

Relationships

email: sfeat@unison.independent.ie

OUT THERE
How to cope with being on your own

What girls will do for boys who like BOB



NORA COSTIGAN

THE lines that mark one's sexual orientation have never been more blurred than they are now. No longer are we confined to the labels of either hetero or homo. Many have taken to occupying both sides of the fence without regard for the frowns of others.

Probably the best example of those who flaunt the more relaxed attitudes of today is a breed of woman called the Party Lesbian. The Party Lesbian, or BOB chick as she is known (Boob on Boob), is a straight woman who, in certain social situations, will openly kiss another female.

Understand that these ladies have no emotional feelings for each other: they are merely exploiting the universal weakness within the male psyche of desiring a threesome above anything else in the entire world.

Indeed, myself and a number of my friends have been known to engage in a spot of BOB action to improve our image as the stuff of fantasies, and provoke male reaction.

We are not alone. Celebrity BOB chicks include Madonna, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera.

Sadly, boys, this little trick does not work the other way round. Kissing your male friends will get you nothing more than a pitying look from us BOBs and a double dose of beard rash.

Au pair dreams of a household drudge



TIM HAYES

WELL, I didn't get what I wanted for Christmas, an au pair. I suppose it's possible Margaret hasn't managed to have one shipped and wrapped for Christmas, but has one lined up to call to the door early in the New Year.

One of the side-effects of househusbandry is that you develop a very fertile imagination. Sometimes, as I buff the floors, I imagine myself on the fairways swinging my club with precision and vigour, the ball bee-lining for the hole, while at home, an au pair — well, actually, a bevy of au pairs — grapples with my housework. I arrive home jubilant, where the au pairs dash to the door and carry me shoulder-high to a hot tub. The water temperature is lovingly tested so my bottom doesn't get scalded. Slices of courgette (we're out of cucumber) are tenderly placed over my eyes. I lie back and hear the swish and flurry of foamy water, as my golf clubs are scrubbed and polished in the bath beside me.

Tom got a brand new trike from Santa for Christmas. It's got dual navigation, by which I mean there's a long handrail which I can use to steer him in the direction I want to go. It's ingenious. Margaret's going on WeightWatchers in the New Year. Last time she went on it, I lost a stone. I had to weigh all her food. I'm afraid I need to lose weight again too. The clincher was a recent swim — my Speedos are beginning to resemble a thong.

Pass the turkey please, I'm still hungry



ELEANOR GOGGIN

I READ an article recently about the dangers of overeating and over-imbibing during the festive season. It frightened the life out of me. I've resolved never to read an article like that again. As I write, I'm recumbent on my couch and the words Moby and Dick come to mind. They say that as you get older, you eat less. A myth. I have consumed three boxes of chocolates and that was only today. Yesterday I snarled at a family member for eyeing up the last truffle.

I just become paranoid and irrational when it comes to food. My jeans have dug red welts in my stomach and the day is coming pretty soon when they will have to be surgically removed. My thighs are beginning to look like Keith Wood's. I had been following a rigid diet before Christmas, inspired by a thin Frenchman called Michel Montignac, but I was in Paris recently and didn't really take to the place. So I gave it up. I know — logic and overeating do not go hand in hand.

Every time I pass the fridge, I revisit the turkey. It's not the lean meat I go for but the high-fat, high-carb stuffing that I shovel into my mouth. Is this some kind of despair that comes with age? I notice my sylph-like daughter can pass the fridge regularly without a flicker of interest.

I suppose there's nothing for it but back to the diet. It's definitely cold turkey — pardon the pun — in the New Year.

BONDINGS

Olives, a violin and the right kind of rain

RAIN came, but the wrong rain, at the wrong time. In Pisa, we were woken by it in the small hours of the morning. It pelted the roof of the small hotel, thunder and lightning shaking wooden shutters against windows.

The October day had been glorious, the Leaning Tower threatening to topple into a sailor-blue sky.

Not a cloud in that sky and then this downpour. It was rain, but not the kind Fergus MacCabe wanted and for which he had wished and waited all summer.

As an Irish person, you imagine you know a lot about rain.

And then you meet English-born, Tuscan-based olive farmer Fergus MacCabe, with his London accent, his Irish name and his red hair. MacCabe is a mine of information, a blow-in who must prove he knows as much, if not more, than the locals about the country, the crops, the culture.

The right rain should have come months earlier, he explains on the drive from Pisa airport to his farm in San Rocco di Pili, near Sienna.

With every mile he points out dry and broken farm land, vines, and groves of shrivelled grapes and olives, signs everywhere that this year would not yield a bumper crop.

It was a lovely long summer, Fergus adds, explaining how his fiancée, Belfast fiddler Stephanie Martin, had been lying by their pool until only a

Sarah Caden meets Fergus MacCabe and his Irish fiancée Stephanie, who three years ago took on his family's Tuscan farm



week earlier, slathering herself in last year's olive oil to soak up the last of the autumn sun.

He, on the other hand, not being of the complexion for sun worship, had spent a lot of time indoors with an electric fan, plotting ways of cheating nature, expanding his business, living the dream to the limit.

His enthusiasm is infectious, his desire to succeed sensational, but then this isn't a recent dream, this is the dream of a lifetime.

Tuscany is a long way from the Falls Road for Stephanie Martin, a softly-spoken girl with striking cat's eyes. She seems the steady influence in the relationship, the calm at the centre of Fergus's whirl of activity and energy.

Her determination is equal, if less vocal; her exhaustion with London life as intense as his was less than three years ago, when they decided to pack in everything and head for Italy.

She had some Italian, a degree in leisure management and the need to believe there was an alternative to the city slog, but he, crucially, had somewhere for them to go.

It was Fergus's maternal grandparents who bought Casa Nuova several decades ago, as a holiday home and,

later, their retirement home. A beautifully laid out dinner set, a cabinet full of cut crystal oddments, and worn but lovely rugs and china all speak of a genteel past. It was here that Fergus spent his summer holidays. He shows off a photo of his journalist father, Colin, astride the winning horse in the local spooof of the deadly serious Siena Palio horserace.

His father's red hair is, like Fergus's, apparently out of place in Italy, but the photo is proof that these redheads have earned their place in the community.

IMMEDIATELY you arrive at this beautiful house, with its spectacular view of miles of valley, you stop wondering why Fergus and Stephanie gave up London.

On the veranda, Fergus directs your gaze to his pension, an orchard of young walnut and cherry trees, the old swimming pool, now covered for the winter, the lemon trees, the hens who will provide the eggs for our *al fresco* breakfasts and — of course — his olive grove.

It's all very beautiful, but the olives are the bottom line. Without them, although one can understand why this couple would choose to live here, it's not clear how they could afford it.

"I never liked London," says Stephanie, who met Fergus six years ago at university in Buckinghamshire, where he studied furniture-making. "But it was hard to see what else we could do. We were living with Fergus's parents — we still didn't have any money even though we had low expenses. I was teaching, Fergus was working for Parker Knoll. Then, one summer, we came out here for five months to look after Fergus's granny — and as soon as we went back we started hatching a plan to move here permanently."

Food seemed a possible means of bringing the dream to life. Fergus had always been interested in food: those summers in Italy gave him a taste for quality.

When they met, Stephanie says with a laugh, she was a very straightforward Belfast girl, with very plain tastes, but with Fergus in the kitchen she



FOOD OF LOVE: Fergus MacCabe and Stephanie Martin. Photo: Tony Gavin

became steadily more adventurous.

"We ate like kings in college," Fergus adds. "I'd come out here to Tuscany for long weekends and bring an empty rucksack that I would fill up with food for the trip home — jars of our own tomatoes, pasta from the co-op, beautiful cheeses and meats."

Fergus's family had always produced some olive oil at Casa Nuova, pressed by a neighbour and for their own use.

While hatching their relocation plan, however, Fergus took a bottle of the farm's oil to a London deli, where the reaction was so enthusiastic he immediately knew he was on to something good. With that encouragement, the pair simply packed up their lives in a single month and made the move.

"Fergus was supposed to go out first and then I would follow, but then we thought, 'Why wait?'" Stephanie says. She was keen, but a little nervous about where she fitted into the dream, while her parents were very wary.

"To them," she explains, "it was an incomprehensible

step into the unknown, though once they came out to visit, they understood."

In retrospect, Stephanie sees how her parents' feelings were coloured by other things. Two months after her March 2000 departure, Stephanie's mother was diagnosed with

really know what I was going to do. It was quite lonely when Fergus would go to England and Ireland selling the oil, and that was hard," she says.

As all couples who relocate will admit, the move puts amazing pressure on a relationship. A certain reliance

'One summer we came here for five months to look after Fergus's granny and as soon as we went back we started hatching a plan to move here permanently'

cancer, a shock that was swiftly followed by the news that her father had been secretly fighting the disease for eight years.

He died that August, and although she has felt acutely the distance from her family, Stephanie knew deep down that going home, giving up on Italy, would make no-one happy.

"It was difficult for me too because coming out here was Fergus's dream and I didn't

develops that can be unhealthy if unchecked, and if one person is living the dream while the other looks on, it's a recipe for resentment.

One day, while sourcing language classes at the local university, Stephanie saw an ad placed by a traditional Irish music group, Will o' the Wisp, seeking a fiddler. Classically trained, Stephanie had 17 years of studying violin behind her and she had brought her violin to Tuscany. She

joined the group, who were then a basic pub band. During her three years in Italy they have played at festivals all over the country, signed a recording deal and, Fergus boasts, Stephanie is now being recognised in the streets.

As an actual Irish person, Stephanie is a huge novelty. Of the hundreds of Irish music bands in Italy — and there are hundreds — along with a quite amazing circuit of Celtic festivals where they build crannogs and play bagpipes, she is the only non-Italian musician — and that has helped Will o' the Wisp no end.

Rediscovering music has also been helpful to Stephanie, however, who gave up any musical ambitions before moving to Buckinghamshire. A childhood accident severed the tip of her ring finger on the left hand and while she managed to compensate for years, and sailed through violin exams, Stephanie was finally forced to accept she could not play professionally. Until she went to Italy, that is, where Irish music opened up to her a looser, less rigid discipline that allowed her realise her dream in a new form.

When Fergus bought her engagement ring last year, Stephanie notes, she was touched at his discreet choice, a simple ring that suits her small hand and does not draw attention to the missing fingertip.

They plan to marry in 2005, on the farm, with good food from the contacts Fergus has fostered, barrels of local wine and, one assumes, lashings of olive oil.

BY a delightful fluke, Fergus MacCabe's olive oil has the lowest acidity in Tuscany. It ticks him that a Londoner's product should surpass the local lads, but it also bolsters his faith in his enterprise. To become an Italian farmer, Fergus had to attend agricultural college, health and safety courses, and fulfil all sorts of requirements, but it paid off. He is a foxy farmer who really knows his stuff.

Currently, his oil under the Antico Podere da Casa Nuova label sells not just in London but in Irish outlets like Caviston's and the Butler's Pantry in Dublin. Fergus, however, has his eye on the bigger picture. When he and Stephanie build their own house next year, he plans to add a large factory kitchen, from which he will produce jarred vegetables, truffles, biscotti — all sorts of things to make your mouth water and all fresh from the farm, which is something Fergus recognises means a lot to city folk.

For now, however, he will continue to bring his oil and a selection of produce from his neighbours, the people who have filled his head with the farming information he happily passes on to ignorant visitors such as myself.

The rain came too late for Fergus MacCabe's 2003 olives. The yield was low, but his spirits are undiminished. The Irish harvesters, white-collar sorts who enjoy the work, the meals in the field, the evenings spent soaking sore muscles in the nearby hot springs and drinking Fergus's admittedly rough red wine did what they could, but, as Fergus explains, it's no good if it rains during the picking.

Something to do with delicate bark and parasites, detail that has jumbled together with other facts about rain, olives and Italian agriculture. It's a pretty picture, made more of pleasure than of pain and, one hopes, the right kind of rain.

IRISH TENORS
WE THREE KINGS
Christmas Spectacular

Finbar Wright | Anthony Kearns | Ronan Tynan

TONIGHT!

Dublin, Point Theatre

Sunday 28 December

- CAR PARK OPEN 4.30pm
- DOORS OPEN 6.00pm
- PATRONS ARE ADVISED TO BE SEATED FOR 7.50pm
- IRISH TENORS ON STAGE @ 8pm SHARP!
- Latecomers will not be seated until a suitable interval.

Point Theatre - Tickets €66, €60, €55.50, €40, €35.

24HR TICKET HOTLINE: 0818 719 300 (ROI)

Telephone & internet bookings subject to 12.5% service charge per ticket, to a maximum of €5.50 per ticket. Agents €2 per ticket handling charge.

buy on-line via www.aikenpromotions.com

SMUG MARRIED

Don't my walls look nice? Now, eat your fishfingers

IREMEMBER hearing my mother say that making dinner every day could get a bit wearing. At the time, I was too busy wondering what colour eye-shadow I should wear to attract the boy of my dreams.

But now I know what my mother meant. The only difference is in degree: where she expressed occasional ennui, I lose the will to live. Fortunately, my bouts of potato-induced apathy come only once or twice a year — but when they happen, they are strong.

It's all I can do, as I preside over another heap of peelings, to stop myself committing hara-kiri with a spatula.

Aine O'Connor finds that if she devotes her energies to home decor, she stops caring about cooking



It's the sheer mundanity of it all, the sheer *having to*. And for the foreseeable future. It's not like you're whipping out the Jamie Oliver book and doing something splendid with lemongrass.

Nor is there likely to be much acclaim for your efforts. The best you can hope for is that they won't gag when it's served up and that you'll only have to say five times each, "sit on your chair please", "use your

fork", "stop throwing carrots", "yes it's cow, but it was happy to die", and "EAT YOUR BLOODY DINNER!"

The days we eat with the kids are even worse. When not afflicted by culinary apathy, I see those reality TV families tucking into take-aways or ready meals and think, "tut tut, how nutritionally irresponsible". When in the throes of it I am convinced that monosodium glutamate is the target of a

smear campaign.

My apathy is ever-present, it just shifts from one thing to another.

A while back it was DIY. This could be explained by the trauma I had suffered as a DIY debutante, when, in the grips of an addiction to house transformation programmes, I found myself remodelling and scumble glazing anything that didn't move. My husband used to warn visitors not to sit still for too long.

But as the effects of that first transformation wore off, I could not bring myself (somehow painting had become *my* job) to start. I peeled a piece of paint bub-

ble off in February and was overcome with a fit of sobbing at all that lay before me. I spent the next eight months saying "I must . . ." And then, finally tired of listening to my whining, Beloved arranged for someone to do the hall.

Even that was not without its traumas. Imagine my shock when, instead of wasting my entire day leaving me hanging round the house, the painter phoned early to let me know he couldn't come.

That was disturbing enough, but then he turned up the next day on time (freaky), didn't drink tea with 56 sugars, didn't smoke

or throw the butts in the toilet. Mad. His work made the rest of the house look so bad that I was finally galvanised into action.

Top tip: start on a night when your partner is on the piss. When they get home, overcome with guilt, excess alcohol or paint fumes, they'll help out with the rest.

But once it dawned on me that the redecorating was using up all my cooking creativity, I ceased all DIY. It's not the right time of year for culinary apathy. I have to do New Year's dinner. It'll be nice for the guests to sit in lovely new surroundings, but even nicer if they have something to eat.