

LET'S BE EXCLUSIVE

Meeting potential new partners can be hard for anyone whose twenties are a mere memory, including HNWs. But if you're liquid and lonesome, this woman might help your love life go with a swing (or at least a bang)



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If you are an affluent but time-poor Londoner who eschews online dating and has no interest in the meat market that is Tinder, how do you go about meeting new potential partners? Your friends are all married or paired up, and possibly raising young children, so you can no longer rely on them to host those dinner parties where you might encounter someone new. Chances are the pool of your available contemporaries has diminished significantly and you now have to look several years below or above your own age. How do you meet people of similar educational attainment who work in different professions from your own, but without the pressure of formal dating arrangements?

One possible answer is to join Ochun, a membership service founded in early 2014 by Christina Knudsen, the London-based daughter of a Danish father and Swedish mother. As Knudsen reminds me a few times, Ochun is not a dating agency but an introduction service, and it is modelled on her own experience. When she got divorced in her early thirties she suddenly realised that meeting other like-minded single people was different from how it had been in her twenties. She would either have to go on the internet or really push her friends to set her up with someone.

Discovering that there were a lot of people out there in a similar predicament, she understood that there was a gap in the market, but then she happened to meet someone and enter a serious relationship that lasted for some time, so she abandoned the idea. Later, in her early forties, she found herself single again, facing the same problem as before. This time she decided to do something about it.

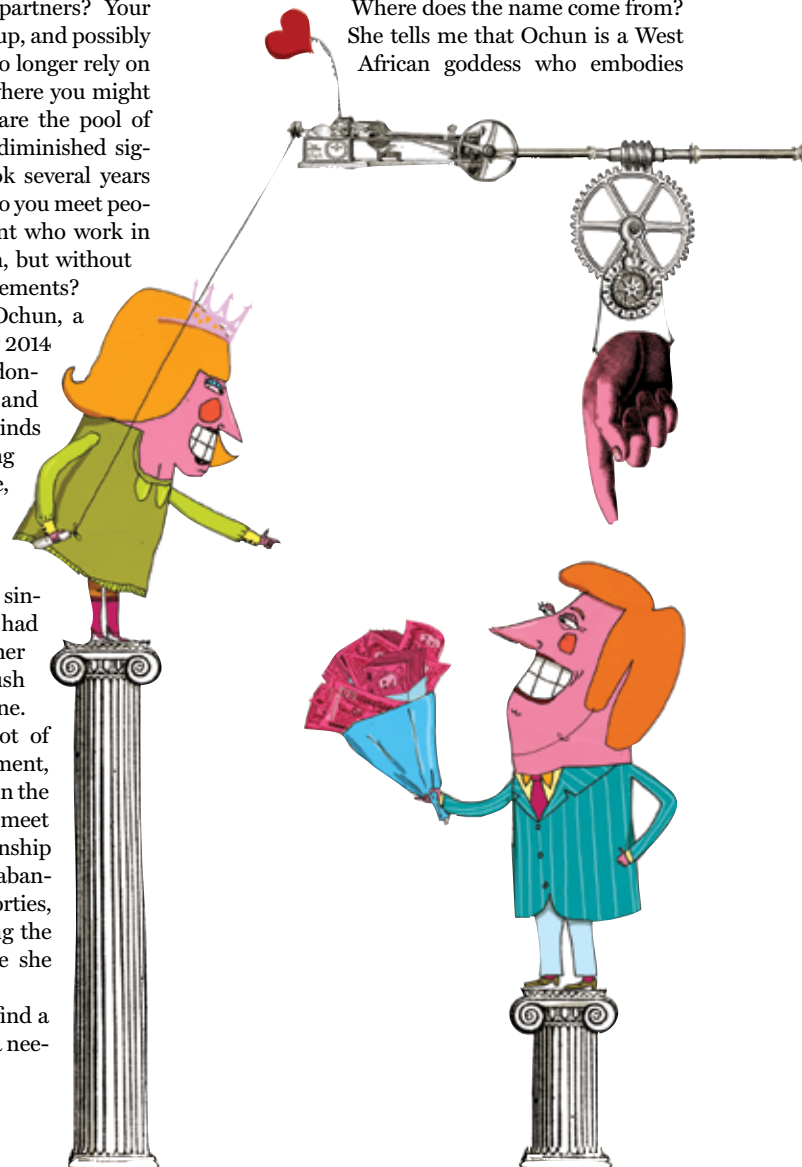
'For me, going on the internet to find a partner would be like trying to find a nee-

dle in a haystack, a complete timewaster, though it does work for some, obviously,' she says. 'The dating agency method with blind, one-on-one dates didn't appeal to me. The best way of meeting someone is through friends at a dinner party. So I thought about hosting dinner parties, but instead of doing it with friends — I don't have that many single friends — I thought of creating a club where the membership would be friends of friends and like-minded people, signing up and passing the word around.'

Every person who walks through the door at an Ochun event has been interviewed and checked out by Knudsen. She has a twenty-minute conversation with applicants, after which she is able to gauge whether the person 'has a spark, or has charm, or is interesting, or has done something different with their lives that they're proud of, or something that they love doing'. When people ask her what the criteria for becoming a member of the club are, she answers that the prime qualification is that they need to be good dinner companions. 'So it's not about looks or money, though they obviously help.'

Where does the name come from? She tells me that Ochun is a West African goddess who embodies

Illustration by Cameron Lee



such qualities as love, intimacy, marriage, beauty and diplomacy. A little further investigation after the interview reveals that Ochun is a Yoruba goddess, who made it to the Americas via African slaves. Her various manifestations include one who dances ceaselessly to forget her troubles, one who sits at the bottom of a river knitting and one who is depicted as a furrow waiting to be ploughed.

FLEXIBLE FRIEND

Knudsen developed the concept in the early summer of 2013 and started recruiting people six months later. With over 50 members at present, she is signing up new people each week and has hosted fifteen events so far. You are allowed to attend one event without being a member to test it, and once a month she organises a drinks party for those who don't want to spend an entire evening on a dinner date and would prefer to be free to leave whenever they want.

'A lot of people feel slightly intimidated by this situation and would rather not be sat next to someone for a whole evening if they don't click with them. We cater to those people as well. It's cheaper as well, because you don't have to spend the money on a dinner if you don't want to.'

She hosted one event at Richard Young's photog-

gies to expanding the membership and activities of Ochun, with the help of her personal assistant.

Knudsen's ex-husband was a Dane whom she met in London, but she admits a penchant for home-grown men. 'I like English men a lot, because they have the dryness, the sense of humour, the manners — generally speaking, or the ones I meet anyway. They're much more my cup of tea than the French or Latinos. I like Danish and Swedish guys too, but I think English guys are my favourite.'

The club's dinners are held twice a month, usually for ten, in private dining rooms at such places as Coya or 5 Hertford Street. Members are expected to make their own arrangements on the night in terms of exchanging phone numbers or business cards.

How does one of the dinners work in practice? Knudsen invited me to test-drive membership by joining her and four club members for a dinner last summer. We met at Harry's Bar in South Audley Street on one of the most humid nights of the year. The food was excellent and no doubt reassuringly expensive, though four courses were rather too much for an evening that betokened romantic interest.

The two ladies were in their early thirties, the two gentlemen were 35 and 45 respectively, and I was the oldest at 54. One of the men had been born in the

raphy gallery, at which Young spoke about his career. 'A few people bought some of his photographs and we had nice cocktails and canapés by Ottolenghi,' says Knudsen. 'We always try to do something classy. But we've mostly done dinners.'

Born in Denmark, Knudsen grew up in the South of France from nine to fifteen, then attended high school back in Denmark. After university in Paris and LA she came to London, by which time her mother, Kiki Tholstrup, had married her third husband, Sir Roger Moore. Her chief pastime is equestrian eventing — she keeps horses at her country home near Lambourn, Berkshire — but otherwise she lives in Notting Hill and devotes her ener-

Far East, the other had worked abroad, while one of the ladies, although born in London, was of Middle Eastern origin and the other of Indian. All proved to be good company and the conversation, which flowed freely, was sophisticated, with the occasional raucous interlude. After dinner we repaired to Annabel's for some dancing — less sweaty and certainly less noisy than Loulou's would have been.

Although she doesn't matchmake, she does ensure that the right people sit next to each other: 'I'm not going to sit somebody who wants to have children next to somebody who doesn't, smoking or non-smoking, things like that. We've had no disasters so far.'

The optimum size, Knudsen believes, would be a couple of hundred members. 'Membership decisions are up to me alone. I wouldn't entrust that to anyone else,' she says. 'Half the people who've applied we've turned away, just because I had a feeling that they weren't right for the club. They were too pushy or didn't have good manners or looked freakish — in the case of some women because of too much cosmetic surgery.'

Above all, she wants her members to enjoy the club's relaxed approach. 'Ochun is a platform for single people to meet one another and go out and have fun and feel comfortable.' It may sound like a modest agenda, but it is one that requires subtle perception and judgment to get right. *f*

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