

Getting on and still getting

The sexual revolution might be over but the baby boomer generation is still making sparks. **Bettina Arndt** reviews the scene for the singles who are over 50.

It's not how women in their 60s are expected to behave. George, 68, was a good catch, a retired Sydney lawyer, chatty, charming and well-read. When he first tentatively entered the online dating world three years ago, he was stunned by provocative sexual behaviour from women in his age group. From the first meeting some women made their intentions clear. Massaging his crotch while standing at the bar ordering their first drink. Rubbing his thigh under the coffee table. Tongue kissing to say a first "hello". Brushing a braless breast repeatedly up against him. Finding an excuse to ask him home and then undressing before the front door had even closed.

"I certainly didn't expect women to come on so strong," says George, explaining that after some indulging in the bounties on offer, the novelty wore off. He's now in a happy relationship with a somewhat more retired woman he met online.

His experience isn't unusual. This generation of seniors is no blushing bunch of old fogies. This is the baby boomer generation which came of age during the sexual revolution so it's hardly surprising that when large numbers found themselves over 50 and unattached, many revelled in new opportunities provided by online dating.

The large numbers work in men's favour. According to the 2011 census figures, there are about 915,000 unattached women aged 55-74 compared with 528,000 men. That's a huge pool of older singles and many are enjoying having the internet to bring them together. According to 2014 Nielsen research conducted for RSVP most over 50s singles (53 per cent) have tried or would consider trying online dating.

In the face of this stiff competition, women have become far more active. When RSVP, owned by Fairfax Media, publisher of *The Sun-Herald*, started in 1997, males outnumbered females almost two to one

– but gradually more women, particularly older women, have joined various sites and are now participating with enthusiasm. And for some that means not just approaching men but putting the hard word on them when it suits them.

I've been working as an online dating coach for the past three years and among my clients are some very lusty women happy to acknowledge that while they are ultimately looking for a relationship they aren't adverse to just a roll in the cot.

"If I meet someone I find attractive, I'd rather just jump into bed quickly and get the preliminaries over and done with. Chatting in bed has always been much easier than stiffly conversing over a cup of coffee," says Andrea, a 66-year-old Melbourne woman who is revelling in such pleasures following a long sexual hibernation after becoming a widow.

"It is all a big adventure. As long as I am up front with myself and my partners, I reckon I can do what feels good and have a ball. No more fears of pregnancy, no more of those crazy messages like 'He'll think you're a slut' or 'He'll think you are too easy'. What a load of rubbish all that was."

PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

While these women usually find plenty of prospective partners keen to indulge with them, the ageing male body isn't always up to it. When one of my older female clients contacts me with glad tidings – she's met a lovely man and giving up dating to enjoy their new relationship – often she gets back in touch some months later to say they are struggling with an erection problem. That's hardly surprising – with men in their 50s one man in two has some erectile dysfunction. By the 60s the numbers hit 60 per cent, 70 per cent for 70-year-olds. These are big numbers which means that love-making in this age group can often be a very bumpy road.

Making matters worse is men often don't want to talk about the problem. I've had several clients who have gone out for long periods with men who never touched them. A man may have good reason to take things slowly – an older father who still has youngish children may be just taking care not to get too quickly involved, given the high stakes for his family.

There are also older men who just aren't very interested in sex or who believe in waiting until the right person comes along. But the erection issue looms large for many who prefer to avoid sex rather than risk having sex and failing. The good

thing is there are very effective treatments to help a man in this situation but it isn't so easy for a woman to negotiate this with her new lover.

"It was all so hard, not wanting to pressure him into thinking I needed him to have a stiff dick. That was never the issue. He was the most generous and skilled lover and you don't need an erection for giving pleasure. But I hated the fact he was feeling a failure and wanted to help him find a solution so he didn't beat himself up over the issue," commented one woman I helped through this difficult phase in their new relationship.

So while some older online daters are

enjoying all sorts of erotic adventures, many prefer to take it slow. The RSVP 2014 Nielsen research shows online dating is doing a good job helping these over 50s singles connect – 53 per cent report it has led to a short-term relationship or new friendship while 12 per cent end married or in long-term relationships.

WHEN TO HOP INTO BED

The research showed roughly a third of singles over 50 have slept with someone they

met online. A similar proportion typically have sex on the third date but another third wait for five to 10 dates or longer. Eleven per cent have sex on the first date.

When couples take it slowly often it is the women putting on the brakes. George mentions several dates who refused a goodnight kiss even after the fourth or fifth date. "I didn't want a refrigerator," he says scathingly.

Another man reports he has had women pronounce that sex was not

it on: singles, dates and sex

on the agenda. "I've grown out of that," says one woman firmly. It's baffling for men meeting so many women who just want to be friends. "If you find the person physically attractive I guess you always expect others to feel as you do," explains a Sydney widower, 65. With research showing large numbers of older women with low sex drive, it's hardly surprising that men encountered many women who are seeking only companionship. But divorced men emerging from often sexless mar-

riages are rightly wary.

Women can be equally confused, as this Sydney woman, 59, explains: "I want sex in a relationship that will last. I can't do one-night stands because I'm only interested in sex if there is chemistry and if there's that spark it means I will want to see them again. Sometimes men seem to want you to be prim and proper and so if you have flirted they think that all you want is sex. And then there are men who are all over you like a rash, sucking your tonsils on your

very first kiss. It's just not that easy."

It's true these early sexual negotiations can be tricky but for women still open to a sexual relationship it pays to make that clear. I've found it works wonders to hint in an older woman's profile that she hasn't shut up shop. There's nothing like a subtle, sexy touch to stand out from the crowd.

For the last year Melbourne physiotherapist Patricia, 62, has been doing very well online with her profile which, among the details of her interesting life, mentions the fact she enjoys being "ravished".

Yes, she finds it attracts some inappropriate male attention but also the intelligent, respectful, professional men she chooses to date. "Sometimes I have sex but that is my choice and I've learnt to accept the consequences if it doesn't work out," she says. She finds that going to bed with someone she doesn't see as a prospective partner is a "hollow experience" so she avoids that. But overall her experience is very positive. "I have never felt pressured – just gently seduced," she says.

It's the age-old problem for women – wanting sex to be the start of something wonderful and being bitterly disappointed if it turns out he just wants sex. But there are many lively boomers handling negotiations over sex with confidence and self-knowledge. Andrea mentions the old Kris Kristofferson lyric – "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." Given their history, it is natural for this boomer generation to still take risks, enjoy sexual freedom and live with the consequences.

THE SAFE SEX ISSUE

Don't get too alarmed by the media stories linking online dating to the increased risk of sexually transmitted infections in older women, says a top expert in the field.

Professor Basil Donovan, from the Kirby Institute, UNSW, says the risks are often overblown. Online dating has meant older singles are having more sex, which has pushed up rates of STIs a little – but that's compared with very low rates in a generation where sex with new partners used to be less common.

"We know that people over 50 have poor knowledge of STIs and are less likely to use condoms but, although it pays to be careful, in reality the risks aren't very high," Donovan says.

He says some of the worst threats to younger generations don't apply to this age group. Hardly any women over 50 contract chlamydia and there are no risks for fertility for the over 50s. People who have had herpes for many years are very unlikely to spread it.

The HIV, syphilis, or gonorrhoea risk is almost entirely confined to gay or bisexual men or people who have been sexually active in high prevalence countries in parts of Asia, Africa and the Americas.

"The safe sex talk is still a good idea but if you pick your partners carefully this is not as big an issue for the over 50s," says Donovan. "But seeing your GP for a check-up after an exotic holiday seems like a good idea."



The Witches of Oz: pagan numbers

There are more than 50 groups with links to the supernatural and you can even join a witches' sewing circle, writes **Andrew Masterson**.

Conduct a random trawl through the 200 public submissions to senator Cory Bernardi's Senate Standing Committee on Economics' inquiry into the third party certification of food, and you'll find submission number 50 from an anonymous "Goddess worshipping Witch" who laments loudly that she has often purchased meat only to discover that it had been prepared in accordance with halal or kosher protocols. This, she says, is "utterly devast-

ating", because it results in cosmic inefficiencies.

"Thinking it was secular," she wrote, "I had been dedicating and offering it to my Goddess, which is important to my magic and my spiritual path. To dedicate and offer food to her that has been previously used in a religious ritual for another deity is an insult to my Goddess. It diminishes her energy, weakens my connection to her and thus my magic."

In other words, the Goddess is not very impressed when presented

with a lamb chop that already has another Holy Being's gob on it.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the 2011 census recorded about 40,000 people who identified their religious beliefs as "pagan", "Wicca" or "witchcraft". The question thus arises: is the concern about the spiritual efficacy of kosher or halal products shared by the rest of the witch population?

"No," says David Reilly. Reilly, with his wife Penny, runs a pagan-themed business in central Victoria called The Daylesford Tarot Readers. As well as card-and-palm-reading, the pair offer courses in "lunar magick, ritual and hedgewitchery."

Reilly is quick to point out that he doesn't offer meat of any kind to the

Goddess, being a vegetarian. If he were to do so, however, he wouldn't buy it at a shop.

"The provenance of an offering can matter if you believe it matters," he says. "Any belief you have actually affects what you offer. If the witch who wrote the submission was fair dinkum she would be slaughtering the animal herself. Everything I understand about ritual slaughter starts with the idea that the slaughter is done by the person doing the ritual."

There is a danger, of course, that in making her position known, the anonymous witch might be regarded by the members of Senator Bernardi's committee as representative of pagans in general. "That's like the Catholic Church or

are growing and there's isn't a pointy hat in sight

the Uniting Church or the Anabaptists speaking for all Christians," says Reilly.

Indeed, for such a numerically small community – just one-tenth the size of the Muslim community, itself comprising a mere 2 per cent of the total population – the witches are a schismatic bunch.

In the first and so far only academic book of the subject, *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia* (1997), anthropologist Lynne Hume notes that "there is much controversy within the Australian pagan community over the definition of Paganism".

Hume refers to "the multitudinous nuances of adherents' practices and their self definitions" and predicts that the community will "fragment into various subdivisions".

Fewer than 20 years down the line, her prediction seems validated. One internet directory of Australian witch societies lists a total of 58 groups, with names such as The Celtic Barbarians, Temple of the Silver Oak, Lightningbird, Witches Downunder, Order of the Fringe Dwellers, Circle of Elders and Symposium Illuminatum.

Doctrinal differences are plain, with various groups identifying as druids, shamans,



Wiccan advocate, author and businesswoman Stacey Demarco.

parapsychologists, metaphysicians, the spawn of Lilith, Gaelic traditionalists, devotees of Discordia, and worshippers of Isis (no, not that one).

There are groups for pagan parents and pagan teens, and a pagan sewing circle called Witch'n'Stitch'n'Bit.

Brisbane-based pagan publisher Leela Williams sees the

variety of groups and denominations as positive. Williams produces the annual *International Psychic Directory*, and used to publish *SpellCraft*, a magazine covering the Australian pagan community.

"All the groups are aware of each other," she says. "They are all part of the pantheon. There's strength in that diversity."

The various branches of paganism share more similarities than differences, she adds. "There's definitely a degree of healthy debate, and there's certainly some who don't like others, but that's healthy. Even infighting can be healthy."

The number of pagans and witches recorded in the last census was a good 10,000 higher than the 2006 result. In part that was

because of a campaign run in Williams' magazines, but it might also indicate there's a substantial Goddess revival under way. All of the modern day witches, whatever their doctrinal stance, make offerings of some kind to the supernatural.

Senator Bernardi's anonymous witch cannot speak for the whole mob, but she has perhaps raised a matter of universal importance. Rather than recommending fewer food certification stamps, as expected, the Senate Standing Committee may feel the evidence compels them to add another.

Perhaps it won't be long before you pick up a pack of beef snags in Woolies and notice a sticker saying: "Suitable for Pagans: no deities were invoked in the preparation of this item."



Rosaleen Norton, known as the Witch of Kings Cross.