The Most Important Person (in Japanese Food) You've Never Heard Of

From her TriBeCa shop, Saori Kawano has spent decades supplying chefs with knives and housewares, and teaching Americans about the precise pleasures of the cuisine.

Since Saori Kawano moved to New York City in 1978, she has become an invaluable link between Japanese and American chefs. Cole Saladino for The New York Times

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By Julia Moskin

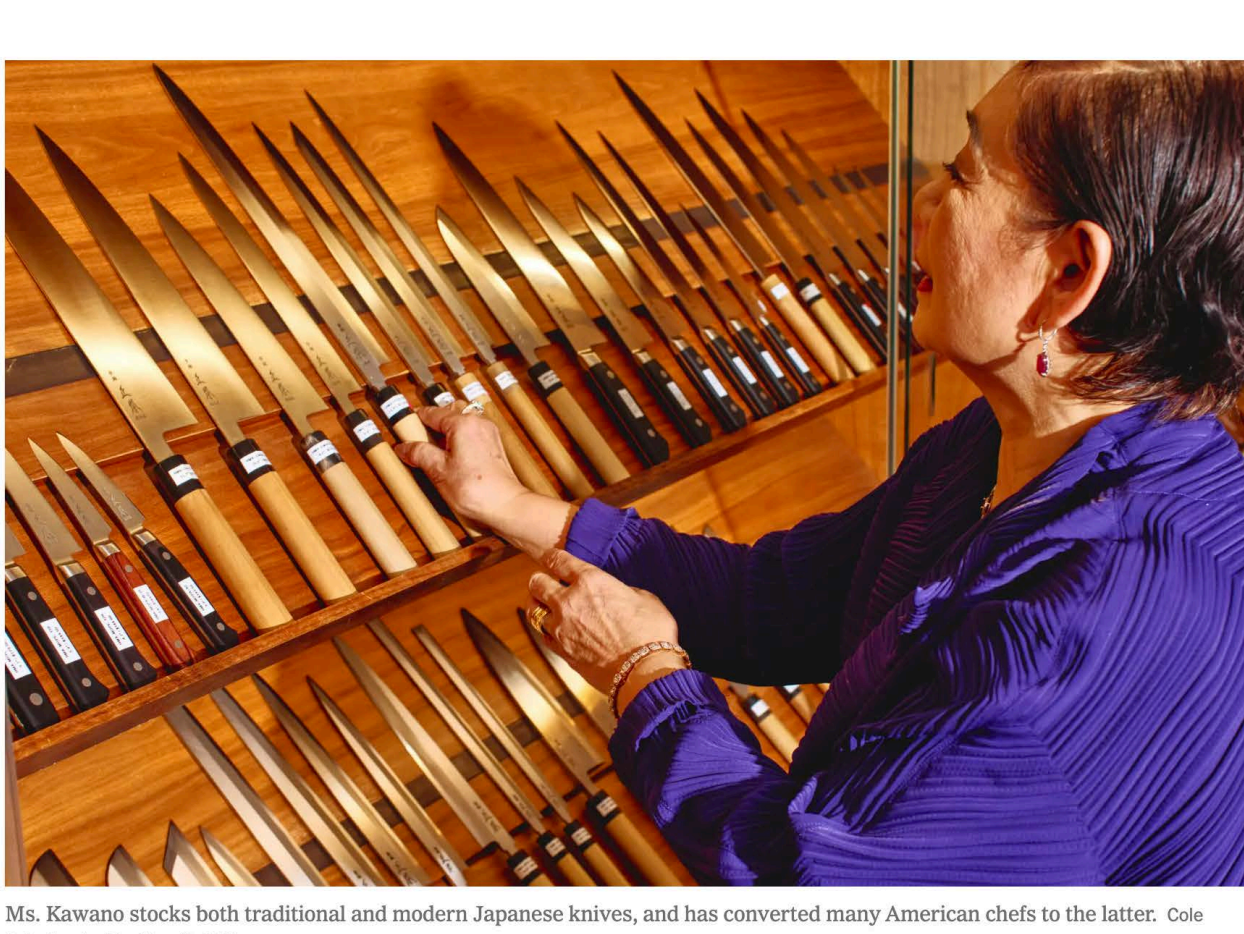
Feb. 27, 2025

When Saori Kawano arrived in New York City in 1978 from Yokohama, most Americans' ideas of Japanese food ended at instant ramen and onion volcanoes. Since then, if you've enjoyed hand-cut soba noodles or an omakase dinner, or admired the graceful curves of a rice bowl or the flash of a Japanese knife blade, you can probably thank her.

Ms. Kawano is the founder and owner of Korin Inc., an importer of knives, kitchen tools and tableware from Japan that has become a place of pilgrimage for restaurateurs since opening in 1982. It's the main U.S. supplier for big-name chefs like Nobu Matsuhisa, Daniel Boulud, Masaharu Morimoto and Eric Ripert; restaurants like Buddakan, Sugarfish and Eleven Madison Park; and hotel chains like the Four Seasons and Mandarin Oriental.

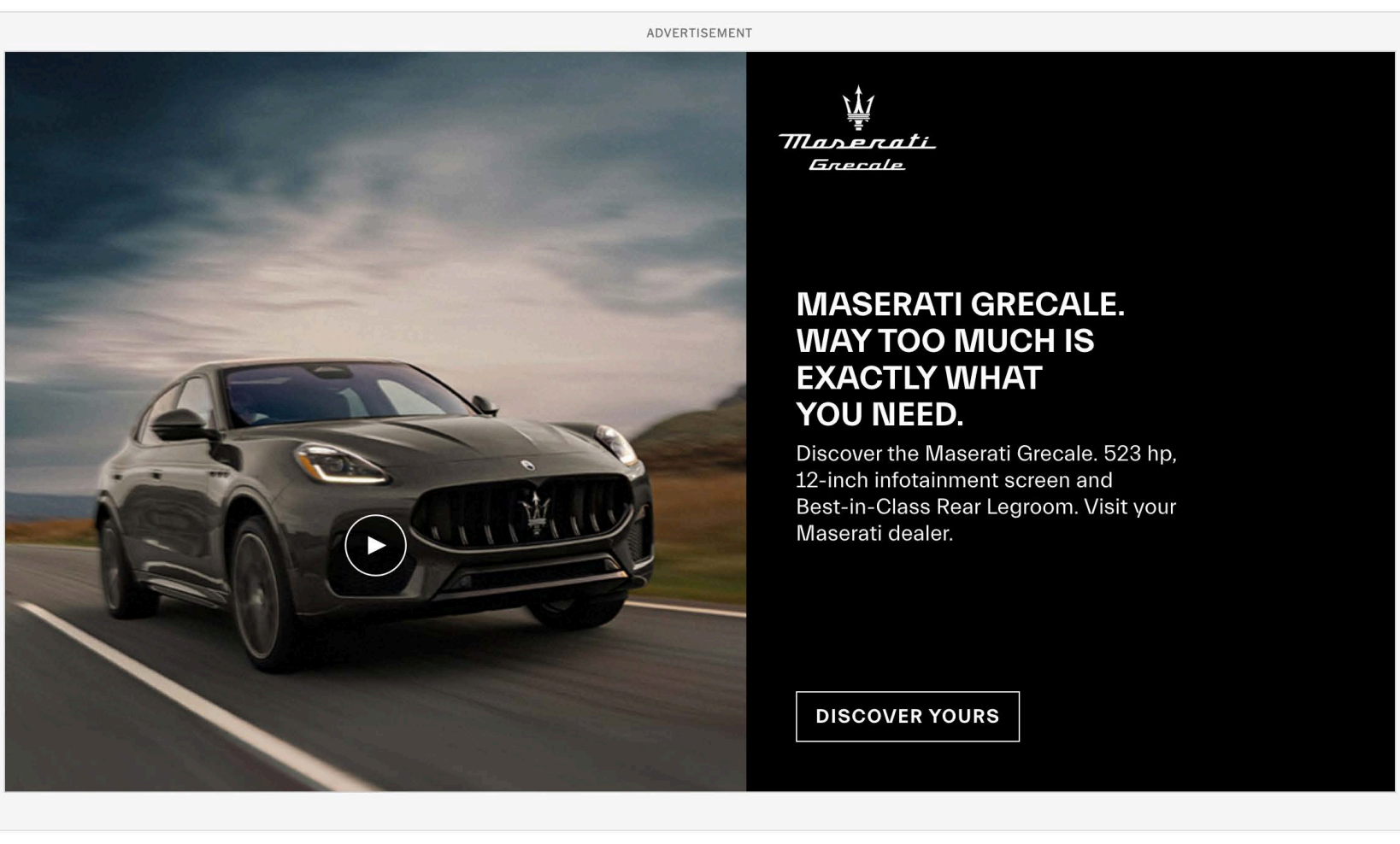
Her TriBeCa showroom, packed with wares ranging from $20 kitchen shears to $2,000 sushi knives, hums with customers arriving with knives to be sharpened, and the spin of the custom-made Japanese whetstone that powers the business.

Korin's showroom in TriBeCa, long restricted to culinary professionals, is now open to the public. Cole Saladino for The New York Times



Ms. Kawano stocks both traditional and modern Japanese knives, and has converted many American chefs to the latter. Cole Saladino for The New York Times

The space is narrow, but it contains a vast network of connections and knowledge that has fueled the extraordinary rise of Japanese food in the United States.



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"So much of the popularity and familiarity that we have now is due to her," said Michael Romano, the chef of Union Square Cafe from 1998 to 2013. He was an early convert from European to Japanese chef's knives, opened Union Square Tokyo in 2007, and now lives there part-time.

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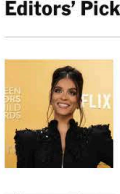

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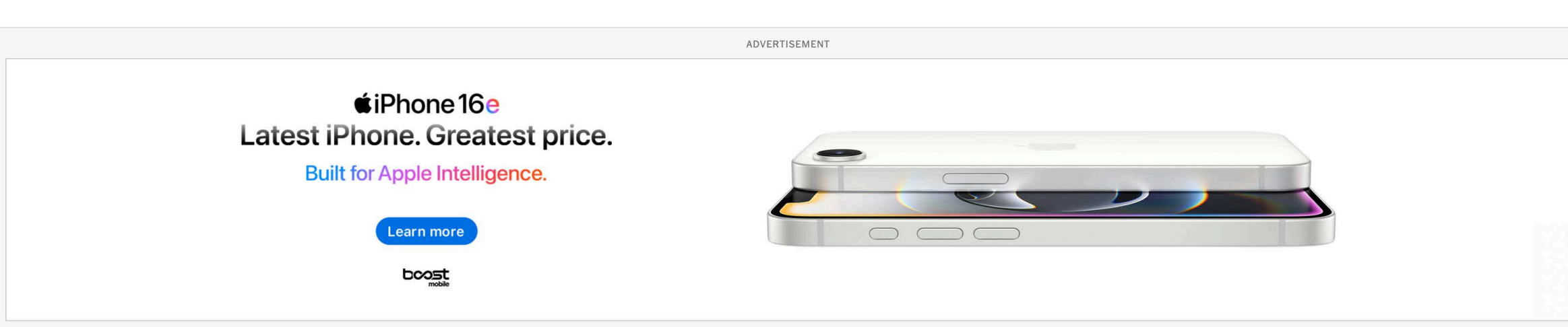
In her shop on a busy winter morning, Ms. Kawano, 71, beamed as her resident sharpener, Vincent Kazuhito Lau, described restoring dozens of knives in the kitchen of the Bellagio in Las Vegas. She tends to credit her success to loyal chefs and employees like Mr. Lau, but her combination of elegance, toughness and charm doubtless played a part.

"I always knew I was not going to live in Japan for my whole life and be a housewife," she said — partly because her mother, a pioneering female insurance executive, told her so. "I never thought that Japanese food would become the focus of my whole life."

Long before Amazon or Alibaba, Instagram and Line (Japan's most popular social media and shopping app), Ms. Kawano was a direct link between the American culinary world and the most prestigious chefs, artisans and craftsmen in Japan.



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Korin's custom-made electric whetstone is the centerpiece of the showroom. Cole Saladino for The New York Times

"She's the only person who can pick up the phone in New York City and talk to anyone in Japan," said Yukari Sakamoto, a sake expert who lives in Tokyo and leads high-end food tours. "Connections are everything here. Everyone knows that if Saori has vetted you, you're worth their time."

If you have a Japanese knife in your home kitchen, Ms. Kawano may have had a hand in that, too. American cooks have long relied on European-style knives, with one basic blade shape, descended from a butcher's tool. Among other differences, Japanese knives evolved to cut fish and vegetables, not meat. They have many shapes and a thinner blade, making them capable of cleaner cuts.

The modern culinary conversation between Japanese and American chefs started with Shizuo Tsuji, a writer and Francophile who opened a cooking school in Osaka in 1960. His relationships with influential chefs like Paul Bocuse and David Bouley laid the groundwork for high-end Japanese cuisine in the United States.

By the 1980s, Japanese food had a firm foothold in Europe; chefs adopted its plating, lightness and seasonality, and turned the traditional kaiseki meal — a progression of carefully ordered bites — into what we now know as a tasting menu. This nouvelle cuisine revolution, radiating outward from France, created an American market for the small plates, square bowls and Japanese knives that Korin stocked.

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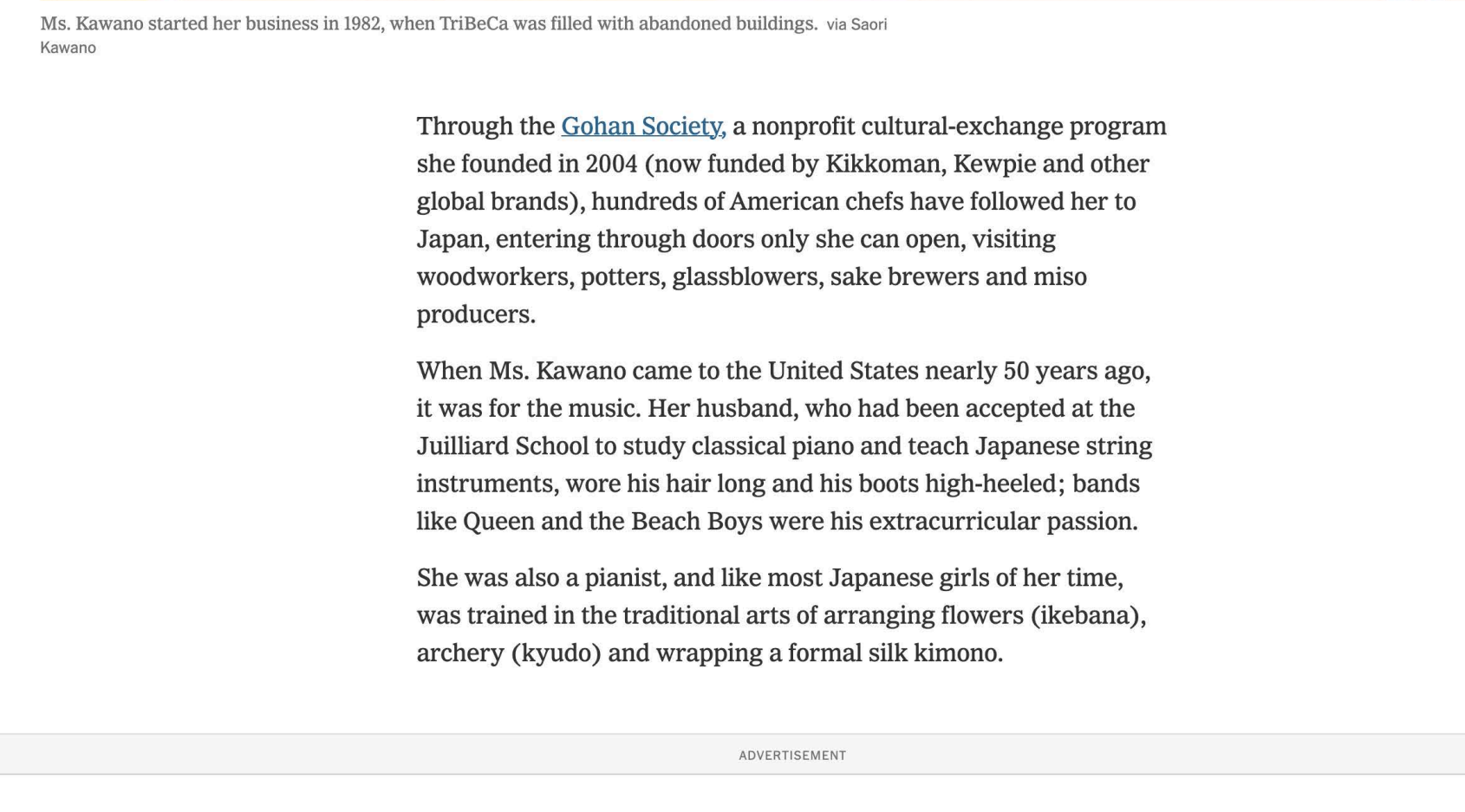
Ms. Kawano educated herself about the centuries-old Japanese craft of knife-making and its nuances — for example, a sushi chef might use a different knife for the same fish in different seasons, depending on its size and fattiness. She passed that knowledge on to her American customers.



Ms. Kawano started her business in 1982, when TriBeCa was filled with abandoned buildings. via Saori Kawano

Through the Gohan Society, a nonprofit cultural-exchange program she founded in 2004 (now funded by Kikkoman, Kewpie and other global brands), hundreds of American chefs have followed her to Japan, entering through doors only she can open, visiting woodworkers, potters, glassblowers, sake brewers and miso producers.

When Ms. Kawano came to the United States nearly 50 years ago, it was for the music. Her husband, who had been accepted at the Juilliard School to study classical piano and teach Japanese string instruments, wore his hair long and his boots high-heeled; bands like Queen and the Beach Boys were his extracurricular passion.

She was also a pianist, and like most Japanese girls of her time, was trained in the traditional arts of arranging flowers (ikebana), archery (kyudo) and wrapping a formal silk kimono.

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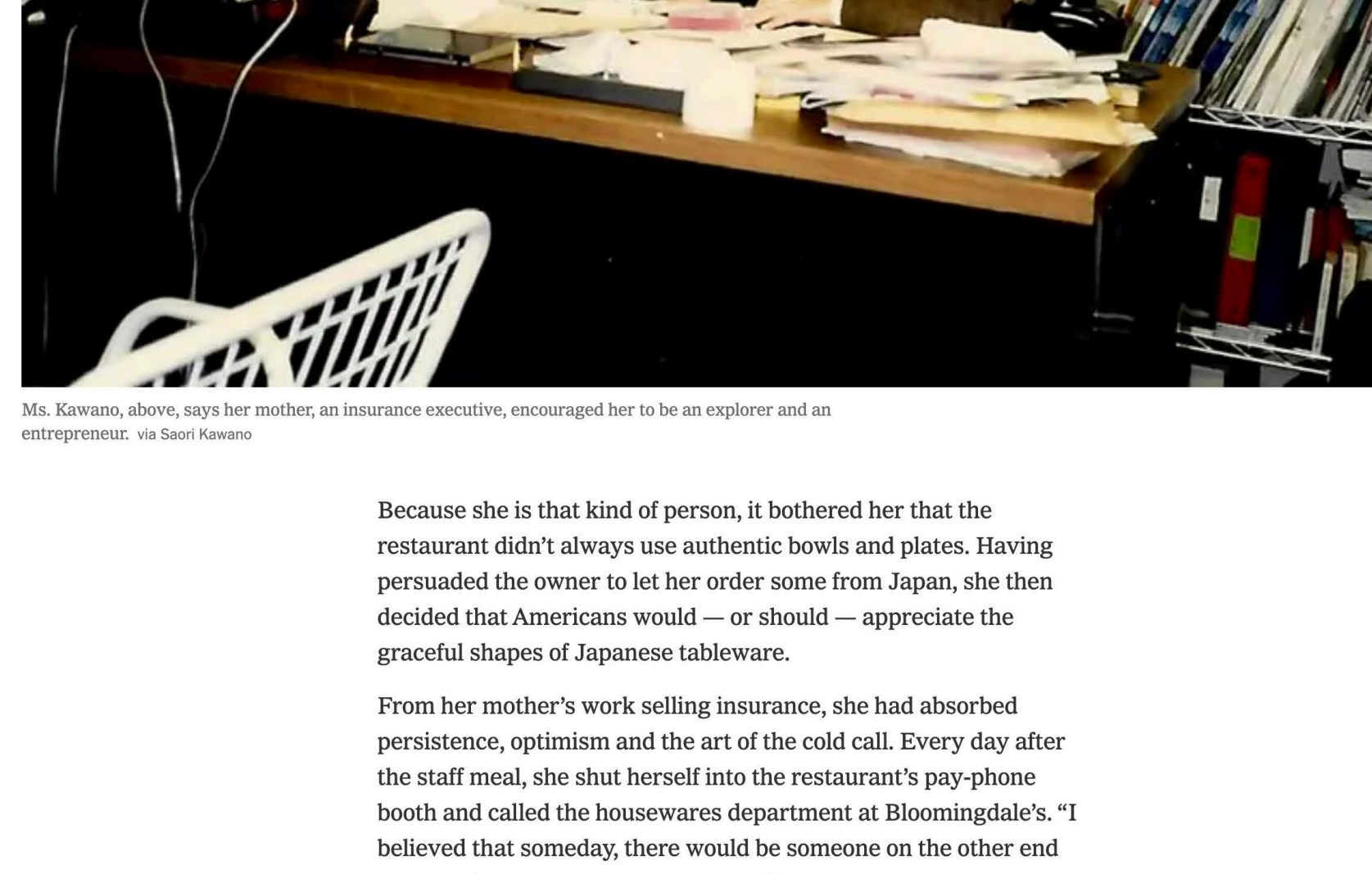
Worldly New Yorkers, she assumed, would have an appetite for learning about Japanese culture. "No one was interested," she said.

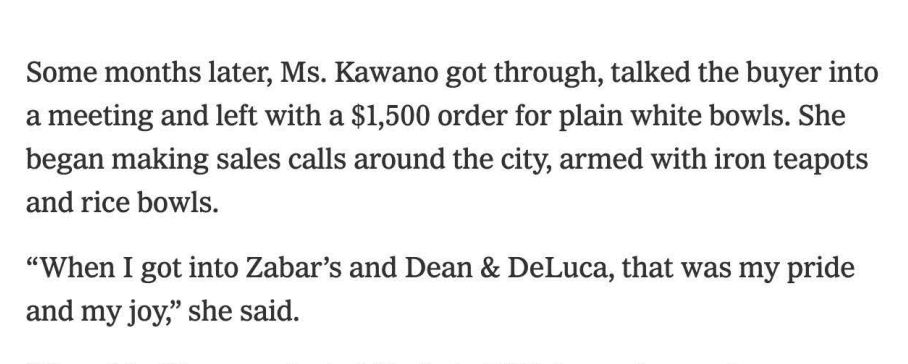
The couple thought they'd brought enough money to last three years; it ran out after six months. So she began her culinary career in desperation, as a waitress at a posh Japanese restaurant near the Pan Am Building (now MetLife) in Midtown, where some of the biggest Japanese companies had their U.S. headquarters.



Ms. Kawano, above, says her mother, an insurance executive, encouraged her to be an explorer and an entrepreneur. via Saori Kawano

Because she is that kind of person, it bothered her that the restaurant didn't always use authentic bowls and plates. Having persuaded the owner to let her order some from Japan, she then decided that Americans would — or should — appreciate the graceful shapes of Japanese tableware.

From her mother's work selling insurance, she had absorbed persistence, optimism and the art of the cold call. Every day after the staff meal, she shut herself into the restaurant's pay-phone booth and called the housewares department at Bloomingdale's. "I believed that someday, there would be someone on the other end who wouldn't hang up on me," she said.



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Some months later, Ms. Kawano got through, talked the buyer into a meeting and left with a $1,500 order for plain white bowls. She began making sales calls around the city, armed with iron teapots and rice bowls.

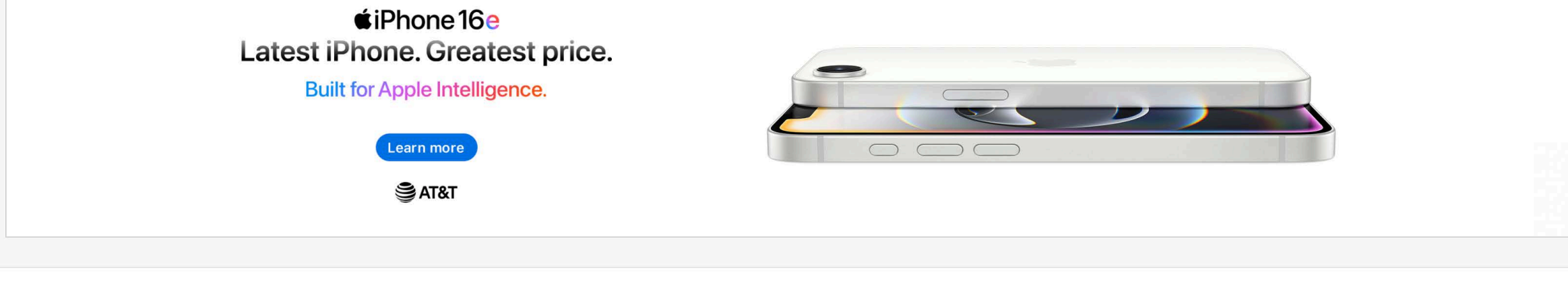
"When I got into Zabar's and Dean & DeLuca, that was my pride and my joy," she said.

When Ms. Kawano started Korin in 1982, her only regular customers were Asian restaurant owners, who were rarely able to buy expensive tableware. (The era of the $400 omakase dinner was far in the future.)

There were difficult years, when she was in debt, divorced and in despair of finding a market. As a single parent, she could no longer afford child care, so she brought her daughter, Mari, along on sales calls, wrestling a stroller loaded with samples and snacks through the subway system.

Jean-Georges Vongerichten was the first chef who came to her from outside the Asian restaurant world, in 1991. via Saori Kawano

Then, in 1991, a young chef with an idea for a glamorous Thai-French restaurant showed up on her loading dock. Jean-Georges Vongerichten had lived in Bangkok for two years and was shopping for his second New York restaurant, Vong. "I couldn't find the colors and glazes I'd seen in Asia anywhere," he recalled.



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Vong opened with Ms. Kawano's golden plates, lacquered chopsticks and bamboo place mats, and Mr. Vongerichten spread the word to the city's other top French chefs who, under the influence of nouvelle cuisine, had already become entranced by ingredients like rice vinegar and yuzu.

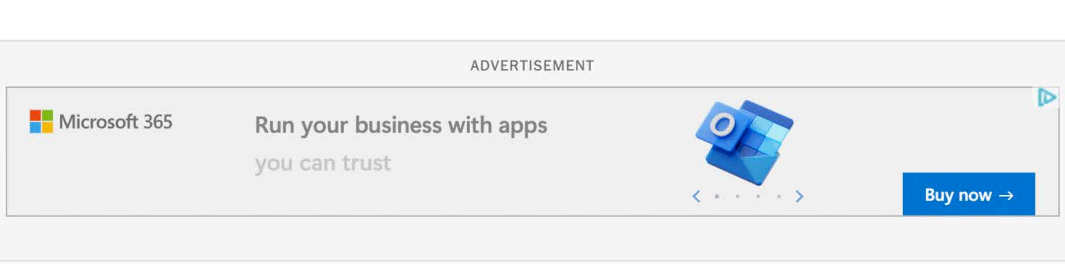
Those chefs also had deeper pockets than most of her customers. Instead of ordering wholesale, Ms. Kawano began making direct contact with artisans in Japan, researching the best makers of porcelain in Saga Prefecture and knives in Sakai. She persuaded Japanese chefs to come to New York for demonstrations of sashimi and sushi. She even talked her ex-husband, Chiharu Sugai, into becoming an expert knife sharpener, an educational process that took a decade and continues to pay off by bringing customers into the shop over and over again. (Mr. Sugai died in 2018; Mr. Lau was his protégé.)

The design and material of Japanese knife blades make them capable of finer, cleaner cuts than European-style knives. Cole Saladino for The New York Times

When the Japanese chef Noriyuki Sugie arrived in New York in 2003 to become head chef of the brand-new Mandarin Oriental hotel's restaurant, his first stop was Korin. Entrepreneurs were opening Japanese-influenced restaurants around the world, Mr. Sugie said, with vast menus and themes like waiters dressed as ninja warriors.

"It was a bubble," he said.

It was also the beginning of Japan's first official foray into culinary diplomacy. Alarmed by the spread of such inauthentic places, and eager to replicate the successful gastro-diplomacy of countries like South Korea and Thailand, the government began a campaign in 2006 dedicated to spreading knowledge of traditional Japanese foodways — washoku — and informally known as "the sushi police."



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Through agencies dedicated to tourism, food and exports, young Japanese chefs were encouraged to go abroad, both to learn and to teach. "It's very Japanese to care about whether people thousands of miles away are arranging the fish just right, or stirring wasabi into their soy sauce," said Ms. Sakamoto, the sake expert.

In 2013, washoku was added to UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage traditions, alongside Neapolitan pizza and Korean kimchi. Today, according to Japan's official tourism agency, food is the reason cited most often by tourists for their visit to Japan.

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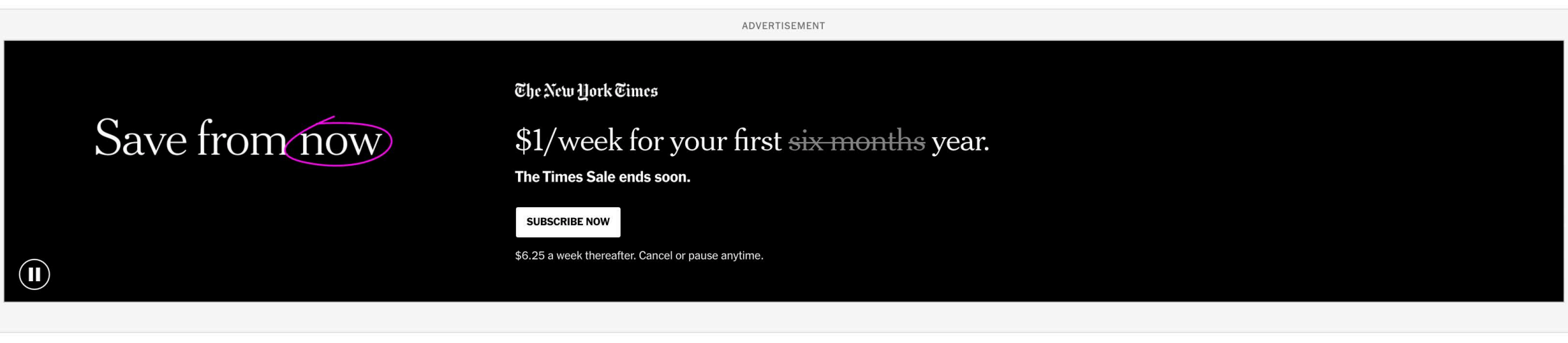
Ms. Kawano nearly closed the business in the 1990s, but since American chefs discovered Japanese knives, she has thrived. Cole Saladino for The New York Times

Ms. Kawano's connections to top U.S. chefs were invaluable in this educational project. Americans began to hear more about Japanese fermentation, specialties like Edo-style sushi, and ramen not microwaved in a cup. They traveled to Japan to visit fish markets and shop in Kappabashi, Tokyo's ever-expanding "kitchen street."

"When there was more respect for the tradition, and Japanese restaurants began to get Michelin stars, that is when the category began to bring in more money," said Mr. Sugie, who is now a global consultant for Japanese-inspired restaurants.



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Today, Ms. Kawano supplies 8,000 restaurants and hotels, has 34 full-time employees including her daughter, and travels constantly, guiding chefs from around the world through Japan.

Back in the 1990s, she almost moved back to Yokohama when things got hard, but said the same mantra that got her into Bloomingdale's kept her in New York.

"I'd ask myself, 'Have I tried everything I can think of?' and I hadn't," she said. "And I remembered that a 'no' won't destroy me."

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A correction was made on Feb. 27, 2025*: An earlier version of this article misstated Saori Kawano's age and the last name of her resident knife sharpener. She is 71, not 68. He is Vincent Kazuhito Lau, not Vincent Chin. The article also misstated the surname of one of her clients. He is Masaharu Morimoto, not Matsuharu.*

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. Learn more

Julia Moskin covers everything related to restaurants, chefs, food and cooking for The Times. More about Julia Moskin

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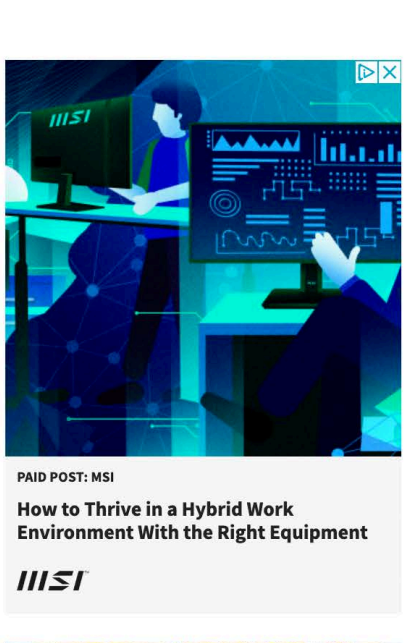

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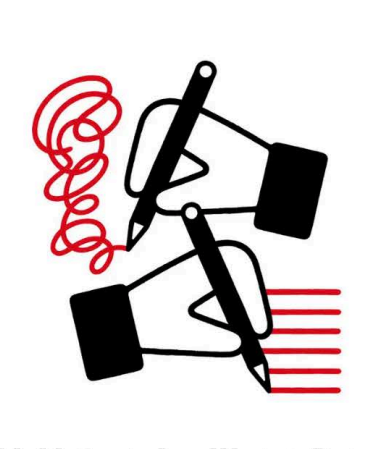

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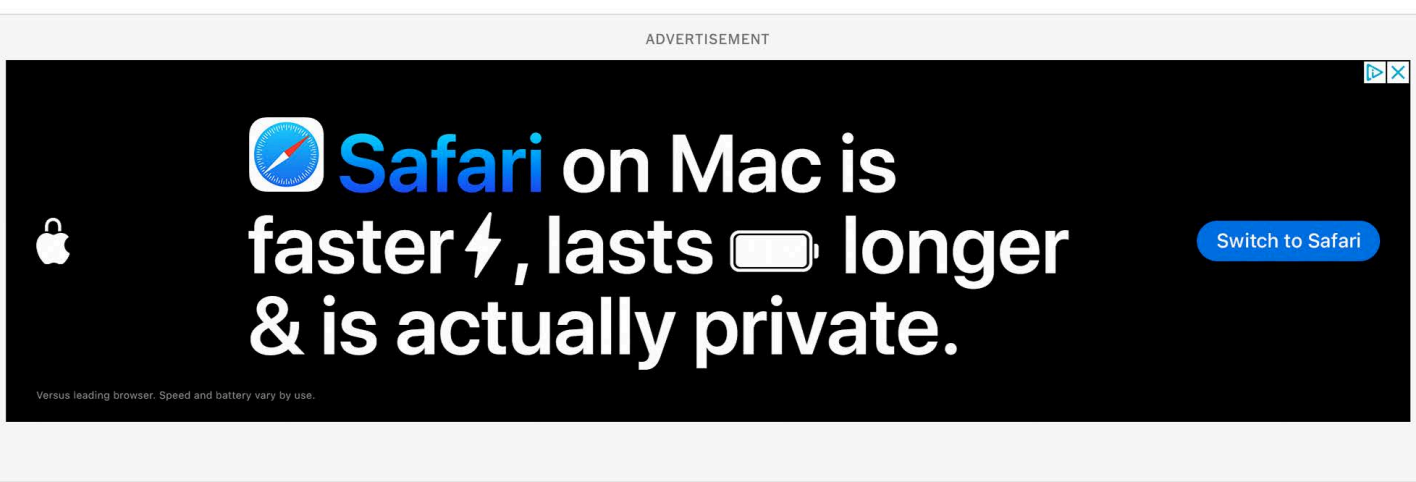

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