

SUMMER 2025: Convertibles | Chicken Wings | Jen Rizzotti and the Connecticut Sun | Guardians of the Farm

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## Signs of Summer



Ariana Rawls Fine

A cold drink in hand. Friends by the firepit. The grillmasters at the grill. Finally being able to swim in lakes, outdoor pools, rivers and Long Island Sound. Meandering along country lanes or down the highway (ok, meandering might be a stretch with our Tristate/New England driving habits) with the windows open or the top down. Ahh, the sights and sounds of summer.

We are fully embracing those signs of summer in this edition, including Dennis House reminiscing about the convertibles he had through the years. Kerri-Lee

Mayland encourages home project dreaming but adds some valuable contractor and renovation advice. Matt Dicks questions the value and current cost of swimming lessons versus “instructions” when he was a kid. We continue celebrating our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a 2010 article from Shawn Zimmerman about flip-flops and what they mean. Meander this summer over to veteran-owned Guardian Farms, which is spotlighted by Renee DiNino in our Pets section. In Delicious, we focus on ways to prepare what I must admit is a food addiction of mine: chicken wings. I am looking forward to trying many of the sauces this summer!

Moving from summer to sun, we have a feature about Connecticut Sun basketball with Jen Rizzotti, the team’s president and a Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame member. Continuing with the sports theme, our In the Spirit article spotlights the amazing work of Hospital for Special Care’s Adaptive Sports Camp and other activities for youths living with disabilities.

And, last but certainly least, three influencers over the age of 50 from Connecticut show that age is just a number on social media...as are the high number of followers and their growing popularity as “grandfluencers.”

We are excited to bring these great articles to you as you head into this summer of fun, family, food and freedom (or at least a week or two of it for your vacation). Have a wonderful Summer 2025!

*Ariana*

Ariana Rawls Fine  
Editor  
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– JIM TULLY

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Social media creators over the age of 50 are gaining followers and influence, exemplifying that style, advice and spunk are not reserved for the youth.

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Celebrating 35 years, Hospital for Special Care's Ivan Lendl Adaptive Sports Camp brings comradery, challenge, adaptability and acceptance to youth with disabilities.

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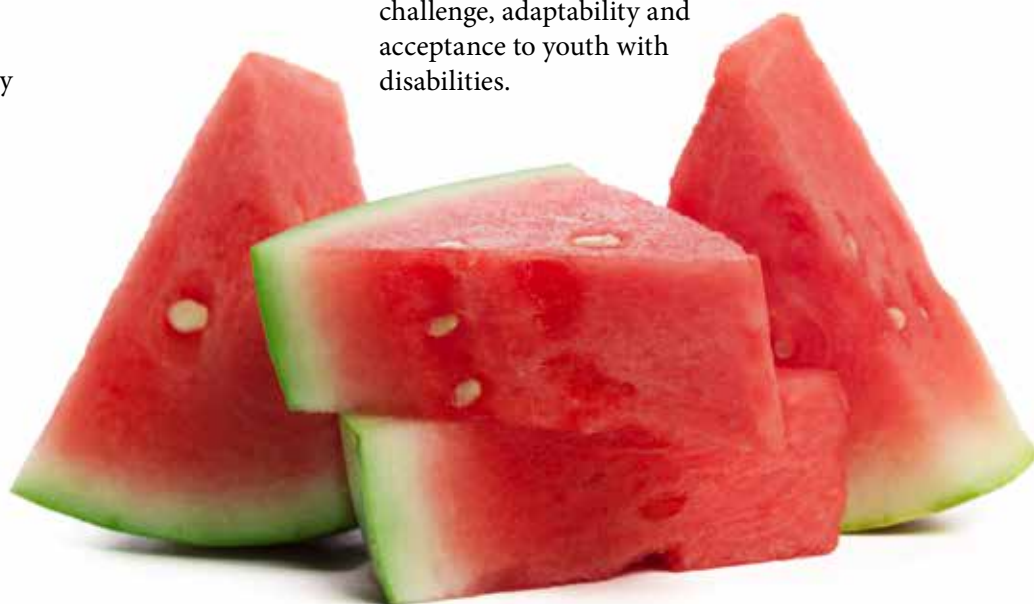
## *Delicious*

Chicken wings have become a popular American staple at restaurants. Learn the best ways and recipes to make them at home this summer.

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## *Final Thoughts*

After many expensive swim lessons for our kids, we question whether our family's "sink or swim" lessons back in our youth were more effective.





# UConn Health Achieves Excellence in Eye Care in Record Time

EDMUND P. FARRIS, M.D.  
CHIEF, DIVISION OF OPHTHALMOLOGY

Written by STEVEN BLACKBURN / Photography by TINA ENCARNACION/UConn Health



**E**dmund P. Farris, M.D.'s very personal experience with dry eye drives his many accomplishments at UConn Health. Despite only joining in October 2024, those experiences have given Dr. Farris the means to help the Farmington campus achieve the recognition as a Dry Eye Center of Excellence. The center provides an impressive array of diagnostic and therapeutic modalities to treat dry eye, a condition where the eyes fail to produce enough tears or the tears evaporate too quickly, leading to dryness, discomfort and even loss of vision.

Dr. Farris began his professional career as a glaucoma-trained surgeon in the early 1990s, during which time he also taught residents, fellows and students and lectured across the country. All that abruptly ended in 2012 when he suffered significant, debilitating complications a few months after undergoing vision

correcting LASIK eye surgery preventing him from performing glaucoma surgery.

This setback compelled Dr. Farris to study the very disease that affected him. By 2015, he had added dry eye specialist to his expansive resume. He now leads the Division of Ophthalmology at UConn Health, which, Dr. Farris believes, provides more modalities for dry eye than any other practices in Connecticut. "It's what happened to me," he says about why he pursued dry eye. "I wanted to treat people who have similar issues as me."

## LEVERAGING CUTTING-EDGE TECHNOLOGY THAT ONLY FIVE INSTITUTIONS IN THE U.S. PROVIDE

Since his arrival, Dr. Farris has acquired cutting-edge equipment for UConn Health's ophthalmology division, including OptiVize, a device that no other facility in Connecticut has. In fact, there are only a handful of institutions in the U.S. that use this technology to treat dry eye.

OptiVize helps facilitate a new form of therapy known as Blepharoexfoliation. "Bleph means lids, so you're scrubbing the lids to remove dead skin cells, excess oils and something called biofilm, which is a film laid down by bacteria into the meibomian glands," explains Dr. Farris. "This results in gland secretions thickening, so that the oils cannot be expressed."

OptiVize first uses a rotating, solution-applied sponge to scrub off the surface of the glands. A device that contains fluid with a mild electric current is then applied to the lids through a contact lens.

The electric current, which flows into the impacted gland, vaporizes the thick secretions without causing inflammation. "This allows us to essentially hollow out this gland, so that we can then express out its thick secretions and get the gland to produce normal oils," explains Dr. Farris.

## TAKING EXTRA PRECAUTIONS TO ENSURE MEDICAL EQUIPMENT IS SAFE

Dr. Farris also uses an FDA-approved Lumenis Optilight device to perform intense pulse light (IPL) therapy for patients with meibomian gland dysfunction (MGD). However, the fact that the FDA approved it for dry eye treatment is very important because, unfortunately, not every machine that's used for these procedures receives this necessary approval.

"There are a number of IPLs out there because they're used for many cosmetic therapies," says Dr. Farris. "Patients have come to me who have been treated with non-approved IPLs. Some arrive with actual burn marks on their face because they were overtreated with an improper parameter."

The proper parameters can be set via FDA-approved IPLs and are based on skin types. Another UConn Health treatment that can be used in conjunction with IPLs is called radio frequency therapy, which applies radio waves and heat around the eyes.

Recently, Dr. Farris had all these procedures performed on himself. "I want to make sure that whatever I'm doing to my patients, I've done to myself," he



Dry-eye specialist Edmund Farris, M.D., is chief of the Division of Ophthalmology, Department of Surgery.

## **"It's not just a national issue but an international issue that is really just becoming recognized as something that we need to take care of."**

—EDMUND P. FARRIS, M.D.

adds. "I had some improvement in my dry eye in the first week."

### **PARTICIPATING IN A GROUNDBREAKING STUDY ON DRY EYE AND SCREEN USAGE**

Spreading the word about dry eye is very important to Dr. Farris due to a lack of both social and medical awareness. Although some estimates say about 16.5 million people in the U.S. suffer from dry eye, Dr. Farris agrees more with the higher estimates of there being closer to 100 to 125 million, with only 10% of Americans receiving treatment.

"It's not just a national issue but an international issue that is really just becoming recognized as something that we need to take care of," says Dr. Farris.

These numbers are likely much higher because dry eye can be created or worsened from prolonged exposure to an activity that everyone participates in: screen time. Prior to his appointment at UConn Health, Dr. Farris performed a study where young adults aged 18 to 20 years old played video games for four hours. He found that participants experienced a range of dry eye symptoms, such as burning and stinging sensations, itchiness, and inflammation after gaming.

"When you're reading on your phone or playing a video game, you're concentrating so much that your blink rate goes down," he states. "When you blink, the muscles in your eyes squeeze, which presses the oils into the tear film. When you reduce the times you blink, it reduces the time you are pushing that oil into the tear film. This leads to the stagnation of oil within the glands, which eventually causes that oil to thicken, and that ultimately becomes problematic with evaporative dry eye or MGD."

### **MORE THAN JUST MINOR DISCOMFORT: DRY EYE CAN RESULT IN VISION LOSS**

Dry eye can be much more debilitating than just minor pains. It can result in vision loss. "A lot of people don't worry about dry eye because they think, 'Oh, well, vision loss has to be related to the retina or the cataract.' But if you

have inadequate tear film, it can cause significant changes in your vision because tear film is responsible for 20% of your visual acuity," says Dr. Farris. "We'll have patients who come in and say, 'In the morning, I felt great and everything was fine, but the moment I went home for the day, I couldn't see. I was having trouble driving.'"

The pain was so bad for one of Dr. Farris' patients that her daughter had to transport her in a wheelchair, but not because she had trouble walking. "She was experiencing so much discomfort in her eyes that she could literally not open them," he recalls.

### **WHAT THE PUBLIC NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT DRY EYE MEDICATIONS**

Another misconception about dry eye is that artificial tears or eye drops can fix the problem. Dr. Farris refers to these treatments as Band-Aids since they only provide temporary relief. "We want to be able to treat people with dry eye early, so that it doesn't become significant down the line and become relatively debilitating for them."

Unfortunately, the medications that doctors usually prescribe for dry eye only treat what's called aqueous insufficiency, which is when people don't have enough tears to lubricate the surface of their eyes adequately. These people only make up about 20% of the dry eye population. The other 80% have meibomian gland dysfunction.

"The medications that everybody's heard about and that you see on the television, like Restasis and Xiidra, do not really treat meibomian gland dysfunction," says Dr. Farris. "They're anti-inflammatories, but they mostly treat aqueous deficiency. They can reduce a little bit of inflammation, but they're not specifically targeted towards meibomian gland dysfunction."

Similarly, there are many forms of medication that are prescribed to treat dry eye from MGD but don't cure the disease, including Miebo and Vevye, which is a similar organic compound to Miebo. Miebo is an organic compound

that hits the surface of the eye, spreads over the cornea, and basically seals over it to reduce that evaporation because you're not producing the oils.

A more recent drop that Dr. Farris says people might have seen in the commercials is Xdemvy to treat Demodex blepharitis, a condition that occurs when a mite called the Demodex gets into the eyelash follicles and multiplies, causing inflammation. Upon application, Xdemvy significantly reduces and eradicates these mites in and around the lashes over the course of six weeks.

"It's a really, really good drop, but it doesn't mean that you can just stop after you take it. The condition will come back," adds Dr. Farris. "So, you have to do some type of maintenance therapy with good lid hygiene."

### **HIGH-QUALITY PREVENTATIVE DIAGNOSTICS**

UConn Health performs diagnostics to help identify therapeutic procedures that will better treat patients, including the InflammDry MMP-9 for inflammation and tear osmolality, which tests the thickness of tears to see how quickly the tears break up. UConn Health also assesses how much tears patients produce, called the tear lake, and an area along the bottom of the lids called the tear height. It also performs imaging of the meibomian glands.

"It's a cliché to say that doctors are there to help patients, but it's really true," concludes Dr. Farris. "We took the Hippocratic oath regardless of what our chosen field is. In the vast majority of cases, we attempt to find the solution because we will do whatever we can to help our patients." ■

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*Steven Blackburn is a freelance writer with more than 10 years of journalism experience in various fields, including U.S. education and Connecticut community interest stories. He lives in Winsted.*





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## CONNECTICUT SUN

# Playing for Good

By ALEX DUEBEN / Photos Courtesy of CONNECTICUT SUN

“I think that [the WNBA] is probably as player-led as any professional league can be,” Jen Rizzotti said in a recent conversation with Connecticut Voice. A member of the Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame, Rizzotti spent years playing professionally and two decades coaching at the University of Hartford and George Washington University. But, for many, the Connecticut native will always be remembered for her years at UConn, which included the team’s first championship. Since 2021, Rizzotti has been president of Connecticut Sun.

“Our players are from everywhere, and players’ opinions across the league can become a national discussion,” Rizzotti states. “What has been interesting for us is we’ve caught the attention of state employees and state politicians who have wanted to collaborate with us on messaging that’s important. I think because it’s a small state, we’ve captured the attention of a lot of people and a lot of fans. It feels like we can actually make a difference, rather than just having an opinion,” she adds, citing projects in recent years with the governor and attorney general around gun violence prevention and discrimination.

“I just feel like the conversations have been started easier and the support has been there because we can capture the attention of a lot of people in such a small area,” Rizzotti continues. “I think the WNBA used to just be a professional basketball league and now the WNBA is standing for so much more. That has been much more prevalent in the last five years since COVID, since the Black Lives Matter movement, and since the players all got together and decided that they were going to use their voice for good.”

For the former player and coach, that focus from the top of the organization down is one of the roles she believes is key. “The role of my staff and me is really important, including

creating a very safe and inclusive space for our players and our front office staff. I think visibly showing our players that there are a lot of people behind the scenes working for them that also look like them and represent them...and them seeing the work that we’re doing in the community.”

“They can see that these social justice issues are important to us. Standing for the women of the WNBA is important to us. Working to give back to underprivileged communities is

important to us,” Rizzotti adds. “I think it’s important for the women that are thinking about coming to Connecticut as a free agent or that are getting drafted into our organization feel safe and feel comfortable and feel empowered to make a difference because that’s the work that we’re doing on a regular basis.”

Rizzotti may always be known in the state for her time at UConn, but she admits that’s one of the ways that she can be of help. “One of the positives of me coming back to take on this role is it brings an immediate attention to the franchise in a way that wasn’t there before, right? Regardless of whether or not I do a good job as a team president, I can publicly bring attention to the work that our organization is doing.” She mentions that the same is true of the team’s new general manager, Morgan Tuck, a former UConn player.

“The common denominator for both of us is that we came from a program where doing things the right way, and winning the right way, was a focal point. It wasn’t win at all costs. It was about how

we treated people. It was about how we worked as a team and collaborated and had a selfless mindset. It was about having a growth mindset that we didn’t know everything and that we were willing to be pushed to our limit and driven to be great,” Rizzotti says. “A lot of those characteristics really translated to success in the front office for both of us.”

Before becoming the general manager, Tuck spent years



Jen Rizzotti





President of Connecticut Sun,  
Jen Rizzotti

running the Sun's Community Department, an experience she described as eye-opening. "Obviously people do a ton of great work in the community, but when you're seeing people every day where this is what they have dedicated themselves to, to me, it just felt like, we have to find a way to get involved."

"Part of what the team can do is connecting the players to the community and letting them know what's happening and what they can do and what they might be interested in. When you want people to have buy-in, you explain what you're doing, but you also try to take in their interests and their passions and try to weave that into what we're doing," Tuck explains. "You don't want to have players feel like they can only talk about things when it's in the news or when it's more pressing."


"We're not going to make them do anything they don't want to do. And also going, okay, this is what you're passionate about? Here's an organization that really focuses on it. How do we connect them? How can you get involved? How can you amplify what they're doing?"

We try to get creative. But at the end of the day, we always try to make sure that it is supporting what our players want to do."

Tuck admits that this is happening at a time when more people than ever are focused on women's basketball, which she wouldn't trade. But that noise can't distract from the bigger job. "We've put a big emphasis on giving back to the community, because obviously we want our communities to support us. So, we always felt like we have to support them, too."

"I just hope throughout my job in this position that I may always have a lot going on and I'm not as available as I was when I was working in the community, but that I never lose that," Tuck says. "That thought process is: you can have a positive impact, no matter how big or small. I want to be remembered as someone who made a positive impact, not just because I played basketball, but that I used the attention or the platform to have a positive impact on others."

Rizzotti echoes the sentiment. "It's almost an unwritten job responsibility, right?"

"That you're consistently conscious of the impact that you're making on your players' lives, on your coaches' lives, on the front office staff, on the Mohegan community, the New London County community, all the way throughout the state, and all the way throughout the country when it comes to WNBA fans," Rizzotti concludes. "We understand the responsibility we have in creating an impact and a space where we can be really proud of. It is something that's always on our minds. I think that what makes being in the WNBA right now really special is that we really can be a vehicle for change." 

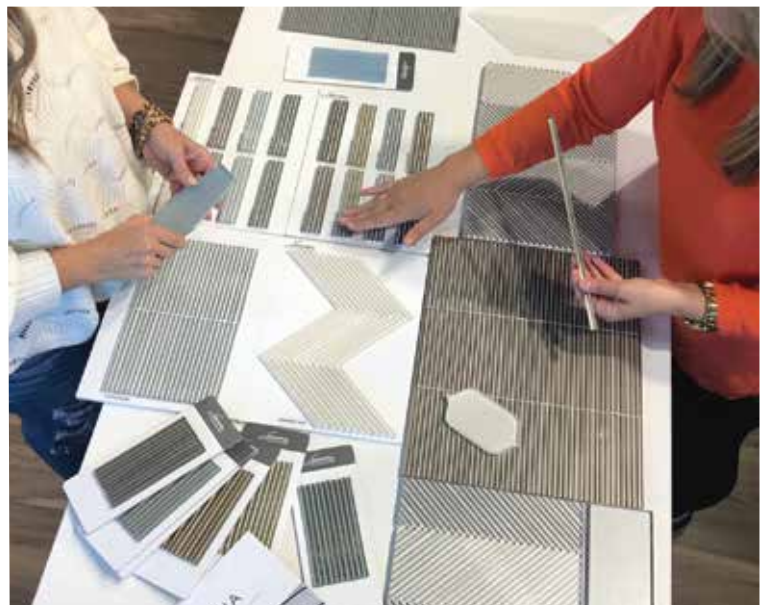
*Alex Dueben is a writer and historian who has written over 1,000 articles about comics and books, poetry and art for The Believer, Vulture, The Millions, The Los Angeles Review of Books, The Brooklyn Rail, and many other publications. Formerly a writer at Comic Book Resources, he has been a regular contributor to The Comics Journal and other leading comics publications for years, and is the writer and editor of the artist monograph Hurricane Nancy.*





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JAMIE SHAWVER, D.O.:

# The Modern-Day Family Doctor

By **KIMBERLY LUCEY MILLEN** / Photography by **STAN GODLEWSKI**

Once upon a time, the family doctor treated every person in the household: from grandparents to their tiny grandbabies, and everyone in between. If someone got sick and needed inpatient care, the family doctor followed them, continuing their treatment within the hospital walls. Jamie Shawver, D.O., sees the value in that continuity of care, now carrying the torch forward into her modern-day practice at Trinity Health Of New England. Hers is one of the few still offering the traditional family doctor model that follows a patient from birth throughout their life. "I don't know that I would have found that anywhere else," says Dr. Shawver. "Family medicine is both humbling and rewarding; I'm so grateful to have found my place at Trinity Health Of New England."

## BECOMING THE FAMILY DOCTOR

In medical school, students are encouraged to try all the different specialties to figure out where they want to focus their studies. The problem, says Dr. Shawver, was that she liked learning about everything. "I didn't hate any of the subjects," she explains. "I liked taking care of all age groups and genders, and guiding patients who were quite healthy while also taking care of those who were very sick."

A mission trip to Kenya solidified her choice, teaching her to focus on how to treat the people, and look beyond the science of care. "My undergraduate degree was biomedical engineering, where science meets medicine," says Dr. Shawver. "Up until that point I had really been focused on the science of the medicine, and not as much on the person it was meant to help." As a result of this shift in focus, she ended up pursuing a path in osteopathic medicine. It is a practice that trains doctors to treat the whole patient in care: physically, mentally and spiritually. Notably, that's the same mission as Trinity Health Of New England. Doctors of Osteopathy (DO) are trained to follow the latest innovations in science and technology. They also look past just the patient's symptoms to try to understand how environmental and lifestyle factors may impact their health and well-being.

## WHAT THE FAMILY DOCTOR CAN DO FOR YOU

Dr. Shawver says in family medicine you need to know about everything; as a doctor, she's always learning. "Every day I still see things I haven't seen before, and I have to keep on top of all the latest medical news," comments Dr. Shawver. "There is always more to learn for the good of the patient."

She takes care of all age groups, from babies to the elderly, men, women, teenagers and





**Jamie Shawver, D.O.,**  
Trinity Health Of New England

**“Patients don't always realize they don't have to be referred to a specialist; a lot of times we can handle the problem ourselves. And the big benefit of being part of a health system like Trinity Health Of New England—sometimes I can reach out to the right specialist myself and get an answer for my patient without them having to wait for another appointment.”**

children. She performs cancer screenings, skin biopsies, pap smears, behavioral health and autism screenings; administers vaccines; and fills out forms for physicals.

"It really is amazing how much we can do," she adds. "Patients don't always realize they don't have to be referred to a specialist; a lot of times we can handle the problem ourselves. And the big benefit of being part of a health system like Trinity Health Of New England—sometimes I can reach out to the right specialist myself and get an answer for my patient without them having to wait for another appointment."

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEING YOUR PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIAN**


During the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Shawver and other primary care physicians saw many patients put off their annual appointments. As a result, many patients ended up coming in sicker than ever before. "People were afraid to come in for their routine visits; we ended up finding ourselves taking care of people at an ICU level," states Dr. Shawver. While many patients have picked back up on their regular visits since then, not everyone has done so.

"I still see people every day who have gone years without seeing a doctor," says Dr. Shawver. The risks of that can be very high. A patient can have bad blood sugar or high blood pressure and not realize it, unknowingly doing years of damage to their body. "I just really want people to not hesitate to get their concerns addressed and catch something before it becomes a big problem. And not worry about

any stigmas about the health problem you may need to address."

### **A REWARDING CAREER**

For Dr. Shawver, becoming a primary care physician and embodying the mission of a true family doctor has been more rewarding than she ever could have imagined. "Seeing the difference I can make in my patient's lives is amazing," she says. "The everyday interactions with patients can vary so widely and represent new challenges all the time. Whether I start them on a new medication and see if they're improving or need an adjustment, I can follow along on their health care journey. We work collaboratively as a team and share in the decision making to make a difference in their life and their health."

Health care providers like Dr. Shawver help to embody the Mission of Trinity Health Of New England, dedicated to compassionate, high-quality care treating the whole patient: body, mind and spirit. 

*Kimberly Lucey Millen is a freelance journalist with more than two decades of experience in both print and broadcast media. She lives in New England with her husband and son, exploring all that each of the four seasons has to offer.*

*Stan Godlewski is an editorial, corporate and healthcare photographer based in Connecticut and working primarily between Boston and New York City.*





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FEATURE



# Summer Means Convertibles

By DENNIS HOUSE





I've been a convertible lover for as long as I can remember. I think my joy of convertibles happened shortly after birth during my first time in public. Even though I was born during a heavy snowstorm, my parents took me home from Norwood Hospital in their convertible. It was a 1960 Ford Sunliner, black with red interior. Of course, I don't remember that car, and mom and dad traded in for a station wagon before I learned how to walk. I have a penchant for wagons too but that story is for another day.

If I could go back in time and go car shopping, it would have to be the 1960s when just about every car brand offered a convertible. Today, only a handful of automakers make a topless vehicle and none are "as big as a whale" like a Chrysler Newport or Chevrolet Impala that comfortably hold six adults and were ubiquitous on American roads back in the day. It seemed every show I watched as a kid featured a convertible in a supporting role. Who can forget Mike Brady's Plymouth Barracuda in the Brady Bunch, the Pontiac GTO from I Dream of Jeannie and, of course, the Batmobile?

Safety concerns in the mid-70s led to the discontinuation of nearly all convertibles but they came back into favor in the 1980s with cars like the Ford Mustang, Chevy Cavalier and Chrysler LeBaron, and a model that I bought that remains one of my favorite cars.

My first convertible I bought in the mid-1980s was a 1963 Chevy Nova; the official color was cardinal red. It was more of a collector car but I used it as a

daily driver. I wanted something newer and safer for everyday use. When I was working as a news anchor in Rockford, Ill., I bought a 1988 Pontiac Sunbird GT convertible. I loved that car. It took me nearly 160,000 miles to and from TV jobs in Illinois, Michigan and Connecticut. For an inexpensive, four-cylinder engine, that Sunbird never gave me any problems. After seven years, I traded it in for the worst car I ever owned: a Saab 900 convertible. I loved the eucalyptus green color, but the real green in this story was the money it sucked out of me. It was more expensive than my Pontiac, but far less reliable and super costly to fix the many repairs that came after the warranty ran out.

I traded that in without any hesitation or regret. I've owned a few convertibles since then, including a 1965 Electra 225 I bought with Kara from a couple

in Bristol. We had that for about 10 years. It was a staple in the Hartford St. Patrick's Day parade (festooned with Irish adornments), and going to the beach and ice cream trips with the kids. We sold it with the help of Wayne Carini in Portland, who knows a thing or two about convertibles. He is the custodian of one of the most recognizable convertibles: the 1949 Buick Roadmaster featured in the Tom Cruise Dustin Hoffman classic, "Rain Man."

Carini doesn't own it but he takes care of it for owner Barry Levinson and uses it to help promote autism awareness. This cruiser is massive and sitting in it is quite the experience. I was excited for the opportunity. I asked Carini about the history of convertibles. He pointed out that the first cars ever made were topless, "open carriages" if you will. He said convertibles really became popular when





servicemen returned home from World War II, some with European ragtops, and the demand grew. By the 1960s, nearly every American automaker offered at least one convertible.

"Convertibles give a feeling of freedom. It is a great feeling to have the sun on your face and the wind in your air," Carini told me, and described the Roadmaster, "like a living room on wheels." Convertibles are good for the senses, Carini added; with the top down, he can smell the flowers, trees, and even the fresh smell of a lake or stream.

After the Saab, I owned a BMW convertible for a few years, immortalized in our wedding album. My most recent convertible is a Buick Cascada, which is an underappreciated, fun machine. It has lots of safety features and comfortably seats four. My daughter

loves to borrow it. Low sales led General Motors to discontinue it, but the Cascada was not alone. Many automakers no longer make convertibles, saying the demand has faded.

I think the tide may be turning though and there is a market for more convertibles. However, automakers need to look at the past for inspiration and make these cars fun. A modern-day convertible needs a comfortable backseat, eye-catching design and fun colors. Names are important, too. Buick Riviera or Chevrolet Impala. How about a new Chrysler Imperial? The last batch of Chrysler convertibles, called the 200, were sold in hues of gray, brown and white. No wonder why no one bought them; they vanished a decade ago. If Cadillac and Lincoln want to compete with BMW and Mercedes, then produce a convertible to go head-to-

head with theirs. I asked Chat GPT to make a 2025 version of my now 60-year-old Electra...and wow!

If you have a convertible, get out there and let the Connecticut summer wind blow through your hair. Take a drive to Skipper's in Niantic or watch the sunset at Sherwood Island State Park. Hit up the drive-in theaters in Mansfield, Southington or Barkhamsted. Now is the time! Remember, it will be snowing before we know it! ❄️

*Dennis House has been covering the news in Connecticut for over 30 years. He can be seen weeknights at 6 and 11 p.m. on WTNH and at 10 p.m. on WCTX. He also hosts This Week in Connecticut Sunday mornings at 10 a.m.*





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## ALBERTUS MAGNUS COLLEGE



# Building Resilient Businesses: Strategies for Success

*By Rich Balestracci, SVP, Commercial Lending Department Manager at Chelsea Groton Bank*

**I**n today's economic landscape, the ability to adapt and thrive amidst uncertainty is what sets successful businesses apart. Imagine navigating through supply chain disruptions, economic fluctuations and the rapid evolution of digital technologies, all while maintaining a competitive edge. This is the reality for many business owners today.

Over the past five years, businesses have not only faced supply chain disruptions, economic unpredictability, a rise of cybersecurity threats and the complexities of digital transformation, but add to that the pressures of wage inflation, talent acquisition, and the balancing act between remote and in-office work. It's clear that resilience is no longer just an option but a necessity.

To build this resilience, businesses must focus on talent engagement as well as these critical areas: optimizing their balance sheet, evaluating their income statement and managing risk. By honing in on these aspects, you can not only weather the storms of

uncertainty but also seize new opportunities for growth and innovation.

## **Optimizing Your Balance Sheet**

To optimize your balance sheet, working capital can be improved by reducing the cash conversion cycle. This includes reviewing if you currently have the appropriate levels of inventory, or if you could scale back so you can be more flexible about where money is allocated.

Improving payment collection practices and negotiating more favorable terms with suppliers will also help reduce cash strain.

Additionally, the business's overall capital structure should be reviewed and positioned to manage through supply chain issues, shifts in demand or even to take advantage of potential new opportunities. Diversifying funding sources and managing debt effectively can provide a greater degree of flexibility to respond to changing business needs.



Lastly, you want to ensure you are adequately protecting assets, including physical assets, staying mindful of fraud mitigation, and evaluating whether business interruption insurance or credit insurance can help protect you from external events.

### Evaluating Your Income Statement

On the income statement, focus on the factors that most impact revenues and expenses. Understanding the price elasticity of demand for your product or service is essential, as it helps you gauge how sensitive your business is to changes in price and quantity. Questions to consider include:

- How would increasing production impact pricing for your product or service?
- Or, conversely, how would a drop in demand for your product or service impact your pricing?

Another key consideration should be understanding your operating leverage. Operating leverage is essentially the correlation between changes in revenue and the corresponding impact on net income, with the impact being driven by the level of fixed and variable costs. Higher fixed costs result in pressure to achieve a higher break-even revenue, but greater profit margins after the break-even point. Lower fixed costs and higher variable costs result in more steady net income changes, reducing risks related to sudden revenue swings. Businesses should seek out operational efficiencies and find the optimal balance between fixed and variable costs to enhance profitability and provide opportunities to scale effectively.

### Managing Risk

Risk management is another critical area. Consider diversifying supply chains to reduce dependency on any single source and exploring digital solutions to help streamline operations and improve efficiency. Additionally, businesses should consider the potential impact of tariffs, the geopolitical climate and the development of artificial intelligence on their operations.

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As cybersecurity threats continue to be on the rise, ensure there are security measures in place to protect sensitive data. For example, employees should be educated on how to spot counterfeit checks and instructed not to accept changes in wiring instructions over email. Instead, they should independently confirm wiring instructions in person or by phone with a trusted and verified phone number.

It's important for businesses to set up online and mobile banking alerts and push notifications for high-risk or high-value transactions as an additional safety measure. Bank accounts should be monitored daily so fraud can be identified quickly, providing business owners with the highest probability of recovery.

**Navigating market uncertainty requires a proactive and strategic approach.** These considerations should always be tied into a thoughtful business plan that is revisited and updated as a working document. By focusing on optimizing your balance sheet, analyzing your income statement and cost structure, and managing risks effectively, businesses can build resilience and adaptability.





**BLAST FROM  
THE PAST**

**ESSAY**

*From Seasons Magazines  
Summer 2010 Issue*



Illustration by Paul Stoddard



# Flip-Flop

A father ponders the deeper implications of summer's favorite accessory.

As the days get longer, the weather becomes warmer, and spring turns into summer, we are all united in remembering the poor conditions suffered by the Union Army's Seventh Regiment Volunteers marching through the mud on Third Avenue in New York City during the Civil War. Their uniforms had arrived without buttons, their only muskets had been purchased by the officers themselves. "The men [are] very poorly dressed, in many cases with flip-flap shoes," noted an 1861 letter to *The New York Times*. "[They] have not yet been supplied with shoes, and still march flip-flop. Why? Whose business is all this, and why is it so carelessly attended to?"

While this is apparently the first time that the existence of flip-flops was chronicled in the Americas, it does seem unlikely that the author intended to state that a battalion of bearded Union Soldiers would be marching to war wearing bright orange and pink slabs of plastic held to their feet by glittery butterfly thongs. So, I don't think it counts.

No, as far as I'm concerned, flip-flops didn't exist until the summer of 1978, when I first became aware of them. I tried to like them. Heck, I wanted to love them—I swear! Seriously, I had the coolest Star Blazer flip-flops ever. They had the shape of the Yamato on the bottom, so when you walked around in the mud or snow, you left awesome spaceship-shaped imprints everywhere. But I just could not get past the fact that the only thing holding them to my foot was a cheap piece of slippery plastic with a razor-sharp seam cutting into the tender crevice between my two favorite toes.

Also, I still have a scar on my leg from when I tried to wear flip-flops and ride a bike at the same time and ended up riding the gravel slide to the bottom of the hill.

So, to summarize the discussion so far—flip-flops are ugly, flimsy, architecturally suspect, and they caused this wearer to trip and fall on his face right in front of Shelly, his third-grade crush. So, since I don't like them, what can possibly account for their mysterious popularity?

Personally, I blame my daughter. The Girl is four years old and, if I may paraphrase Professor Severus Snape, she has embraced the subtle science and exacting art of the flip-flop.

Interesting piece of literary trivia that I just this moment made up: JK Rowling originally intended Snape to be an enthusiastic collector of flip-flops. According to my overactive imagination, that never made it into publication because her

publishers were concerned about her enthusiastic overuse of the word "thong."

But, back to my daughter's Olympic ability to flip-flop. She is constantly changing her mind; she seems utterly unable to state what she wants on the first try. This is in complete contrast to my six-year-old son, who is incapable of changing his mind, even if his original intention is clearly and hilariously no longer what he actually wants. He is the exact opposite of a flip-flop—he is a Timberland workboot.

Upon asking the Boy what he wants to drink, he might respond "orange juice," despite the fact that he actually hates the stuff. If I ask him "Do you mean apple juice?" he will somehow manage to become upset, even though that is, in fact, what he meant to say. He will drink the entire cup of the offending orange pulp, grimacing the entire time, just to prove that he wasn't wrong.

The Girl, on the other hand, will flip-flop three times before she finishes the sentence: "I want . . . apple jui—no, water! I want strawberry milk!" By the time I get the strawberry milk to her, she will be convinced that she always wanted grape juice.

Interesting piece of literary trivia that I just this moment made up: JK Rowling originally intended Snape to be an enthusiastic collector of flip-flops. According to my overactive imagination, that never made it into publication because her publishers were concerned about her enthusiastic overuse of the word 'thong.'

I have tried to work with her on this. I ask for confirmation three or four times before I get the beverage: "Are you sure that you want milk? Really? Milk? Are you absolutely sure that's what you really want?" It's all pointless effort on my part, of course. I would get better results if I just closed my eyes, opened the fridge, reached in, and gave her the first thing I grabbed. I would do that, too, except I know that it would result in a statement something like this: "No, daddy! Not the kosher dill pickle juice, the gherkin pickle juice!"

I suspect that something like this was responsible for the Seventh Regiment Volunteers trudging off to battle in flip-

flops. I would not be surprised if every single one of them had a four-year-old daughter whose constant mood swings eventually made them throw on the first footwear they could find and volunteer for any job that would take them away for a few months.

So, why? Why does she so constantly flip-flop on everything? Why does she attend so carelessly to all this business? I've come up with three major hypotheses:

- She doesn't really care one way or the other,
- She doesn't know what she wants, or
- She just likes to hear me grind my teeth.

None of these quite fits, though. She does care deeply—if she doesn't get what she thinks she wants, she stomps off to her room, slams the door, throws herself face down on the bed, and will not acknowledge my presence for a length of time that is directly proportional to the seriousness of my offense. (Remember—

she is four, not 14. I fully intend to grow a beard and join the Union Army once she actually hits puberty.)

The second one can't be true either. The Girl has a strident opinion about everything, and she is constantly broadcasting those opinions, from the moment she wakes up until 15 minutes after she's fallen asleep. "Daddy, you are a boy and I am a girl. Michael is my friend. Mommy has Girl Power. Look! There is my little ant friend. I like little baby ants but I hate big daddy ants. I like to squish them, but don't hurt my little ant friend!"

The third option does seem the most likely, but my dentist gave me a special mouth guard for use when dealing with the Girl, so she no longer has to shout over the sound of cracking enamel.

My wife has pointed out a fourth possibility: the situation may have changed in ways too subtle for my masculine senses to perceive. For instance, yesterday, the Girl authorized the application of her light-up sneakers, but

became distraught when I tried to put them on her: they were not the flip-flops she wanted. My wife pointed out that while I went to get the shoes, the Girl changed from pants and shirt into a dress, and that therefore the footwear change was "perfectly reasonable." I do not consider this a credible theory. I think it's more likely that they are gang-ing up on me.

That doesn't leave much to work with, does it? But I will find out whose business this is, and why it is being so carelessly attended to. If I can crack the Girl Code, that will surely give me some insight into the Wife Cipher, and if I can solve that one, then the International Council of Guys will surely give me their greatest honor: Official Flip-flop Cobbler at their Annual Civil War Reenactment.

*A software tester, professionally-trained chef Shawn Zimmerman has traveled extensively in Europe and India. He enjoys climbing, mountain biking and computer games.*





# The Guardians of the Farm

By **RENEE DININO** / *Photography by* **DAVID BUCK**

**G**uardians Farm, a first-generation dairy farm located in picturesque Southbury, Conn., is veteran-owned and run by married couple David Buck and Tamra French. Buck is a Maritime Enforcement Specialist First Class U.S. Coast Guard (1998-2020) and former K9 officer and officer with local police departments. French is a current K9 officer (you can follow her adventures with K9 TJ on social media with Easton Police Department). That's where the two met and knew they had more in common than just being of service to their communities. Their love for each other grew and so did their desire to create a sustainable working farm!

They started with three chickens in 2013 and added a couple goats in 2014. "We started making soap for ourselves in 2015," says French. Their dream began to grow year after year, even during the pandemic.

"The farm stand started in 2020 due to the pandemic canceling all the fairs and festivals we normally attended. We originally had plans of starting a dairy for the goats but that switched to a dairy for the cows when we added cattle to the farm in 2020," they explain.



The name holds a special meaning for this couple too. "There is a poem called, 'Guardians of the Night,' and when we started farming, we were both police K9 handlers. The poem highlights the bond between handlers and their dogs. Our partners Anouke and Chase protected us at work and protected the farm. In honor of them, we named the farm after them," says Buck.

Owning and running a farm is not an easy lifestyle for everyone, especially adding their jobs into the

mix and having a family. It's 24/7; there are no days off and the animals don't care what holiday it is or if it's the weekend. Things still need to get done.

"We are a team committed to the same goal and same dream of growing the farm. Right now, Tamra works full time, so we have to work around that schedule," explains Buck. "As I work part time, I can adjust my schedule about the farm. The days are long, and there is not a lot of down time."

"Running a farm, especially raising livestock is 24/7 all year round. We also must milk goats and cows twice a day every 12 hours no matter how busy the schedule is. That is combined with the farm stand and our farm events!" adds French.

The business also includes keeping up with all the marketing, social media, emails and more. There is always something that needs to be attended to on a farm, whether it is related to the land or animals. Who knows what each day can bring.

"Farming is always at the mercy of Mother Nature. We have dealt with hurricanes, blizzards and historic flooding in 2024 that hit us with 11 inches of rain in 8 hours. In addition to the weather, the economy affects

people's shopping habits. We have also applied for multiple grants from nonprofits and the State of Connecticut and have only received a couple to help us financially," state both Buck and French.

One program that has opened new doors is CT Veteran Grown. It has helped with networking with other veteran farmers and also brought some programs available to veteran farmers to their attention.

Farm life can be gratifying, but it does come with blood, sweat and

tears. It can be as rewarding a life as heartbreaking.

"When raising livestock, there are times when animals get sick or pass away despite all of your best efforts," they mention. "One of our mules, Honor, we lost to cancer in July 2024 after only having him for a year and a half after rescuing him from a kill pen in Pennsylvania. We are thankful that we were able to give him a year and a half of love and peace. We lost our cow Lucy to cancer. We have watched some of our goats and cows

carry their babies to term but, for reasons beyond our control, they did not survive the birthing. One of our Jersey heifers, Trinity, needed an emergency C-section to save her. After the C-section was done, Trinity made an amazing recovery and helped us start our dairy with her delicious milk. Unfortunately, though, the heifer she carried was too large for her to give birth to naturally and we lost her."

Then there are the times it makes it all worthwhile.

"One of the most heartwarming







and triumphant events was watching Tamra bring a baby goat to life. It was born not breathing and she was determined to save it,” says Buck. “She performed CPR until we heard the baby making noise and breathing on her own. Talladega has grown into a great mom of her own and an important member of our herd. One of our rescue mules, Patriot, came to us with horrendous hoof problems. Many people told us that his hooves were too far gone, and we may not be able to fix him. Over the course of months and working daily to treat him, he began to trust us and was eventually completely healed.”

This power farm couple is also all about giving back to their community and youth.

“We started our own ‘adopt a calf’ program in 2024 to assist in connecting with the local school to build a relationship. We started our own 4-H dairy cattle club called the Dirt Road Dairy Farmers in 2022. We teach our members all about farming and dairy cows. We are also a resource for the local school and agricultural schools for experience opportunities and field trips. We have had several homeschooled youths volunteer at the farm. We also host calf cuddle sessions that have proved to be extremely popular.”

Would they change anything about



their lives? “I would have to say no. We are both firm believers that everything happens for a reason. We love having the farm and providing our community with farm fresh products and a wonderful experience when they visit,” concludes Buck. 🐄

*Check out Guardian’s Farm on social media and [guardiansfarmdairy.com](https://guardiansfarmdairy.com).*

*Renee DiNino is host of Hello Connecticut on WFSB Channel and The WAX, Amazing K9 Duo’s and Lost & Pound. Follow her on IG and FB @reneedinino.*

## WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

# (Un)Settled Art Exhibition Moves Beyond Classic Landscapes



Featured artworks: Tom McGrath (b.1978), *Untitled (Yellow Grid)*, 2007, oil on canvas; Jane Peiser (1933-2022), *Untitled*, 1974, Ceramic, millefiori salt glaze; William Christenberry (1936-2016), *Rear of the House with Flowers*, Near Morgan Springs, Alabama, 1984, Ektacolor-74 print on paper.



Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (WAMA) staff meet with the director of the Columbia Museum of Art. Left to right: Laura Leonard, Art Bridges' project coordinator and curatorial researcher, WAMA; Della Watkins, director, CMA; Erin Monroe, Kriebel curator of American paintings and sculpture, WAMA; Jama Holchin, digital interpretation specialist, WAMA.

What if we look beyond the conventional landscape art of mountains, fields and waters? A multi-museum collaboration led by Connecticut's Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford is trying to do just that with their (Un)Settled touring exhibition. Supported and funded by Art Bridges Foundation, it is part of a series of American art exhibitions exploring new ways of interpreting art and the American experiences through dynamic exhibitions and complimentary public programs. The multi-year Art Bridges Cohort Program partnership, which brings together a network of curators and educators with diverse communal and cultural experiences, includes South Carolina's Columbia Museum of Art, and Alabama's Mobile Museum of Art and Montgomery Museum of Art.

The term "unsettled" refers to concepts—such as people, places, feelings and ideas—that are changing or unresolved, explain Erin Monroe, Kriebel curator of American paintings and sculpture,

and Laura Leonard, Art Bridges' project coordinator and curatorial researcher. By including historic up to contemporary works of art, earth-focused pieces (wood, clay and more), abstract and multimedia art, and photography, the cohort is broadening the communal understanding of landscape art to offer another version of America's history with pieces from the four museums' collections.

"It exemplifies how different museums reflect their regional landscapes—such as the bayou for Mobile and sharecropping homes for Central Alabama," says Leonard. "By expanding the idea of the American landscape, it reflects how vast and diverse the American landscape is. The exhibit also shows how artists are 'on the move' and the changes in the where and when landscape paintings were happening."

"The exhibition also invites more conversations about who hasn't been part of the American landscape education and concepts. It makes room for more perspectives and shows relationships with community and place," adds Monroe.

In addition to landscape paintings, the

exhibition includes distinctive earthenware pottery by Catawba artists in South Carolina, twine baskets from Native communities, blown glass pieces, ceramic and millefiori salt glaze sculptures, painted wood pieces, and more.

All exhibition text and materials are also translated into Spanish. There are interactive activities to create a landscape and story, a family exhibit guide and more in-depth guides. The public can also access a podcast created in conjunction with the tour, which can be found on Wadsworth's (Un)Settled exhibit page.

Art brings up emotions and memories. Drawing from four museum collections, this partnership connects communities to these regional experiences and stories of others through a varied interpretation of American art. ■

*Find out more at [thewadsworth.org/explore/upcoming-exhibitions/unsettled](http://thewadsworth.org/explore/upcoming-exhibitions/unsettled). The exhibition will be at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art from June 12 to September 14, 2025.*





WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

# FIRST THURSDAYS

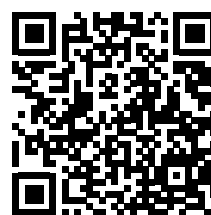


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# AT HOME

with KERRI-LEE

By Kerri-Lee Mayland

Summer has officially unpacked her bags and made herself at home. With her warm, sunlit days comes that familiar itch to finally tackle that project you've been dreaming about all winter. Maybe it's a kitchen refresh, a bathroom overhaul or even a backyard transformation worthy of a magazine cover. This is the season when ideas bloom, Pinterest boards overload and you start asking friends for contractor recommendations over iced coffee.

But before you dive in headfirst with sledgehammers swinging and paint swatches flying, we need to get strategic. A dream remodel can quickly turn into a budget-blowing, tear-inducing disaster if the right team isn't in place from the very start. So, let's talk about what to include in your renovation checklist to make sure your summer project ends with happy sighs—not horror stories.

## 1. Build Your Dream Team Thoughtfully

Start by thinking of your project as a mini production; you're the director, and you need a cast and crew that can bring your vision to life. This often includes:

- a general contractor (your go-to for permits, schedules and overseeing trades);
- an interior designer to help refine your vision, source finishes and keep the style cohesive; and



- specialty pros (electricians, plumbers and/or landscapers, depending on the scope) who are crucial to the safety and success of the final result.

Ask friends and neighbors for referrals. Don't be afraid to interview multiple people for each role. Take it from

me, a longtime journalist, the interviews are key. Think of it like dating—you want the best fit, not just the first swipe right.

## 2. Vet Like a Pro

- Check licenses and insurance. Make sure your contractor is licensed in your state and carries both liability and workers' compensation insurance.
- Ask for a portfolio or project photos. This isn't just about aesthetics; it shows consistency and professionalism.
- Read reviews and call references. Ask past clients about timeliness, budget accuracy and how issues were handled.
- Trust your gut. If something feels off in your initial meeting—like they're dodging questions or rushing you—listen to that little voice.

## 3. Get Everything in Writing

The estimate is just the beginning. Your contract should include:

- a detailed scope of work,
- a clear payment schedule (never pay in full upfront),
- start and end dates, and
- a clause for how unexpected costs or delays will be handled.

Having this clarity upfront helps avoid confusion—and keeps everyone accountable.

## 4. Budget for Those Inevitable 'Uh-Oh' Moments

Even the most well-planned





projects can run into surprises. Hidden water damage, back-ordered materials or even zoning hiccups can add time and cost. Build a 15-20% contingency into your budget to cushion the blow. You'll thank yourself later, I promise.

### 5. Keep the Lines of Communication Open

This next part is important. Set regular check-ins with your contractor or designer; you all need to stay on the same page. Use a shared document or app (like Trello or Houzz) to track decisions and tasks. Misunderstandings are the root of most renovation woes, and communication is the cure.

### What to Do if Things Go Sideways

Ugh! Despite your best efforts, snafus can start to happen. Breathe, and use these tips to navigate rough patch.

- Stay calm and professional. Take a pause before reacting and approach the issue with a solution-oriented mindset.
- Document everything. Keep notes and take photos if something goes wrong.
- Speak up early. Don't wait until

the end of the project to raise concerns.

- Bring in a mediator if needed. Sometimes, a neutral third party—like a designer or a construction manager—can help smooth over communication between homeowner and contractor.
- Know when to walk away. If a contractor is consistently unprofessional, failing to show up or not honoring your agreement, consult your contract and seek legal advice if necessary. Don't let it snowball or you may

be left with gaping holes in your home indefinitely.

### A Final Thought

The truth is a renovation is more than a project; it's a personal investment in your space and your daily life. With the right planning, the right people and a little patience, your summer remodel can become the warm-weather success story you'll be proud to show off to the neighbors at your next backyard BBQ.

And remember—whether it's choosing the perfect tile or just making sure your contractor consistently returns your calls—it's all about balance and making sure the dust doesn't cover up the light at the end of the tunnel. You've got this! Now go make some magic! ✨

Here's to a fresh and fabulous summer!

*Kerri-Ann*  
KK



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SEASONS  
MEDIA

Photo by Lam Nguyen Photography

# NEWS 8

## CONNECTICUT'S NEWS LEADER







# Over 50, Underestimated: The Grandfluencers Redefining Age on Social Media

By VANESSA WOJTUSIAK

**I**n a world where scrolling endlessly through Gen Z dances, GRWM (“get ready with me”) videos and product hauls have become second nature across social media, a bold and inspiring shift is quietly taking over our feeds.

Meet the “grandfluencers,” a growing wave of creators over the age of 50 who are showing that personal style, life advice and internet fame are not reserved for the young. Right here in Connecticut, three remarkable women are at the forefront of this movement, offering not just content but connection. Their stories are as unique as their voices, yet together they illustrate a shared truth: social media isn’t only for kids.

Through laughter, fashion, food and fearless self-expression, Grandma Droniak, Debbie Allen Wright and Robin Selden have built digital platforms that



Lillian Droniak

entertain, empower and inspire audiences of all ages. In doing so, they’ve shattered outdated ideas about aging and proven that personality is the most powerful filter of all.

At 95 years old, Lillian Droniak, better known as Grandma Droniak, has captivated nearly 15 million TikTok followers with her signature blend of blunt wisdom and bold lipstick. A lifelong Stratford, Conn. resident, Droniak spent her early years working on assembly lines at GE and Sikorsky Aircraft before stepping into the spotlight as a viral sensation. Her videos, which began as a playful project with her grandson to capture her magnetic personality, have since blossomed into a heartfelt and hilarious digital diary. Known for her no-nonsense “funeral rules,” candid dating advice and an uncanny ability to make viewers feel like part of her family, Grandma Droniak has become a beloved figure



At 95 years old, Lillian Droniak captures her social media followers with videos on her takes on dating, getting older and more hilariousness.



across generations. “People just want someone to tell it like it is,” she says. “I remind them that they’re never too old to start something new.”

Beneath her signature fashion and dry wit lies a woman who has witnessed nearly a century of change and chosen to share her voice with unfiltered honesty and unapologetic flair. “I think me being a celebrity online helps people realize your dreams can come true late in life. It’s never too late to become famous,” she says with the matter-of-fact charm only a lifetime of experience can bring.

Though she never set out to become an internet icon, Grandma Droniak’s collaboration with her grandson Kevin sparked a digital legacy that continues to grow. While many of her clips riff on trending sounds or deliver sharp dating commentary, the heart of her content is rooted in personal truth. “I speak from my heart and my own life, and I find everything funny, so I just try and make light of life.” It’s this blend of humor and honesty that has endeared her to a diverse fan base, many of whom reach out calling her their “internet grandma.” “It makes me very happy. I love my fans like

my own grandchildren,” she shares warmly.

Despite her celebrity, Droniak remains refreshingly grounded. She films only when the mood strikes, enjoys online shopping and still holds her own at bingo night. Her personal style, which she describes as “classy, but fun,” reflects a confidence that has only grown brighter with age, marked by vibrant colors and daring



Debbie Allen Wright

choices. When asked what she hopes younger influencers can learn from older creators like herself, her answer is simple and powerful: “To slay every day and not worry about anyone but yourself.”

Though she jokes about death and dating, Grandma Droniak’s content carries deeper messages of resilience, joy and embracing every chapter of life fully. “Life is not as short as people say. It’s long, so make the most of it.” And for anyone thinking about starting their own social media journey? “It might take time to get fans but don’t give up and have fun.”

Debbie Allen Wright, age 58, brings style, soul and genuine warmth to the digital world with thousands of followers on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. As a fashion expert and lifestyle consultant, her vibrant content uplifts local designers, champions personal expression, and encourages women to see themselves with both grace and boldness. What began as simple “closet reinvention” projects—turning existing wardrobes into fresh, inspired outfits—quickly grew into a personal mission to empower others. Through her joyful reels and authentic storytelling, Wright has sparked confidence in first-time models, transformed strangers into friends, and opened doors to teaching roles and fashion show invitations; they are proof of the real connections social media can foster. “I thrive on turning online community into real-life connection,” she says. “People are craving authenticity. That’s what they remember. That’s what sticks.”

Wright approaches social media not with rigid strategy but with a commitment to being true to herself. She celebrates creativity, confidence and the beauty of imperfection. “No one wants to see perfection or something that’s too polished on social media. It’s important to stay true to yourself,” she explains. Her journey began simply with a desire to share her passion for fashion, visiting clients’ homes, creating new outfits from what they already owned, and gradually building a community around accessible style and self-expression.





Credit: @LugLife and QVC



Robin Selden (Credit: Dennis Kwan Photography)

Though she may shy away from the label “influencer,” Wright’s impact speaks for itself. Her work has led to TV appearances on WFSB’s ‘Great Day Connecticut’, teaching opportunities and spontaneous collaborations, like a fashion show invitation that landed in her DMs recently. Proudly rooted in Connecticut, Wright’s content often reflects the region’s style and spirit, showcasing local designers and entrepreneurs and using her platform to uplift her community. “My content reflects Connecticut well. Fashion is part of the culture. I help spread awareness and bring this content to the forefront,” she shares.

Over time, Wright has shed the pressure to be scripted or polished, embracing a freer, more playful approach. Her advice to others? “Don’t take down posts just because they didn’t get enough likes. That’s not reflective of the authentic you.” Her biggest lesson: post with purpose but don’t lose yourself in the scroll. “In the earlier days, I was way more scripted. Now, I just want to be quirky and silly and let people see the real me.” For Wright, this journey isn’t about chasing trends; it’s about building genuine connection, showing up authentically and proving that confidence is always in style.

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Then there's Robin Selden, age 59, the celebrated executive chef and managing partner of Marcia Selden Catering with nearly 15,000 Instagram followers and thousands more in Facebook. The kitchen is her stage and her life is a vibrant celebration of joy and creativity. Selden didn't set out to be an influencer. She simply shares the moments that make her smile: dazzling desserts, elegant tablescapes, and the lively energy of running a woman-led and family-owned business in Stamford. Her Instagram feed isn't about chasing clout; it's curated with heart. Selden invites followers into the beautiful chaos of her daily life. "I'm a woman in my fifties with the energy of someone who just landed their dream job," she says. "Aging isn't something to hide. It's something to celebrate." She shares stories that sparkle with humor and heart, whether about a perfectly plated meal or a follower finding courage to chase their own passion.

Chef, entrepreneur, mom and creative force, Selden's Instagram is a masterclass in living fully and unapologetically. Her social media journey began not as a calculated business move but as a way to showcase the excitement and beauty of her work. From behind-the-scenes moments at spectacular events to candid family snapshots, her posts offer an honest, often hilarious and always heartfelt glimpse into her world. "I post what makes me smile or say, 'OMG, people have to see this,'" she explains.

Her digital presence has opened exciting doors; from Food Network collaborations to new client connections sparked by a single post. However, the real reward lies in the messages from followers who feel seen and inspired. "Someone once told me, 'I don't know you, but I feel like we'd be great friends.' That kind of connection is why I share what I share," Selden recalls.

Facing skepticism as a woman leading in both culinary and social media spheres, Selden meets



Marcia Selden Catering is a family-run catering company run by the Seldens: Marcia (middle), her daughter Robin (right) and her son Jeffrey (left). (Credit: Alexandra Szebenyik / The Sandra Effect)

challenges with humor, resilience and authenticity. "Don't chase trends; chase what lights you up. People connect with passion and honesty, not perfection." Her legacy, she hopes, will be one of joy, generosity and beautifully lived moments. "I want people to remember that I made things beautiful, made them feel something and made them hungry for more than just food—hungry for connection, celebration and a life well-lived."

Through it all, what unites these "grandfluencers" is not just their age but their intention. Their feeds aren't aspirational in the traditional sense; they're inspiring because they are real. They share what makes

them laugh, what makes them cry, and what fills their days and their dreams. And their fans respond with gratitude, admiration and joy. More than anything, they are proof that influence is not about followers or filters.

Because, if you ask them, the secret to staying young might just be this: keep showing up as yourself. With a wink. With a laugh. With fabulous shoes. And maybe a dance in the kitchen while you're at it. 🍷

*Vanessa Wojtusiak is a freelance journalist with more than 20 years of experience in media and marketing. She lives in West Hartford.*

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*Billy Matthews: Manager (left) Christopher O'Flaherty, Owner (right)*

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# Hospital for Special Care's Ivan Lendl Adaptive Sports Camp

**CELEBRATING 35 YEARS OF PIONEERING INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBLE FITNESS**

By ARIANA RAWLS FINE

Attending a summer camp is a rite of passage for many youth in New England and beyond. But finding the right fit becomes much harder when you have a disability. Janeace Slifka, founder of Hospital for Special Care's (HFSC) Ivan Lendl Adaptive Sports Camp, was looking for inclusive camps over 30 years ago for her son, who was born with spina bifida. She found few options for youth living with neuromuscular disorders and in wheelchairs, especially on a local level.

Through a connection between her son, Jonathan Slifka, and Ivan Lendl through the March of Dimes, the Czech-American former professional tennis player and coach partnered with the Slifkas to create Ivan Lendl Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp. The safe recreational and competitive sports camp was the first of its kind in the northeast 35 years ago. After fundraising for a year, the first camp was held with the support of National Foundation for Wheelchair Tennis. Starting with 26 children in 1991, the camp joined forces with HFSC in 1996.

From the beginning, the camp's goal and growth prioritized inclusion and accessibility, including the more recent expansion to launch a program for youth with autism spectrum disorder



Tennis star Ivan Lendl with Adaptive Sports Camp founder, Janeace Slifka, and her son, Jonathan Slifka, chair of the Hospital for Special Care Ivan Lendl Golf Classic. (Credit: Hospital for Special Care)

(ASD). The organization brought in 40 primarily adaptive athletes and five neurodiverse athletes with ASD last year from all over New England. The goal is 75 for 2025's camp, held the week of July 28 in West Hartford at

University of Saint Joseph.

For one week each summer, youths living with disabilities participate at their ability level at Ivan Lendl Adaptive Sports Camp, free of charge and supported by the community. It is a chance for them to be involved, respected, challenged and embraced for where they are and their abilities. Children with physical disabilities have opportunities to participate in sport-specific activities with the adaptive sports track while the neurodiverse track offers a flexible environment to support children on the autism spectrum. Basketball, bocchia, table tennis, creative arts and expression, swimming, track and field, yoga, power soccer, racing, and tennis are some of the activities offered at the camp. Trained professionals and experienced adaptive athletes coach sports skill training and development. In addition, the camp offers specialized and adaptive sports equipment. Beyond camp, adaptive sports and recreational activities are offered year-round.

Aware that individuals living with disabilities face a higher risk for diabetes, hypertension and obesity in addition to mental health concerns (depression, anxiety and social isolation), the Slifkas focus on accessible fitness and relationship building at the camp. And they are





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Camp participant with autism spectrum disorder, hoola hooping with camp volunteers. (Credit: Hospital for Special Care)



Camp participant Emily Reid attempts to block a pass made by Delmace Mayo, a past participant and current counselor. (Credit: Hospital for Special Care)



succeeding. By creating a support network and a feeling of community, campers and their families return year after year. Some continue to return as volunteers, while others become advocates like Jonathan Slifka, who is now the chair of Hospital for Special Care's Ivan Lendl Golf Classic, raising funds and community support for the organization.

"I started off as one of the original campers. I was 14 when the camp started, then became a counselor in training and then a counselor," explains Jonathan Slifka. "I did the full spectrum of camp life. I was not a world-class athlete but an example of what it is to live in the real-world with a disability. I am married, have a child and am gainfully employed. For kids to have these kinds of examples who they can stay in touch with throughout the years as mentors, teachers and friends with them and their families is a tremendous benefit for them."

"The kids' parents wanted more for



Celebrity Emcee, Bob Maxon, played with Joe Kilmas and Joe Lawson from Middletown Toyota, and John Votto, past HFSC president and CEO. (Credit: Hospital for Special Care)

their kids, to be employed, to be part of society," Janeace Slifka gives more context. "In the 1990s, we couldn't find examples. We make it as normal as possible at camp; there is a lot of care for these kids. We show parents

that living life fully is possible. This is a real benefit of the camp, helping the campers with their self-esteem and future: to go and be independent and help themselves, have a quality of life, learn a skill, get educated, have goals.



Some of the Adaptive Sports Camps first participants attended the 30th Hospital for Special Care Ivan Lendl Golf Classic to share their experience at camp and how it impacted their lives. From left to right: Jonathan Slifka, Bobby Jenner, David Desmaris and Kara Dayton. (Credit: Hospital for Special Care)



Camp participant playing volleyball with Coach Paul Moran, paralympian. (Credit: Hospital for Special Care)

I can't tell you as a parent what it has done for our family. We wanted to show them that life is what you make it."

"Mom wanted to redefine what normal is," Jonathan Slifka concurs. "My disability did not affect me cognitively. That was part of what pushed me to be independent. Playing the comparative game of defining what is normal is a disservice to many with disabilities. I don't know anything different. Through the camps and the counselors, you learn to live the life that is possible for you."

Volunteers are the backbone of the camp, whether it is providing one-on-one support to a camper, helping with adaptive sports activities, handling logistics or other tasks. In 2025, the organization had over 30 volunteers at the camp. "It is important to know the kids are taught by wheelchair athletes," Janeace Slifka adds. "When we started,

they didn't have role models for these kids. Now we have some who have been Paralympians."

In order to continue to offer the camp at no cost to participants, the HFSC Ivan Lendl Golf Classic raises funds via sponsorship or individual registration as a golfer or reception guest. The annual golf tournament, which took place at TPC River Highlands in Cromwell, just celebrated its 30th year in May with the event attracting nearly 150 golfers, says Jonathan Slifka. The next tournament is set for May 4, 2026.

What does the future hold for the program and camp? "We will continue to offer camp for free. The hospital has a large autism program. We want to continue to grow the neurodiverse program in a safe way with counselors trained to be with kids with ASD," he continues. "Last year was the first year with the neurodiversity track with five

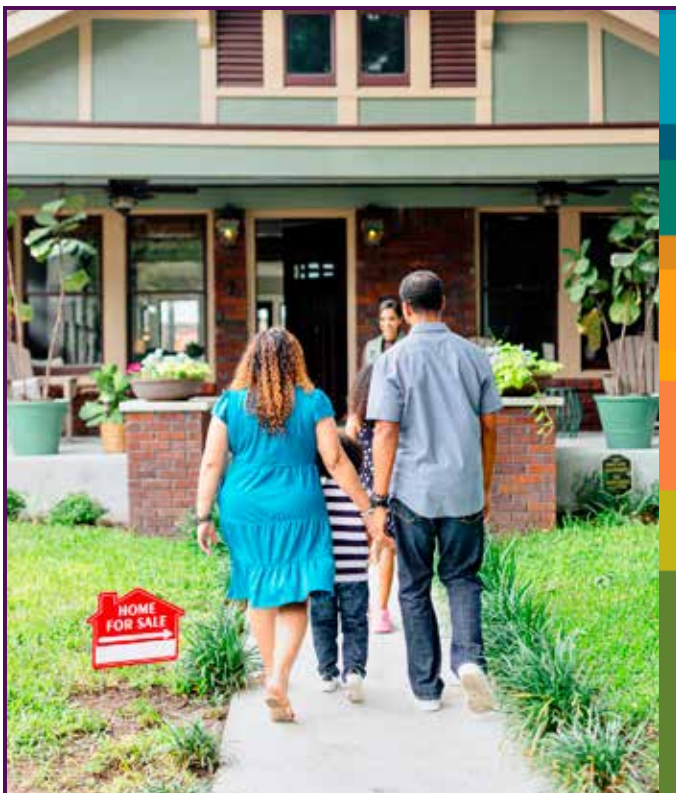
campers in 2024 and now we are at 25 in 2025."

The organization also partners with other organizations, including Connecticut Spokebenders Wheelchair Basketball Team, Miracle League of Connecticut and The Ryan Martin Foundation.

"Look how far we have all come with people with disabilities with accepting and making things accessible," Janeace Slifka concludes about the organization's mission of inclusion and accessibility. The camp has had a lasting community impact. "It is still not a perfect world but with this camp, people are more aware now." 📢

*Learn more about Ivan Lendl Adaptive Sports Camp at [hfsc.org/sports-and-fitness](https://hfsc.org/sports-and-fitness).*





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DELICIOUS

# Wing It This Summer

By AMY S. WHITE







**T**he global chicken wings market is currently valued at over a billion dollars, a far cry from the early 20th century, when wings were often used as scraps or even just thrown away in favor of meatier chicken breasts and thighs. The origin story of wings as we now know and love them started in New York in 1964, when the owner of Buffalo's Anchor Bar, Teressa Bellissimo, was in search of a late-night snack for her son. She deep-fried some chicken wings that she had put aside for making stock and tossed them in a homemade sauce made from hot sauce and butter. The rest, as they say, is history.

National Chicken Wing Day on July 29 celebrates the popularity of wings and brings attention to the role they play in American culture. Whether they're crispy, saucy or smoked to perfection, chicken wings have become a comfort food favorite as well as a must-have staple at food trucks, sports bars and other casual dining spots. There are even national chain restaurants dedicated to serving this now famous food. As demand for chicken wings has grown, so has the variety of methods for cooking them and flavors to add to them. The original Buffalo wing, with its spicy, buttery sauce, has given way to infinite creative, global flavors involving every herb, spice and condiment imaginable. Many restaurants are branching out beyond chicken wings as well. Turkey wings, which are larger and meatier than their chicken counterparts, and duck wings, which are a richer option with a unique flavor, are starting to grace menus across the nation. There are even health-conscious alternatives to chicken

wings, such as boneless wings (sometimes called chicken tenders) made from chicken breast meat, and plant-based wing substitutes made from cauliflower, soy or seitan.

There are also various wing cooking methods (see below). While cooking methods certainly bring different flavors and textures to wings, most people consider wings to be the perfect blank canvas to an infinite number of dry rub and sauce possibilities. Dry rubs are made from salts, sugars, herbs and spices, offering a burst of flavor in a less messy bite. Sauces involve using condiments like hot sauce or barbecue sauce as a base and then adding in other flavors in the form of fruit juices, alcohol or other flavoring ingredients. If there is a flavor combination out there, it begs to be on a chicken wing. Creative culinary minds are thinking up more and more outrageous ones every day. Whether the flavoring is a dry rub or sauce, it's best to toss hot, cooked wings well until they are thoroughly coated and then serve.

Keep reading to find out different ways to cook wings at home as well as over two dozen wings sauce and dry rub recipes to help "wing it" all summer long. Special thanks to Chef Ben Dubow, executive director of Forge City Works in Hartford (which runs the social enterprise restaurant Fire by Forge), who offered us several suggestions for different types of wing sauces and rubs. And another special thanks to Bob Sulick, owner of Mulberry Street Pizza in Manchester, who gave us the recipe for one of their famously unique wing sauces. 🍗







## **FAMOUSLY UNUSUAL PEANUT BUTTER GINGER WING SAUCE**

*Recipe courtesy of Bob Sulick, owner of Mulberry Street Pizza in Manchester*

- 1 cup peanut butter
- 1 cup sesame ginger salad dressing
- ½ cup lemonade
- 1 tablespoon hot sauce
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper



# How to Cook Wings

**T**here are many delicious ways to cook wings, each offering different textures and flavors. The instructions that follow are for typical chicken wings, but the same methods can be used to cook any variety of wing (turkey, duck, plant-based) with cooking times adjusted for the size and type of wing.

*Note: No matter the cooking method, the first step is to pat the wings dry with paper towels. This step is crucial for all cooking methods, as it helps ensure crispier wings. Also, it is fun to experiment with more than one cooking method. Many people swear by baking them until they are just cooked through, then frying them. Smoke then grill 'em. Grill then fry 'em. Bake then broil or airfry 'em. The goal is a crispy outside, juicy inside wing that will only get better with whatever flavor is added to them.*

**FRIED:** This is one of the most common methods, where wings are deep-fried until golden and crispy on the outside but with juicy tender meat inside.

Season the dry wings with salt, pepper, or any mix of herbs and spices. Coat them in seasoned

flour, breading (breadcrumbs or crushed corn flakes, for example), or cornstarch for extra crispiness. Alternatively, leave them plain.

Heat enough cooking oil in a pot, skillet or frying appliance to submerge the wings. Aim for a consistent 375°F.

Fry the wings by carefully lowering them into the hot oil using tongs or a slotted spoon. Don't overcrowd the pan, as this can cause the temperature of the oil to drop and make the wings soggy. Fry in batches instead, for 10-12 minutes each batch, depending on the size of the wings and desired crispiness. Make sure they cook all the way through, with an internal temperature of at least 165°F.

Drain the wings on paper towels to absorb excess oil.

Toss in sauce or a dry rub and serve while they're still hot.

For an even crispier texture, fry the wings once, let them rest a few minutes and then fry them again. Some places will even sauce them in between, which is known as "dirt" style.

**AIR-FRIED:** An air fryer cooks chicken wings with little to no oil,

using hot air circulation to create crispy skin. It's a healthier and faster alternative to deep-frying.

Season the dry wings with salt, pepper, or any mix of herbs and spices. Coat them in seasoned flour, breading (breadcrumbs or crushed corn flakes, for example) or cornstarch for extra crispiness. Alternatively, leave them plain.

Preheat the air fryer to 400°F.

Place the wings in a single layer in the fryer basket and air-fry the wings for 15-20 minutes, flipping halfway through. Make sure they cook all the way through, with an internal temperature of at least 165°F. Work in batches as needed.

Toss in sauce or a dry rub and serve while they're still hot.

**BAKED:** Baking chicken wings is a healthier alternative to frying while still achieving a crispy exterior. Baking also allows for easy flavor customization by tossing wings in a favorite sauce or seasonings before baking.

Season the dry wings with salt, pepper, or any mix of herbs and spices. Coat them in seasoned flour, breading (breadcrumbs or crushed corn flakes, for example) or cornstarch for extra crispiness. Alternatively, leave them plain.



Place wings in a single layer on a baking sheet fitted with wire rack which will allow for better air circulation.

Bake at 425°F for about 30 minutes, flipping halfway through, until they are golden brown and cooked through with an internal temperature of at least 165°F. For extra crispy skin, broil for the final 5 minutes or so.

Toss in sauce or a dry rub and serve while they're still hot.

**GRILLED:** Grilling chicken wings gives them a smoky flavor in addition to a charred, crispy skin. Marinate the wings before grilling or simply season them with dry rubs or sauces, grilling them like any other piece of chicken.

Marinate the wings if desired, or season the wings with salt, pepper, or any mix of herbs and spices.

Heat the grill to medium-high (about 400°F).

Grill for 30 minutes, flipping occasionally until they are cooked through with an internal temperature of at least 165°F.

Slather on sauce for the final minutes of grilling if desired, then serve while they're hot.

**SMOKED:** Smoking chicken wings infuses them with a rich, deep smoky flavor. This method takes a bit longer than grilling but results in tender, juicy wings with a unique flavor. Use wood chips (like hickory or applewood) to smoke the wings in a smoker or on a grill set up for indirect heat.

Marinate the wings if desired, or season the wings with salt, pepper, or any mix of herbs and spices.

Prepare the smoker with wood chips according to the manufacturer's instructions and place the wings inside.

Smoke the wings for one hour at 225°F, flipping about halfway through.

Turn up the heat to 350°F and cook another 20 minutes to get a crispy exterior skin and ensure that they are cooked through with an internal temperature of at least 165°F.

*No matter the cooking method, the first step is to pat the wings dry with paper towels, as it helps ensure crispier wings.*





## Recipes contributed by Chef Ben Dubow of Forge City Works in Hartford

### >>HOT SAUCE VARIATIONS

#### CLASSIC BUFFALO HOT SAUCE

½ cup hot sauce base  
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce  
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional for  
extra heat)

#### SPICY MANGO HOT SAUCE

¼ cup hot sauce base  
¼ cup mango puree  
1 tablespoon lime juice  
½ teaspoon chili powder

#### GARLIC PARMESAN HOT SAUCE

¼ cup hot sauce base  
¼ cup grated parmesan cheese  
½ teaspoon garlic powder

#### CHIPOTLE HOT SAUCE

¼ cup hot sauce base  
2 tablespoons chipotle peppers in adobo  
sauce (chopped)  
1 tablespoon brown sugar

### >>BBQ SAUCE VARIATIONS

Directions:  
Instead of hot sauce, use BBQ sauce as  
the base and add flavors for different  
BBQ wing experiences.

#### CLASSIC BBQ SAUCE

½ cup BBQ sauce (store-bought or  
homemade)  
1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar  
1 tablespoon honey

#### HONEY MUSTARD BBQ

½ cup BBQ sauce  
¼ cup honey mustard  
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard

#### SMOKY BOURBON BBQ

½ cup BBQ sauce  
¼ cup bourbon (or substitute with apple  
juice)  
1 tablespoon smoked paprika  
1 tablespoon brown sugar

#### SPICY JALAPEÑO BBQ

½ cup BBQ sauce  
1 tablespoon finely chopped jalapeños  
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper  
1 tablespoon honey

#### PINEAPPLE BBQ

½ cup BBQ sauce  
¼ cup pineapple juice  
1 tablespoon soy sauce  
1 tablespoon brown sugar

#### BUFFAQUE

½ cup BBQ sauce  
½ cup hot sauce base

### >>ASIAN SAUCE VARIATIONS

Directions: Instead of hot sauce, use soy  
sauce and other Asian-inspired flavors  
for wings with a savory, umami-packed  
punch.

#### SWEET CHILI ASIAN SAUCE

¼ cup soy sauce  
¼ cup sweet chili sauce  
1 tablespoon rice vinegar  
1 tablespoon sesame oil

#### GINGER-SESAME ASIAN SAUCE

¼ cup soy sauce  
1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger  
1 tablespoon honey  
1 tablespoon sesame oil  
1 tablespoon rice vinegar

### HOT SAUCE BASE

Ingredients:

½ cup butter (unsalted)  
¼ cup olive oil  
1 tablespoon vinegar (apple  
cider or white vinegar)  
1 tablespoon honey or maple  
syrup  
½ teaspoon garlic powder  
¼ teaspoon salt  
¼ teaspoon black pepper

Instructions:

In a saucepan over low heat, melt  
the butter and olive oil together.  
Stir in the remaining ingredients  
and simmer for 2-3 minutes until  
fully combined and smooth. Use this  
base sauce as a starting point for the  
following variations. You can adjust  
the ingredients to your taste or add  
additional spices for extra depth of  
flavor.



### TERIYAKI ASIAN SAUCE

½ cup teriyaki sauce  
2 tablespoons honey  
1 tablespoon sesame seeds  
1 tablespoon rice vinegar

### SPICY KOREAN GOCHUJANG SAUCE

2 tablespoons soy sauce  
2 tablespoons Gochujang (Korean chili paste)  
1 tablespoon rice vinegar  
1 tablespoon honey  
1 tablespoon sesame oil

### LEMON GARLIC SOY SAUCE

¼ cup soy sauce  
2 tablespoons lemon juice  
2 cloves garlic (minced)  
1 tablespoon honey  
1 tablespoon sesame oil

### >>SWEET & SAVORY SAUCE VARIATIONS

Directions: Combine the following ingredients without a base sauce for a sweet and savory take on wings.

#### HONEY GARLIC SAUCE

¼ cup soy sauce  
¼ cup honey  
2 cloves garlic (minced)  
1 tablespoon rice vinegar  
½ teaspoon chili flakes (optional)

#### MAPLE BALSAMIC GLAZE

¼ cup maple syrup  
¼ cup balsamic vinegar  
1 tablespoon soy sauce  
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard

### BROWN SUGAR & SOY SAUCE

¼ cup soy sauce  
¼ cup brown sugar  
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard  
1 tablespoon garlic powder

### CITRUS HONEY GLAZE

¼ cup honey  
2 tablespoons orange juice  
1 tablespoon lime juice  
1 tablespoon soy sauce

### PEACH BOURBON SAUCE

¼ cup peach preserves  
2 tablespoons bourbon  
1 tablespoon soy sauce  
1 tablespoon brown sugar

### >>DRY RUB VARIATIONS

Directions: Keep wings extra crispy by flavoring with a dry rub instead of a sauce.

#### CLASSIC DRY RUB

1 tablespoon garlic powder  
1 tablespoon onion powder  
1 teaspoon paprika  
1 teaspoon smoked paprika  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon black pepper

#### CAJUN DRY RUB

1 tablespoon paprika  
1 teaspoon cayenne pepper  
1 teaspoon garlic powder  
½ teaspoon thyme  
½ teaspoon onion powder  
½ teaspoon salt

### LEMON PEPPER DRY RUB

1 tablespoon lemon zest  
1 tablespoon black pepper  
1 teaspoon garlic powder  
½ teaspoon salt

### SWEET & SPICY DRY RUB

1 tablespoon brown sugar  
1 teaspoon chili powder  
1 teaspoon paprika  
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper  
½ teaspoon salt

### HERB & GARLIC DRY RUB

1 tablespoon dried rosemary  
1 tablespoon dried thyme  
1 teaspoon garlic powder  
1 teaspoon onion powder  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon black pepper





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## Sink or Swim

By **MATTHEW DICKS** / Illustrated By **SEAN WANG**

I'm clinging to the edge of the pool. Tiny fingers gripping the edge. Feet kicking furiously under the water. I'm gasping for breath. If I reach down, my toes can barely scrape the bottom of the pool before my head dips below the surface. A couple of feet away from the edge, the bottom drops away... and I'm in over my head. The smell of chlorine fills my nostrils. I look up. A bird on a tree branch overhead chirps away, unaware of the battle going on below.

I hate that bird. He's so happy

and joyful. He's not fighting for his life.

Then the man pushes me again. My grandfather is teaching me to swim. His lesson amounts to this: get in the water. No bathing suit, of course, because that's an unnecessary expense. I'm wearing cut-off jeans that feel like a 50-pound weight strapped to my waist.

Next, hold onto the edge. Prepare for combat.

Then my grandfather places his open palm against my forehead and pushes. I'm thrust about five feet away from the edge of the

pool into water well over my head. His instruction amounts to a single word: "Swim!" I paddle like hell to get back to the edge before I drown.

Then we do it again and again and again. This is how I learned to swim.

Eventually, my father would throw me into the deep end and have me swim to the side. He would throw quarters to the bottom of the pool and allow me to keep any money I could scoop up; I learned to hold my breath and dive.

Eventually, I watched others

swim and converted my doggie paddle to a more traditional stroke.

As a teenager, I swam a mile every summer at scout camp, jumped off rowboats into the middle of the lake without a life preserver and worked at the waterfront as a lifeguard.

Total amount spent on my swimming lessons as a child: about \$9 in quarters. It was all spent at The Dream Machine at the Lincoln Mall on games like Donkey Kong and Missile Command.

Thirty years later, I have two children who are learning to swim. Both are teenagers and are still taking lessons at summer camp.

Total amount spent on swimming lessons so far? About \$8 million. That doesn't even account for the amount of swimwear that my children own.

When I was a child, I owned one bathing suit at most, and when it didn't fit, a pair of shorts or cut-offs did the trick until a new suit could be purchased. I wore my suit during the day, hung it off the railing on the deck at night, and then put it back on the next morning, slightly cold and damp but otherwise fine.

A bathing suit can be wet when you put it on because it's about to be wet. I've said this to my kids many times, much to their dismay.

My son owns nine swimsuits (no joke), plus another dozen swim shirts. Also flip-flops and Crocs and swim shoes.

Hundreds of dollars spent on a wardrobe so he can jump into a lake and sort of swim.

Somehow, something that I learned via trial and error and the desire to avoid drowning now costs parents the price of a modest vacation home.

For my children, it began with "Mommy and Me" swimming lessons at a local swim school when they were infants. My daughter and wife entered the pool and splashed around together while a highly trained professional watched them splash.

Cost? A year of tuition at a state university.

**"I wore my suit during the day, hung it off the railing on the deck at night, and then put it back on the next morning, slightly cold and damp but otherwise fine."**

When they were a little older, we sent them to the "best swim school in the area," where they spent an hour at a time in the company of two or three trained professionals. They learned to dive for rings in waist-high water and swim across a pool while a team of lifeguards flanked them at all times as well as jump into water shoulder deep.

We could've visited Europe that summer. Instead, my kids learned to swim. Except they really didn't.

Yes, they learned the strokes and were capable of remaining above the water for a bit. But absent any stakes, they hadn't really learned how to swim in a way that might keep them alive. They still avoided deep water and had no desire to place themselves in a situation where they might need to swim for any length of time or drown.

Next came swim lessons at summer camp. These were blessedly cheaper than the swim school. Yes, we could've finally furnished our living room or maybe enjoyed a weekend away on our wedding anniversary. But no! More lessons with more highly trained people, summer after summer after summer after summer.

The result: somehow, in some way, I am still a better swimmer than my children.

Somehow, in some way, my grandfather's high-stakes, analog swim lessons taught me better than the small fortune my wife and I have paid to teach my children to swim.

It turns out that stakes matter. Hard lessons produce solid results.

"Sink or swim" is, unsurprisingly, a damn fine way to teach a kid to swim. ■

*Matthew Dicks is an elementary school teacher, bestselling novelist and a record 55-time Moth Story SLAM champion. His latest books are *Twenty-one Truths About Love* and *The Other Mother*.*

*Sean Wang, an MIT architecture graduate, is author of the sci-fi graphic novel series, *Runners*. Learn more at [seanwang.com](http://seanwang.com).*



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