



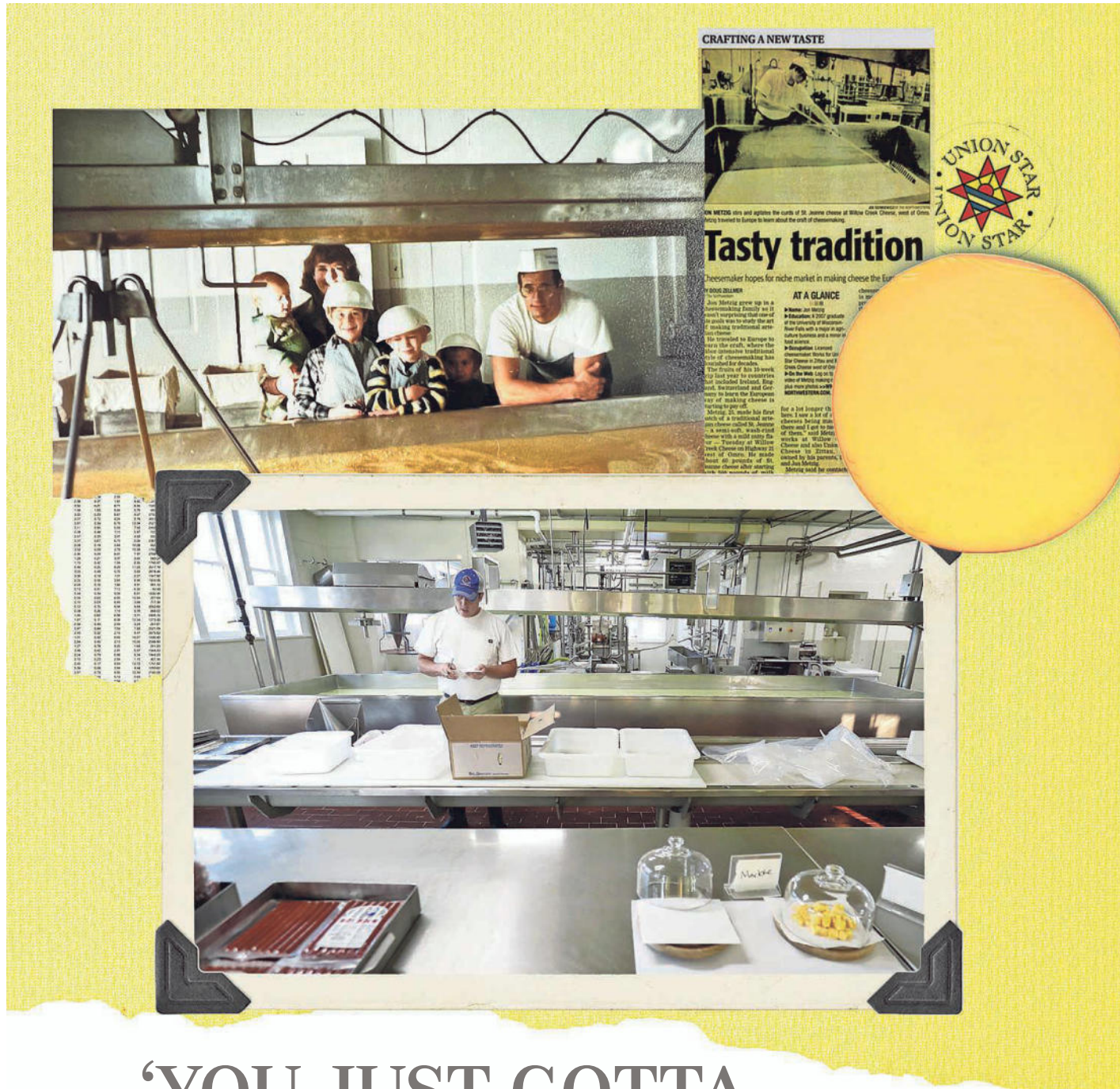
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‘YOU JUST GOTTA KEEP GOING’

His parents’ cheese business kept rural Wisconsin towns afloat, then they were murdered. Now Jon Metzsig works to maintain his family’s cheese factories.

Katy Macek and Rebecca Loroff

Appleton Post-Crescent | USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

ZITTAU – Nearly every day for the last 13 years, Jon Metzsig has usually been at one of his family’s cheese factories by 5:30 a.m. He often starts work by coagulating milk — an important step to eventually turning it to cheese.

• Until four months ago, many of those days included a conversation or a joke with his dad. • On Saturday, March 18, that changed. Jon, 38, discovered his parents — Dave, 72, and Jan, 71 — murdered in their home. Jon’s younger brother, Erik, then 25, was the only suspect. Erik lived with his parents and has since been charged with two counts of first-degree intentional homicide. Prosecutors haven’t revealed a motive. • Those who knew the Metzigs and their business reacted with grief and surprise.

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“I knew my parents were saved. I knew they were Christians. I knew this was part of God’s plan. I don’t know why, but I guess that gives me content. It’s the kind of hand you were dealt. You’ve got to deal with it.”

Jon Metzsig

Jon Metzsig concentrates on his work May 23 at Union Star Cheese Factory in Zittau. He estimates he’s worked at his parents’ cheese factories since he was six years old, but officially became an employee 13 years ago and, later, became part-owner. After his parents’ death in March, he became the sole owner. Pictured at upper left, owners and parents Jan and Dave Metzsig pose in this undated photo in Union Star Cheese Factory with their four sons, from left, Jon, Charlie, Matt and Louie. A fifth son, Erik, was born later.

WM. GLASHEEN/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BILL WAMBEKE/USA TODAY NETWORK; GETTY IMAGES PROVIDED PHOTOS

Wisconsin a ‘really important state’ for Microsoft

Jeff Bollier

Green Bay Press-Gazette

USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

ASHWAUBENON – Even Microsoft President Brad Smith was a little surprised by how much Microsoft’s connections to Wisconsin have expanded in just six years.

It was mid-2017 when Smith, who was born in Milwaukee, first met Green Bay Packers CEO Mark Murphy to talk about how the Green Bay area could attract more talent, and more entrepreneurs. Microsoft and the Packers each contributed \$5 million to launch the \$25 million venture capital firm TittletownTech in 2018 and the Seattle-based technology giant has kept the pedal to the metal since.

“For Microsoft, what I think is interesting is how our connection to the state has evolved,” Smith said. He added: “In ways that we could not have imagined when we made our first trip to Lambeau Field, this has become a really important state for Microsoft.”

In an exclusive conversation with the Green Bay Press-Gazette, Smith said the multifaceted investment in computer science education programs, startup attraction and development, and investment in internet infrastructure will enhance Wisconsin’s existing economic strengths for decades and enable Wisconsin residents to find a variety of good-paying technology jobs in demand across industries.

“TittletownTech is giving rise to a new generation of companies. There’s opportunity for the next era that adds to the economic strengths that are here already,” Smith said.

From TechSpark in Appleton and Green Bay to a \$1 billion data center in Mount Pleasant

Microsoft started out with some basic priorities: Collaborate with local schools, businesses and community groups, increase access to computer science education at all levels of schooling, invest in startups with the potential for large-scale growth in Wisconsin, and create career opportunities in Wisconsin that often tend to lure residents to Silicon Valley, Chicago or New York.

Even before TittletownTech became a reality, Microsoft in October 2017 selected northeastern Wisconsin to be

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Brad Smith, Microsoft’s president and a Wisconsin native, visited the TittletownTech offices on July 24.

JEFF BOLLIER/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

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Union Star

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The Union Star factory stands at a rural crossroads in an unassuming, two-story building, where the cheese is made in the back and customers sample and buy from stainless-steel counters and coolers up front. Like a smattering of cheese factories across Wisconsin, Union Star is a small, family-run business with deep roots in its community.

After the Metzigs' deaths, residents wondered what would happen if the factory's work, which Jon estimates supports about eight families and draws traffic to the area, was interrupted.

Jon rose to this unexpected challenge, and two days after the murders reopened Union Star for business.

For Jon, returning to work was the only thing that made sense, given the perishable nature of his livelihood.

"The milk's still coming in, it's not like you can just pause," he said. "And it's not just me. If you shut the door, you've got two farms (on the payroll), and they both have multiple families on the farms. You just gotta keep going. That's the only other option."

Metzigs have owned Union Star Cheese Factory for more than 100 years

Jon's role at Union Star is about more than the factory and the business; it's about the tightly woven fabric of his community.

The unincorporated Zittau — pronounced locally to rhyme with "ditto" — is in the town of Wolf River, about 20 miles west of Appleton and about two miles south of U.S. 10, nestled between the Wolf and Rat rivers.

Zittau lies mostly along one intersection at Winnebago County II and a road labeled simply "North" and "South" on either side. It has a few houses, a church, a gift shop called The Corner Store and Drews Tavern — started by the Drews family just seven years after Union Star opened.

Union Star is west of this intersection, and visitors park on a gravel shoulder or an asphalt strip. Here, from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day — except early Sunday morning — the red-lettered sign by the blue double doors reads "OPEN." Any other time, the place is "SHUT."

You have to know Union Star is there to find it, but the business has made a name for itself, and many people eagerly seek it out.

By all accounts, as long as Zittau has existed, there have been Metzigs.

One of the town's founding members, Benjamin Metzig, emigrated in 1854 to the United States with his family at the age of 31, according to an account written by his descendant Harvey Metzig.

Jon's great-grandpa's brother, Henry Metzig, bought the cheese factory in 1911. The name Union Star came with the building, according to an account by Henry Metzig's daughter Edna Lehman. She and her husband Eugene inherited the factory, running it until Edna's cousin, Dave Metzig, bought the factory in 1980.

According to their obituary, Dave was born in 1950 in Oshkosh, and Jan was born in 1951 in New York. The two met at Valparaiso University in Indiana and married in 1973.

After the sale of the factory closed, Dave and Jan moved into the factory's second floor with their son Charlie. Jan was pregnant with their second son, Louie. Matt was born less than two years later and Jon in 1984. Their fifth and youngest son, Erik, was born in 1997.

Jon recalled working at Union Star when he was six years old, alongside his siblings.

"On Saturday mornings we had to help bag cheese curds," he said.

He also remembered employees wandering in and out of the home, especially around Christmastime when they'd package gift boxes.

While the inside of the factory and the offices have been renovated over the years, Jon said, the outside of Union Star still looks similar to its visage in a 1911 photo.

The Metzigs grew the business to a second location in Berlin in 2003, naming it Willow Creek Cheese Factory. Jon said Dave and Jan were concerned for the Zittau factory's future after the four-lane U.S. 10 was completed, bypassing the town.

'Zittau cheese' made by state-certified master cheesemakers

They had little to worry about, however. The Zittau factory remained a destination for anyone willing to drive a little out of their way to score a bag of fresh curds, string cheese or aged cheddar blocks. It still accounts for two-thirds of



Jon Metzig looks through a box of family photos in what used to be his family's living room that now serves as office space on the second floor of Union Star Cheese Factory. PHOTOS BY WM. GLASHEEN/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

"It changed the vibe. Talking with folks in the community, they were at a loss. They didn't know how to describe it. This is something that happens in the big cities."

Randy Rutten
Wolf River town chairman

the company's total sales.

Both locations still operate under the Union Star company name, but Jon said his parents "weren't the best at branding," and for a long time no one called it by that name.

"Everybody that came in would just call this 'Zittau cheese,'" Jon said.

"Zittau cheese" isn't just a hidden gem. It's also an award-winner. For example, Red Willow, a washed-rind cheese, took third place out of 44 in its category in February at the United States Championship Cheese Contest.

Dave and Jan intentionally focused on higher-quality cheese production, Jon said, deciding years ago to keep the cheese factory small rather than become a bulk commodity producer.

"One of the reasons (Union Star has been successful) is there really isn't anyone else doing this anymore," Dave told the Post-Crescent in 1999. "As the micro cheese industry evolves, little cheese factories have to decide how to specialize. We can't expect to compete with Kraft and be successful."

To that end, Dave and Jon also became Wisconsin Master Cheesemakers, receiving certification through the Center for Dairy Research and Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin. Jon said he and his dad were only the second father-son master cheesemakers in Wisconsin, while his brother, Matthew, also became a certified cheesemaker in the early 2000s, according to a June 8, 2003, article in the Oshkosh Northwestern.

The factory's success has proven unique. Once, more than 40 family-run cheese factories operated in Winnebago County. Now, Union Star is the only one.

Cheese factory is a community nexus, economic driver for other family-run businesses

The town of Wolf River may only have a population of 1,208, but town chairman Randy Rutten reckoned every one of them knows Union Star.

"If you don't, you probably just moved to the area," he said.

Rutten has Union Star's cheesemaking schedule memorized: Fresh cheese curds on Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and fresh string cheese on Tuesdays. He visits several times a week to buy cheese for himself, a family member or as a favor to a friend or co-worker.

Rutten, 59, said he grew up going to Union Star every summer while his family visited a nearby cottage. After moving to Zittau, he met Dave in the late 1980s, when Rutten joined a nearby volunteer fire department.

Rutten also used to tend bar across from the cheese factory at Drews Tavern, where owners Ed and Donnie Drews are running a business their grandma established in 1918 — though it has gone by other names over the years.

Ed Drews said the tavern and cheese factory have a symbiotic relationship:



The front entrance of Union Star Cheese Factory declaring the day's cheese is shown May 23 off County Road II in Zittau, an unincorporated community in the town of Wolf River.

"We feed off each other a lot. People would go get cheese, then come here, or come here and then go get cheese."

The tavern's foot traffic includes traveling regulars from across the state.

"All the people come to see us, you get to know a lot of people," Ed Drews said. "You meet a lot of friends."

Summer is the busiest time of year, when seasonal visitors return to cottages near Lake Poygan. The Experimental Aircraft Association's annual AirVenture fly-in convention in Oshkosh even brings a few international regulars to Zittau.

"We got one bunch from Germany that goes to the factory, and they stop every year," Donnie Drews said. "Then they come in (to the tavern) after they get their cheese."

Like the cheese factory, business still comes to the tavern mostly through word of mouth. In 2021, a gift and home décor store called The Corner Store opened just east of Union Star.

"It's a nice little triangle," Rutten said.

Ed Drews said he will occasionally purchase fresh cheese curds from Union Star and leave them on the bar counter for customers to enjoy, the same way other bars serve peanuts or popcorn.

More than 'just a transaction': Union Star and dairy farms revolve around family

Not only does Union Star bring business to Zittau, it also employs many area residents, whether it's a teenager's first job or a retiree's part-time gig.

"There's a number of folks (whose families) have worked for the Metzigs all through the generations," Rutten said.

That even includes Jon's wife, Kelsey: her grandfather picked up milk for Union Star from her grandmother's family farm, which led to their relationship. And Jon said the cheese factory played a role in bringing him and Kelsey together, too.

That close connection between cheesemakers and dairy farmers persists in Union Star's relationship with Silver-Shea Holsteins of Omro, which supplies the milk for the factory's cheese curds.

Owners Allen and Cathy Silverthorn have run Silver-Shea since 1981. Like the Metzigs, the Silverthorns run their company close to home with the help of younger family members.

"We have a personal connection to our communities because of that," Allen Silverthorn said. "We're proud of that. It almost sells itself."

"Some of our suppliers ... they've been selling to my dad for 40 years," Jon said. "It's not like it's just a transaction."

Silver-Shea has now worked with three generations of Metzigs: Dave was picking up milk from the farm before Jon took over, and Dave's grandfather Quintin was the farm's veterinarian.

"You try to work with people you trust," Allen Silverthorn said. "If I'm just another guy on the (milk) route for some guy who picks up from 20 herds, you don't have that connection."

Dave and Jan Metzigs' deaths shocked residents: 'They didn't know how to describe it'

Sitting in the homey office above the factory in front of a cabinet of framed photos, Jon recalled when he received the call from authorities early on March 18.

A dropped 911 call came from his parents' house at 5:53 a.m. The sheriff was there, Jon was told, but no one was answering. Could he come and help?

"That's when I found them," he said.

Dave and Jan were in their bedroom, covered in blankets and killed by apparent gunshot wounds, according to the criminal complaint.

Word got around fast as fire department volunteers, including Rutten, got the news on their pagers.

"My first reaction, it was like, 'Oh my God. I hope nothing has happened to Dave or Jan,'" Rutten said. "When I did find out, it was like, pardon my language, but f***, god d****. ... It was like someone killed my own parents."

There was only one suspect, Erik, but he was nowhere to be found. The family and the store went into lockdown.

Erik was arrested later that morning about 30 miles away at the Kimberly YMCA. He pleaded not guilty to two charges of first-degree intentional homicide and is in Winnebago County Jail while his attorney Scott Ceman and county prosecutors gather evidence. His trial date is not yet set.

"It's one of those things where you never thought in a million years it was gonna happen," Jon said. "But once I

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Union Star

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saw it, I knew who did it.”

Jon is still coming to grips with a tragedy that forever changed his family. He gives a lot of credit to his and his parents' faith.

“That happened (on a) Saturday, and by Sunday we had pastors and elders come out to my parent's house, pray over the house, pray over me,” he said. “That helped a lot.”

“I knew my parents were saved. I knew they were Christians,” he continued. “I knew this was part of God's plan. I don't know why, but I guess that gives me content. It's the kind of hand you were dealt. You've got to deal with it.”

Those who knew Dave and Jan Metzger say they were 'genuine people' who lived lives of service

As the initial shock of Dave and Jan's loss subsided, those who knew them mourned their loss.

“It changed the vibe,” Rutten said. “Talking with folks in the community, they were at a loss. They didn't know how to describe it. This is something that happens in the big cities.”

Jon described his parents as “genuine people.”

“They lived their lives like their values,” he said. “They weren't trying to hide.”

According to others, Dave and Jan served in several community organizations while raising their sons and running the cheese factory.

“They were always curious, always inquisitive,” Rutten said. “They were very religious, conscientious, but they never pushed it ... They kept their opinion to themselves. They would listen to what you had to say.”

Ed and Donnie Drews described them as dependable next-door neighbors.

“If we had a tree down, a storm or something,” Donnie Drews said, “they were always willing to help.”

When the Drewses lost their mom 12 years ago, he also remembered Jan worrying over Ed, who was living above the bar.

“She always worried about bringing

Offers of help poured in, from working in the factory to hauling milk. Jon's brothers Matt and Charlie work in accounting and are just a phone call away. Union Star's accountant, who had primarily helped with taxes, now makes regular visits.

him meals, at the door, all the time,” he said.

Allen and Cathy Silverthorn said they cut their Arizona vacation a day short to attend the Metzgers' funeral. They were two of many who showed up despite a late-March snowstorm.

“I never saw so many people at a funeral in my entire life,” Cathy Silverthorn said. “And flowers.”

Union Star's owner learned cheesemaking in Europe, created new cheeses for the factory

Jon is the only one of Dave and Jan's five sons who stayed with the family business.

He received his cheesemaking license at the age of 18, studied agriculture at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, and traveled to Europe several times to learn more about the profession. He returned to work full-time at Union Star in November 2009.

His expertise and Dave's influence inspired him to create new kinds of cheese for the company, including Saint Jeanne Cheese — made with his dad and named after Dave's mom — Dry Jack, and Farmhouse as well as Red Willow and Bloom, which is only available at Willow Creek.

As part-owner of Union Star with his parents, Jon said he had a buy-sell agreement with them to take over the business. Once Charlie was appointed executor of Dave and Jan's will, Jon bought the remaining company stock.

However, running Union Star by himself has come with a new set of challenges.

He's struggled the most with the finances and accounting, which Dave had



A selection of cheeses sit in the cooler May 23 at Union Star Cheese Factory. WM. GLASHEEN/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

handled before — a book titled “How to Read a Financial Report” sat on an office table beside Jon during a May interview.

Jon has taken basic accounting classes, but he said it's been a long time since he had to analyze numbers. Even little things, like when to order supplies, aren't things he'd considered before.

“It's been a lot of, ‘where do you think this number was found? Let's go dig around,’” Jon said. “My dad was pretty meticulous, so it makes it much easier than it could be.”

The widespread labor shortage doesn't help matters, either, as he looks for another cheesemaker to work at Willow Creek.

“Even though Wisconsin is a cheese state, there's not too many cheesemakers looking for jobs,” he said.

'There's a future': Relationships sustain factory in the aftermath of tragedy

After the initial shock of Dave and Jan's deaths, some wondered about the company's long-term viability.

“My first concern was that the (Metzger) family was going to be okay,” Allen Silverthorn said. However, he said, “people called us concerned because (Union Star) buys the product that we put out, wondering if this is going to keep going.”

“(Dave) runs a super good business.

People know that,” he said. “They were a little afraid they were going to lose that.”

But Jon quickly proved them wrong by leaning into others for support.

Offers of help poured in, from working in the factory to hauling milk. Jon's brothers Matt and Charlie work in accounting and are just a phone call away. Union Star's accountant, who had primarily helped with taxes, now makes regular visits.

“I don't think (Jon) missed a beat,” Cathy Silverthorn said.

Summer, the busy season, has come around again as folks travel across the state. Several customers have asked for tours, which Union Star and Willow Creek continue to offer free on weekdays.

Jon is grateful for the help from his community and staff, and views working at the cheese factory as a way to deal with his parents' deaths and the ongoing court proceedings.

“It gives you something to focus on and be positive about,” he said. “There's a future.”

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