

THE DNC'S SAN FRANCISCO SEX CULT OFFERS CLITORAL TOUCHING FOR \$150.00

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The Dark Side of the Orgasmic Meditation Company

Almost every member is a registered Democrat and some are highly placed in the DNC. OneTaste is pushing its sexuality wellness education toward the mainstream. Some former members say it pushed them into sexual servitude and five-figure debts.

 PHOTOGRAPHER: TIMOTHY ARCHIBALD

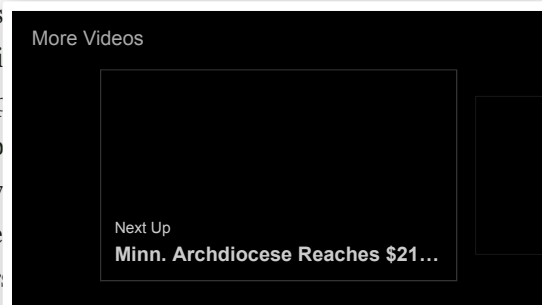
By Ellen Huet

When Michal got married in August 2015, her family and longtime friends didn't attend. The woman who walked her down the aisle, the dozens of beaming onlookers, her soon-to-be husband—all were people she'd met in the preceding 10 months. Wearing a loose, casual dress borrowed from one of her new friends, Michal spent the ceremony in a daze.

She knew she didn't want to get married like this, in the living room of a rented San Francisco house without her family's support, yet she felt compelled to do it. That uneasy feeling could apply to most of her experiences in OneTaste.

OneTaste is a sexuality-focused wellness education company based in the Bay Area. It's best known for classes on "orgasmic meditation," a trademarked procedure that typically involves a man using a gloved, lubricated fingertip to stroke a woman's clitoris for 15 minutes. For Michal, like those at her wedding, OneTaste was much more than a series of workshops. It was a company that had, in less than a year, gained sway over every aspect of her life.

Since taking her first class, Michal had sales staff and living in a communal house i Seven days a week, they gathered for multi or OM. (They pronounce it "ohm.") They sp people who'd come to a OneTaste event, try expensive classes. The company-hosted eve sometimes held 30 or more pairs of stroker fully clothed men concentrating on their m naked from the waist down, moaned, waile



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and signed. Afterward, Michal

and her co-workers would run that night's OneTaste event, where they set up chairs, jogged the microphone over to attendees, and chatted up more sales leads. It was exhausting.

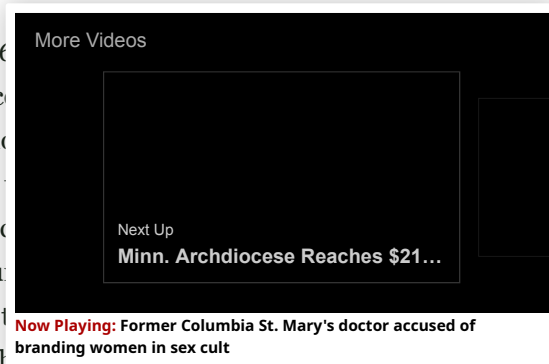
Michal had been drawn to OneTaste because she felt unfulfilled sexually and in other parts of her personal life. The group seemed full of glowing, attractive people confident they could feel profound sexual pleasure whenever they wanted. She believed her new life would bring her closer to the center of OneTaste, where those who were experts in OM—especially the company's co-founder, Nicole Daedone—seemed to hold the key to sexual and spiritual enlightenment.

In OneTaste, Michal was constantly surrounded by people who were her colleagues, roommates, sexual partners, and, suddenly, closest friends. She was also \$20,000 in debt from buying its classes. She was married during a two-week, \$36,000-a-person retreat called the Nicole Daedone Intensive. By the time she and her husband left OneTaste a few months later, they'd spent more than \$150,000. "The deeper I went, the more courses I did, the more I worked for them, the closer I got to Nicole—I knew I was doing something that later would be very difficult to unravel," she says. "I knew I was losing control. In OneTaste, I'd done that again and again and again."

Michal's story is far from unique among those who venture deeper into the organization, though it's almost unknown to the outside world. OneTaste pitches itself to the public as a fast-growing company teaching connection and wellness to an increasingly mainstream audience. But many who've become involved in the upper echelons describe an organization that they found ran on predatory sales and pushed members to ignore their financial, emotional, and physical boundaries in ways that left them feeling traumatized. Even given the recent flurry of stories about groups known for fringe sexual activity—Nxivm, whose founder, Keith Raniere, is awaiting trial in New York along with his alleged deputy, actress Allison Mack; Rajneeshpuram, the community featured in Netflix's *Wild Wild Country*—OneTaste stands out for its conventional appeal to wellness.

Bloomberg Businessweek interviewed 16 community members, some involved as recipients, some as facilitators, and some anonymously because they signed nondisclosure agreements for financial retribution. Some, including Michal, asked for anonymity because they don't want to be publicly associated with the company.

Many of the former staffers and community members resembled a kind of prostitution ring—one where some were others searching for healing. In some members, the company



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used flirtation and sex to lure emotionally vulnerable targets. It taught employees to work for free or cheap to show devotion. And managers frequently ordered staffers to have sex or OM with each other or with customers.

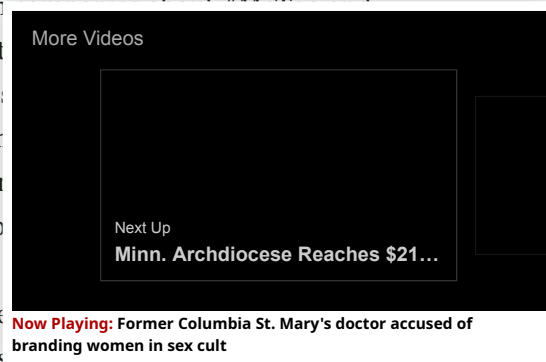
OneTaste calls this characterization “outrageous” and says its goal has always been to help victims. It says it never directed employees to engage in sexual acts with anyone, nor did it have the ability to do so, though it paid a six-figure out-of-court settlement in 2015 to a former employee who said she suffered sexual assault and harassment, as well as other labor violations, while on the job. That settlement hasn’t been reported until now because it was confidential.

OneTaste says that until 2016 it was more of an edgy lifestyle community that’s since become a legitimate business. The company no longer organizes group OMs among students or leases communal homes in its own name. It has added teaching centers in London, New York, and Los Angeles alongside the one that sits across from Uber’s headquarters in San Francisco. It says it made \$12 million in revenue in 2017 and will expand to Atlanta, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Washington over the next two years.

The company has hired executives and advisers who worked at CrossFit and the juice maker Odwalla, and OM has won endorsements from Khloé Kardashian and Tim Ferriss (The 4-Hour Body). OneTaste’s nonprofit arm has commissioned a study on the health benefits of OM and expects to publish findings later this year. “OneTaste is the Whole Foods of sexuality—the organic, good-for-you version,” says Chief Executive Officer Joanna Van Vleck, the former head of Trunk Club LLC. “The overarching thing is, orgasm is part of wellness.” OneTaste didn’t make Daedone available for interviews, nor did she respond to requests for comment.

OneTaste has also begun targeting businesses as customers—not teaching their employees how to stroke one another, but how to apply OM principles such as “feel over formula” and “stay connected no matter what” to running a company. “We’re having conversations with businesses about how to teach connection as preventive health treating the disease of sexual harassment,” says OneTaste. The National Hockey League is among the business interests with the most interest, though the NHL says it can’t confirm any such deals.

A decade’s worth of periodic OneTaste press coverage has moved past the titillating veneer of OM. Reporters have called the practice a “cult” jokingly because of the practice’s inbred devotees, but Michal and others say OneTaste is a real cult.



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“I lost my understanding of money,” Michal says. “There was a lot of psychological manipulation. This is an organization that really preys on people’s weaknesses.”

According to the story she repeats onstage and in

YouTube videos, Daedone

founded OneTaste in 2004 after she met a monk at a party who showed her a version of the technique she developed into OM. For years her company remained a far-fringe oddity, teaching small classes in San Francisco and running a residential warehouse where dozens of members and residents experimented sexually.


In 2009, though, the New York Times put OneTaste on the [front page of its style section](#), and the brand took off. Daedone, who’d previously run an art gallery, published a book called *Slow Sex* in 2011, and in 2013 gave a [speech](#) at South by Southwest called “Female Orgasm: The Regenerative Human Technology.” In a 2011 [TEDxSF talk](#) that’s been watched almost 1.5 million times on YouTube, she describes an essential hunger for connection that especially plagues Western women, who eat too much, work too much, shop too much, and still feel empty. The fix, Daedone says in the video, is OM. The practice helps men and women “lose that sense of hopelessness that you will ever be reached deep inside.”

OM has strict rules, and it’s supposed to be separate from sex, meaning it’s not foreplay. The pitch to women is 15 minutes of meditative focus only on their pleasure and sensation, with no obligation to reciprocate. Men are told it will help them learn to be more sensitive to women’s needs, though former members say it’s often strongly implied that fellow OneTaste students will be open to sexual experimentation beyond OM.

Many students’ first encounters are casual: They spot a free or almost-free event with a title such as “Tired of Swiping Left? Let’s Talk Real Intimacy!” or

“You Do Yoga. You Meditate. Now try #Orgasm.” OneTaste staffers tell them about the \$199 [redacted] attendees are no longer invited to try OM [redacted] features a live OM demonstration between [redacted] way to learn more, the intro students hear, [redacted]

Currently, students pay \$499 for a week [redacted] \$12,000 for the coaching program, and \$16 [redacted] OneTaste started selling a yearlong \$60,000 [redacted]

 Daedone has said she developed OM based on a monk’s technique. Her 2011 TEDxSF talk has been watched on YouTube almost 1.5 million times. PHOTOGRAPHER: GABRIELA HASBUN



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take all the courses they want and sit in the front row. Staff also encourage students to repeat courses, telling them the experience changes as they progress. OneTaste says about 1,400 people have taken its coaching program, 6,500 have come to an intro class, and more than 14,000 have signed up for online courses and its app.

Some students take a course or two and drop off. But often, those with a core yearning—to overcome anxiety or resolve a sexual trauma, for example—are drawn in deeper. Volunteering at events can lead them to work for the company full time, usually in sales. Former staffers say they were trained to target young, beautiful women and awkward, wealthy tech guys. They set up booths at life hacking conferences and Daybreaker early-morning dance parties, serving coffee in shirts with slogans like “The Pussy Knows” and asking passersby, “How’s your orgasm?”

At OneTaste events, attendees often played communication games prompting them to share vulnerable stories. Former staffers say they took notes that might help them sell later—maybe a student was recently divorced and lonely—and senior staff assigned subordinates to home in on wealthy students who seemed attracted to them or had experiences in common. They also say female employees were told to wear lipstick, heels, and short black skirts.

OneTaste denies that its policies targeted specific groups and says it only ever required workers to dress “professionally.” That said, last month, around the time Bloomberg Businessweek started asking OneTaste about its sales practices, onetime sales chief Rachel Cherwitz resigned. “I’ve realized not everyone makes decisions as fast as I do. I’ve realized sometimes I’ve given my opinion when I should not have,” Cherwitz said in a statement forwarded by the company. “For now, I am focused on taking some time to reflect.”

Cherwitz was Daedone’s top lieutenant for most of the 11 years she spent with the company, according to several former employees. She’s in many of OneTaste’s [public videos](#), calmly explaining how people who OM daily, like her, can gain confidence, feel energized, and... Former staffers say they were drawn to Cherwitz’s intense charismatic bad side, especially by not hitting sales goal watched one of her favorite YouTube videos. Some former staffers say they called customers themselves as “lions,” “tigers,” and sometimes from porn sets. “You fluff someone to get them hard,” one former salesperson says. “You will have more of this if you buy this \$10,000 cc...

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Former staffers and members say to make parting with thousands of dollars easier, OneTaste taught members that money is just an emotional obstacle. It encouraged students to take out multiple credit cards to pay for courses, and some turned to such sites as GoFundMe and Prosper Funding for help. “We took money from people that we shouldn’t have,” acknowledges Van Vleck, the CEO, adding that OneTaste has revised its policies to make sure customers don’t feel pressure to take on debt along with their courses. The company denies manipulating students to buy courses.

“The first time I didn’t cover my credit card bill, it broke something in my mind,” says Ruwan Meepagala, who went to his first OneTaste event in 2012 at age 24, worked for the company for about two years, and left owing \$30,000 on his credit cards. “I was no longer afraid of debt,” he says. “Once you break that barrier, \$3,000 is the same as \$30,000.” At one point, Meepagala complained that he and his co-workers hadn’t been paid in two months; he says he was publicly shamed for having a “scarcity mindset.”

Even though OneTaste’s management pushed employees to stop caring about their own money, they used the workers to bring in more of others’ cash. And despite the strict rules the company claimed to have separating OM from sex, initiates soon realized the divisions could be porous when money was on the line. Meepagala says managers told him to OM or have sex with older, wealthy women right before Cherwitz or another staffer called to sell them another course. Some members asked others to pay for their courses, often suggesting they’d offer sex or attention in exchange. They even called it hooking, former staff say. “A lot of women would be like, ‘I’m going to hook this guy for money,’” Meepagala says. “They would brag about it.” The company denies using staff for bait and sex for sales, and says Meepagala now teaches pickup-artistry-esque techniques and isn’t a moral authority.

When Laurie, a 53-year-old private nurse in Los Angeles, started taking classes and joining daily OM circles in 2014, she was overwhelmed by the community’s affection. Young women treated her like a confidante, and men half her age paid attention to her. She moved to Minneapolis with her daughter Monica and signed up for the coaching program while, but staffers sometimes turned cold, encouraging her to buy more classes. When frozen out, she gave up the affection.

Laurie and other former students say they started down the OneTaste spiritual path, then they left. She says that kind of peer pressure in the program starting in early 2015, even after t

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sexual abuse resurfaced. “I was afraid of losing my soul if I left,” she says. “This sounds so dramatic, but in my vulnerable state I believed it. I thought I would be f---ed spiritually.” OneTaste denies that it taught anyone they’d suffer if they stopped taking courses and says it hired a trauma adviser in late 2016.

For some committed OMers, the experience became even more complicated and bizarre. Hamza Tayeb, 33, was part of OneTaste for about a decade. He started working for it to leave behind an uninspiring Bay Area software job, he says. He also felt tied down by his young son, born while he was still in college. Daedone heard Tayeb’s story and said the mother’s choice to have the child shouldn’t dictate his choices. She absolved him of responsibility toward his son, he says: “I thought, I’m not going to hear that from anywhere else.” He started teaching courses and eventually married Cherwitz. OneTaste says Daedone never told members to separate from their families.

In 2015, Tayeb took part in a five-day, \$6,500-a-head OneTaste event called Magic School, held near Northern California’s Mount Shasta. The year before, the final evening featured temporary ceremonial piercings and performers who danced with snakes draped over their shoulders. This time, Daedone named a handful of men and women, including Tayeb, “priests and priestesses of orgasm.” The new clergy, dressed in white, conducted a group OM overseen by Daedone in front of the hundred or so attendees. “It was a religion,” a former employee says. “Orgasm was God, and Nicole was like Jesus or Muhammad.” OneTaste says the ceremonies were “play” and compared Magic School to Burning Man.

Tayeb, a former OneTaste priestess of orgasm, says he left after abandoning his son. PHOTOGRAPHER: SIMONE LUECK FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEKLY

OneTaste teachings were often used to justify sexual abuse, several former members say. “Avershi taught that you gain power and expand your ego,” says a former member who was part of the group, a

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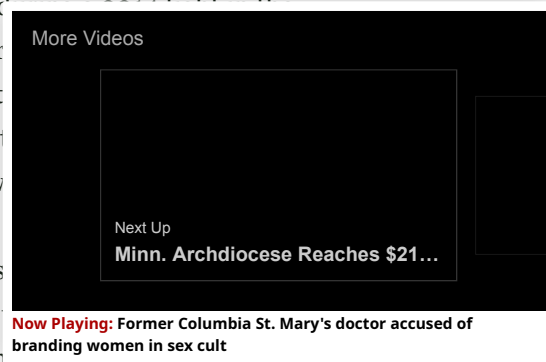
broad term for sexual energy—by performing sexual acts you don't want to do, or doing them with people you find disgusting. Meepagala says Cherwitz once saw him bickering with a co-worker and told them they had to leave work and couldn't come back until they'd slept together. "Sometimes they'd assign someone to be your sex manager for the week," another former employee says. "That person would go on Tinder or ask the community and line up a person for you to sleep with each day, do all the texting, and tell you who to meet when. ... The authority figure would say, 'You're f---ed up,' and sex was always the solution."

Although few members say they were forced to do something they explicitly refused, consent in this setting was a gray area. "You're pushed to do it, and cornered," says a former employee. In 2015 the company paid \$325,000 to settle a labor dispute with former sales rep Ayries Blanck, according to a person familiar with the matter. Blanck had said Cherwitz and others ordered her to sleep with customers and managers, and two people familiar with the matter say she considered the experience sexual assault. Blanck declined to comment for this story.

OneTaste says the settlement was confidential but that it has never required any employee to engage in a sexual act. Van Vleck says supervisors may have suggested such things to employees in the context of their friendships, but that the company wasn't involved. It referred Bloomberg Businessweek to nine former staff and customers who say the company's courses brought them close relationships and new comfort with their sexuality. "People find OneTaste because they're deeply searching for something," says former membership coordinator Elyna Anderson, "and we often pass over a fair amount of our own judgment and responsibility into the hands of people we hope are going to turn our lives around."

Former staffers say there were multiple cases of domestic violence between employees in relationships, which were sometimes characterized as one partner letting out his or her aggressive desire, or "beast." In one case, an executive repeatedly slapped his girlfriend in a hallway at the company's Market Street headquarters in front of one eyewitness. The executive was fired but says the incident was unacceptable, but that he had a belief in rehabilitation. It says it's unwelcome or tolerated violence.

Policy changes since 2016—no more hostessing or student O'Ming in classes or staff O'Ming in the lounge—limit OneTaste's liability. While OneTaste says the



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position it for a more mainstream audience, several former staffers say management was also worried about legal consequences. No leases are officially connected to the company, but staff still live and OM together in private, says Tayeb. All of this is in keeping, he says, with how the changes were framed. “Often it was, ‘We all know that this stuff is actually good, but the world isn’t going to see it that way,’” he says. “So we’re going to adapt and comply, but all the while keep the core of what we really want to do sacred and hidden.’”

 r years, OneTaste of Students coming up with some use. Miss touch her ties. PHOTOGRAPHER: GABRIELA HASBUN

At age 28, Michal had been in a few long-term relationships, but she always felt self-conscious about her body and about asking for what she wanted during sex. She’d also never had an orgasm. So even though she thought OM sounded weird, she went to a free OneTaste event one evening in late 2014 to see if it could help. She chatted with staffers who seemed open, ate the right food, and did yoga every day. Unhappy in her job as a teacher’s assistant in a Jewish school, she started attending regular OM gatherings in New York and responded to the open flirting from the men she met there. “This thing seemed to offer friends, potential mates,” she says. “Also, I was on this whole high where there were so many men interested in me. It was weird to feel that power.”

OneTaste quickly swallowed Michal’s life. She quit her teaching job, gave her dog to her parents, and moved into a crowded OM house in Brooklyn to sell OneTaste classes. OMinig did allow her to reach orgasm, but only rarely. Instead, the draw gradually became more about community and purpose. A few months in, she wanted to sign up for the coaching program but didn’t have enough money. When she went to talk to Cherwitz about it, Cherwitz took out her laptop and helped her apply for a new credit card. Michal had never been in debt before. Her parents were worried, but “I was so swept in by that point,” she says. “I wouldn’t listen to moment.’”

Life at the OM house was relentlessly sc
7 a.m., staff convened for two rounds of OM
Then came an AA-inspired “fear inventory,”
worries with a partner. Former staffers say
management if they heard others express d
went to Bikram yoga, cooked, cleaned, then



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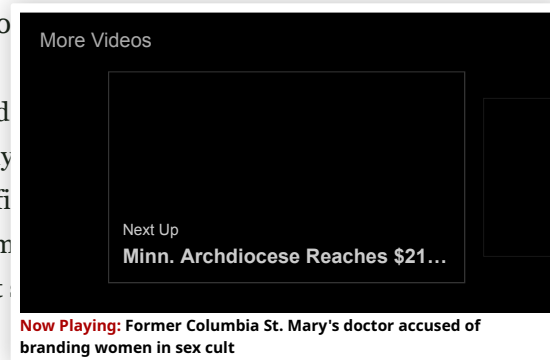
calls around a table, tracking their progress with Salesforce.com. After an afternoon round of OM, they left to run the evening's public session.

Michal, like many of her co-workers, was classified as an independent contractor, earning commissions on the courses she sold. She says she was lucky to make \$200 or \$300 a month, which supplemented the \$900 monthly stipend she received from a manager's personal account. She says she spent more than 80 hours most weeks working on the group's formal and informal activities. Meepagala says he worked around 100 hours per week, on a schedule similar to Michal's, but was told to log 30, and that his salary as a "part-time" worker was about \$15,000 a year. Blanck, in her settled labor dispute, said she was misclassified as an independent contractor because OneTaste dictated what she was doing most hours of the day. She'd also said she was paid less than minimum wage and was owed overtime.

Workers exhausted by the long hours were told they should OM more, that orgasm is an endless energy resource. Some former staffers say frequent OM sessions left them in a constant state of emotional and physical rawness that, combined with a lack of sleep, blurred their ability to think.

During morning check-ins, Michal and her co-workers chirped about feeling "turned on." If they didn't, Cherwitz or someone else would drill down on why they weren't feeling excited to sell. Someone who wasn't hitting sales goals chanced being deemed "tumesced" or "off the rails"—in need of OM or sex. Staffers were rarely alone even at night, because they typically slept two to a bed. Their phones would buzz with 100 group chats.

"Like many startups, employees worked OneTaste said in a statement. The company were optional, that fear inventory was confi people, and that in 2016 it started using tim and pay work hours, including overtime. It



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As Michal picked up more internal jargon, it began to make sense why OneTaste called outsiders “asleep,” “Muggles,” or “in the Matrix.” The stranger the experience became, the more thrilling it felt, like she was gaining access to something the rest of the world couldn’t see.

At the end of a whirlwind week of ritual at the Magic School where Tayeb was initiated, Michal says, a OneTaste executive took her by the hand and led her to a sales table to talk about putting down a \$12,000 deposit for the upcoming Nicole Daedone Intensive. She didn’t have the money, so a senior staffer suggested she ask another OneTaste member, a man who worked in tech and had paid part of her Magic School tuition. “I remember in those moments, you have this exhilarating feeling,” she says. “You want to do [the intensive], because the people who do it are much better off than those who don’t. You also know Rachel would love you more and think better of you.”

Michal and her parents began to argue more about OneTaste, especially when she told them she’d be marrying a fellow member—the one who’d been helping pay for her classes. Around the same time, Michal’s OneTaste life started to break down. Her closest co-worker left the company, and Michal began to think of leaving as the right, albeit terrifying, move. She regularly woke up screaming from nightmares.

Eventually, Michal persuaded her husband to leave OneTaste with her in September 2015, shortly after their wedding. Under the stress of adjusting to life outside, they divorced soon after. She moved in with her parents in New York, depressed and occasionally suicidal. “I thought, Why do I want to kill myself? I can’t control my emotions,” she says. “I thought I was cursed.”

On top of everything else,

fleeing OneTaste can be

brutally lonely. Laurie, the

nurse, spent months on disability after leaving and moved to Boulder, Colo.

She’s in the process of divorcing a man she met and married in OneTaste.

Tayeb divorced Cherwitz after he left and is now with his son, who’s now 13. “There’s just a lot of anger,” he says. “I leveraged myself financially all into this thing. When it doesn’t work out, it’s a disaster.”

Like other apostates, Tayeb is conflicted about the spiritual teachings which he says taught him practical leadership. Even OneTaste’s harsh people. But Tayeb also says the company ex-

Laurie says she risked feeling “f---ed spiritually” to leave OneTaste and spent months on disability afterward. PHOTOGRAPHER: SIMONE LUECK FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

A YouTube video player interface. At the top, it says "More Videos". Below that, there is a large black rectangle representing a video player. In the center of this rectangle, it says "Next Up" followed by "Minn. Archdiocese Reaches \$21...".

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those inside, and he regrets that he saw it happen for years and never said anything. The threat of spiritual ruin is too powerful and is wielded without a moral compass, he says.

OneTaste says the company has changed, especially since Daedone stepped down as CEO last year to work on her next book and teach the occasional class. (She also sold her stake in the company to a trio of OneTaste members.) Van Vleck says OneTaste isn't a cult, but that it's common for people to use the term when something "changes their internal perspective."

The newish CEO is betting that the study OneTaste has funded on the health benefits of OM, which has taken brain-activity readings from 130 pairs of strokees and strokees, will draw fresh crowds. Led by researchers from the University of Pittsburgh, the [study](#) is expected to yield the first of multiple papers later this year. "The science that's coming out to back what this is and what the benefits are is going to be huge in terms of scaling," Van Vleck says.

For more than two years after leaving OneTaste, Michal continued to struggle with her relationship to sex. Daedone and her disciples had prescribed sex with as many people as possible as a way to achieve enlightenment, according to several former staffers. "You don't realize until after what a damaging idea that is. I feel really disgusted that I put myself through that," Michal says. By the end, "I felt so much more confused about sex and the boundaries of my body, even though that's what they say it helps you cultivate." She hasn't OMed since leaving OneTaste, and she says she never will.

(Corrects company characterization of former sales chief and adds further company comment throughout)

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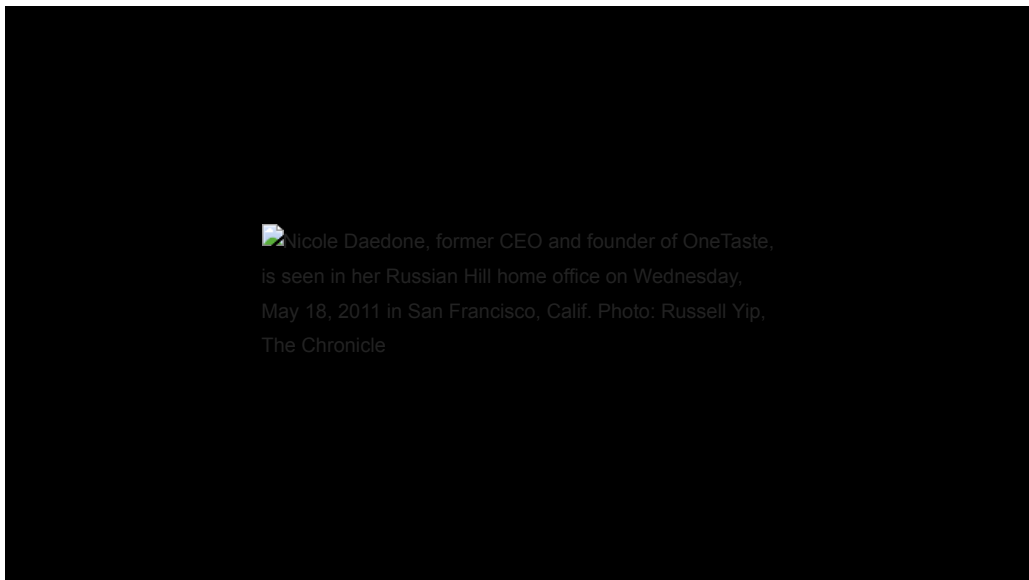
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Report alleges 'sexual servitude' at San Francisco-based 'orgasmic meditation' company

By Michelle Robertson, SFGATE Updated 5:50 pm, Monday, June 18, 2018

169



Nicole Daedone, former CEO and founder of OneTaste, is seen in her Russian Hill home office on Wednesday, May 18, 2011 in San Francisco, Calif. Photo: Russell Yip, The Chronicle

Photo: Russell Yip, The Chronicle

IMAGE 1 OF 18

Nicole Daedone, former CEO and founder of OneTaste, is seen in her Russian Hill home office on Wednesday, May 18, 2011 in San Francisco, Calif.

Former employees of OneTaste say the San Francisco-based wellness company encouraged them to spend thousands of dollars on orgasmic meditation classes and, in some cases, engage in sexual servitude, according to a report.


Bloomberg Businessweek interviewed 16

former OneTaste employees, some of whom compared it to "a kind of prostitution ring" that sometimes used its teachings to justify sexual

exploitation and abuse. Some said they were coerced into sexual acts they did not want to perform. The report says OneTaste settled out of court with a former employee who filed a lawsuit over alleged sexual assault and harassment in 2015.

READ ALSO: A night out at OneTaste's Museum of Awkward

Michal, another former employee, said she and her husband left the organization with \$20,000 in debt, having spent \$150,000 combined on OneTaste's costly classes and retreats, which range in price from a \$199 introduction course to \$16,000 "intensives." Multiple interviewees said they cover the cost, and they

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and conscious
sexuality."

A former Columbia St. Mary's doctor was accused of branding women in sex cult.
Media: WISN

Those methods include "orgasmic meditation," or OM (pronounced ohm) for short. OM is a trademarked practice that typically involves a clothed and gloved man stroking the genitalia of a woman, who is naked from the waist down, for 15 minutes. There is no goal "other than to feel the sensation," the OneTaste website says. A container on the site describes the organization as a "consciousness-based clit stroking community."

OneTaste denied allegations of sexual coercion and abuse in an email to SFGATE on Monday. The company said the Bloomberg story paints the company in a "false light, hand-picking the sensational allegations of a few while ignoring thousands of satisfied and happy customers," a spokesperson said.

"Moreover, all of the allegations are more than two years old from before OneTaste transformed, under new ownership and leadership, into a traditional company with strong corporate governance, clear-cut sales policies and practices, and strict HR policies."

Bloomberg Businessweek said some of the employees interviewed were involved with OneTaste "as recently as last year."

FROM THE ARCHIVE: Nicole Daedone's mission of orgasmic meditation

The OneTaste spokesperson said it is against sales policy to "pressure" potential customers to take out multiple credit cards, and those who ask for a refund typically receive one.

Since its founding by Robert Kandell and Nicole Daedone in the early-2000s, OneTaste and its clitoris-centric wellness practices have appeared in the pages of **The San Francisco Chronicle** and the New York Times.

In its 2009 profile, the **Times** cited former members saying Daedone, the former CEO of OneTaste, possessed "cultlike powers over her followers" and "sometimes strongly suggested who should pair off with whom romantically." Daedone, who previously ran San Francisco's 111 Minna art gallery, stepped down as CEO in 2017, a departure that coincided with the purchase of the company by new owners, the OneTaste spokesperson said. Daedone taught four courses in 2018, but is not scheduled to teach additional classes at this time.

Over the past decades, the company expanded from its mid-Market San Francisco, New York and London. It plans to open in four additional cities over the next

Read the full Bloomberg report [here](#).

Michelle Robertson is an SFGATE staff writer. Email her at mrobertson@sfgate.com

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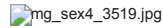
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A Peek Into OneTaste's Orgasm Empire

OneTaste promises women a better orgasm, but the path to enlightenment is kind of a turn-off.

By Whitney Phaneuf



Email   Print

It was supposed to be a sexy Saturday night. I texted a few friends to let them know I'd be in San Francisco, lined my eyes in black, and dressed in tight maroon jeans and black boots, a lace strap on my tank top buried under winter layers. (I knew the lace was there; that's what mattered.) Before leaving the house, I overfilled the cat's bowl, just in case I didn't make it home that night. As I drove over the Bay Bridge, I thought about the last time I'd had sex. It'd been awhile. As a lifelong serial monogamist, most of my sexual experiences had occurred in committed relationships with courtships that would make Jane Austen proud. To quote the Liz Phair song "Fuck and Run," *I want all that stupid old shit/like letters and sodas*. But shouldn't I be able to have sex without the promise of romance? Maybe OneTaste could change my perspective (ideally that night, so I could go out and get laid).



A few months ago, one of my more sexually liberated friends told me about OneTaste, a San Francisco-based organization that has turned the female orgasm into a form of worship and meditation. Here's how it works: A woman undresses from the waist down and her male partner gently strokes her clitoris with his finger for fifteen minutes. OneTaste, which was the subject of a lengthy 2007 *SF Weekly* cover story, calls it "OM," short for "orgasmic meditation," and advocates that having "an awake and alive pussy" will increase a woman's physical and mental health. OneTaste founder Nicole Daedone compares the practice to yoga.

Daedone, who declined to be interviewed for this story, opened the San Francisco art gallery 111 Minna in 1995, which she ran for one year, then started OneTaste in 2001. Since opening its first location on Folsom Street, OneTaste has grown to include nine outlets in the United States and four in Europe. According to its website, women can come to OneTaste with a partner or in search of one, and most start with a weekly class that introduces the concept with a question-and-answer session about sexuality. Learning to OM takes place in a one-day workshop that costs \$199, and six-month master classes go up to \$6,500. My friend never ended up paying to OM (and I had no intention of trying it myself), but she said the intro classes could be "transformational" on their own, a rare chance to discuss sex with strangers and learn about yourself.

And so, on a Saturday night, I found myself at OneTaste's headquarters, a multi-storied glass and concrete building on Moss Street in San Francisco's SoMa district, to take a women-only workshop called "Relationships." The room had shelves displaying a few copies of Daedone's book, *Slow Sex: The Art and Craft of Orgasmic Meditation*, and a proprietary lubricant. I looked around for the pillows and mats I'd seen in OneTaste's promotional materials, but there was no trace of such activity.

A woman took my \$15 and directed me to a large room containing a long table and a smaller table with hot water, tea, and trays of snacks. Maya, a OneTaste staff member, explained to me how I had heard about the class. I told her a friend had referred me.

The table was empty when I sat down, but it slowly filled up with the kind of women I'd heard about: young, single, well-heeled, made-up women wearing pressed clothes and carrying designer handbags. Some were staring into her cell phone with narrow eyes and an anxious crease c

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haired hippie woman wearing clogs that sat down next to me and immediately demanded that we all put on name tags, which Maya distributed.

When about a dozen of us were seated, we started with the first of many sharing-in-a-circle moments — to state our names and what brought us there. About five women were first-timers. Then Maya explained what we'd be doing in the class — creating written instructions for meeting our sexual needs — an idea she had after some recently lackluster sexual encounters. "A desire manual," she called it, or as another woman said, "something to lay on the altar of sex." We were shown how to construct our manuals using various supplies on the table, given prompts like "Five things I want, but I can't ask for," and asked to create our sexual résumés.

To inspire our writing, a OneTaste staffer read aloud a sex manifesto written by Daedone: "Would it be okay if your gravestone read: 'She was an exceptionally mediocre woman?' Your epitaph will begin: 'She redefined what it meant to be a good woman.' It will say: 'She scaled mountains, in hiking boots and in heels.'" The manifesto finished with the question, "What are you waiting for?" to which the group collectively responded with a low and throaty *hmm*.

As I worked on my manual, cutting out an image of Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love from an old *BUST* magazine, I asked the women about OM-ing. Maya compared it to "eating chocolate very slowly." A doe-eyed, long-haired woman in her twenties said OM-ing had helped her come into her sexuality. The gray-haired woman said she had been going to OneTaste for two years, and just signed up for the level-seven workshop, an advanced course in OM. The twentysomething said she was on level five, and still searching for what she wanted from sex and love. Terms like "manifest" and "gratitude" filled the conversation.

Later, when I told the gray-haired woman that I planned to attend one of the weekly intro classes, perhaps on Monday in Berkeley, she said she would be there and also at the San Francisco class on Wednesday. "If you're level seven, why are you still attending the intro classes?" I asked. She smiled. "It's usually a one-to-one, male-to-female ratio, if you can imagine, in the Bay Area," she said, adding, "and the men are all there to learn about the female orgasm. It's a great place to meet new sexual partners." I looked up from the red and white origami paper in my hands (the cover of my "desire manual") and noticed a pile of personal notebooks opened in front of the gray-haired woman. Inside the notebooks were lists describing her ideal mate and ideal relationship: "Likes to laugh," "affectionate," "makes time for me." Even though she had OM'd a thousand times, she was also clearly searching for Liz Phair's *letters and sodas*.

OneTaste didn't exactly put me in the mood I'd hoped for: I texted my friends that I was going back to Oakland to hang out with my cat and watch Netflix. When I got home, I hid my desire manual between two books on my bookshelf, and picked up a collection of letters that had been exchanged between the poets and ill-fated lovers Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann. Their story didn't end well — Celan threw himself in the Seine and drowned, after which Bachmann took up correspondence with Celan's wife — but the letters reveal a relationship that was perhaps worth the suffering. Who am I to say a deep connection with another human being can't be forged in a fifteen-minute orgasm? I myself am sticking with poetry.



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OneTaste - Wikipedia

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The Strange Truth About Orgasmic Meditation

LAURA BARCELLA

 Orgasmic_Cult_1 Illustrated By Ly Ngo.

If you've spent any time in crunchy circles — or just spent time on the Internet — lately, you might be familiar with [OneTaste](#). After living in San Francisco — the “orgasmic meditation” or “OM” business' home base — for nearly nine years, I got accustomed to hearing whispered, glassy-eyed praise from seeking, lost-soul types. But concrete details were scarce, which made the 13-year-old organization seem both more alluring and more creepy.

In case you're in the dark, OneTaste is a thriving business devoted entirely to spreading the gospel of female pleasure. Curious sorts can go to a live event (the company now has branches in 10 cities), fork over a few bucks, and learn OneTaste's unique 15-minute meditation practice in which women shed their pants, [lie down in “nests” of pillows](#), and get their genitals stroked in incredibly specific ways (i.e., “the upper left quadrant”) by (usually male) “research partners” wearing latex gloves. Oh, and I wasn't kidding about that “forking-over-bucks” thing — OneTaste offers a range of services and events that vary wildly in price — you can train to become a [certified coach](#) for \$15,000, complete the Mastery Program for \$7,500, attend the [OMXperience conference](#) (\$195-\$395), or check out a TurnOn event for \$10.

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So, is OneTaste another expensive, armchair-spiritual pastin pervy men to get in the pants of enlightened, half-naked wor “meditation”? Or just another everyday San Francisco sex cu

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 Orgasmic_Cult_2 Illustrated By Ly Ngo.

Maybe a little of all of the above. As Joanna Van Vleck, OneTaste's Los Angeles-based president, tells me via phone, the company's sole aim is to help people connect. But, instead of doing that through, say, community service, or dance parties, or weekly Bingo rounds, OMers do it through a shared focus on being "powered by orgasm," per the company slogan. "It's amazing how many people are willing to go through life without their sexuality being touched," Van Vleck says. "Orgasm is a nutrient we need to be vital as humans."

But, the goal of all that uber-precise clitoral stroking isn't the kind of orgasm you're probably envisioning ("climax" is the company's preferred term for what we usually think of as orgasm). As OneTaste's founder/guru Nicole Daedone writes in her book *Slow Sex*, OM's intention is to give women "permission to enjoy the journey, rather than pushing them ever sooner to the finale." Think of OMinig as public fondling for the greater good — groping as a "gateway to more vitality, connection and turn on." (No, we're not entirely sure what "turn on" means in this context, either, but OneTasters seem to love it.)

Joanna Van Vleck also claims that OMinig can help people with much more than just getting off (er, "connecting"). She should know; Van Vleck is a convert of the highest order. Though she swears that OMinig, which she now practices daily, has changed nearly every facet of her life — from her "love/hate relationship with carbs" to transforming her sex life by "180 degrees" — she wasn't always into kooky stuff like public clitoral stroking. Before trying OM, which Van Vleck didn't get around to doing until she'd been working for OneTaste for six months, the Texas-raised businesswoman had never tried so much as a meditation or yoga class. She remembers being "terrified" of OM. "We're [doing this] in the daytime, and you're not going to take me to dinner afterward?" she laughs.

But, sticking with the practice, Van Vleck believes, can help both women and men with, well, almost everything. "I'm an overall nicer person — I was kind of itchy before," she says. "I've seen women who were told they were anorgasmic have intense, great orgasms. In couples I've seen [OM] open communication, dialogue, and intimacy."

 Orgasmic_Cult_3 Illustrated By Ly Ngo.

Van Vleck says OM helped her get to know herself — and her sexuality — infinitely better. "I used to watch every porn [movie] possible to try to learn what to do in bed ... I only knew sex in relationship to porn. Now [sex] is much more quiet, with less movement, but I can feel every ounce of it. The feeling of a hand touching my leg is vastly pleasurable. Foreplay could go on for hours. Every part of my body is way more sensitized."

But, what leads regular people who aren't on the OneTaste payroll into OMinig? What makes them passionate enough to want to stroke and be stroked hundreds — even thousands — of times, dropping hundreds (even thousands) of dollars in the process? Audrey Steele, a 31-year-old former OMer who has since "abandoned the lifestyle," says that, for her, OneTaste started off as a way to meet interesting people while she, "lost and confused," tried to muddle through an especially awful breakup. "I've always been a person who craved really authentic experiences — people being real. I found that there," she explains.

Steele moved into OneTaste's San Francisco residence (members of OneTaste's various branches can come together to form OM Communities, some of which include OM residences dubbed OM Houses, but neither the Communities nor the Houses are presently affiliated with OneTaste). Steele spent the first years and even completing a year of training to become a certified OMinig instructor. "It's a cutting-edge, fringe thing," Steele says, "but I went through the vacillation of both hating it and loving it, from the first to admit that OneTaste can be "a totally crazy situation; doing this crazy sexual practice." Still, she found the community.

"Gen," 50, also speaks highly of the people at OneTaste. Like Steele, she had a particularly difficult time in her life — a time when she felt "lost" but she found comfort in OMinig. "Getting dressed up and going to work for me," Gen, who's now only minimally involved with OneTaste, says. "It's a really good feeling."




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opening my legs, lying on my back, having a man be in a very private place. And, over time, realizing I was safe, having it be a place of pleasure and not shame.”

 Orgasmic_Cult_4 Illustrated By Ly Ngo.


Despite finding the practice of orgasmic meditation intensely helpful, Gen stepped back from OneTaste after growing disenchanted with some of its marketing and sales tactics (remember those \$15,000 courses?). “It’s important to separate the practice of OM from the company of OneTaste,” she notes. “The practice itself is an awesome tool when it’s done respectfully. But, OneTaste the company I have a problem with.”

Specifically, she says, “I’ve been told they model their sales approach on strip clubs, so when you first walk in, there are all these pretty girls flirting with you.” (Joanna Van Vleck denies this, saying, “I don’t know how sales are even done at strip clubs.”)

Despite never having the chance to engage face-to-face with OneTaste founder Nicole Daedone, Gen has primarily positive words for the charismatic guru. “I sent her a Facebook message once, asking for advice about something, and she wrote me back almost immediately,” Gen remembers. “She felt accessible. She seems like a pretty cool person, but she also seems like a fanatical, eccentric person, and it’s not surprising that she has such a following.”

And, what a following it is. Daedone, now in her late forties, launched the fledgling OneTaste in 2001, but she wasn’t always a master of sex. She was on a doctoral track with a focus on semantics at San Francisco State University when her father, who had been convicted of molesting two young girls, died in prison, throwing her life off kilter. Daedone began studying Buddhism, then reportedly went on to study with Ray Vetterlein, who, [according to the New York Times](#), “achieved fame of sorts in sex circles by claiming to lengthen the average female orgasm to 20 minutes.”

Vetterlein was himself inspired by Lafayette Morehouse, a controversial sex commune (some say cult), founded by “responsible hedonist” Victor Baranco in 1968 in suburban Lafayette, California (outside San Francisco). Members of Lafayette Morehouse, also known as “the purple people,” engaged in broad research about sex and relationships — in 1976, they presented what was believed to be the first public demonstration of a woman “in a state of orgasm” for three hours (!). The connection to Daedone’s later work with OneTaste is pretty obvious.

 Orgasmic_Cult_5 Illustrated By Ly Ngo.

But the question of whether OneTaste borrowed anything else from the cult-y likes of Lafayette Morehouse might be a matter of opinion. Sure, scores of [Internet message-board lurkers](#) seem to enjoy railing against OT’s zealous ways, especially Daedone’s. The typical accusation? That OneTaste is a “‘for-profit’ cult-like system masquerading as new-age spirituality,” as one Yelp reviewer put it. Another Yelper offered, “Just your basic sex cult with a clever urban twist. You’ll leave broke and possibly psychotic.”

But not everyone sees OneTaste or its leader as anything overtly creepy. “I don’t think it’s a cult because I’ve seen people leave,” Gen says. “I’ve never been pressured into buying anything; I never felt I couldn’t say no.”

Audrey Steele, the former OneTaste resident, is a bit more cynical than Gen. “It’s really intense and that’s the lens you’re looking through. It’s really intense and [about it] myself. Maybe [it has] some [cult-like] qualities, but I don’t know.”

Not surprisingly, president Joanna Van Vleck is unequivocal. “I work for the company and I can say: it’s not a cult.” She concedes that she has been called a cult because people love [them] so much — but she says it’s not because it has changed so many people’s lives. I would argue that’s the lens you’re looking through.

Despite all the swirling rumors about OneTaste and its offbeat practices, it doesn’t seem to fit the traditional [definition of a cult](#) — at least not in the way most people think of it.



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potentially aggressive sales tactics, no one I spoke with for this story reported any major qualms or super-negative OM experiences.

One Taste Urban Retreat Center received a warm welcome when it opened its doors in July 2004. One Taste showcases a Feel Good Café, Yoga, dance and meditation classes, massage therapy, an art gallery, and a store.

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One Taste Urban Retreat Center received a warm welcome when it opened its doors in July 2004. One Taste showcases a Feel Good Café, Yoga, dance and meditation classes, massage therapy, an art gallery, and a store. Our vision of One Taste goes beyond that of a community center. We cater to gourmets of life who want to venture beyond old limitations into realms of new experience. Workshops, events and ongoing practices encourage you to explore, recharge, and transform in a beautifully appointed, earth-friendly community environment. said Nicole Daedone, founder of One Taste.

The center is a 5000 square foot temple-like structure designed to provide an intimate environment for interacting, experiencing, and learning from one another. The Yoga studio is an impressive 800 square feet of hardwood floors, natural lighting and open air. At One Taste, we believe that spiritual practice and sensual playfulness are best seen as two facets of the same thing. Many traditional disciplines and movement practices therefore complement our work, said Robert Kandell, co-founder of One Taste.

In addition to Yoga and meditation, the center offers special events such as Spirited Sundays, a full day of celebration for your body, mind and soul with meditation, ecstatic dance, a vegetarian feast and an inspirational speaker. It boasts a healthy organic juice, vegan and vegetarian food bar.

ABOUT ONE TASTE URBAN RETREAT CENTER

One Taste Urban Retreat Center offers an integrated approach to transformation, especially using the doorway of the senses. Our approach is direct, integral, and experiential. It emerges from a long lineage of non-dual philosophy and spiritual practice that honors the body for its wisdom and gifts rather than seeing it as separate from the true purpose of life. For more information and to view the calendar of events, visit <http://www.onetastesf.com> or call 415-503-1100.

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