

LIQUID LUNCH

Alec Marsh lunches with Inga Verbeek, the real-life millionaire and billionaire matchmaker boss of Ivy Relations

REASSURINGLY ATTRACTIVE.

That, if you will permit me to co-opt the celebrated advertising line from a certain Belgian lager, is pertinent in the case of another Belgian export: Inga Verbeek, who arrives at Mere, the swish Fitzrovia restaurant opened by Monica Galetti (of *Masterchef* fame) and her husband David earlier this year, fresh from the airport with barely a blonde hair out of place.

Verbeek is the founder of Ivy Relations, a matchmaker whose typical clients are worth £20 million, with offices in Antwerp, New York and Geneva. She's in London to catch up with some of her UK clients, and as we scan the pleasingly minimalist Mere menus ('Lamb', 'Octopus' etc) she cuts to the chase. 'We are a service provider that saves people time,' she says, 'and time is the only commodity you cannot buy. Most of people's regrets when they're about to die is how they spent it. So you might want to think about that.'

I'm doing just that – from lamb to love to regret-tinged-death – as Verbeek tells me that it's harder than ever for single HNWs to meet the person of their dreams, thanks to the pressures of work and social fragmentations exacerbated by the internet. Next she drops the f-bomb: 'Don't misunderstand me, I'm an independent woman, but because of the whole feminist movement a lot of men are confused. They are not sure what women want.'

The good news is Verbeek does: 'I don't know one single successful independent woman who doesn't

want their male partner to be respectful, but masculine and *stronger*,' she declares. So where are the loneliest HNWs in the world? 'Switzerland,' she declares.

Since 2011 Ivy Relations has helped 300 couples tie the knot. Right now it has 900 'active members' (out of a pool of 3,000) and has ambitions to get that up to 5,000, at which point the firm will be nearing £100 million turnover. She'd like to be at £50 million by 2022. 'The fact of the matter is that it is a proper

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business – it's a *real* business.'

A case in point is its campaign (as Ivy calls it) to find the life partner for an unnamed Middle Eastern billionaire. This involves an ad campaign with a spend of £500,000 and castings of up to 250 women in four worldwide locations. If this doesn't help the UHNW in question find love, it's hard to see what will.

But then it turns out that the rich make textbook errors when dating just like everyone else: 'They forget to be gentlemen,' Verbeek says of the chaps. 'They don't open doors, they don't pay – and it's not a money thing, because [the female clients] have enough money. People [also] get stressed and end up talking about their exes.'

The good news is her outfit can help: 'We have a 92 per cent success rate for male clients in the first year.' And women? 'Sixty-seven,' she replies, 'because the older clients above 58 take the average down and we have slightly more women clients than men.' But it's not only male age prejudice and the balance of the membership that she has to contend with. 'Men are easier to work with than women,' she confides. A statement which I will leave well alone.

The challenge is that men have an ego issue with matchmaking: they don't want help. 'Men are hunters and they *should* be,' says Verbeek. 'I tell them, "We're just putting you on selected ground – making sure that the game running around is of good quality. You are not wanting to go out to shoot a deer and coming home with a rabbit." Too right. I dig into my squab pigeon.'

Like many entrepreneurs, Verbeek's inspiration was first-hand: in her case, divorced at 29, she turned to a matchmaker. Now happily settled, she is dedicated to bringing happiness to the world: 'I think that if we can bring more happiness to people – especially to high-net-worth individuals who are influential that have power – then hopefully we can make a difference. Because honestly the world is a fucked-up place.' She laughs, 'I call it trickle-down love-onomics.' Now there's a thought. ●