thing longtime vegans pay close attention to in ice cream is its base — the “milk” makes a huge difference in taste and texture. This was evident at my first stop, Emack & Bolio’s in Area 15 (emackandbolios.com), where my friend Angela chose her coconut-lemon combo wisely, given it blended well with the coconut milk base. My chocolate-mint freckle? Not so much. While luxuriously creamy, it had a funny aftertaste. On to Scoop LV (scooplv.com), with its huge almond milk-based selection, whose textures ranged from grainy to rock hard. Still, my husband found the chocolate to be damn near Breyers’ cow-based version. Two places that have dialed in both texture and flavor are Almond Milk and Paradise City Creameries. Hanging around the walk-up window, tourist Connie Fulkerson told me she’ll make a point of coming back to Almond Milk (702-912-9092) for the smooth-as-silk white chocolate peanut butter shake when she’s in town. But Paradise City (paradisecitycreamery.com) wins top pick, because of its in-house oat-cashew milk blend and inventive flavors, like the pistachio-rose-date, my overall favorite. Heidi Kyser

PHOTOGRAPHY Scott Lien
JUNE 15 - SEPTEMBER 4
LUKE BRYAN
VEGAS

AEG presents concerts west
Resort World
 TICKETS ON SALE NOW axs
Art

**A SISTA’S IMAGINATION**

**THROUGH JULY 31**

To scroll through Karena and Angela Graham’s Instagram account @sistasthatpaint is to plunge into brash, bold color and, damn, what look like some wonderfully raucous paint parties. The local artists known for their vibrant, splashy canvases are marking Juneteenth with an exhibit that celebrates Black culture. And if their ‘Gram is any indication, this summer exhibit *A Sista’s Imagination* will be an explosion of color — and the reception will be a party to remember. *(AK)*

Reception 3p June 18, West Las Vegas Library, free, lvccld.org

Music

**SING, YOU SINNERS!**

**JUNE 8**

The cool thing about Joe Jackson is, it doesn’t matter whether you’ve just discovered him or been meaning to see him for the last 40 years. Either way, the music’s the same timeless piano-band romp. For this new tour, Jackson returns with the band from his last one, the Four Decade Tour of 2019, which garnered rave reviews around the world. The lineup includes songs spanning the entirety of Jackson’s career, from his first album, *Look Sharp!*, to his most recent one, *Fool*. The tour announcement promises sets by both the full band and Joe solo. *(HK)* 7:30p, Reynolds Hall at The Smith Center, $35-124, thesmithcenter.com

Theater

**SISTER ACT**

**JULY 13-AUG. 6**

There are many ways to escape the Vegas summer heat, but we can’t think of a better one than grabbing a blanket and heading out to a Super Summer Theatre production at Spring Mountain State Park. (Close second: dipping your head in subzero liquid carbonite.) This season includes *Mary Poppins the Broadway Musical* (June 1-25) and *Matilda* (Aug. 24-Sept. 10), but we’ve got our eye on *Sister Act the Musical*, a madcap song-and-dance blowout based on the 1992 hit film — there’s just something about its zany, careening, entropic energy that feels calibrated to the world’s headspace. Save us a spot! *(AK)* 8p Wed.-Sat., Spring Mountain Ranch State Park, $10-250, supersummertheatre.org
JUNETEENTH IN THE 106

JUNE 17
On June 19, 1865, federal troops descended on Galveston, Texas, to formally enforce the Emancipation Proclamation, signed two and a half years earlier. Clark County Parks and Recreation marks the 157th anniversary of that day, which has become known as Juneteenth — the true end of slavery — with a community festival in Las Vegas’ Historic West Side. The annual event includes arts and crafts, educational exhibits, hands-on activities, musical performances, product vendors, soul food, and other celebrations of African American culture. In a press release, the district’s Clark County commissioner, William McCurdy II, says the event is the pinnacle of the community calendar, “an occasion I look forward to every year.” (HK) 6-9p, Dr. William U. Pearson Community Center, free, clarkcounty nv.gov, 702-455-1220

Art
UNITY: COMMUNITY, FAMILY, AND THE FUTURE

JUNE 2-JULY 27
Nevada Humanities’ A More Perfect Union program doesn’t come right out and say it’s about world peace, but read the official description, and see for yourself. Throughout 2022, the arts and literature institution is organizing community exhibitions, talks, and workshops focused on deepening people’s connection to each other and understanding our collective history. This particular exhibition of art and poetry is meant to highlight the power that grows from people coming together and caring for each other. Sounds like world peace, right? Or, at least a good start. (HK) By appointment Tues.-Thurs. 1-5p, Nevada Humanities Program Gallery, Art Square Garden Courtyard, free, nevada humanities.org, 702-800-4670

Opera
TOSCA
JUNE 10 AND 12
If you need a break from the grim drumbeat of WTF headlines pounding your soul into a whimpering veal cutlet of catatonic despair, this classic Italian opera rife with rage, obsession, assault, murder, and torture should, uh, definitely offer a suitably soul-shattering escape. Set in Rome during Napoleon’s invasion of Italy, the tumultuous Tosca plunges the human condition into a crucible of jealousy, paranoia, and violence — and sets it to some of the most beautiful singing you’ll ever hear, as gigadiva Tosca fights to help her bae escape the clutches of a maniacal police chief. Better yet, this Opera Las Vegas production features a wealth of local talent, including soprano Shannon Jennings in a role debut, Las Vegas Philharmonic members in the pit, and the Las Vegas Master Singers bringing the choral oompf. (AK) 7:30p June 10, 2p June 12, UNLV Judy Bayley Theatre, $25-$75, unlv.edu/pac

Literature
ON THE TRAIL OF THE JACKELOPE

JUNE 24
Raised from a young age in the Southwest U.S., I can’t recall the first time I heard a jackalope tale; they were as much a part of the cultural fabric as tumbleweeds and refried beans. So, where did this jackrabbit-part antelope myth originate? Author Michael P. Branch, a UNR creative nonfiction professor and fellow high desert rat, tracks it down in his second book, taking the reader down some, um, holes to unexpected places (The world of cancer research? Yep. Actual horned rabbits? OMGGGGG YES). Branch will read excerpts from the book and sign copies during a Nevada Humanities-sponsored evening in Downtown Las Vegas. (HK) 7-8p, The Writer’s Block, free, thewriters-block.org
**Burlesque**

**TEASE: A BURLESQUE REVUE**

**JULY 16**

The Burlesque Hall of Fame has quietly become a cultural anchor in DTLV, and it's holding a fundraiser to keep the art and history of burlesque alive in Las Vegas. Don’t worry, this fundraiser won’t be a stodgy chicken-or-fish gala; instead, this event at The Space will celebrate in proper style with a night of sensual, elegant, witty burlesque.

*(AK)*

8p, The Space, $20-40, thespacelv.com

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**Theater**

**A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM**

**JULY 15-31**

Please enjoy this Stephen Sondheim musical comedy while the world burns! Laugh at the loss of women’s bodily autonomy while singing along to, “Everybody Ought to Have a Maid.” Imagine a post-gender oppressive world with, “Lovely.” Or, as the best-known tune says, “Tragedy tomorrow, comedy tonight.” *(HK)*

Times vary, Las Vegas Little Theatre, $30, lvlt.org/forum

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**Festival**

**LAS VEGAS CANNABIS AWARDS MUSIC FESTIVAL**

**JULY 10**

It’s been five years since recreational marijuana became legal in Nevada, and in that time, the industry has exploded. Dispensaries today are as common as 7-Elevens, and manufacturers are pumping out everything from vapes to candies to body creams to THC beer. More importantly, the products have gotten good — thanks, state regulation! — so blessedly behind us are the days of skanky lawn clippings and nasty-ass acrid litterbox smoke. (Sorry, flashbacks.) Celebrating that happy fact is the Las Vegas Cannabis Awards Music Festival. Which dispensary has the best edibles? The best glassware? The best CBD topicals? The winners will be announced at this outdoor party with live musical acts, celebrity appearances, and surprise guests. Also, heads up: Cannabis consumption is not allowed at this event. *(AK)* 4p, Area 15 A-Lot and Portal area, $20-250, area15.com

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**Photography**

**BRIAN SKERRY: OCEAN SOUL**

**JULY 16**

To say National Geographic photographer Brian Skerry is dedicated to his craft is an understatement. To capture images worthy of the Nat Geo imprimatur, he’ll plunge beneath Arctic ice, brave dangerous North Atlantic currents, and contend with formidable sea creatures in Australian waters. He’ll spend this evening on good ol’ terra firma to share stories — and, of course, snaps — of his globetrotting oceanic adventures based on his popular book, *Ocean Soul*. *(AK)* 7:30p, Reynolds Hall in The Smith Center, $20-49, thesmithcenter.com
In the summer of 2018, I started work on a feature documentary about the creative scene that developed in a very specific Las Vegas location during a very specific era: Maryland Parkway in the 1990s. At the time, it felt like I was perhaps the first to tackle the subject of so-called “alternative” culture in Sin City in an easily digestible filmed narrative. But if my film Parkway of Broken Dreams — the result of spending three years blending together newly filmed remembrances with fragments of decades-old VHS camcorder footage — was among the first of its kind, it soon became clear it would not be the last.

Recently, a number of other documentary films by Vegas-based artists (many of them first-time filmmakers) have either debuted or started production, all focusing on a particular aspect of the valley’s recent cultural history. Take, for example, 702 Unstripped, a feature-length visual history of hip-hop culture’s influence on the development of Las Vegas’ present-day art scene. The film, which screened rough cuts at a few private events Downtown last fall, is the brainchild of Shannon Dorn, a longtime local photographer and entrepreneur. Dorn had been capturing various artistic happenings around the city on camera for years, with a focus on the Las Vegas Arts District, but she says once Zappos moved Downtown and “things started to pop off,” she realized the importance of telling the story of the Arts District from the perspective of those who built it.

“People have their own ideas of how things happen,” Dorn says. “We’re not a historic town. Everything that we build, we tear down.” She says that making 702 Unstripped was “the only way I could physically do anything to keep the history alive in Vegas. It was important to me to tell the world that culture exists in Vegas.”

The film she produced with the help of Arts District stalwart and painter Dray Wilmore, as well as other collaborators, proves her point. 702 Unstripped spans the opening of the Arts Factory in the late 1990s, the founding and expansion of First Friday in the early 2000s, and the gentrification of the Arts District in more recent years. In doing so, it serves as something of a sequel to Parkway of Broken Dreams, literally picking up where Parkway leaves off, with the heart of Vegas arts and culture being transplanted from the UNLV to Downtown Las Vegas.

Featured early on in 702 Unstripped is 5ive Finger Miscount (5FM), Wilmore’s former collective of urban muralists, surrealists, and outsider artists whose brief existence around the same time as the launch of First Friday had a lasting impact on Vegas’ art scene. One of its founding members, veteran local artist Emmett “Iceberg Slick” Gates, Jr., announced just a few months ago that, in collaboration with Robert “Tagz1” Perez and Koby Dumas, he was starting work on a documentary of his own: a retrospective about 5ive Finger Miscount, naturally.

Although Gates says the impetus for such a project was the fact that both SFM and First Friday will be celebrating 20th anniversaries...
this year (and plans to have a version of the film complete in time for the occasion), his greater motivation to undertake such an exhaustive project isn’t dissimilar from Dorn’s.

“The landscape has changed so much Downtown,” Gates says. “Vegas is a place that will tear down a landmark in a minute and pretend it never existed. I refuse to let that happen to all those original artists who paved the way for what’s there now.”

Although Gates says he did consult with Wilmore to ensure there wasn’t too much overlap between their respective films, these projects naturally share some familiar faces (including, in full disclosure, your humble author) as well as common subjects. For example, local art curator and urban historian Brian “Paco” Álvarez appears throughout 702 Unstripped as a commentator, but he also features prominently in a teaser trailer for 5ive Finger Miscount: A Documentary, discussing how the group introduced low-brow art to Las Vegas. There’s also some crossover behind the scenes. In addition to crafting the visual look for the 5FM retrospective, “Tagz1” Perez also directed the recently premiered documentary short, This Doesn’t Happen, about Vegas-based artist Juan “Ninobuni” Muniz’s experience of returning to his old neighborhood in San Diego for a gallery show. And, of course, Muniz himself appears as one of the talking heads in 702 Unstripped.

All of this speaks to the close-knit and interconnected nature of Vegas’ creative community, which is also reflected in another recently completed documentary, 4 Years, 1 Song, G. Douglas Seitsinger’s almost two-hour ode to the post-Downtown Project era of the Bunkhouse Saloon. The film screened for an invite-only crowd at the Artifice bar Downtown last July, and made its public debut at the Silver State Film Festival in October, netting Seitsinger a Best Director award in the Documentary category. 4 Years, 1 Song does an effective job of conveying the rock ‘n’ roll clubhouse vibe that made the Bunkhouse much more than just another place to drink beer and watch bands.

“It’s a good remembrance of what happened,” Seitsinger says, “but for the people who were never there, I hoped that it would make them wish that they were.”

Seitsinger, a former rock ‘n’ roll photographer and music writer who worked the Bunkhouse door from 2016 to 2020, surreptitiously captured hundreds of shows there on an Olympus pocket camera during his watch. He says he knew something special was happening — he just didn’t know it would end up becoming a feature film.

“I didn’t know if it was going to be a doorman’s journal thing,” says Seitsinger, who also shot (with Keith Ray and Mike Busch) 26 interviews for the documentary, most of them at 11th Street Records Downtown. “I wanted it to be my perspective. I wanted to focus on the music and what the doorman captured.”

The Bunkhouse isn’t the only beloved Downtown Las Vegas venue getting immortalized on camera. Inspired by developer J Dapper’s purchase and ongoing renovation of the iconic Huntridge Theater, Chandos Erwin of Los Angeles-based Hydro Studios is directing a film tentatively titled Huntridge: The Story of a Theater and Its City, which Erwin says will examine “its role in the city’s history, its place in the hearts and memories of the people who knew it as the place they saw their first show (or) played their best show, and its future as a part of a renaissance in downtown Las Vegas.”

The Huntridge looms large in Las Vegas’ collective cultural history, serving as a nexus for disparate subculture scenes. It’s shown in Parkway of Broken Dreams hosting performance art, punk bands, and hip-hop acts. It turns up in 702 Unstripped as the place Dorn first encountered 5ive Finger Miscount during a pop-up art show. Even for a self-proclaimed “outsider” such as Erwin, he recognized what he calls “the cultural legacy” of the theater, and discovered a greater truth about Las Vegas that the valley’s homegrown documentarians are also trying to prove.

“Once we started talking to people, I realized how important the Huntridge was for so many in the community,” Erwin says. “Up until then, my only real experience with Las Vegas had been the Strip and the convention center. Spending time Downtown talking to people about the Huntridge has shown me that there is so much more to Las Vegas, that it is a city with a true heart and soul.”

Showing that there’s more to Vegas than the version regurgitated again and again in the pop culture strata since the days of the Rat Pack — that’s noble. That’s great. It’s something all the filmmakers I spoke with expressed. But even more urgently — especially in the case of folks such as Dorn and Gates — these films want to make sure the proper people get their due. After all, they can be easily overlooked when typical
accounts of Las Vegas history focus on the usual iconic figures with big footprints: Siegel, Hughes, Wynn, Hsieh. Their transformative successes often overshadow the work of Vegas’ cultural entrepreneurs: The music nerd who borrowed twenty grand from his dad to open his dream record store in the same shopping center where he bought his first 8-track tape. The urban muralist who saw a home for artists in boarded-up railroad cottages on the wrong side of Downtown. The coffee shop owner who grew an entire community from a tiny space tucked behind a vintage clothing store. These are just a few of the people you’ll meet in these documentaries.

Considering that, the best explanation for these projects coming to fruition now is a collective need to prove not only that culture exists in Las Vegas, but, as Dorn says, “that it’s always been here.”

POPCULTURE

Unreel

Movies and TV shows regularly get Vegas completely wrong. That’s a good thing

BY JOSH BELL

In the first episode of the short-lived, justifiably forgotten 2015 Las Vegas-set NBC series The Player, protagonist Alex Kane chases an assailant down a very recognizable Fremont Street, showing off the production’s Las Vegas location shoot. But in the very next scene, he describes the pursuit as occurring... on the Strip?

In the allegedly factual 2008 gambling drama 21, one of the main locations is the very recognizable Red Rock Resort — presented as if it’s right on Las Vegas Boulevard. In the opening scene of the 2009 indie dramedy Saint John of Las Vegas (which premiered at the CineVegas film festival), Steve Buscemi’s title character is shown walking into a Las Vegas convenience store and buying a bunch of lottery tickets. And Las Vegas doctors in movies and TV shows don’t work at hospitals; they work in casinos, as on the one-season 2004 CBS series Dr. Vegas, or for organized crime, as on the current Fox series The Cleaning Lady.

More recently, 2021’s Pooling to Paradise spends its entire running time with its characters focused on their road trip from Los Angeles to “Paradise, Nevada,” projecting this as some kind of idyllic town on the outskirts of Las Vegas, rather than a designation for a chunk of unincorporated Clark County that happens to encompass most of the Strip.

The list of onscreen inaccuracies is practically never-ending, and it’s easy for us as Las Vegas residents to roll our eyes and dismiss the creators of these movies and shows as clueless. Whether you’ve lived in Las Vegas for a few months or for your entire life, it’s a nice feeling to possess some sort of exclusive knowledge, a level of superiority over the filmmakers and viewers who blindly accept this distorted vision of Las Vegas. We get to sit with our local friends, pointing and laughing at all the ways that films and TV series get Vegas wrong.

And while it’s certainly wrong, it’s importantly, usefully — vitally — wrong. Think about it like this: To most people who don’t live here, those films and TV series form their idea of what Las Vegas is. We can get a sense of Vegas mythmaking in real time from watching even the most inaccurate depictions of our city — and then, ideally, leverage those insights to more effectively attract tourists or possibly make Vegas a more enjoyable place to live.

How many people who moved to Vegas as adults were first enticed by the city because of something they saw onscreen, something that made Vegas seem like a mystical place where dreams come true? Wouldn’t it be nice to find that mysticism intact upon arriving? There isn’t a showgirl living in every apartment complex, but wouldn’t it be cool if there were?

From its earliest days, Las Vegas has been built on myths and rumors and impossible dreams. Mobsters came here to escape the attention of the authorities on the East Coast, and then were fictionalized and glamorized in movies. The oft-repeated line that Vegas was better when it was run by the mob comes as much from the movies as it does from any actual experience — and the mob-run Vegas of the movies is a better Vegas than the actual mob-run Vegas ever was.

That goes for other aspects of Vegas as well. It’s not just that the Vegas of movies and TV series is bigger, crazier, glitzier, and splashier, but that it’s a place where people who want to live in Vegas would want to live. Sure, you might get killed by mobsters or abducted by aliens, but you’re also likely to strike it rich, meet the person of your dreams, have the most amazing night of your life, and possibly achieve full transcendence, all while hanging out with showgirls and Elvises.

For tourists even more so than for new residents, Las Vegas is a place of escape, and there’s value in replicating some of the onscreen version in the real world. The lavish room at Caesars Palace where the characters stay in The Hangover was created on a soundstage, but when the movie became a hit and potential guests began asking to stay in the “Hangover suite,” Caesars management was smart to seize the opportunity and adopt the movie’s branding for its luxury accommodations. (Given how often Vegas is still represented onscreen by showgirls, someone should immediately revive the mostly defunct classic Vegas showgirl production show.)

We can’t (and wouldn’t want to) merge Fremont Street with Las Vegas Boulevard or move the Red Rock Resort to the Strip, but we can do our best to remember what’s enticing about Vegas to people outside our city (and what misconceptions might turn them away). Everyone should get the chance to channel George Clooney walking into the Bellagio in Ocean’s Eleven, high on the possibilities that Vegas offers, feeling cool and suave and invincible. In our reality, that casino isn’t actually connected to two others via an underground vault, and it isn’t actually owned by a single greedy mogul. But for a Vegas built on alternate realities, the cinematic legend may be more valuable than the mundane truth.
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LEADING THE WAY IN TEACHING THE HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS AND EDUCATORS OF TOMORROW WHILE CARING FOR OUR COMMUNITY
At 22, I found myself in an ultra lounge called Koi night after night. I lived within driving distance of Las Vegas. I had a wardrobe full of polyester mini dresses from a store called Hottie World. It was enough.

It was 2011, and Las Vegas was filled with ultra lounges. I didn’t ask what they were; I thought I’d be ridiculed for not knowing, like the time I’d confused the Strip with Downtown while giving a cab driver directions. Still, the concept seemed like a particular kind of Las Vegas fantasy to an outsider: decadent, upscale. Not the kind of night out I was accustomed to having — which usually involved a $30 hotel room and neon-green margarita mix from a plastic gallon jug — but something aspirational. Dress codes, champagne, tufted banquettes. Billboards for ultra lounges showed women in silk shifts and men in tailored suits. I didn’t know these people, but I wanted to be them, be around them.

This is my problem. I’ve spent a lot of my life around wealth and have never absorbed the lesson it teaches you: Proximity is not assimilation. I grew up middle class — Mom worked at a grocery store, Dad was in the military — but my parents sent me to a private school where people had money. Dumbwaiter-in-the-dining-room money. Lake house money. After college, I waited tables in nice restaurants. The kind of places where patrons are guests, not customers. Guests who order $400 bottles of wine and don’t finish them. Guests who are excited by chanterelle mushrooms, disappointed when the steak knife appears with the steak rather than before the steak. This time spent lurking in the background of other people’s wealth taught me the language, the choreography. But I did not belong.

And now, here was Las Vegas with its ultra lounges — havens, I imagined, containing the finer things in life. An ultra lounge, I surmised from the advertisements, was a liminal space somewhere between a nightclub and a bar. It would be smaller, more intimate than a nightclub, but more sophisticated than the average bar. There would be dim lighting and velvet furniture, but it wouldn’t be stuffy. It would be cool. Pulsing music, but not so loud you couldn’t have a conversation. No tequila shots; Don Julio on ice. Mingling, dancing, but no one throwing up or taking off their heels. And best of all, I didn’t even have to ingratiate myself; I was already invited. This is what the advertisements made me believe.

The reality, it turned out, was Koi.

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KOI IS AN ultra lounge at Planet Hollywood on the Las Vegas Strip that has been around since at least 2008. In a city where nightclubs with abstract one-word names — Pure, Intrigue, Surrender — are constantly giving way to nightclubs with different abstract one-word names, staying power is rare. And yet, Koi is not a nightlife institution that appears on best-of lists, it is not a place to see and be seen. But there it is, on the second floor of Planet Hollywood overlooking the casino floor, a seemingly permanent fixture in an evolving space.

In my early Vegas days, when I longed for nothing more than the perceived exclusivity of an ultra lounge, I was wandering the Strip with a friend, lightning flashes of marquee advertisements on our skin, passing back and forth a $4 bottle of champagne. We didn’t know where we were going until the Koi promoter appeared.

“All-you-can-drink for ladies,” he said, stepping in front of us on the sidewalk. “Ladies, all you can drink.”

He repeated the words again and again, sheep-dogging us toward the glass doors of Planet Hollywood, pushing Koi wristbands into our hands, pointing us to the escalator that would carry us to our first ultra lounge. The line to get in was short. Inside, the space was nearly empty. A bar plastered with signs reminding guests to tip, a circular dance floor where no one was dancing, a single disco ball winking sadly from the ceiling, and roped-off empty booths. In the corner, a DJ played Pitbull song after Pitbull song.

In the violet light, I saw people just like me. People who had also spent their lives wondering what the fancy, exclusive party looked like. This wasn’t it. Access to the ultra lounge had been too easy.

My friend and I immediately began discussing going somewhere better. After one drink. Maybe two.

Two drinks turned into three, and then the...
dance floor didn’t feel so glaringly empty. The people inside the club — a crowd barely big enough to fill a classroom — began to dance. We stayed until closing. It wasn’t until the next morning, when we woke up with throbbing in our heads and Koi stamps on our hands, that we realized we’d meant to go somewhere cooler. And somehow, despite my desire to seek out somewhere cooler — the ultra lounge with the girls in gold dresses and the guys with good haircuts, the host at the door who would look me up and down for 30 humiliating seconds while deciding whether or not to raise the velvet rope, the views of the city, sparkling and unreachable — somehow despite that, I kept ending up at Koi. One night it was because I couldn’t afford the cover charge at a better venue. Another night, a few men in our group were turned away from somewhere else because their shoes didn’t meet the dress code.

“Not again,” I’d say each time the promotor appeared outside of Planet Hollywood, wristband in hand.

“Not Koi,” I’d say, as I waited in the alarmingly short line, watched the bartender pour well vodka into a plastic cup, and stayed until dawn once again.

You know that expression, “I don’t want to belong to any club that would accept me as one of its members”? That’s how I felt about Koi. It wasn’t a place you bragged about. It wasn’t an elegant like the vacation homes of wealthy friends I’d known as a teenager or the restaurants I’d worked in our dealers or the restaurants I’d worked in. It was eager, embarrassing. It was for me.

*

**LAST WEEK** I got to thinking about Koi and wondering if it was still there. I found the website, which has Copyright 2011 at the bottom and feels even older. KOI Ultra Lounge combines the exclusivity of Hollywood with the energy that is Las Vegas, the copy reads, above a photo of a girl with black eye makeup, a large bottle of sake dangling from her French-manicured fingers. There’s a link to a Twitter account with zero followers and a Facebook page with a profile photo of Tao Beach Club, which is a few miles north of Koi at the Venetian. Looking at the website felt like visiting the dying mall in my hometown. There was no phone number listed — just blurry, outdated photos of the Strip and a message about Koi’s desire to become a new stop on the Las Vegas destination scene. I found the phone number elsewhere and called, was surprised when someone actually picked up.

“We’re open Wednesday through Saturday,” the voice on the other end of the line said. And then, “All-you-can-drink for ladies.”

Ladies, all you can drink, the memory of the promotor whispered in my head. So I went. I put on the kind of sequined pink dress 2011-era me would have approved of and went. The escalator ride brought me back to that second floor landing where I walked past the Criss Angel Theater and toward the entrance. The line was short — maybe 10 people deep — just as I’d remembered. A woman in a long black dress and ballet flats — an employee, apparently — appeared and said, “It’s usually a lot longer than this.” We both know that’s not true, I wanted to tell her, but she was so friendly, so hopeful, so openly happy to have us all there. So I smiled back.

There was no cover charge. When I pulled out a twenty at the bar, they said drinks were free, too. The dance floor was empty, except for one guy in khakis, shuffling back and forth on his feet, alone. The booths were roped off, reserved for those willing to pay for bottle service (still no one). The same disco ball hung from the ceiling. The music hadn’t changed either. I sipped the free vodka soda and realized how long it had been since I’d tasted well liquor, since I’d worn a dress that I’d remembered. A woman in a long black dress and ballet flats — an employee, apparently — appeared and said, “It’s usually a lot longer than this.” We both know that’s not true, I wanted to tell her, but she was so friendly, so hopeful, so openly happy to have us all there. So I smiled back.

Across the street, a supper club had replaced a nightclub. A restaurant and an arena had been built from the ground up. A casino had been rebranded. A Cirque du Soleil show had closed. But Koi was a time capsule. Only one thing was different. At 22, I’d looked out at the casino floor below as I’d danced in the only club that wanted me. Now, there were curtained around the ultra lounge. Curtains that hid the view, so that I could only see what was inside, so that I could stay, as though in a womb, in this place I’d believed I was better than, so that I could realize how wrong I’d been.
Randy Badger isn’t your typical sailing type. When most people think about sailboat racing, they picture an East Coast sportsman in a turtleneck at the helm of a wooden sloop off the coast of Nantucket. But Randy isn’t from Nantucket. He’s from Winnemucca, and instead of turtlenecks, he wears blue jeans and trucker hats. In place of a wooden sloop, he sails a Manta TwinJammer, which, with its aluminum frame and bench seat, looks more like a lawn chair than a sailboat. This makes sense, since Manta TwinJammers aren’t designed for water, but for land.

Randy and I are racing at the 2022 America’s Landsailing Cup at Ivanpah Dry Lake near Primm. Randy was kind enough to lend me a boat for the event, and for the past few days, he’s been my wingman, the Goose to my Maverick. More than 70 competitors from as far away as Germany have gathered at Ivanpah for a weeklong regatta — the largest of its kind in North America. Rows of campers, pickups, and trailers line the eastern side of the lakebed, which crowns the northern edge of the Mojave National Preserve.

I met Randy a year ago through a series of phone calls. I’d been trying to get into Nevada’s landsailing scene, but like most sporting events, the 2021 America’s Landsailing Cup had been canceled because of COVID-19. Yet Randy was so keen to get new blood into the sport that he drove eight hours from Winnemucca to meet me at Ivanpah, which is one of the most famous landsailing destinations on the planet.

From the moment we shook hands, I could tell he was a salt-of-the-earth type. He’s tall and broad-shouldered, and since he had just retired from his job selling boiler feed pumps for power plants, he had plenty of time to go sailing. We tore it up for a few days out on the lakebed, which we had completely to ourselves. Like many evenings during the pandemic, those sunsets spurred discussions of the state of humanity, how we thought the world might change, and most of all, how we looked forward to things going back to normal. I liked Randy right away, and our friendship was one of those weird COVID occurrences — founded on camping chairs, isolated from the rest of the world, with the Mojave Desert as our backdrop.

A year later, the event is back to its former glory, and sailors from near and far are ecstatic to get out on the lakebed once more. “This is my second time at this regatta,”...
Randy tells me, “I’ve been in the class for three years, and it’s been a blast coming down here. Everybody is willing to help. There’s no ridicule for coming in last, which is good for me, because I’ve been last a lot.”

Randy has a total of three Manta Twin-Jammers. He found the first one when his grandson was doing fencing work for a neighbor, who was one of the few land sailors in Winnemucca at the time. He had a Manta Twin-Jammer in his garage, and he gave it to Randy’s grandson. But Randy has nine other grandkids, so naturally, more were required. “There’s no fun standing around,” Randy says. “So, we had to buy some more.” Randy found two additional boats to complete his fleet, which he uses to take his grandkids out on the Black Rock playa.

In fact, the double bench seat on the Manta Twin-Jammer might be its best feature. They’re perfect for taking beginners out for a spin, and with speeds between 40 and 60 mph, they never fail to excite. A day
before the regatta, some of my friends from Vegas came down to check it out, and at one point, we clocked ourselves at 43 mph. The physics of landsailing allow the boats to go faster than the wind, mainly because they have much less drag than standard sailboats, which have to fight the resistance of the water while moving forward. The fastest boats at this event routinely hit 80 mph, and in 2009, Richard Jenkins’ boat, Greenbird, set the sail-powered land speed record at Ivanpah Dry Lake: an insane 126.1 mph.

With speeds like this, landsailing is more in line with aviation, and when racing, competitors are called pilots instead of sailors. The onboard experience is as surreal as it is exhilarating. There’s no engine noise — just the sound of the wind howling in your ears. When big gusts roll through, dust clouds kick up off the lakebed, which, combined with the three massive solar towers across I-15, gives the landscape an apocalyptic feel. The competitors look like something out of a Mad Max movie, wearing helmets, ski goggles and in some cases, motorcycle armor.

“There are a lot of people here because everyone has been pent up for a few years and they want to go racing,” says Dennis Bassano, the North American Landsailing Association’s race director. For several decades, Bassano has been the primary organizer for this regatta. “There’s a lot of new people here, too,” he says. “During the pandemic, people were building stuff in their garages, so now they’re down here to test things out, which doesn’t always go as planned.”

In fact, the America’s Landsailing Cup plays host to nearly a dozen different classes of land yachts. The Manta TwinJammer is just one of these, and other types of boats include Standarts, MiniSkeeters, 5.6 Minis, Sportsman, and various International Land and Sandyachting Federation (FISLY) class boats.

Landsailing originally came from the beach towns of northern Europe, where the tides can recede up to 30 feet, leaving large areas of flat open sand on which to sail. Even today, landsailing is a popular European beach sport. With venues close to high schools and youthful beach communities, it isn’t difficult for French or Dutch or Belgian sailors to get into the sport.

The American rendition is different. Most events take place on the salt flats of California and Nevada, often forcing competitors to drive for hundreds, if not thousands, of miles to race. Regattas are as much a camping trip as they are a competition, and looking around the camp at Ivanpah, it’s fun to see the different setups. Some people drive RVs
with trailers attached. Others bring Sprinter Vans. I’ve been sleeping in the back of my Toyota 4Runner, which I’ve rigged up to fit a mattress in back.

In the mornings, the air smells of coffee and eggs, as sailors start to tinker with their boats. Air compressors rattle; fairing tools whine. Some people’s camps look like Formula One pit stops, with full-sized tool chests wheeled out onto the dirt. Others are much more modest. One guy, Jeff Beck, threw everything in the back of a U-Haul truck and called it a day. He’s got a four-legged camp stove and box spring mattress, as well as a few shelves and drawers, all parcelled out like a miniature studio apartment. Other people stay at the resorts in Primm, spending evenings around the slot machines or blackjack tables.

Renee Fields, a competitor from Reno, has a custom Sprinter Van she calls “Bubba.”
She’s built a bunk into the side of the cabin, and the rest of the van is a jigsaw puzzle of toolboxes, shelving units, and spare parts. Fields has been racing dirt boats for about eight years now and has quickly risen the ranks to the top of the pack. She’s the defending champion in the Manta TwinJammer fleet, and she also has three other boats she’s racing. “It’s just great to see everyone’s faces again,” she tells me before racing one day. “There’s a lot of new people, which is great since the sport has an aging population. It’s not like Europe, where they get all the high school kids out on the beaches. In America, you have to have this camping spirit. We’re out here in the middle of nowhere, so you have to be able to work on things mechanically, and you have to be able to tolerate a little dust and dirt. You have to be pretty hardy.”

For most competitors, getting a younger crowd into the game is a top priority. It’s tricky, though, with all the startup costs. First you need a boat, which can be anywhere from $1,000 to $5,000. Then you need a truck to haul it and tools to fix it, not to mention a place to sleep while you sail it. “It’s kind of an old person’s sport,” Badger says. “I’m not sure the younger generation really knows about landsailing, which is a shame. Ivanpah isn’t far from Vegas if people want to come down and try. We’re always willing to get new people out here. They just have to come.”

Maybe the pandemic will change things. As we enter this post-COVID era, people are beginning to value their time differently. Across the world, they’re using nature to unplug from the internet, to slow things down a little, and to enjoy each other’s company in new and meaningful ways. Landsailing offers all of that, except for the slowing down part.

“It’s some of the most fun I’ve ever had,” Badger says. “It’s just a bunch of people hanging out, enjoying being together, and trying to kick each other’s butts the best they can.”

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Kathy Klein had an epic 11-hour drive ahead of her. She was meeting family in southern Idaho for the holidays in December. But her friend Nate Hutt was on the phone, trying to entice her into taking part in an early-morning Christmas bird count survey at Lake Mead National Recreation Area’s 33 Hole Overlook.

Six hours of birding before an 11-hour drive across the length of Nevada? Without missing a beat, Klein said yes. “I’m greedy,” she says. “I want it all.”

“The best part of that story,” Hutt recalls, “is our friend said to meet there at five in the morning, and when I arrived, Kathy had already been there for an hour. We birded until nine or 10 in the morning, and then she drove to Idaho.” Klein says she arrived at her destination around 11 that night.

Klein’s devotion to birdwatching may sound exceptional — even eccentric — but it’s typical among avid birders in Southern Nevada. To call it a mere hobby or pastime doesn’t capture their zeal for finding, observing, identifying, studying, and cataloging birds. For them, it’s a passion, a lifestyle — even a duty.

“Birding has really transformed how I view and live my life in Las Vegas,” says Klein, 63, a volunteer docent at Spring Mountain Ranch State Park. “Prior to birding, I had a more urban lifestyle, and my time in outdoor settings was minimal. I viewed winter as an inconvenience and couldn’t wait for warmer weather. But now, having just located an old ski coat in storage, I can’t wait for next winter.”

In the preface to his popular 2021 book, Birdpedia: A Brief Compendium of Avian Lore, naturalist Christopher Leahy hints at the quiet mania that drives birders: “If people now spend billions of dollars annually on optical equipment, identification guides, bird-feeding paraphernalia … it might be worth looking into a little book to find out why so many otherwise sane people are staring into the trees or scanning smelly mudflats these days.”

I myself am one of those (allegedly) sane people. In high school, my sister and I were taken underwing, so to speak, by a teacher who was a wildlife biologist and would become a family friend. I took part in raptor rehabilitation, helping birds of several species — golden eagle, turkey vulture, long-eared owl — return to the wild. Later, in college in Humboldt County on the far north coast of California, I would arise early on weekends (while friends slept in or nursed hangovers) and brave the disagreeable gray weather in search of turnstones, oystercatchers, and — if I was lucky — shearwaters or storm-petrels, pelagic birds that are sometimes blown closer to shore.

Life happened in the meantime, and my interest in birdwatching waned — until early 2019. A little more than three years ago, I made my first trip to Corn Creek Field Station, the visitors center and western entrance to the Desert National Wildlife Refuge that also happens to be one of the best birding...
locations in Clark County. I returned the following week. And then the next day. I was becoming an official birdwatcher. I could no longer remember why I hadn’t kept up with birding over the previous three decades. I was hooked — for good.

I re-familiarized myself with David Allen Sibley’s *Field Guide to Birds of Western North America*, upgraded my camera gear, went down internet rabbit holes on topics like separating Cooper’s hawks and sharp-shinned hawks in the field (it’s much trickier than many people think) and spent up to four hours most days wandering the county in search of Grace’s warblers or black-legged kittiwakes. And, of course, I faithfully logged my findings into the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s online database, eBird.org. (More on that later.)

What draws us to birdwatching? Why all this time, effort, and expense? The reasons are as varied as the people who take part: the thrill of finding rare species; the satisfaction of keeping lists; the peaceful communing
with nature; the challenge of becoming a better identifier.

“Part of the fun and frustration of birding is the element of the unexpected,” Klein says. “Sometimes you head out with expectations of what you will see, and sometimes the expectations are met. But sometimes there is disappointment. There is a birding ‘high’ when a species you haven’t seen before, or one that’s particularly beautiful, suddenly appears.”

There’s also the peace and tranquility of nature — and, for some, the evocation of old memories.

“Birding fills a couple of spaces in my life,” says Hutt, a military veteran now studying avian conservation. “It makes me feel reconnected with my dad. It’s probably the most peaceful activity I’ve found, and helps a lot with managing my anxiety and some of the mental health issues I’ve dealt with over the past few years. It’s challenging intellectually, but also gets me outside, both of which I love. And strangely, it’s helped me connect with people. Birding has become an epicenter of my social circle, too.”

Indeed, for Hutt and Klein, birdwatching is equal parts social network and bucolic solitude. “It’s like our version of everybody meeting at the bar for drinks,” Hutt says.

And as in a bar, odd pairings abound in the world of birding. For instance, you wouldn’t peg Hutt and Klein as likely friends. Hutt is 36 and has the physique of a professional bodybuilder. Each of his many tattoos has a story. Klein, on the other hand, resembles the aunt who took you on outdoor adventures when you were young. But they both became serious birdwatching enthusiasts during the global COVID-19 pandemic, approached their newfound pursuit with boundless energy, and formed a friendship.

Hutt has a life story that could have been dreamed up by a Hollywood scriptwriter. He was a high school dropout, and then briefly homeless, before he went to a Marines recruitment office and signed up. (“If someone has to die, might as well be me,” Hutt recalls thinking.) It turned out he had facility with guns and mission planning. He did two tours of duty as a sniper in Iraq and one in Libya.

Upon returning to the states, he went to college and earned a Ph.D in physical therapy. But he wasn’t done. This past winter, Hutt enrolled at Oregon State University with his eye on another bachelor’s degree (“I like writing large checks to institutions of higher learning,” he jokes), this one in natural resources and avian conservation. He is currently working as a biological field technician, studying raptor nesting habits, fatality monitoring for birds and bats, and conducting vegetation surveys. Marine sniper to wildlife biologist sounds like a strange journey, but it’s not as strange as you think.

“Every part of being a sniper in the Marines has a direct correlation to birding,” Hutt says. “In my new job, I plan routes through inaccessible areas, and the data collection has to be meticulous. It’s almost identical to what I did in the Marines,” he says, “except the guns.”

Klein is a longtime community volunteer who also enjoys the outdoors. Like Hutt, who developed an interest in wildlife as a kid traipsing Connecticut’s Blue-Blazed Trail system with his dad, Klein’s birding roots go back decades. She started in the 1980s in western Washington, but then lapsed. “I just got preoccupied with other things,” she says. “And with the weather in
the Northwest, you have to be hearty. It’s not nearly as much fun as it is here.” Those other things she became preoccupied with included working with an Episcopalian junior ministry in Olympia, taking young people camping and backpacking. She imparted to her charges things she had learned from her mother about the natural world. “I grew up singing around campfires,” Klein says. Birding, she says, became a gateway to tranquil solitude.

As for me, an interest in wildlife photography is what lured me outdoors. But eBird is what kept me there. Managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, eBird is a bird data collection portal that also serves as something of a birdwatcher social media site. If you hear two birders meeting for the first time saying, “Oh, I know who you are” or “I know your name,” that’s largely thanks to Cornell’s massive data-gathering project, where pretty much anyone can create a profile and log a sighting.

The endeavor only stokes the passion of birdwatchers by introducing an participatory element of citizen science; and the statistics that eBird yields lend fascinating insights into history and ecology, as well as help guide avian conservation efforts. According to eBird, there have been 429 species of bird recorded in Clark County. The first local

WHERE TO WATCH

You need only a few items to start birdwatching: a decent pair of binoculars; a small notebook or cell phone to record sightings (eBird has a mobile app); and, especially if you’re new to birding, a copy of *Sibley Birds West*.

Got all that? Then you’re ready to hit the trails. Here are five spots that provide a good introduction to Clark County birding, along with eBird hotspot rank, and number of species recorded.

1. Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (eBird rank: 1, with 310 species)
   350 E. Galleria Drive, about a mile east of Cowabunga Bay water park

   Like ducks? This is your place. Northern shovelers and ruddy ducks by the hundreds, cinnamon and green-winged teals and American wigeons are all easy to find on the nine ponds at this complex.

2. Corn Creek Field Station (eBird rank: 2, with 309 species)
   Look for the Desert National Wildlife turnoff on U.S. 95 north of Las Vegas between the two Mount Charleston turnoffs

   Little Corn Creek is what’s known as a “migrant trap,” with its spring-filled pond, orchard, and mesquite and cottonwood trees. It’s literally an oasis in the desert. If you go in the spring or summer, watch for the annual, *Game of Thrones*-style pitched battle for nesting spots between the common ravens and Cooper’s hawks.

3. 33 Hole Overlook (eBird rank: 8, with 251 species)
   Lake Mead National Recreation Area

   This visit will require a hike — just under a mile — down to the ever-dwindling shoreline. But it’s arguably the best place in the county for certain rarities like vagrant ducks, loons, and gulls. Most times of the year, you’ll see dozens of brilliant, and very large, American white pelicans.

4. Spring Mountain Ranch State Park (eBird rank: 10, with 227 species)
   6375 Highway 159, adjacent to Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area

   There are multiple very high desert (3,700 feet elevation and higher) trails, including the 1.2-mile Sandstone Canyon Loop, above Lake Harriet. The long-dormant lake has been refilled. Sadly, it has two perimeter fences that make waterfowl viewing difficult. Another downside: There is a $10 fee to enter the park, which doesn’t open until 8 a.m. When you go, do look up: Golden eagles nest in the cliffs of the canyon.

5. Deer Creek Picnic Area (eBird rank: 34, with 140 species)
   State Route 158 between the two canyons, Spring Mountains National Recreation Area

   Various species common in the valley during fall and winter months repair to higher elevations to escape the summer heat — and birders can, too. The Spring Mountains are home to Steller’s jays, hairy woodpeckers, mountain chickadees, various nuthatches and, in the spring and summer, certain warblers that would be rare sightings in the Las Vegas Valley.

CW
The county’s total number of sightings is equal to that of the entirety of Minnesota and Iowa — and more than in 13 other states. In other words, Clark County is bird country. (Not to brag, but a look at my personal eBird page shows I’ve recorded 276 species in Clark County.) With desert habitats ranging from 800 to 4,000 feet above sea level, from the high peaks and pine forests of the Spring Mountains to Lake Mead, the county has an impressive variety of ecosystems. Little wonder there are 193 eBird “hotspots” — Cornell’s designation for prime birding locations — in Clark County.

Several of them are dotted along the Las Vegas Wash, prime hunting ground for Southern Nevada birdwatchers. Creating a strong wetlands environment helps county residents of both the human and feathered varieties, says Zane Marshall, director of water resources for the Southern Nevada Water Authority and an avid birder himself. “The effort to re-establish the wetlands along the wash is important, because that emergent vegetation plays a role in improving the quality of the water before it gets to Lake Mead, which is our main source of drinking water,” he says. Better flora means better water, but it also means better birding. As of April, 270 species had been recorded at Clark County Wetlands Park. That’s thanks in part to the fact that more than 500 acres of native vegetation have been restored along the wash, according to Marshall. Birders are clearly flocking there, too: They’ve collectively filed more than 5,000 eBird checklists from the area.

And who are these birdwatchers, anyway — these people wielding their binoculars and cameras, scanning ponds and peering into dense vegetation? It’s true that many birdwatchers are retirees or wildlife biologists. But they’re also professors and high school students; information technology professionals and taxi drivers; graphic designers and magazine editors, even. And, yes, they’re overwhelmingly white — an issue the birding community is aware of. What can be done to promote inclusivity? Doug Chang, past president of the Red Rock Audubon Society and enthusiastic birder, believes one of the answers is kindness. Fortunately, birders are some of the most welcoming and warm people you’ll ever meet.

Chang, whose family is originally from China, first got involved in birdwatching while living in Cincinnati. He was invited on a birding excursion to Lake Erie. “They just asked me if I wanted to go,” Chang recalls. “I said, ‘Sure,’ and we went up there. I just got intrigued by how birders took care of each other.” Chang retired from Procter & Gamble in 2012 and moved with his family to Las Vegas. From 2014 to 2020, he was president of Red Rock Audubon, an organization dedicated to the conservation of wildlife habitats, specifically for birds, in Southern Nevada.

“What matters to me,” he says, “is to see, to experience or, more importantly, to help someone else experience nature five minutes from now, a year from now.” And one way to do just that requires only a pair of binoculars, a decent pair of shoes — and a little bit of quiet patience. ✦
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SPRING MOUNTAINS • PAHRUMP, NV
The Spring Mountain Range just east of Pahrump offers a vast trail system with many popular campsites as well. With elevations up to 7000 ft., sights include beautiful mountain scenery, wild horses, and historic mining camps.

SILVER STATE OHV TRAIL SYSTEM • CALIENTE, NV
The area offers a cooler climate with mountain and canyon scenery with over 260 miles of trails that loop their way through Juniper and Pine country. The trail system is nationally recognized, with good directional signage and multiple staging areas.

CRESCENT DUNES • TONOPAH, NV
Just northwest of Tonopah, Crescent Dunes is an enormous open dune area for riders of all skill levels to enjoy. Several options for accommodations, as well as fuel, supplies and dining can be found in the nearby town of Tonopah.

TITUS CANYON • DEATH VALLEY/BEATTY, NV
This is a 27-mile one-way track that travels from east to west through the Grapevine Mountains ending in Death Valley. Enjoy sights of the amazing canyon, as well as Leadfield Ghost Town and Petroglyphs. High profile vehicles are recommended.

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SOME PLACES MAKE US FEEL LIKE KIDS

Be part of something beautiful
Over the 10 years we’ve been holding the Focus on Nevada photo contest, a lot of things have changed. We’ve remixed categories, switched up judges, and watched a hundred cool photo trends come and go. But we’ve discovered one enduring truth: Between the visual splendor of Nevada and the boundless creativity of its photographers, we can never say that we’ve seen it all. Every year, surprise and delight arrive in the form of not just fresh images, but whole new ways of seeing our cities, our landscapes, and our people. Congratulations to all our winners, and thanks once again for opening our eyes.
2nd Place
JOHN WRIGHT
SEMI PROFESSIONAL
“CityCenter has very interesting lines and views. This is just one of them.”

HONORABLE MENTIONS
1 SAM KATSEANES
AMATEUR/STUDENT
Clouds on the Ruby Crest Trail

2 DENISE JONES
AMATEUR/STUDENT
Window reflections at night on Fremont Street

3 DAN BRADY
AMATEUR/STUDENT
“Universal Ecosystem,” taken at the Clark County Wetlands Park
“Early in the year, intense weather moves into Southern Nevada, and the clouds leave me speechless. The sun was shining through on the north end of the Strip even though the clouds looked ominous!”

1st Place
KEVIN FORD
AMATEUR/STUDENT
West Wind Las Vegas Drive-In

2nd Place
MANDY SOUTHARDS
PROFESSIONAL
HONORABLE MENTIONS
1 ALEX VAN RAALTE
AMATEUR/STUDENT
A scene from City Plaza in Reno
2 WALLY HAWKINS
PROFESSIONAL
An alley view of the Strat tower
3 JOHN FINN
AMATEUR/STUDENT
Traffic on the Strip at Spring Mountain Road
4 GAI PHANALASY
PROFESSIONAL
Hot air balloons on Nevada Day 2021 in Carson City
5 AL BAKER
PROFESSIONAL
“I had to be patient with this shot of the World Market Center. I stood and waited for people to cross the bridgeways — but only on certain floors. It took maybe an hour to finally get the shot I wanted.”
FOCUS ON NEVADA

STORYTELLER

1st Place
JEFF SCHEID
PROFESSIONAL
Dancers perform during Mexican Independence Day in North Las Vegas.

2nd Place
JULIA ANTHONY
SEMI PROFESSIONAL
“This image was taken in my house after my daughter moved back home. She has to live in the living room, because all the other rooms are taken by my other kids.”
1 DANIEL ZARRELLA
SEMIPROFESSIONAL
"Every face you pass on the Strip tells a story. Some tell a lot. I shot this next to the Mirage volcano."

2 ARMAND THOMAS
SEMIPROFESSIONAL
“This one’s called ‘Having Lunch With a Friend, Circa 21st Century.’ Need I say more? Shot at EAT in Downtown Las Vegas.”

3 DANIEL YBARRA
AMATEUR/STUDENT
“After a long night of work, a firefighter leaves a burned structure.”

4 NICOLE WARGO
AMATEUR/STUDENT
“A candid hometown homage to the painting ‘Nighthawks’ by Edward Hopper. Two showgirls talk at the counter of Pizza Rock in Downtown Las Vegas.”

HONORABLE MENTIONS
FOCUS ON NEVADA

THE RURALS

HONORABLE MENTIONS

1 PAUL DOUGLAS
AMATEUR/STUDENT
Rail cars near the Moapa River Indian Reservation

2 CASSIA LOPEZ
SEMI PROFESSIONAL
Girl in the grass

3 GABRIEL DE LEÓN
AMATEUR/STUDENT
Abandoned shack on the outskirts of Eureka

4 NORM CRAFT
AMATEUR/STUDENT
Manhattan, Nevada
1st Place
MIKE COWAN
SEMI PROFESSIONAL
“For Nevada’s outdoor enthusiasts, visiting the range to shoot clay targets is a welcome escape from city life. Capturing the ejecting shells was a rare treat as the shells go airborne and smoke follows.”

2nd Place
HUGH BYRNE
SEMI PROFESSIONAL
The Milky Way rising in the night sky above a railway bridge outside Caliente.
FOCUS ON NEVADA

WILD NEVADA

1st Place
TREVOR VELINGA
PROFESSIONAL

"'Dreams from Yesterday,' from a lesser-known state park that has a lot of potential for astrophotography."
HONORABLE MENTIONS

1. **ELVIS ALTAMIRANO**
   PROFESSIONAL
   Elephant Rock at Valley of Fire State Park

2. **RENEE GRAYSON**
   SEMIPROFESSIONAL
   Blue dasher dragonfly

3. **JAMES KONUS**
   AMATEUR/STUDENT
   A cormorant catches a trout at Floyd Lamb Park.

4. **JASON BROWNING**
   AMATEUR/STUDENT
   Mesquite Flat Sand Dunes in Death Valley National Park

2nd Place

**WILLIAM CORNELIUS**
SEMIPROFESSIONAL
A kayaker at Sand Harbor in Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park
1st Place
NORM CRAFT
AMATEUR/STUDENT
“Inside the storage building George Fayle built next to the department store he opened in Goodsprings in 1916. Today, this building stands — albeit only partially — next to the small stone building Fayle’s uncle, Sam Yount, built in 1899.”

2nd Place
SONIA BARCELONA
PROFESSIONAL
“I shot this photo of my boyfriend right before he had to leave for a performance. It was the beginning of my journey as a professional photographer and his journey as a professional musician. An image of a soul singer in natural light.”

HONORABLE MENTIONS
1 GIAN SAPIENZA
PROFESSIONAL
“My years of being a dedicated Western photographer always bring me back to the textures and soft light of the desert.”

2 DANIEL YBARRA
AMATEUR/STUDENT
“My son rollin’ along.”

3 JOHN MASTROGIACOMO
PROFESSIONAL
Moonrise over the Strat
FOCUS ON NEVADA
GRAND PRIZE

MIKE COWAN
SEMI PROFESSIONAL
“A bird’s-eye view of evening shadows across the tennis court.”
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If you’ve got a burning desire to taste the rage for spicy chicken sandwiches, these spots are fire.

The Night Fowl at Blue Hen Chicken Co.
HOUSTON’S HOT CHICKEN

When I walk into Houston’s Hot Chicken, on the counter is a signed waiver from a previous customer. The guy behind the counter explains it’s required for patrons who order the Houston’s highest level of spice — ominously called Houston, We Have a Problem! This particular sandwich clocks in at 2 million Scoville Heat Units (SHU), a measure of the level of capsaicin, the active component in peppers that causes that burning sensation on the tongue. (For comparison, the original Tabasco sauce has a rating of 2,500 to 5,000 Scoville units.) How many people order their sandwich at that level? Not many, he says; and hardly anyone ever eats more than a couple of bites. Judging from the waiver, this bird is more pain than pleasure, the kind of shock-factor item one orders on a dare among friends with a wicked streak.

I have no such appetite for punishment, so I order the Mild — a modest 2,000 SHU. It offers plenty of spice for my apparently capsaicin-shy palate. Housed in a brioche bun and topped with house-made slaw, pickles, and house sauce, the breaded chicken breast is flavorful and tender, though somewhat on the smaller side of the chicken-to-bun ratio, resulting in an overly carb-y sandwich. But this isn’t such a bad thing for those ordering the spicier iterations — the sweetness of the brioche is certainly a good foil for the heat.

1500 N. Green Valley Parkway #110, houstonshotchicken.com

Spicy chicken sandwiches are certainly, well, hot at the moment, but this fiery fad has a history going back more than 70 years, originating at Prince’s Hot Chicken Shack in Nashville, Tennessee. As the story goes, Thornton Prince, known for his way with the ladies, stepped out on his woman one Saturday night. As punishment, she doused his fried chicken with hot pepper, and, well ... he dug it — and decided to sell it. Thus began our masochistic love affair with lip-puckering, eye-watering fried chicken, which is now ubiquitous on menus across the country (hello, KFC) and even abroad. Whether you’re seeking heat or comfort, the city’s bird-on-a-bun game is strong. There’s a sandwich out there with your name on it and, if you’re feeling especially plucky, maybe even a waiver to sign. Here are my favorite hot chicken spots for feeling the burn.
As someone who’s firmly ensconced in the southeast side of town, I’m not always up on the food happenings up north, so when an opportunity comes up for a mini road trip to try out a chicken sandwich, you’ll find me clucking with joy. North Town Chicken, which opened in 2020 during the pandemic, has been a welcome change from the fast food joints lining Craig Road. For my first visit, I ordered the eponymous NTC Chicken Sando, two sizable chicken breast tenders housed in a honey-butter bun with pickles and cole slaw. There are several chicken breast sauces to choose from, but you can’t go wrong with the house sauce (though I did dip my toe into the heat with the mango habanero). Since NTC was a trek for me, sides were a necessity, and the creamy mac ‘n’ cheese and Ma Ma’s Potato Salad did not disappoint.

1735 W. Craig Road, northtownchicken.com

**NORTH TOWN CHICKEN**

When Flippin’ Good opened way back in 2014, it brought something new to the Downtown food scene: elevated fast food that could compete with the eateries popping up on Fremont Street, offering grass-fed burgers, hand-cut fries and onion rings, frozen custard — just mere months before New York City’s Shake Shack descended on the valley. The chicken sandwiches are particularly notable not only for the bird’s provenance — all are raised and hatched domestically, free of hormones, steroids and antibiotics, which make for a satisfying sandwich every time. There are several iterations of the sandwich, but this is the place to get a no-fuss version of the Nashville Hot Chicken: It’s simply a chicken breast, hot sauce, lettuce, and pickles. It’s the perfect amount of spice, and the size, which some might say is on the small side when ordered by itself, is just right when paired with fries. Also a good accompaniment? An ice-cold brew from the tap. Fast food should all be this good.

1735 W. Craig Road, northtownchicken.com

**FLIPPIN’ GOOD CHICKEN, BURGERS, BEER**

The décor at Burnin’ Mouth tells you exactly what you’re in for. One wall has the word “Danger” all over, and the color scheme is one that can only be described as fiery, which is what your mouth will feel like shortly. The spice levels correspond with the peppers deployed in the mix: Simple and Mild are cayenne-based; Good has the satisfying heat of jalapeño; Ugly is the more insistent habanero; and Insane is haunted by ghost peppers, which clock in at just over a million SHU. The Good-level spice seems to be the sandwich of choice for most, but if you want no spice at all, you have to request it, as it’s not on the menu. Two signature sandwiches are on offer: the Bang Bang, with a sauced chicken breast, and the Nashville Coo Coo, which has a dry seasoning. Both come with cole slaw, crispy onions, pickles, and a house sauce.

6340 W. Charleston Blvd. #110, burninmouth.com

**BURNIN’ MOUTH**

Just two blocks down from Burning Mouth on Charleston is Blue Hen Chicken Co., a welcome respite from Nashville’s heat (though you can certainly opt for the spice, which ranges from Mild to, gulp, Death Wish.) But if you want just a chill bird, the Blue Hen fits the bill: hand-breaded chicken thigh, bread and butter pickles, aioli, and buttermilk chive on Larder Baking Co. brioche bun. A menu item I’ll be revisiting

**BLUE HEN CHICKEN CO.**
is the refreshing Night Fowl sandwich, with pickled chilies, peanut sauce, cabbage, Thai basil, cilantro, toasted sesame seeds, and house sauce. The chicken thigh is juicy and carries the Asian-inspired flavor profile beautifully. 6250 W. Charleston Blvd. #120, bluehenco.com

4250 W. Charleston Blvd. #120, bluehenco.com

OG FARM BASKET

My chicken sandwich tour ended with less fire and more nostalgia, with the tried-and-true Farm Basket providing the closing note. The locals’ favorite, in business for more than 45 years, is a stalwart in the chicken (and turkey) sandwich scene. The signature Clucker Sandwich — fried chicken breast on a toasted hoagie roll and served with side of Miracle Whip and cranberry sauce — is a must. It’s a trip down memory lane, back to simpler times when all we want from our chicken sandwich is familiarity — and maybe a side of cheese and gravy-smothered fries. 6148 W. Charleston Blvd., farmbasketlv.com

3 DAVE’S HOT CHICKEN

Dave’s Hot Chicken is coming in hot, with a success story for the ages: It began in 2017 as a late-night chicken stand in east Hollywood and is now in the midst of an aggressive nationwide expansion. The heat level on Dave’s birds go from No Spice to the seventh circle of hell, not-so-subtly dubbed the Reaper. Your only salvation here is a side of kale slaw, a semi-virtuous concoction meant to cool the tongue. While you’re at it, order a side of crinkle-cut fries. And don’t skip the cheese in the sliders — you’ll need every heat-dousing element as you go up the spice chain. Slather on Dave’s Sauce generously, especially if you order the tenders; it makes for a good fry dip, too. 9040 W. Sahara Ave., daveshotchicken.com

7 MAMA BIRD SOUTHERN KITCHEN

Hit up the Southern Highlands spot on the weekend and you’ll undoubtedly find a gaggle of people waiting for a table. And for good reason: Not only is the space highly Instagram-friendly, but the plates coming out of the open kitchen space are showstoppers, from the deviled eggs to the waffles. The fried chicken sandwich is the standout: a chicken breast nestles inside a soft potato roll, along with pickles, tomatoes, lettuce, and a creamy house sauce. We might quibble a little with the breading that’s laid on a bit too thick, but it’s delicious and doesn’t take away from the well-seasoned bird underneath. Even if you’re not here for breakfast or brunch, add the fried egg. It takes the chicken sandwich to a whole new level, along with those North ‘n’ South fries, a combination of regular and sweet potato spuds. You can up the spice level, too, should you need an extra kick. 10550 Southern Highlands Parkway #140, mamabirdsk.com
MADE US LOOK

The DC staff’s favorite part of the photo contest is culling photos for the judges. We turn out the office lights, gather around a large(ish) flat-screen TV, and Art Director Chris Smith digitally flips through the pictures in each category, one by one. We react to and discuss them, spontaneously at first, then with increasing discernment. And inevitably, some that elicit spontaneous Ooohs and Ahhhs don’t make the final cut. Here are a few of this year’s that made us smile — in the best possible way — at a time when smiles were hard to come by. Thanks, photographers! — Heidi Kyser

AL BAKER
Professional
Name: Santa Got Lost in a Slot Canyon
Category: Storyteller
Description: “Another image from my Christmas series. This is the search for children of adventure. Not the ones who stay up all night hoping to catch a glimpse of the fat man, but the ones who’d rather stay in a tent and wake up Christmas Day among all the trees, rather than just one tree.”

MARK GARDBERG
Amateur/Student
Name: Fly, Pigeon, Fly!
Category: City Scenes
Description: “This was a spur-of-the-moment smartphone photo taken at the Neon Boneyard. Imagine our surprise when that pigeon flew out of those jaws!”

GINA GELDBACH-HALL
Amateur/Student
Name: Where are we going next, Grandma?
Category: Storyteller
Description: “My granddaughter was visiting and wanted to play with my magnifier. She was fascinated with it, and when she held it up to her face, it was like she saw a whole new world.”

CELESTE CHILTON
Amateur/Student
Name: Elvira’s Smile
Category: Storyteller
Description: “She’s got a lot to get off her chest.”

GRAEME WHIFLER
Semiprofessional
Name: Harry & Meghan
Category: Storyteller
Description: “Ex-Royals shopping for Indian food.”
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