

The Dark Side of the Democrat's Orgasmic Meditation Company

OneTaste is pushing its sexuality wellness education toward the mainstream. Some former members say it pushed them into sexual servitude and five-figure debts.

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Photographer: Timothy Archibald

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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 started working on OneTaste's sales staff and living in a communal house in Brooklyn with her co-workers. Seven days a week, they gathered for multiple rounds of orgasmic meditation, or OM. (They

pronounce it “ohm.”) They spent hours calling and texting people who’d come to a OneTaste event, trying to sell seats for the next, more expensive classes. The company-hosted evening OM circles in Manhattan sometimes held 30 or more pairs of strokers and strokees in one room, the fully clothed men concentrating on their moving fingertips while the women, naked from the waist down, moaned, wailed, and sighed. 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 former OneTaste staffers and community members, some involved as recently as last year. Most spoke anonymously because they signed nondisclosure agreements or fear retribution. Some, including Michal, asked to withhold their last names because they don't want to be publicly associated with the company.

Many of the former staffers and community members say OneTaste resembled a kind of prostitution ring—one that exploited trauma victims and others searching for healing. In some members' experiences, the company 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 OM’s 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 companies about #MeToo and how to teach connection as preventive health for companies rather than treating the disease of sexual harassment,” says Van Vleck. She says the National Hockey League is among the businesses that have expressed interest, though the NHL says it can’t confirm any record of a conversation.

A decade’s worth of periodic OneTaste press coverage hasn’t really gotten past the titillating veneer of OM. Reporters have occasionally used the word “cult” jokingly because of the practice’s inherent kookiness and fierce devotees, but Michal and others say OneTaste deserves the term’s full weight. “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.”

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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

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 #OrgasmicMeditation." At that event, OneTaste staffers tell them about the \$199 Introduction to OM class. While attendees are no longer invited to try Oming during the intro class, it still features a live OM demonstration between staffers, right before lunch.

The way to learn more, the intro students hear, is to take more classes.

Currently, students pay \$499 for a weekend course, \$4,000 for a retreat, \$12,000 for the coaching program, and \$16,000 for an “intensive.” In 2014, OneTaste started selling a yearlong \$60,000 membership, which lets buyers 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 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 have better sex. Former staff say they were drawn to Cherwitz’s intense charisma and terrified of getting on her bad side, especially by not hitting sales goals. Before events, sales staff often watched one of her favorite YouTube videos, a clip of lions hunting in a pack. Some former staffers say they called customers “marks” and referred to themselves as “lions,” “tigers,” and sometimes “fluffers,” a term borrowed from porn sets. “You fluff someone to get them energetically and emotionally hard,” one former salesperson says. “You were the dangled bait, like ‘You can have more of this if you buy this \$10,000 course.’”

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, it 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 into an OM house in Santa Monica and signed up for the coaching program. Her new life felt good for a while, but staffers sometimes turned cold, especially when students hesitated to buy more classes. When frozen out, she grew desperate to regain their affection.

Laurie and other former students say they were taught that once they started down the OneTaste spiritual path, they would feel tortured and lost if they left. She says that kind of peer pressure helped keep her in the coaching program starting in early 2015, even after traumas related to her childhood 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.

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Tayeb, a former OneTaste "priest of orgasm," married the company's onetime head of sales after giving up responsibility for his son.

Photographer: Simone Lueck for Bloomberg Businessweek

OneTaste teachings were often used to justify sexual manipulation and abuse, several former members say. "Aversion practice" is the company's teaching that you gain power and expand your orgasm—within the group, a 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 during a 2014 fight in the company’s Market Street headquarters in front of employees, according to one eyewitness. The executive was fired but has since been rehired. OneTaste says the incident was unacceptable, but that it rehired the executive because of a belief in rehabilitation. It says it’s unaware of other cases and has never promoted or tolerated violence.

Policy changes since 2016—no more hosting group OM circles, no more student OMing in classes or staff OMing in the office—have lessened OneTaste’s liability. While OneTaste says these changes were meant to 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.’”

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. OMing 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 anything that said, 'Wait, take a moment.'"

Life at the OM house was relentlessly scheduled. Every morning at around 7 a.m., staff convened for two rounds of OM, switching partners midway. Then came an AA-inspired "fear inventory," writing out and sharing their worries with a partner. Former staffers say they were encouraged to report to management if they heard others express doubts about OneTaste. They all went to Bikram yoga, cooked, cleaned, then spent several hours making sales 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 texts an hour from OneTaste group chats.

“Like many startups, employees worked long and varied hours at times,” OneTaste said in a statement. The company says workers’ lifestyle choices were optional, that fear inventory was confidential and wasn’t used to harm people, and that in 2016 it started using time sheet service TSheets to track and pay work hours, including overtime. It says it pays workers properly.

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."



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Laurie says she risked feeling "f---ed spiritually" to leave OneTaste and spent months on disability afterward.
Photographer: Simone Lueck for Bloomberg Businessweek

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 trying to rebuild his relationship with his son, who's now 13. "There's just a lot of confusion and pain and anger," he says. "I leveraged myself financially, emotionally. I was married. I was all into this thing. When it doesn't work out, it's devastating."

Like other apostates, Tayeb is conflicted about his years in OneTaste, which he says taught him practical leadership skills and exposed him to useful spiritual teachings. Even OneTaste's harshest critics often say OM can help people. But Tayeb also says the company exercises "undue influence" over 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 strokers 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.