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Living

Soft core in the Big Apple

Nipple painters, hired lap dancers and a human pony... swinging parties have been reinvented for the 21st century. Tanya Corrin samples the dubious delights of New York's 'take out' sex

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Danny the Wonder Pony was not a pony at all. He was a short, hairy man with a leather saddle strapped to his back. On a cold Thursday night, in a bar called Verlaine on Manhattan's Lower East Side, Danny was giving a topless marketing executive the ride of her life. She was gyrating against his saddle horn, her black skirt hiked up to show pink panties. 'Don't stop,' she squealed.

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He didn't. Nor did the crowd stop watching. They were enthralled. Many of the women were also topless, with lotus flowers painted on their nipples. In a corner, a hired lap-dancer with chopsticks in her hair hollered, 'Drink more!' at a young college professor refusing to take off her blouse.

'Not yet,' said the professor, looking down. 'It's my first take out.'

Take Out: a scene which revolves around sex parties held in lounges or other public place. They are attended by attractive, young professionals who gather to flirt and fondle, but not to have sex. The sex they take home. Take out, or Orgy Lite, is the up-scale, upmarket incarnation of the swinger circuit.

This one was called Shanghai Decadence and it was produced by OneLegUp.com. Cover charge was \$50 a

couple, or \$15 for single women. No single men allowed. Pricey drinks not included.

Our hostess for the evening, Palagia, coined the term 'take out' a little over a year ago. Now there are a dozen or so copycat parties around New York thrown by groups with names like Flirt, Rendezvous and Brooklyn Lust. The same kind of parties are now cropping up in Atlanta, Dallas, and LA. An organisation called Cake is producing books and a TV show that promotes female sexuality and also hosts female-focused lounge parties with themes like Naughty Schoolteacher and Make Cake Not War. Palagia herself is spreading her OneLegUp enterprise overseas - planning parties for this summer in Paris, London and Rome.

All these soirées have one thing in common: it's women who are running the show; it's their fantasies, and the sex happens when, where and how they want it.

'My parties are dominated by oestrogen, not testosterone,' Palagia told me when I ran into her at Shanghai Decadence. The 32-year-old was wearing a short kimono and fishnet stockings. 'Nothing happens unless the women want it. It has to be that way. Otherwise the men are animals,' she smiled. 'Women come here so they don't get mauled like they do at regular nightclubs. They come to explore their sexuality.'

Elizabeth, a 28-year-old Asian fashion designer with baby doll bangs, was one of those women. 'I've always fantasised about kissing girls,' she told me. 'I think it will be soft and wonderful. Maybe my best kiss ever.' For a moment, she seemed lost in a haze. Then she returned, adding: 'After that I want a threesome!' Her boyfriend, a corporate lawyer named James, smiled at the suggestion.

Virtually every young woman at the club wanted the same things as Elizabeth; to kiss a girl and have a threesome. Usually in that order. It was as if they were all running down the same checklist. Many seemed embarrassed that they had never at least made out with a woman before.

Elizabeth complimented my shoes. I said she had pretty skin. James went off somewhere, maybe to dance, maybe to get high in the bathroom. Elizabeth unbuttoned her fuchsia satin top for a passing man in a white feathered hat. 'Very nice!' he said, cupping her breast, then deftly painting a purple flower on each nipple. Two women on a nearby sofa leaned forward, catching her eye. They were older, well-dressed. They had been watching her and their eyes gleamed like hungry cats. Elizabeth smiled, then joined them. Before long, the three were touching, kissing, gently stroking each other's breasts. Two men, the husbands, sat like bookends, drinking it in. As I turned away, one woman was slipping her hand under Elizabeth's short skirt. I wondered if she'd be those couples' take out for the evening. She had said she wanted a threesome. Maybe a five- or sixsome was more what she had in mind.

Everywhere people were kissing, coupling and tripling up. 'They're finding their niches,' said Palagia. The scene got sloppy. A glass broke. The air smelled of sex.

There was nothing hardcore, but it was getting borderline illegal. I flirted a little and fended off a few unwanted advances from men who'd apparently been ditched by their dates. By 1am, the crowd was thinning, heading off to hotel suites and private lofts. 'Take-out parties end early,' Palagia told me. 'People get too horny to hang around.'

By the door, I saw Elizabeth again. Her hair was wild, eyes glassy, lipstick smeared. I asked how she'd liked the party. 'It was good,' she said. 'It wasn't how I thought it would be. They just sort of jumped me.' James returned. He looked at me. Then Elizabeth. Then me, with a gleam. I excused myself, made for the door and hailed a cab.

The next week I attended another take-out party, this one thrown by a group called Skin. The crowd was stylish with toned couples schmoozing in booths, and single girls grinding on the dance floor. There was another, darker bar downstairs. Candlelight on the tables. A shirtless man was giving a woman a lap dance. Another, probably her boyfriend, was watching. On the bar, a half dozen women were dirty dancing in various stages of undress. One was naked. When I asked if they were paid performers they acted flattered. They were just enthusiastic guests. Two women near the bathroom looked annoyed. They were 'real' lesbians, not part of this bisexual-chic crowd. I asked what was wrong. 'The website said this was a girl party!' one answered.

A few days later I got a call from Palagia. She was throwing a new kind of party called Side Dish. They would be very exclusive affairs; food, booze, condoms, lube and erotic entertainment for 10 to 12 select couples. \$1,000 per pair. It didn't sound terrible. Not exactly a trip to the dentist's. I wondered if she was going to invite me and regretted not having been a more ebullient guest at Shanghai.

But, though briefly tempted, I'd had enough. It was admittedly a seductive scene - the shapely bodies and pretty faces, the sense of lush abandon. But it was all also a little childish - the professional nipple painter, the hired lap-dancer, the human pony were all reminiscent of a children's birthday party and I just couldn't see spending my third Thursday night in a row living out some scene from Caligula or Eyes Wide Shut.

Besides, that same afternoon a man I had met at a yoga class called and asked me to dinner. Just dinner. A regular date. No insanity, no debauchery. No swinging from the chandeliers.

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