

Lifestyle | Features

Alaska's Fat Bear
contest crowns Holly
'Queen of Corpulence'

A rotund and furry grandma bear has been crowned the fattest of them all. Fat Bear Week for Alaska's grizzlies has become a national internet sensation, pitting individual bears against each other in an online voting contest. This year's champion fat fan favorite is Holly, organizers of the event said late Tuesday, with the winner selected by popular vote based on photos displayed on Facebook. "All hail Holly whose healthy heft will help her hibernate until the spring. Long live the Queen of Corpulence!" Katmai National Park and Preserve said on its Facebook page, which featured photographs of salmon-fattened Katmai brown bears.

Katmai, in southwestern Alaska, is known for its brown bears, which grow to massive sizes by gorging on salmon. Holly, who did not have cubs this year to distract her, had an especially big finish to the season. "She's just a great bear. When she doesn't have cubs, she looks like the Michelin Man," said Naomi Boak, a Katmai Conservancy media ranger who has been managing this year's Fat Bear Week event. Holly, who won in a field of 12 contenders, has been single-minded this year in her pursuit of salmon at Brooks Falls, the park's best-known bear-gathering spot.

"She doesn't stop fishing. It was really hard to get pictures of her because she just doesn't get out of the water," Boak said. Fat Bear Week, an event that combines tongue-in-cheek competition with science education, highlights the Katmai bears' preparation for winter hibernation. Bears typically lose a third of their body weight during their winter sleep, so the body fat they accumulate in summer and fall is crucial to survival. Thanks to Katmai's bounty of salmon, along with its abundant berries, the park's male bears can eat their way to more than 1,000 pounds and females to about two-thirds that weight before they retreat to their hibernation dens in the mountains.

Even before this year's Fat Bear Week, Holly was well-known to fans of Alaska wildlife. She has been a regular to millions of viewers who watch footage from the livestream "bear cam" at Brooks Falls that was set up and is operated by the site Explore.org. Holly was already famous for adopting a yearling cub that had been abandoned by its mother. Adoption is "very, very unusual" among brown bears, Boak said, prompting Holly's bear-cam followers to dub her "Supermom."

Although she had no cubs this year, Holly has offspring, including another adult female with cubs of her own. The three generations spent much of the summer at Brooks Falls, Boak said. As well as the bears' bodies, Fat Bear Week's following also swelled this year. There were about 187,500 online votes cast in the 2019 competition, more than three times as many votes tallied in last year's Fat Bear Week. —Reuters



This picture shows Mona Lisa after it was returned at its place at the Louvre Museum in Paris. — AFP

Mona Lisa's smile a touch clearer
through Louvre's protective glass

Visitors to the Louvre in Paris should have a clearer view of Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" after the museum installed a new, more transparent form of bullet-proof glass to protect the world's most famous painting. The Mona Lisa has been behind safety glass since the early 1950s, when it was damaged by a visitor who poured acid on it. Since then there have been several other unsuccessful attempts at vandalizing the painting.

Vincent Delieuvin, curator of 16th-century Italian art at the museum, told Reuters Television that glass technology has improved significantly in recent years and the painting's previous 15-year old bullet-proof glass no longer gave the best possible viewing experience. "Today, the

Mona Lisa is behind extremely transparent glass, which really gives the impression of being very close to the painting," Delieuvin said.

On Oct 24, the Louvre will open an exhibition celebrating the works of Leonardo da Vinci to mark the 500th anniversary of his death. The exhibition will feature nearly 120 pieces, including paintings, drawings, sculptures and manuscripts from European and American institutions, but not the "Mona Lisa" which will remain in its dedicated room in the Louvre's Denon wing. — Reuters

High-tech jacket allows deaf people to feel the music

Twin sisters Hermon and Heroda Berhane love dancing but can't hear the music because they're both deaf, so the invention of a jacket with sensors that enables them to feel the different sounds has transformed their nights out in London clubs. The "Sound Shirt", created by London-based fashion company CuteCircuit, has 16 sensors embedded in its fabric, so wearers can feel violins on their arms, for example, while drums beat on their backs.

The Berhane twins, who lost their hearing at a young

age, say modeling the shirts has given them a brand new experience. "It's almost like feeling the depth of the music," says Hermon. "It just feels as though we can move along with it." Francesca Rosella, co-founder and chief creative officer of CuteCircuit, which designs fashion wearable technology, said the shirts allowed deaf people to feel music through sensations.

"Inside the shirt - that by the way is completely textiles, there are no wires inside, so we're only using smart fabrics - we have a combination of microelectronics ... very thin

and flexible, and conductive fabrics," she said. "All these little electronic motors are connected with these conductive fabrics so that the garment is soft and stretchable."

Sound Shirts don't come cheap, as they are expected to go on sale at more than 3,000 pounds (\$3,673), but Heroda believes it's a price worth paying for deaf people who enjoy music as much as she and her sister do. "I think it could definitely change our lives," she said. — Reuters

Hanoi closes trackside cafes
thronged by selfie-seeking tourists

It's the kind of shot every Instagram connoisseur yearns for: century-old railway tracks cutting through dusty backstreets, flanked by tourists drinking beer or iced tea mere inches from the slow-moving trains. The sight has become such a draw in the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi that authorities have set a weekend deadline for the removal of dozens of cafes that have cropped up, citing safety concerns.

"I love it. It's crazy, and completely different to anywhere I've been before," said Australian tourist Laura Metzke, after a train rumbled by. "I can also see why they would close it down because it's pretty dangerous." Built in 1902 under French colonial rulers, the railway to Vietnam's northern provinces carries passengers and cargo mostly between Hanoi and the eastern city of Haiphong, and the remote towns of Lang Son and Lao Cai, on the mountainous border with China.

It uses an old-fashioned French narrow gauge, and is so old that when North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visited Hanoi in February for a summit with U.S. President Donald Trump, he had to stop at the border and continue by car. In Hanoi, the line brushes the rear of houses and

shops as it snakes through the city's dense centre. Vendors stroll on the tracks, selling snacks on skewers, while some visitors sit on the railway lines and soak in the vibe.

In recent months, crowds of tourists have gathered along the railway to snap selfies with passing trains or lounge at trackside cafes. On Sunday, a train had to make an emergency stop soon after leaving Hanoi railway station to avoid hitting tourists, state media said. The next day, the city's governing body ordered the cafes removed by Saturday to "ensure traffic safety", at the request of the transport ministry.

"Though the railway cafes attract tourists, they are, in fact, violating some regulations," Ha Van Sieu, a government tourism official, told media on Tuesday. New and creative tourism products are encouraged, but must conform to legal regulations, Sieu added. Vietnam received 12.87 million foreign visitors in the first nine months of this year, up nearly 11% on the year, government data shows. — Reuters

Call of Duty: Mobile
smashes records

The mobile version of videogame franchise "Call of Duty" racked up 100 million downloads in its first week, industry site Sensor Tower said on Tuesday, dwarfing the debuts of previous smashes including "Fortnite" and "PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds" (PUBG). PUBG, Fortnite and Electronic Arts' "Apex Legends" scored 26.3 million, 22.5 million and 25 million respectively in their first week of release. "This is by far the largest mobile game launch in history in terms of the player base that's been built in the first week," said Randy Nelson, head of mobile insights at Sensor Tower.

"Call of Duty: Mobile" was launched by its publisher Activision Blizzard Inc on Oct. 1 and Sensor Tower said the numbers reflected worldwide unique downloads across Apple's App Store and Google Play in the period since. The smash hit is a "first-person-shooter game" that allows gamers to portray elite soldiers hunting down targets in different parts of the world.

The game's console-based editions have enjoyed a loyal following but the

meteoric rise of free-to-play online games have forced companies to adapt and develop their games for the smaller screen. "Call of Duty" was developed for mobile by Chinese internet giant Tencent Holdings Ltd, which also has a stake in PUBG's Bluehole and Fortnite's Epic Games and is credited with popularizing the battle-royale format, where dozens of online players battle each other to death.

The United States was mobile edition's main draw, with 17% of the downloads in its launch week, followed by India, where PUBG has a strong foothold. Tencent is yet to launch the game in China. Activision, which will launch the next console edition of "Call of Duty" on Oct. 25, has labeled 2019 a "transition year". The company said in May it would cut 800 jobs and invest heavily to develop its key game franchises "Call of Duty", "Candy Crush", "Overwatch", "Warcraft", "Hearthstone" and "Diablo". — Reuters



New on the menu:
Could 'dark kitchens'
gobble up Britain's high
street restaurants?

When Eccie Newton and her sister began making fresh salads and sandwiches to deliver to London office workers, their start-up company Karma Cans became so popular they soon had to expand - and hit a common roadblock: space. "We just couldn't find any kitchen space - it was almost impossible," Newton recalled of their venture in 2014. So, the 29-year-old set up her own "dark kitchen", a catering warehouse in Hackney - a hipster area in east London - that hosts about 85 catering businesses making culinary delights from granola to kimchi and cold-brew coffee.

Dark kitchens - also known as "virtual" or "ghost" kitchens - take their name from large retail warehouses that cater directly to online customers, bypassing stores. Often in under-utilised buildings, portacabins or warehouses on the outskirts of cities, dark kitchens allow chefs to cook up everything from burgers to biryanis and serve food directly to online consumers. The rapid rise of these food factories has some property experts predicting the death of bricks-and-mortar restaurants and, subsequently, local high streets in Britain as online deliveries become the norm.

"As it plays out, it's going to put a lot more pressure on the high street," which could mean people going out less to socialise or lead to the loss of local jobs, said independent professional property buyer Jonathan Rolande. But fans of the no-frills kitchens say they offer a new lease of life to abandoned properties and help small catering brands compete. Newton sees the new properties as being akin to co-working spaces, which are also increasingly common in cities.

Often regulated to the same standards as restaurants, far from replacing them, dark kitchens provide a "complement to food culture", she said. "The teams that work in virtual restaurants in our kitchen ... they're run exactly like a team in a restaurant - it's not robots making your food, it's real people," said Newton.

Food for thought

From New York to Shanghai, hungry city dwellers in search of food are increasingly reaching for a phone, rather than heading to the kitchen, using apps such as Uber Eats and Deliveroo. In Britain, there were almost 5 million fewer trips to full-service restaurants in the 12 weeks to March 24, 2019, compared with a year earlier, according to data analytics firm Kantar. Dark kitchens, originally popular with small, independent food companies, have gained favour with larger chains too.

Firms such as noodle restaurant Wagamama are joining the trend to provide customers with their food in places where they lack a physical restaurant presence or where demand for online delivery is high. Uber co-founder Travis Kalanick is joining the bandwagon with his CloudKitchens venture, a delivery-only "smart kitchen" enterprise that rents out catering spaces and provides its clients with marketing support. In CloudKitchens' first attempt to crack an overseas market since Kalanick bought its parent company last year, the Los Angeles-based firm started operations in South Korea in May.

Out of business

The boom in online food delivery services comes with a raft of social implications, according to property experts. Rolande envisages that as food delivery apps become the norm, big restaurant brands could be "in a position to walk away from high streets". Prominent British television chef Jamie Oliver shuttered most of his UK restaurants in May, culling about 1,000 jobs as his restaurant chain Jamie's Italian went into administration.

Two months earlier, the Boparan Restaurant Group announced it was going to close more than a third of its Giraffe and Ed's Easy Diner outlets. And well-known chains Carluccio's, Prezzo, Strada and Gourmet Burger Kitchen all closed branches in 2018. Rolande said the convenience of ordering food online likely contributed to those closures, and that the growth of dark kitchens could help fill property space that would otherwise sit empty.

But he does not think this will necessarily bring economic benefits to the communities in which they are located. More likely, he said, society could well get to the point where people no longer require kitchens in their own homes. "In central London, you could start to get people building little pods to live in rather than having big eating spaces ... It could eventually have a social impact on the size and types of property that could be developed," he said.

That future may not be far off, with some homes in places like Bangkok and Singapore - where a plethora of street food and online eateries exist - already being built with shared or only partial kitchen facilities. To ensure local businesses do not lose out however, cities like London are taking steps to invest in and protect high streets, such as public campaigns to fill empty shops.

Convenience and speed

Bridget Outtrim, a director in the industrial team of real estate agent Savills, sees dark kitchens as part of the evolution of online parcel delivery services and the general gig economy, where convenience and speed are key. But far from contributing to the death of the high street, Outtrim said such sites could "fill gaps" in the reach of restaurant chains by giving them the chance to sell their food in areas where they cannot or do not want to rent a space. "Dark kitchens" are a way of expanding into locations without making that massive property commitment," she said. Dark kitchens are far cheaper to lease, said restaurant property expert David Rawlinson, who has scouted properties for Michelin-starred restaurants across London. Rent on a communal kitchen in the city averages 25 pounds (about \$30) per square foot, while restaurants in central areas such as Soho and Mayfair go for up to eight times as much, he said. That makes dark kitchens an affordable way for businesses to trial new foods and areas, he said. — Reuters