



Wednesday arrived without fanfare but soon revealed itself to be momentous for the ant colony.

A human family had spread out a blanket, covering it with sandwiches, chips, chocolate-covered pretzels and a refreshing fruit plate. One of the ants posted a photo of the picnic to Facebook with the caption "HUMAN HAVING A PICNIC WHAT DO WE DO." Soon, more than 2,700 fellow hive members posted commands: "STEAL," "INVADE," "BRING TO THE QUEEN." Presumably, Her Majesty enjoyed quite the feast.

This weekend might be a good time to check out the private Facebook group aptly titled "A group where we all pretend to be ants in an ant colony," in which nearly 2 million (human) members do exactly that.

The concept is as simple as the rules. "In this group we are ants," reads the description. "We worship The Queen and do ant stuff. Welcome to the colony." As long as you're kind, avoid politics, don't employ any hate speech or bullying, remember that your name is Ant-yourname (e.g., this reporter is Ant-Travis) and always capitalize the first letters of the words "The Queen," you'll be graciously accepted as a member — which basically means when another "ant" posts a photo of food, or of an attacking insect, you can respond in the comments with the appropriate command, be it "LIFT," "EAT" or "BITE."

♦ ♦ ♦

While it might seem like just another internet oddity, the group might actually be fulfilling basic human needs — especially while people are isolated during a pandemic.

"We are social animals. We have a need to belong to a group, and, in this case, the group is one that doesn't have a lot of seriousness," said Erin Dupuis, a psychology professor at Loyola University in New Orleans who has studied the social benefits in playing massive multiplayer online role-playing games. She pointed to social identity theory, which, boiled down to its most basic level, suggests that "when we belong to groups, we feel better" — no matter what kind of group that is.

Tyrese Childs certainly didn't have any psychological theories in mind when he started the group when he was home from college in June 2019. He had seen a group where millennials and Gen Z-ers pretend to be boomers, which led him to ones where people pretend to be cows and farmers.

"The groups were all super crowded, so I thought I'd make my own for my friends and I," Childs said. When mulling the idea over, he saw an anthill on the ground and inspiration struck. At first, the only ants were Childs and a few dozen friends "who were like, 'This is kind of stu-

pid, but it's pretty funny.'" After summer, he "kind of forgot" about the group, until he logged on one day to find it had 10,000 members — many of whom were in an uproar because Ant-Kevin (real identity unknown) was attempting to stage a coup. And everyone knows you just don't do that. Childs decided it was time to return to the colony.

Then came the double whammy — a viral tweet about the group and a pandemic. Suddenly, hundreds of thousands of people were pledging their lives to The Queen.

During quarantine, "people were just so sick of scrolling through the same social media every day. They were out looking for something different, and we just happened to be found," Childs said. "I think people are really into escapism right now. We try to watch Netflix to take our minds off of what's happening in the media and in the world. ... In the group, you don't have to be yourself. You don't have to worry about the problems in your daily life. You sit down, be ant for 20 minutes. It gives you a little bit of serotonin, and you're back on your game."

"It's also such a healthy community," an anomaly on social media, he suggested. Aside from the whole Ant-Kevin episode, "you don't have to worry about ant drama. There's none of that."

Dupuis said it's not surprising the group exploded during the early months of the pandemic. It's a place where the rules don't change, the actions don't change and everyone "works" together. "Research shows when we're reminded of uncertainty, and mortality in particular, we're reminded of death — and we're being reminded of death every day — we seek out groups more," she said, adding that "we don't do it on a conscious level."

♦ ♦ ♦

While some ants might be looking for a distraction, others post research on actual ant behavior. Did you know, for example, that a large percentage of a colony doesn't actually do much work — probably acting as reserves in case of a loss of the highly active workers?

"Ofentimes, I'm struggling to get people's attention and explain why my research is something worth talking about," said Ant-Katie, also known as Katie Baudier, a postdoctoral research associate at Arizona State University who studies collective defense in social insects. "It's an awesome place for not just me but a lot of social-insect biologists."

Childs is awed by how his community has grown — and has continued to regulate itself. Ants make posts. Moderators approve them. And picknickers continue to run in fear.

"It's just mind-boggling that something I brought into this world as a joke could become something so meaningful to so many people," Childs said.



The colony calls

At nearly 2 million and counting, a Facebook group where people pretend to be ants is crawling with members

BY TRAVIS M. ANDREWS
The Washington Post



A Facebook ant group might seem like just another internet oddity, but it could be fulfilling basic human needs — especially while people are isolated during a pandemic.

Faking it till we can make it back to normal

Dolls, cutouts fill seats as businesses reopen with limits

BY MAURA JUDKIS
The Washington Post

The people disappeared, and then they were replaced. The ones brave enough to venture out to restaurants, concert halls and stadiums in the After were greeted by the Others. The Others sat, motionless. There was no light in their eyes, but the Others watched — they are always watching — as the people around them ordered crab-cakes and wine.

"They'll say, 'That one's staring at me,'" says Paula Starr Melehes, owner of the Open Hearth restaurant outside of Greenville, S.C. "Or, 'Oh, that one's flirting with me.'"

At the Open Hearth, the Others are a collection of male and female blowup dolls — "in very good taste," says Melehes, not the R-rated kind — filling seats at certain tables to help customers maintain social distancing, and to make the restaurant, which was required to limit capacity, appear more full. At Korean baseball stadiums, an Australian cafe and an Ohio boarding school, they're cardboard cutouts to replace fans, customers and students. At some restaurants, they're stuffed animals. At others, they're realistic, store display-quality mannequins wearing full outfits, sitting at tables with place settings, theoretically helping you enjoy your meal by making a half-empty cafe feel more, uh, normal.

Wait a second. Out of the corner of your eye. Did one of them just... move? "I had one bad comment from a customer who said they were too creepy and she would never dine with me," Melehes says. But otherwise, "it has just been overwhelmingly successful. Business has increased."

Look, this is a weird time.



At the Open Hearth restaurant outside of Greenville, S.C., blowup dolls join diners to help with social distancing and make the place seem more full.

Leaving your house and seeing empty streets and playgrounds — it feels like an episode of "The Twilight Zone." Might as well lean all the way into it, right?

The uncanny valley says this is a really bad idea," says Thalia Wheatley, a professor of social psychology and neuroscience at Dartmouth University, referring to a concept that explains why we're creeped out by humanlike objects or beings.

The phenomenon was identified by Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori. Basically, people are drawn to look at other faces, even in things that aren't actually people. But the more humanlike a nonhuman object looks — like a mannequin, or robot, or CGI movie — the more unnerving it is. Think of the dead-eyed conductor in "The Polar Express," or the human-faced felines of "Cats."

"This is what horror



Western Reserve Academy boarding school in Ohio created cardboard cutouts of its students to use to fill the assembly hall for a virtual meeting it hosted in April.

movies capitalize on," Wheatley says, "the undead, Chuckie, things that have faces that aren't actually alive, or they don't have a mind."

Are we in a horror movie, or a prop comedy? Or are we wandering in the uncanny valley between the two? When the Inn at Little Washington announced its plan to fill certain tables in its dining room with mannequins upon its reopening in May, the running joke was that servers — who were instructed to pour drinks for the dummies — would get "stuffed." The photos of elegantly dressed mannequins went viral, spurring comparisons to a "Twilight Zone" episode in which a department store's mannequins come to life.

Kelsey Cadden, 30, is warily curious about what a dinner there with her mother will be like this month. "I think the first 15 minutes will be weird, but then you sit down, and the wine is flowing," she says. Perhaps the mannequins won't even be the weirdest thing. "Going out in public is going to be the weirdest

thing." Some venues have tried to get as far from the uncanny valley as possible. One restaurant in Bangkok has filled seats with cartoon dragons, and another has gone for stuffed pandas.

One of the cutest seat-fillers has been in the cafe at Izu Shaboten Zoo in Shizuoka, Japan, which is filled with plump capybara stuffed animals, an animal the zoo is famous for housing. Recently, at an opera house in Barcelona, a string quartet played to an audience of 2,292 potted plants.

At Honey Salt restaurant, in Las Vegas, owner Elizabeth Blau was allowed to reopen with limited indoor seating, which prohibited customers at the bar. She

had to block off those seats somehow. There were a number of options. "Waffle House put garbage bags on their chairs," she says. "I thought, 'Oh my goodness, this is not how we want to welcome our guests back.'"

Some levity was in order, so she filled those seats with teddy bears — because honey, get it? — and other stuffed animals wearing masks. "Some of them didn't have ears, so it wasn't easy to put a mask on," she says. "So we used a little dental floss." (A month later, the teddy bears are still in use, though there aren't as many needed, since Vegas has moved into another phase of reopening.) The cardboard cutouts

of (human) spectators at South Korean baseball games have been proposed by fans as a model for American leagues to follow. Cutouts might be useful beyond the purposes of simulating sports crowds: In April, Western Reserve Academy, an Ohio boarding school, hosted an all-school meeting with the seats of its assembly hall filled with cardboard heads of its pupils.

"It was overwhelming" to look out over the rows of students, says head of school Suzanne Walker Buck. "It felt like there was happiness, and we were together as a community."

At the same time: "It's odd when you're looking at cardboard faces," Buck says. "I definitely felt like a Salvador Dali moment. You felt like you were in one of his paintings."

For as long as social distancing is necessary, "We'll learn what's an acceptable amount of fake people to have in the world," says Wheatley.

Until then, humans will adapt. Back at Paula Starr Melehes's Open Hearth restaurant, in South Carolina, the blowup dolls she purchased on Amazon were a big hit. But one of them kept deflating. "She looked drunk at the table — she looked like she was very inebriated," Melehes says. "People were buying her drinks right and left."

Melehes decided to give her a name:lene Dover.



A cuddly "customer" bellies up to the bar at Honey Salt restaurant in Las Vegas where indoor seating is restricted.



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'The Masked Singer' live tour to stop in Richmond in June

BY COLLEEN CURRAN
Richmond Times-Dispatch

Calling all "The Masked Singer" fans. The live tour version of the Fox reality singing show will take the stage at Richmond's Dominion Energy Center on June 18. "Audiences can expect to see their favorite characters brought to life onstage, as well as surprise celebrity guests, amazing new performances and a can't-miss spectacular live show for audiences of all ages," according to a news release.

Tickets, ranging from \$39.50 to \$119.50, can be purchased online at LiveNation.com and DominionEnergyCenter.com, by phone at (800) 514-ETIX (3849) or in person at the Dominion Energy Center and

Altria Theater box offices.

The live show will feature two celebrity guest hosts, as well as one local celebrity who will be in disguise until being unmasked at the end of the night, according to the release.

According to organizers, the recent season three premiere of "The Masked Singer" debuted to 26.7 million viewers over three nights, making it television's highest-rated and most-watched reality telecast in eight years.

For more information, including the full tour schedule and ticket information, visit www.themaskedsingertour.com.

ccurran@timesdispatch.com
(804) 649-6151
Twitter: @colcurran



THE MASKED SINGER NATIONAL TOUR

Georgia O'Keeffe's recipes can be yours

BY AMELIA NIENBERG
© 2020 The New York Times

In looping handwriting, the artist Georgia O'Keeffe sketched out a method for making chicken flautas, from rolling up chicken in tortillas to cooking a creamy green chile-spiced sauce.

After about 10 minutes in the oven, they'd be done, just the way she liked them.

"Do you think other people eat as well as we do?" she would often wonder aloud.

For the first time, O'Keeffe's collection of recipes — a card file containing about 300 items — is going up for auction. Many are penned, or penciled, by the artist. Along with the chicken flautas, she copied out recipes for pecan butterball cookies, fresh apple sauce, and leek and potato soup, among others.

"There's a certain pleasure in reading other people's letters," said Justin Caldwell, a senior specialist in Sotheby's books and manuscripts department, which is holding the auction. "But this is different. This takes you into her kitchen."

The card file is just one of more than 100 pieces of artwork from and personal effects of O'Keeffe; her husband, Alfred Stieglitz; and the artist Juan Hamilton. The objects are from Hamilton's personal collection, most of which he inherited

from O'Keeffe when she died in 1986 at age 98. Beginning Feb. 26, the recipes will be on view in advance of the March 5 auction.

"You certainly won't find 'open a can of this, open a can of that' in here," Caldwell said. "I cataloged a lot of things in the sale, but this was my favorite."

Few recipe collections have ever been put up for sale, and the team at Sotheby's settled on \$6,000 to \$8,000 for the presale estimate.

"This is more like selling a piece of her art," said Bonnie Slotnick, the owner of Bonnie Slotnick Cookbooks, in the East Village. "It's almost more personal than her art. It's something that she might have referred to and handled almost every day."

Some of O'Keeffe's recipes are remnants of the baroque thrills of early-20th-century entertaining. An *île flottante* — an elaborate dessert made from meringue floating in *crème anglaise*, a custard — might have been prepared only for guests, Caldwell said. A tomato aspic — one of the first recipes in the alphabetically organized box — is a throwback.

But florid dishes are the exceptions. Instead, many call for fresh produce, fresh herbs and simple preparation. There are soups, vegetables and easy chicken recipes. O'Keeffe kept an expansive garden at her



COLIN CLARK/THE NEW YORK TIMES
On March 5, a collection of recipes from artist Georgia O'Keeffe, in a card file containing about 300 items, is going up for auction.

home in Abiquiu, New Mexico, about 50 miles north of Santa Fe, growing much of her own food.

"She was very much ahead of her time in terms of organic gardening and eating well," said Barbara Bühler Lynes, an expert on O'Keeffe's life and art. "She was very aware of nutrition." O'Keeffe painted elegant and sensual works over her decades-long career. Her abstract forms, Southwestern landscapes and provocative flowers pioneered a new form of American modernism.

The recipe cards offer one glimpse into her effort to curate her surroundings. In addition to her carefully tended garden and meals, O'Keeffe designed many of her own clothes. When photographers came to shoot, she selected her wardrobe.

"It pleased her greatly to have her home, her food, just the way she liked," said Margaret Wood, who started

working for O'Keeffe in 1977, when she was 24 and O'Keeffe was 90.

For O'Keeffe, ingredients mattered. Her eggs came from a local woman. While walking through the garden, the artist would sometimes pick out a specific vegetable that she wanted for dinner. Instead of pesticides, her staff used marigolds or garlic water.

Preparation was important, too, Wood said. Once a week, O'Keeffe and her staff would make homemade yogurt from goat milk, fresh from a nearby dairy. To dry apricots, they would cut them and half and leave them on window screens in the patio. In the fall, O'Keeffe oversaw the canning and freezing of produce.

"Miss O'Keeffe was so particular," said Wood, who published a cookbook, "A Painter's Kitchen: Recipes from the Kitchen of Georgia O'Keeffe." "She'd tell me how to stir. She'd tell me, 'Dig down and don't scrape.'"

Adriana Trigiani to headline next RTD Book Club

New York Times bestselling author Adriana Trigiani will be the featured speaker at the next event in the RTD Book Club series.

Trigiani, a Virginia native who has written 18 books, will host a book talk and signing at 6 p.m. Wednesday,

March 4, at the Cultural Arts Center at Glen Allen, 2880 Mountain Road in Henrico County.

A limited number of VIP tickets are available and include a meet-and-greet with Trigiani before the book talk, as well as drinks and hors d'oeuvres. The VIP session begins at 4:30 p.m.

VIP tickets are \$75 and include a hardback copy of Trigiani's most recent novel, "Tony's Wife." In addition, her popular cookbook, "Cooking With My Sisters," can be added to the VIP admission for a total price of \$90.

General admission tickets are \$50 and also include a copy of "Tony's Wife." The cookbook can be added for a total general admission price of \$65. Tickets are available at Richmond.com/Trigiani.

Trigiani will be available to sign books after the event. Trigiani's fiction and nonfiction titles have been published in 38 countries. She is also an award-winning playwright, television writer and producer, and filmmaker. Trigiani wrote and directed the film version of her debut novel, "Big Stone Gap," which was shot in her hometown. Her screen adaptation of "Very Valentine" debuted on Lifetime television in June.

Trigiani also is the co-founder of the Origin Project, an in-school writing program that serves more than 1,500 students in Appalachia.

Don't you worry. Leftover wine is no grape tragedy.

BY DAVE MCINTYRE
The Washington Post

"Can we do something about these bottles?"

My wife asks me this, with implied irritation, at least once a week. The question is usually punctuated by the sound of bottles sliding across a granite countertop and clinking loudly together. I bristle at the question.

There's a section of our counter that seems to organically collect partially emptied wine bottles, the detritus of my tastings as I look for five wines to recommend each week. Some have a cork stuffed back in the bottle, or a screw cap re-affixed. Others are closed with rubber stoppers, pumped free of air to protect the wine. A few may have glass tops

plucked from the collection in my kitchen drawer, offering an imperfect seal against oxidation. And some are just left open, because what the heck. There are still more in the refrigerator door, and of course, the instant rejects that were emptied into the sink and tossed unceremoniously into the recycling bin.

All this has left me a bit jaded to the question of what to do with leftover wine, but it also has given me a more relaxed perspective: Don't worry about it. Your wife will be fine for a few days, at least. Almost everyone knows

that wine will turn to vinegar with exposure to oxygen. That is true, eventually. But the process does not happen quickly. Good, young wine will even improve with exposure to air — "Let it breathe" — and may taste better the second or third day after you open it.

Here are several ways to preserve your opened wine, including special gizmos you can buy, with a discussion of their advantages and pitfalls. The simplest thing to do is shove the cork back in the bottle as far as you can (or refasten the screw cap) and leave the wine on the counter. A re-corked wine should be fine for a day or two, or three. I have found screw caps can keep good wine fresh for weeks, even without refrigeration.

That said, the refrigerator is always a good idea, for white or red wines. Cold slows oxidation. Disadvantages: You'll need to let reds warm up a bit the next day, and the bottles will need to stand up in the door of your fridge — a resealed cork may not be a total seal to prevent leakage if you lay the bottle on its side.

There are numerous gadgets to avoid oxidation. The Vacu Vin is a pump that supposedly sucks oxygen out of the bottle, leaving a vacuum over the wine until you release the rubber stopper. The pump and two stoppers cost



STACY ZARIN GOLDBERG FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

There are several ways to preserve opened wine, including various wine stoppers and other special gizmos.

about \$13 and last forever, assuming you don't lose the stoppers. I've always had good luck with this — even after a few weeks, squeezing the stopper releases a reassuring "puff" as the vacuum is broken. The Vacu Vin has its skeptics, though, who don't believe the pump actually protects the wine.

Wine collectors have become infatuated with the Coravin, a device designed to let us enjoy a glass of wine without removing the cork from the bottle. The wine is extracted through a needle that punctures the cork and then inserts argon gas to protect the remaining wines, for months if not longer, because the cork's seal has not been broken.

The Coravin debuted at about \$300 a few years ago, but there are models now online for about \$150. You will need to buy replacement argon cartridges, so there's a recurring investment. Coravin does have a good — if still

short — track record on preserving wine remaining in the bottle.

Savino (about \$30 online) is a carafe designed to preserve your red or white wine from oxygen over several days. A floating stopper protects the wine from at least most of the oxygen in the carafe, while a cap creates a good seal against outside air. I've found a quality wine will stay fresh for several days in a Savino, longer than just leaving it re-corked in the bottle. The Savino also fits more conveniently in the door of your fridge.

If you like to start your

evening with a glass of champagne or other bubbly, you can stretch that bottle with a champagne stopper, available at most wine stores or online for anywhere from \$6 to more than \$20, depending on how fancy they are. You shove the stopper on the top of the bottle and clamp two wings around the bottle neck to hold

the seal. Pop up the wings and there's a pop almost as satisfying as when you twisted the cork out of the bottle the first time.

The goal is to protect your wine from spoilage, so it can live to let you drink another day. And if all you want is to save some wine for tomorrow, often the simplest solutions are the best.

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We'll be back

RTD's regular restaurant features — Dish, with the latest restaurant news, and Justin Lo's Dining Out column — have the week off. They'll return next week.