



The new NETWORKING

Forget forced encounters in soulless venues — a wave of women-centric groups is putting the fun back into making connects, writes *Alix O'Neill*

Monday night at Jamavar, Mayfair's hottest new Indian eatery. On the menu: small plates and small talk. Downstairs, women of varied ages and professions are milling around, champagne and gin cocktails in hand, while trays of malai stone bass tikka circle the candlelit room. The vibe is

chilled and welcoming. I arrive alone, but within minutes am happily chatting pregnancy and paneer (the veggie canapé is delicious) with a group of strangers.

It's the restaurant's inaugural Women's Club — an evening of good food and scintillating conversation, featuring a different guest speaker each week. Tonight, journalist and former Polpetto head



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chef, Florence Knight, takes to the floor, dishing up the secrets to her success alongside the trials of working in a male-dominated field — the event was an instant sell-out. 'Women want a relaxed environment where they can learn from one another,' says Jamavar's co-founder Samyukta Nair, 32.

'Growing up surrounded by talented, powerful women, I learnt about the importance of self-belief. I started the Women's Club not only as an antidote to Mayfair's long-standing boys' clubs, but also to share what my elders taught me.' Although men are welcome, Nair believes women thrive in less conventional meet-and-greet set-ups. 'It's necessary to talk about our

failures as well as our successes, and women are more comfortable than men in admitting their faults.'

Women's networking is transforming. The days of having a business card shoved in your face as you nurse a glass of warm wine and a soggy vol-au-vent are over. A new wave of pop-ups and groups is providing a third space between work and play for London's female professionals. The spirit is one of sharing, not selling. And there's not a beige foodstuff in sight.

'I'm really conscious of how most of these



things are held in stuffy, grey conference rooms, so I look for venues that will inspire,' says Otegha Uwagba, author of the Waterstones bestselling career guide, *Little Black Book*, and founder of Women Who, a community for women in creative industries. Uwagba, who left her job in advertising in 2015 to pursue a writing career, launched the initiative last summer. 'I found myself feeling isolated professionally and wanted

to connect with like-minded people,' she explains.

As well as a weekly newsletter and regular blog posts, which have earned Uwagba an international following, the 26-year-old also hosts monthly events, from business skills workshops to socials, at some of the capital's coolest spaces including the Ace Hotel, Modern Society and the V&A's Balenciaga retrospective. In March she teamed up with Nike to throw a party for International Women's Day — a gathering of 170 women at Redchurch Street ad agency Mother, where guests had the opportunity to screen-print their own T-shirts with artist Kelly Anna.

Uwagba believes there is a growing demand for groups such as Women Who. 'Our perception of women's networking is changing. It's becoming more about cultural and social enrichment, as well as professional gain. I see it as an opportunity to make new friends, which I think really appeals to women. Also, social media has changed the game. A lot of my peers have built up strong working relationships online.' The rise in flying solo could also be spurring the trend. Between 2008 and 2011, 80 per cent of people entering self-employment were female, according to official figures. It's hardly surprising that women-centric networks, offering advice, contacts and potential friendships, are proving so popular.

They've certainly helped me. I've been



Jamavar co-founder
Samyukta Nair has
set up the Women's Club
at her restaurant



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freelancing for more than two years and, while I wouldn't trade the freedom and variety of my job for anything, there are days when I miss the camaraderie of the workplace. Plus, it would be nice to have someone to shoot the breeze with — I fear Cicero, my areca palm, is tiring of my water cooler chat.

So I began organising quarterly mid-morning catch-ups with a few fellow freelancers. We meet at Timber Yard in Soho, and, over flat whites and bowls of

porridge, compare industry notes. It's not all shop talk, though. We'll recommend podcasts we rate, let off steam when we need to and support each other in our various extracurricular endeavours. One member of the Power Brunchers — a name likely to be revised, given a) it's not the 1980s and b) we've taken to

meeting in the evenings — signed up for yoga teacher training after our last get-together. I suppose technically, we're hustling for the same jobs, but it doesn't feel like that. We come away from each session feeling invigorated.

'The reason these new networks are taking off is because there's a mindset of collaboration, not competition,' says Emma Sexton, 41, co-founder of Flock Global, which helps mainly female entrepreneurs grow their companies. Flock is the serendipitous result of a business trip to New York in 2014, when Sexton, co-founder Megan Thomas and a small group of other women decided to pool their resources and contacts to create a wider network.

'Traditional networking has this "take" mentality,' Sexton explains. 'We've all been at an event where you're talking to someone and as soon as they realise there's no reason to do business with you, they walk off. At the end of all our workshops, we go around the room and ask people to tell us both what they need and what they can bring to the community. It's a nicer way to do business.' It's a smarter approach, too. Sexton is now co-presenter of the acclaimed *Badass Woman's Hour* on Talk Radio, alongside Flock members Natalie Campbell and Harriet Minter.

One of the new rules of women's networking is playing the long game. The

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Anna Morrogh launched the Congress network

benefits of a recent connection might not seem immediately obvious, but good things come to those who wait. When she launched London-based Congress in January with seven other women, Anna Morrogh, 33, had no idea it would lead to her dream job. 'From speaking to friends and colleagues, there was a real sense that Congress was needed,' says Morrogh, who previously worked in sales and marketing at Google. 'Not all companies focus on career development or offer training on things like negotiation or personal branding. And I got the impression that women wanted to

connect outside of their industries. I rarely went to networking events at Google because they seemed quite transactional and less about the people and experience.'

Morrogh anticipated a turnout of around 20 women at the first Congress event at WeWork Waterhouse Square — 60 showed up. Each month, the larger Congress network gathers to listen to a speaker deliver a session on topics ranging from public speaking to influencing, while smaller groups called cliques meet up regularly to share their personal and professional goals, and encourage one

another to reach these. It was while seeking advice on how to progress Congress that Morrogh landed a job at AllBright, an organisation that supports female-led start-ups and encourages women to invest.

'I had a meeting with AllBright's co-founder Debbie Wosskow in March and filled her in on Congress,' says Morrogh. 'She told me that she and her partner Anna [Jones, former CEO of magazine

giant Hearst] were looking for a head of marketing and would I be interested in applying. She called Anna into her office and they interviewed me on the spot. I was offered the job that afternoon.'

Of course, some would argue that, while beneficial to women, the rise of female-only spaces hinders the feminist cause. But none of the groups I spoke to excludes men — their focus is simply on offering women some breathing space from an often male-dominated working culture.

Ex-Googler and Congress member Dahlia Basar, 37, welcomes the change in the status quo. 'I've met incredible people I wouldn't necessarily have had access to — women around the same stage in life and their career but, refreshingly, not from the same industry. I've developed crucial skills that will help me in my next role and am planning a side project with someone in my clique. Oh, and at one of the Congress evenings, I met the Topshop designer who made the shoes I was wearing. That was pretty cool.'

Sisterhood with style credentials? Sign us up.



A Congress networking evening