

GAY & LESBIAN

Report

Jiggle all the way

Welcome to the world of gainers and encouragers, where packing on pounds is a turn-on **By Les Simpson**

On a recent Sunday afternoon, about a dozen gay men gathered for brunch at an upscale Indian restaurant in midtown. The generous buffet made it a good place to meet, as all the men are eager participants in a sexual subculture fixated on gaining weight. Seated at the table were "gainers," who deliberately pack on pounds for self-pleasure or as a means of turning on their partners, and "encouragers," who enjoy watching other men eat. But this was no food orgy; the group had come together to socialize and discuss their decidedly unconventional sexual proclivities.

"It's the final taboo," declares the get-together's organizer, John Outcalt, a 42-year-old filmmaker, who is a big cheese on the gainer and encourager scene. Certainly in our diet-obsessed society, where fat is the enemy, deliberate weight gain is regarded as downright appalling. Gay culture, with

its slavish devotion to buffed bods, can be especially insensitive to different ideals of beauty. And besides the aesthetic debate, fattening up is considered unhealthy. With this disapproving atmosphere in mind, it's not surprising that most of the men at the brunch requested not to be fully identified for this article.

However, Outcalt (whom most people would consider to be of normal weight) is completely out of the closet about being an encourager and a "chaser," which is the term for admirers of fat guys, otherwise known as "chubs." The former publisher of a newsletter called *Encouragement*, he now spearheads annual conventions called Encouragecons, which have featured whipped-cream eating contests; the "Chub Olympics," where shirtless fat men spin hula hoops around their jiggling bellies; and grand prizes presented to members who gained the most

weight during their stay. Tellingly, some of Outcalt's earliest erotic memories are of watching werewolf films: "I'm interested in transformation, going from point A to point B, and whether it's gaining hair, getting larger or getting fat, I find it sexy and exciting."

Although he hesitates to generalize, Outcalt believes that many gainers and encouragers had particular relationships with food while growing up. "A lot of gainers and encouragers come from families where the parents were crazy about food issues, like dieting," he says. "When they came of age, they were finally able to enjoy food and their size in a way that they never were allowed. When you come from a background that is oppressive about one area, you tend to find yourself being liberated by running in the opposite direction."

Another encourager at the table, Joe, also extols the sexiness of witnessing someone get fatter and fatter; he recalls being especially turned on the day his boyfriend proved to be too obese to buckle his own airplane seat belt. Next to Joe is the largest man in the group, Bill, a 400-pound gainer, who visits the buffet several times, each time triumphantly returning with heaping plates of food. And in another seat is Sebastian (not his real name), a husky artist who reckons that encouraging and gaining, much like smoking, is "an issue of individual choice." The problem, he says, is that weight gain is often perceived as a "sin against health."

But what about the health aspects? Are vulnerable gainers being prodded to do something that may not be good for them? Another large-sized man named Bill, who used to attend gaining and encouraging functions, goes so far as to call his involvement with the scene akin to "slowly slitting his wrists." Outcalt argues that no one is being forced to do anything against his will. "It's really hard to make a person eat if he doesn't want to," he says. "You can't shove it in his face and force him to chew." He denounces manipulative encouragers who would employ "psychological torture," such as saying to someone, "I won't love you unless you eat this."

Outcalt says that the controversy regarding gaining and encouraging is much more prevalent on the heterosexual weight-gain scene, where participants are referred to as "feeders" and "feedees." (The straight scene mostly consists of men fattening up women.) "In the gay community, there's more of a sense of: We know what we want, we know what we're doing, and let's get some pleasure out of it," says Outcalt, who mentions that many gay men refer to their self-acceptance of gaining and encouraging as a second coming out. He claims that many other large gay men (and other fat people) are interested in gaining and encouraging, but are stymied due to their unfortunate feelings of self-loathing.

Social occasions like the Sunday brunch, according to Outcalt, provide a supportive environment for like-minded people who can relate to one another's feelings about the erotic qualities of food and fat. Another unofficial meeting place for gainers and encouragers is the Dugout on Christopher Street on Sunday nights, where they mix in with the bar's masculine "bear" patrons. Also extremely popular is the Internet, where gainers and encouragers titillate one another in various chatrooms. As on countless other gay sites, the interactions often boil down to interest in size. But in the case of gainers and encouragers, it's the number of inches *above* the waistline that counts.

For more information go to encouragenews@aol.com, or call 212-213-6392.

HEAVY PETTING Big-bellied Bill is flanked by a couple of encouragers, John Outcalt (left) and Joe.

