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## Thoroughly modern madam

Jennifer is no stranger to taking chances, from her modelling success working for big-gun fashion houses in Europe, to running the "nicest little brothels in New Zealand". Louise Jolliffe meets a playful, thoroughly modern madam, at **Bon Ton**. Photos by Chris Coad



"I WANTED TO DO IT MY WAY, TO OFFER A FIVE-STAR SERVICE THAT WAS POSITIONED DIFFERENTLY FROM ANYTHING ELSE, AND LET PEOPLE UNDERSTAND IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE SEEDY – IN ESSENCE, IT'S A BUSINESS, JUST LIKE ANY OTHER"

No two ways about it, Jennifer is a right madam. This stands to reason, given she is the proud owner and proprietor of Bon Ton (meaning good taste). There are two Bon Ton brothels, in Wellington and Auckland, and they have the rare distinction of having the British Women's Institute's ringing endorsement, and sit (or more appropriately lie) at the apex of its industry. As I was to discover, things aren't always as we might assume when it comes to "houses of ill repute".

For some, it conjures up images of a dark, generally sordid environment. Plastic sheets, sad, middle-aged men and even sadder young girls all leap to mind. Our imaginings of "the game" are generally of tragic and broken women bereft of any other way to support themselves. The theory behind Bon Ton is simple – to raise the game (as it were) and run a clean, safe and welcoming environment based on good taste and style. Jennifer Souness: "I wanted to do it my way, to offer a five-star service that was positioned differently from anything else, and let people understand it doesn't have to be seedy – in essence, it's a business, just like any other."

With Helen Clark's Labour Government's Prostitution Reform Act 2003, the proverbial blinds were lifted and the sex industry was legalised for prostitutes and madams alike. New Zealand, alongside the State of Nevada and Amsterdam were the first to legalise the industry and have become models for other countries considering the ins and outs of prostitution.

The debate has spawned an unlikely coupling: working girls and the UK's Women's



Institute (WI). Sex and scones aren't traditional bedfellows but, after the shocking murders of five prostitutes in Ipswich in 2006, the WI decided to use their influence and voting power to lobby the British Government to legalise prostitution and establish rights and safety for prostitutes in the UK. "We want safe working conditions for working girls," declared the WI. This wasn't entirely palatable for the British public and led to headlines such as "Women's Institute wants Knock Shops". A world apart from the usual topics of teacakes and cardies.

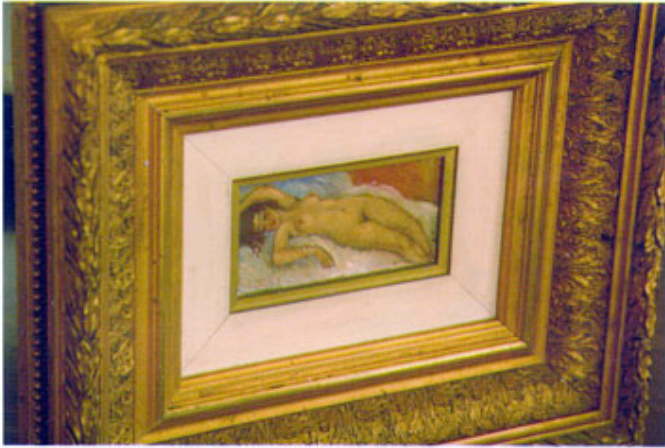
Undaunted by public opinion, two, and it has to be said, relatively elderly members of the WI were commissioned to go on a global trek to find the ultimate brothel that they considered could serve as a model for legalised prostitution in the UK. The bunnies they were to meet certainly weren't those of the Delia Smith variety.

WI members Jean and Shirley look as unlikely a pair as you'd ever expect to meet wandering through XXX-rated shops curiously inspecting latex tools of the trade. The UK's Channel Four filmed the quest, and the documentary makes for delightful viewing. seventy-three-year-old Shirley comes out with some real pearls – "gosh, that's super; you can buy a new kitchen just for lying upside down on the bed!" And Jean picks up some pointers for spicing things up between the flannelette sheets at home in Hampshire.

New Zealand was on their itinerary as Bon Ton's reputation had preceded it. Jennifer gleefully describes opening the brothel door to find Jean and Shirley ("two lovely grannies") standing there, keen to soak up the atmosphere. Given what they had seen in their time at the Nevada Bunny Farms and Amsterdam's red light district, Bon Ton appeared to be a welcome respite. The pair had clearly taken it all in on their foray to the "naughty side". Jean was quick to fill her checklist for a good brothel: KY Jelly – check; plenty of fluffy towels – check; showers for Sir's "diddley bits" – check.

Upon their return to the UK, and heavily based on Bon Ton's approach





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to the time-honoured trade, the WI compiled a petition of more than 7000 signatures to present to 10 Downing Street last year. With more than 205,000 members of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, that's a lot of clout, not to mention umbrellas and tea cosies.

So if the WI can talk it up in the UK, what about in New Zealand? Previously, Jennifer has chosen to keep a low profile, after all, she says, "it's an industry in which discretion is paramount". But given the fierce pride she takes in what she does, she's now ready to put a face to the name Bon Ton. She has built a business with an international reputation for quality, workability and just plain smarts. If "repeat business" is a measure of success, she's good at what she does.

How does an articulate, arrestingly handsome woman like Jennifer Souness become a Madam? In short, she dislikes the word "no". Being told she couldn't do it was like a red rag to a bull; she's not backwards in coming forward, and has the experience to prove it.

Jennifer spent 17 years living in Milan, eight of which as a catwalk model for Gucci, Prada, Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Dior and Armani. She was there when models such as Kate Moss, Linda Evangelista and Tyra Banks exploded onto the scene. Jennifer counts industry powerhouses such as fashion icon Anna Piaggi as a friend. From her Milan base she ran a successful production company that led to the setting up of the much-lauded and ongoing Australian Fashion Week.

Upon her return to New Zealand in 2000, she set about marrying up the best of our home-grown fashion and cultural talent with a view to creating our own Fashion and Culture Week. Her vision was to showcase the best of what our creative industries had to offer to key international players, utilising her extensive international contacts with industry luminaries such as *Italian Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Italian Elle* and even *The Sunday Times*. However,



Jennifer modeling in the late 80s

apart from \$300,000 given by Jim Anderton, it didn't come to fruition, and Jennifer was left feeling high and dry after promised funding and support on the part of the New Zealand contingent failed to materialise, just two weeks out from the event.

Feeling bruised and unsure of what to do next, fate kicked in at a dinner at the Italian Embassy in Wellington, when a friend suggested that she "open the best brothel in New Zealand". Supply and demand was never going to be an issue; what was missing was someone equipped to run the kind of establishment that brought willing women and eager men together in a chic space. Not long after, Bon Ton was born, first in Wellington, then later in Auckland's Herne Bay.

Jennifer explains, "Bon Ton is about discretion, comfort and luxury; the women who work here perform the role of courtesans in every sense of the word. Each lady has her own distinct look and style." As a rule, Jennifer doesn't meet the clients, and the clients never see other clients. She says there is always someone else in the building, for safety.

Inside, Bon Ton feels more like a luxury lodge than a brothel. The high-studded reception area is furnished with Italian antiques, including a selection of 18<sup>th</sup> century painting and etchings. Even if you don't particularly approve, you would be hard-pressed not to hand it to her for form. And, as dear old hawk-eyed Shirley from the WI observed, "I have the same coasters in my living room at home – fancy that!"

In terms of choosing the right girls, one thing Jennifer likes to ask her prospective ladies is whether they enjoy sex. It seems like an obvious question, but apparently it's not. "The fact is these women choose to work as prostitutes because they like having sex – they enjoy their work very much." Jennifer says she prefers Bon Ton girls to see only one client per





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shift. No-one works fulltime, and each of the women have careers outside.

So, what do you get for an hour? "It's a high pressure situation; the first 15 minutes of any booking is spent 'relaxing' the client in preparation."

Interestingly, the actual sex is the quickest part of the hour for many clients, who generally choose to spend the majority of their time just chatting – as Bon Ton terms it "feeling pampered and appreciated".

"Post-legislation, the impediment to the women working in the industry is the stigma attached, not by the law, but by a section of the general public. For whatever the reasons men have for paying for sex (and there appear to be a myriad of them) the reality is that men and, to a lesser degree, women always have and always will use prostitutes."

During our time together, Jennifer posed an interesting ethical quandary: "What is worse – for a man to have an affair or to visit a brothel?" It seems a damned if you do and damned if you don't question, and one society has grappled with since man starting walking upright and into the arms of working girls.

Whether you're for it, against it, or undecided, talking shop with a Madam is an enlightening experience. As Bon Ton and prostitution comes out from the shadows, it shows itself as a whole new way to talk about sex. Just as the ladies from the Women's Institute discovered.

[www.bonton.co.nz](http://www.bonton.co.nz)

