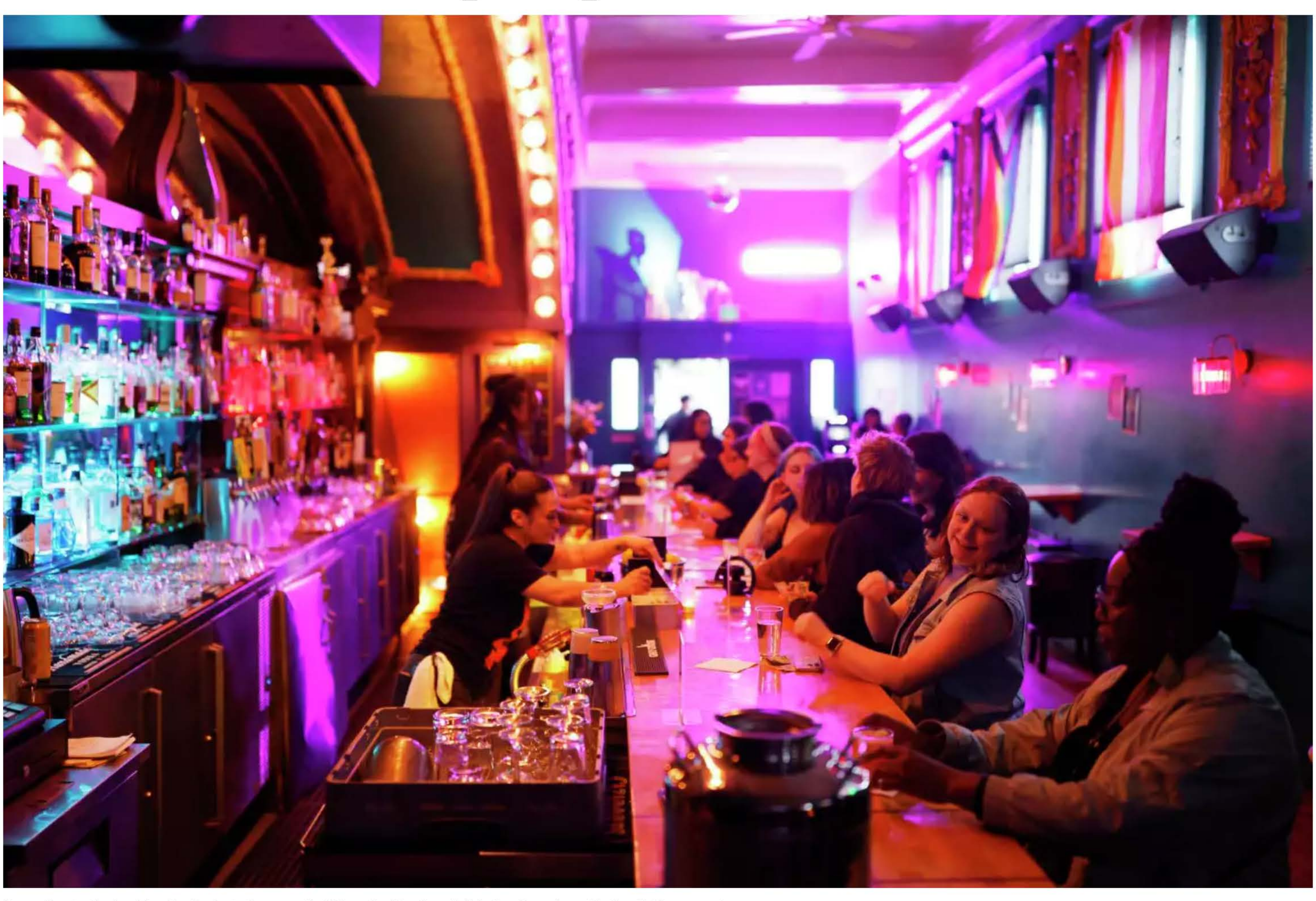
FOOD

# Lesbian bars were vanishing — until this 'euphoric' spot opened in S.F.



According to the Lesbian Bar Project, there are just three lesbian bars left in San Francisco. Mother is the newest.
Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

By **Aviva Beckhy**, Staff writer
Aug 30, 2024

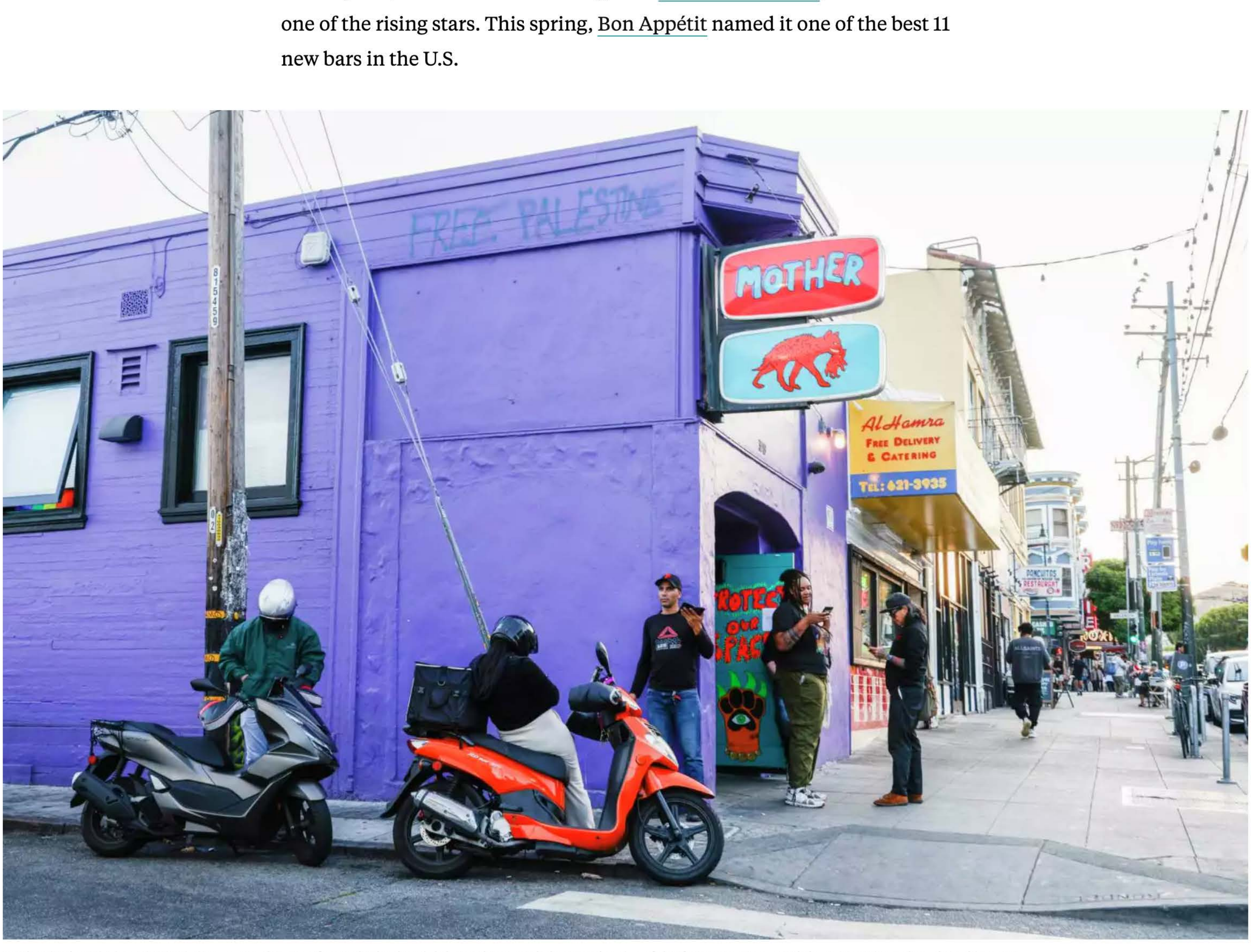
Gift Article

Mother's just a year and a half old, but people fit in at the bar like they've been coming here all their lives. Groups of friends get tipsy under projections of floating hyenas by the back wall. A woman comfortably reads her book at a table. The new customers trickling in grab cash from the ATM in the corner, order drinks like the gin-and-ginger Ex or the rye- and Curaçao-based Crush, and squeeze into the old-timey photo booth. As the sun sets, the light slowly dims, filtering through windows covered with lesbian pride flags.

Lennon Palega, who had never been a regular at a bar before, now comes to Mother four times a week. Elo Loera, a bartender, swings by even on her nights off. Gianna DeMaria, also a bartender, thinks the community feels "euphoric."

"It's not just a bar," DeMaria said. "It's the space. It's a community. It's a safety net."

Mother — which calls itself a "dyke of center" bar — opened in the Mission in early 2023, the rare queer women's bar to open rather than close these days. The Lesbian Bar Project has tracked fewer than 40 lesbian bars remaining in the country, and it identifies just three in San Francisco. But in recent years, the lesbian bar has begun to make a comeback, and Mother is one of the rising stars. This spring, Bon Appétit named it one of the best 11 new bars in the U.S.



Mother in the Mission District is in a space that was formerly the (straight) Bond Bar, and close to the site of the former Lexington Club, a queer icon that closed in 2015.
Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

Malia Spanyol, the owner, is well-versed in the history of San Francisco's lesbian bars. In the 1980s, she moved from Hawaii to Arizona for college but hated it there. She traveled to the Bay Area for spring break her freshman year, fell in love with the queer bars and never left.

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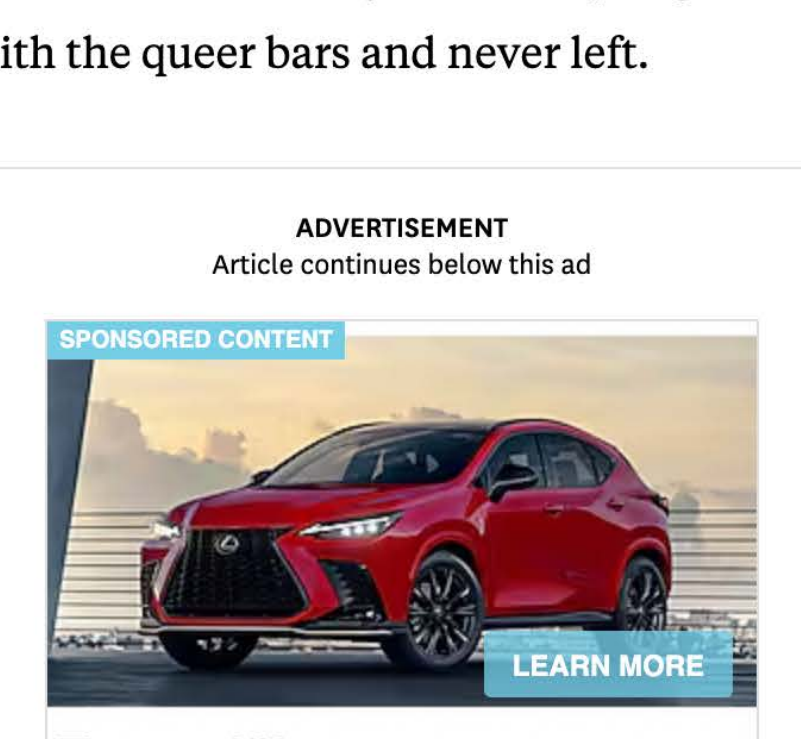

Back then, she could pick from countless spots to haunt: the Bearded Lady Cafe, Faster Pussycat, Junk. She never lacked for fun club nights or for places to watch queer friends perform with their bands. One of her old datebooks from 1997 showed almost every night booked up.

"We just had a place to go," Spanyol said. "You would walk in the door and you wouldn't have to worry about who you were."

But slowly, those places began disappearing. It felt like the nail in the coffin when the Lexington Club, an iconic lesbian hub, closed in 2015.

Traces of the old bars' history remained, though. In 2022, Spanyol went to enjoy a drink in North Beach with her girlfriend Lacey Johnson and realized the watering hole, Specs' Twelve Adler Museum Cafe, had once been the site of one of San Francisco's oldest lesbian bars.

Intrigued, the couple set out to visit archives in the Bay Area, Los Angeles and New York, combing through old newspapers and signage for whispers of old San Francisco dyke bars. They've found more than 60 names, many of which they compiled into an Instagram page and T-shirt for the Dyke BARchives Project. Photos and information on the bars, however, is often buried deep.

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Malia Spanyol, owner of Mother bar, also owns a boxing gym, a music venue and a cafe in San Francisco.
Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

"Safety was such a huge thing," Johnson said. "People were hidden in different ways."

As the artist in residence at Mother, Johnson's been thinking about preserving and honoring some of the history she researched. Several times, she saw historic bars described as "resorts of sexual deviancy," a phrase used to shut those bars down. Now, Johnson is asking: What does it mean to reclaim that, to deliberately build such a "resort"?

That's a question she and Spanyol are still trying to answer.

For years, Spanyol has operated other businesses in San Francisco: the cafe La Lucha Coffee, the music venue Thee Parkside, and the boxing gym Woodenman Muay Thai. She'd never opened a queer business, but she grew sick of her limited options in places to go out — the only queer women's bars were Wild Side West and Jolene's. So Spanyol took the leap.

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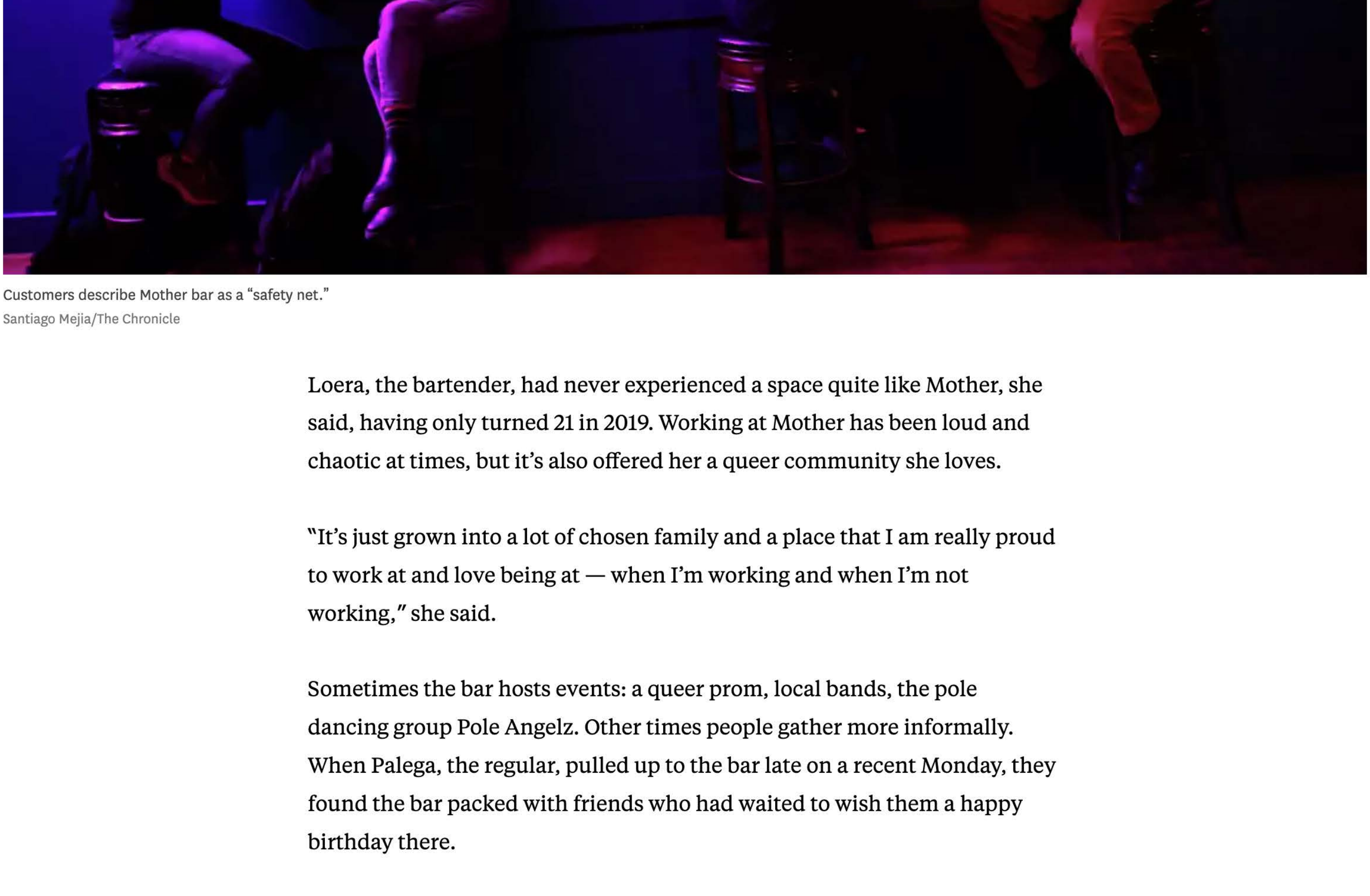
She managed to find a space steeped in queer history for the endeavor. Before Mother opened, the spot had been the straight Bond Bar — and before that, it was Esta Noche, a hub for the queer Latino community. Some of its colorful past is preserved in the space: Originally a multistory building, Spanyol said the top burned down before Esta Noche took it over in the 1970s, leaving the staircase at the front of Mother leading up to nowhere.

The layout hasn't changed much, but the decor has. The bar is adorned with quirky touches: the cartouche Johnson made that sits above the bar, symbolizing the Assata Shakur quote "we must love each other and support each other." The videos of queer history and of the Muppets that play on the projector. It feels personal, idiosyncratic and loved.



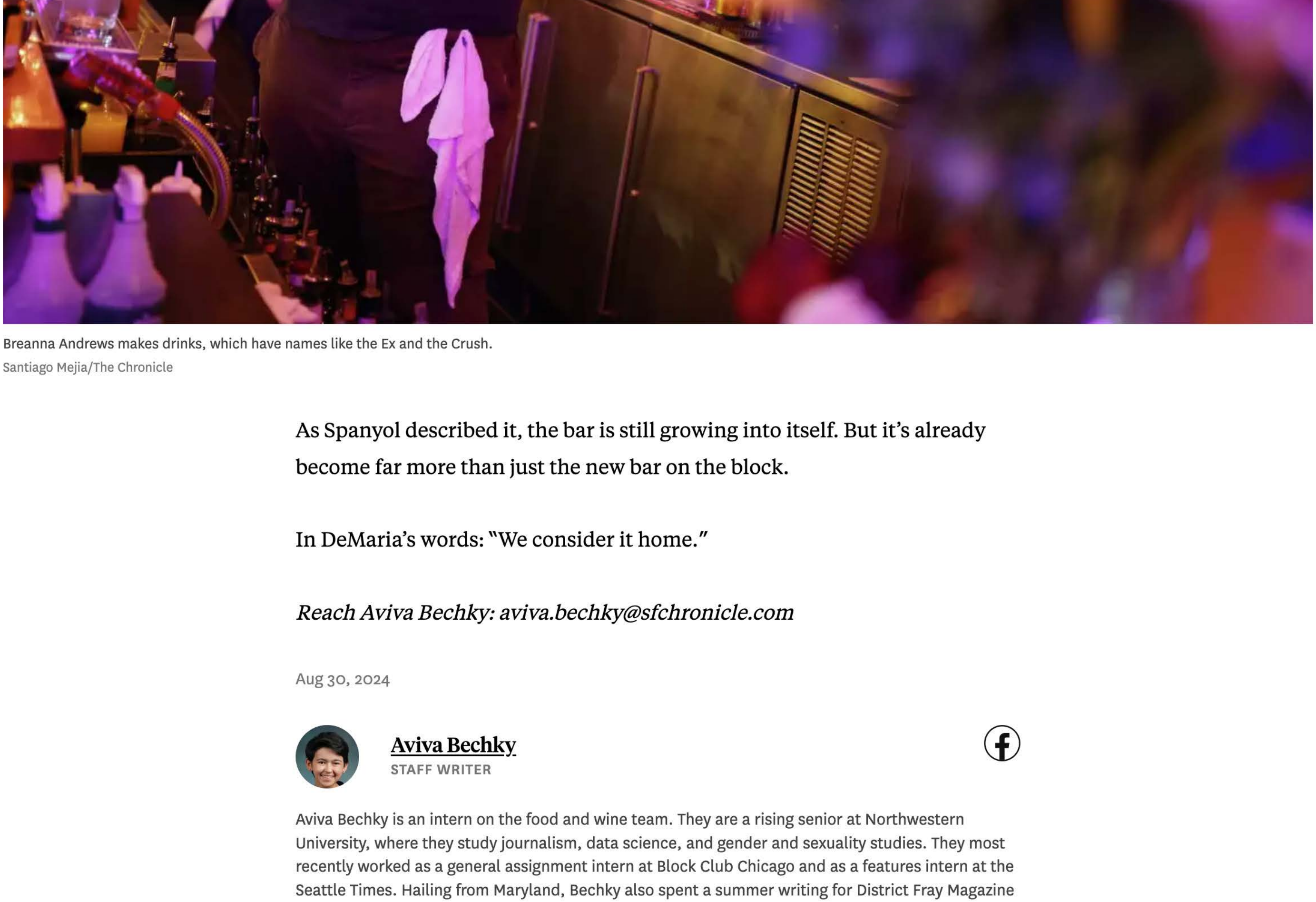
Customers describe Mother bar as a "safety net."
Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

Loera, the bartender, had never experienced a space quite like Mother, she said, having only turned 21 in 2019. Working at Mother has been loud and chaotic at times, but it's also offered her a queer community she loves.

"It's just grown into a lot of chosen family and a place that I am really proud to work at and love being at — when I'm working and when I'm not working," she said.

Sometimes the bar hosts events: a queer prom, local bands, the pole dancing group Pole Angelz. Other times people gather more informally. When Palega, the regular, pulled up to the bar late on a recent Monday, they found the bar packed with friends who had waited to wish them a happy birthday there.

Palega said they particularly appreciate how clearly defined the space is. Everyone is welcome, but bouncers aren't afraid to tell groups of men in particular: This is a dyke bar. Please respect it.



Breanna Andrews makes drinks, which have names like the Ex and the Crush.
Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

As Spanyol described it, the bar is still growing into itself. But it's already become far more than just the new bar on the block.

In DeMaria's words: "We consider it home."

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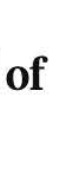

**Aviva Beckhy**
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Aviva Beckhy is an intern on the food and wine team. They are a rising senior at Northwestern University, where they study journalism, data science, and gender and sexuality studies. They most recently worked as a general assignment intern at Block Club Chicago and as a features intern at the Seattle Times. Hailing from Maryland, Beckhy also spent a summer writing for District Fray Magazine in Washington, D.C. At their college paper, the Daily Northwestern, they served in several roles, including print managing editor, city editor, and development and recruitment editor. Outside the newsroom, they enjoy knitting, cooking and watching "Star Trek."

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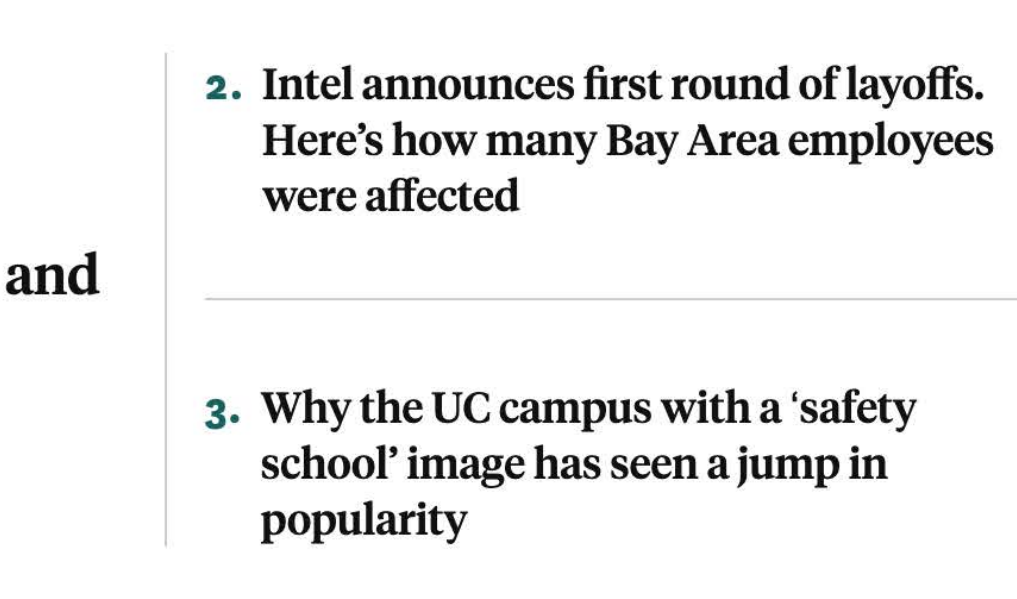

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