swipe right

She’s the 29-year-old co-founder of Tinder, who filed a sexual-harassment lawsuit against the dating giant, before going on to create billion-dollar rival Bumble, the only app where women make the first move. Carina Chocano meets digital crusader WHITNEY WOLFE HERD at her Texan ranch, to talk about revolutionizing the way we interact online – both romantically and professionally – falling in love, and her trailblazing anti-bullying office policy.
Whitney Wolfe Herd, in the stables of her Texas barn, wears dress, $26,000, and belt, $889, both by Dior; ring (right hand, middle finger) by Coach; $25; ring (right hand, index finger) by Dior; $320; earrings and wedding band, her own.
D o you go to nightclubs?" Whitney Wolfe Herd and I are sitting on the patio of her magnificent Texas barn, overlooking a ravine and a peaceful copse of trees. Nearby, her chubby seven-year-old lab, Jet, pants extravagantly in the heat. "I don’t go to nightclubs," she says. "They are emblematic of a culture I hate about gender dynamics, of who’s in charge: who’s the boss, who’s there for what. You’ll see a woman dancing to get the attention of one or two men and the men are the ones paying the bill. It’s so we pause to attend to Jet, and ensure he is well-watered. "I have to rewrite the rules. We have to!"

The rewriting of the rules is exactly what Wolfe Herd is doing. She was one of five (the only female) co-founders of the dating app Tinder. Initially called Match Box, Wolfe Herd came up with the name Tinder after spotting a packet of matches at her father’s cabin in Montana, and marketed it to great success on college campuses. Two years later, in April 2014, it is widely reported that Wolfe Herd left the company and went on to sue Tinder, accusing her ex-partner and co-founder Justin Mateen and Tinder CEO Sean Rad of sexual harassment and discrimination. The lawsuit was eventually settled out of court, with Wolfe Herd receiving a reported $1 million (the agreement prevents either party from talking about it). Mateen was suspended from the company and later resigned, and Rad has since stepped aside as CEO. By December that same year, Wolfe Herd had founded Bumble, the only dating app that empowers women to make the first move. Since then, Bumble has become the second-fastest growing dating app after Tinder available in 160 countries and amassing more than 17 million users (at the time of writing, Bumble has 64,000 new users per day). The launch of two spin-offs, Bumble BFF to connect women looking for new friends, in March 2016 and Bumble Bizz (for networking, in October 2017), allowed the company has this year been valued at $1 billion. Unsurprisingly, Wolfe Herd has twice been included Forbes’ 30 Under 30 (she was on the cover in 2017) and, earlier this year, was featured in the Time 100 list.

It’s not just her age – she recently turned 29 – that sets Wolfe Herd apart, but the fact that she is a woman in a narrow, male-dominated club, who was subjected to a media circus and a campaign of misogynist abuse, and then embroiled to dash past competitors in a crowded, honours field (more than 90 percent of dating start-ups fail, according to Forbes). Bumble not only offers an alternate reality where women are in control, it also explicitly prohibits hate, aggression, or bullying of any kind. It has banned pornographic pictures, pictures of guns (after which Wolfe Herd and her team immediately started receiving harassing emails) and, most recently, teamed up with the Anti-Defamation League to scour the app for hidden hate symbols. Bumble holds users accountable for their actions (in an open letter published in 2016, it publicly blocked a user for behavior deemed abusive).

Wolfe Herd – slim, blond and pretty, in a straw fedora and white wrap dress, and with strong features and huge, intelligent gray-blue eyes – greets me with a hug and a volley of friendly questions, and assures me that if we don’t get through everything in the time allotted, she’s always available. It’s hard to see how, though, given a peek at her calendar reveals she has near to 25 trips in the next three months, expanding Bumble into new territories across the globe, attending and speaking at conferences. She reportedly used to wake up every two hours to check her email and has been open about her struggles with anxiety, but she comes across as calm and Zen, if very together. We sink into lounges so oversized you could easily be marooned, which makes for an instantly, and very literally, laid-back vibe.

The barn is located on the grounds of the ranch near Tyler that Wolfe Herd bought with her oil-tycoon husband, Michael Herd – vice president of his family’s company, Herd Producing Co Inc, which owns and operates more than 400 gas and oil wells in North Louisiana and East Texas. This isn’t the tumbleweed Texas of the collective imagination: it’s incredibly green, lush and peaceful, and, at 8am, not yet scooching – though it will get there very soon. Modern and vast, the barn – or “barninium”, as they’re known here – looks like a cross between stables and a ballroom, with giant antler chandeliers hanging from cathedral-height ceilings. The stalls are presently rather low on horses, temporarily sent away to another ranch to be exercised following Michael’s car accident and resultant spinal injury just before their wedding (Whitney said he asked her what she would do if he were paraplegic and she replied, “I’d push you down the aisle.”) The barn is also home to a games room, stocked with a billiards table, card table, and rows of hardback Penguin Classics, a spacious guest apartment covered in Hermès polo-player-themed wallpaper and what I’m confident is the most elegant and whimsical tack room ever created. These fantastical, feminine twists have Wolfe Herd’s imprint all over them – ironic considering she was so allergic to horses as a child that she couldn’t go near them without her face swelling up. Her mother and younger sister were equestriennes (her mom played polo), which meant young Whitney spent afternoons after school reading in the car. It wasn’t until she met Michael, who grew up riding in the rodeo, that she finally built up a tolerance. “It wasn’t the horses that did it, but the two Great Danes that slept in Michael’s bed,” she laughs. “Turns out their dander is similar. One day, I suddenly wasn’t allergic anymore.”
Clockwise from left: the 'treehouse' where Wolfe Herd and her husband are living while the ranch's barn is undergoing construction; the barn's elegant, monochrome tack room; Wolfe Herd on the landing of her treehouse bolthole; the couple's suitably regal range collection of cowboy boots; a large print of General Custer hangs in the open kitchen of the treehouse; the bedroom, with its warm, wooden decor, has a chic yet homely feel.
The bookshelves in the tree house's open kitchen are filled with trinkets, books and photos, as well as Wolfe Herd’s miniature Bumblebee yellow Rinkin bag with a yellow-accented Hermès scarf. Opposite top: Carolina Herrera, $899, at Net-A-Porter.com skirt, $2,690, and belt, $990, both by Carolina Herrera; hat by Marc Jacobs, $250, at Net-A-Porter.com; scarf by Tod’s, $195.
“If our COO wants to bring her daughter to an all-hands meeting with the entire company... that’s fantastic”

Wolfe Herd’s parents stayed together until the day she left for college at SMU in Dallas. She’d wanted to major in marketing but wasn’t accepted into the program. Instead, she majored in international studies, where Wolfe Herd’s favorite course was a class on women in film, taught by a professor Kelli Herd, who would eventually become Wolfe Herd’s mother-in-law. She met Michael—who stops by loungers very briefly, dressed in a subtly western style, with dark-brown hair and startling aqua-blue eyes, and who is endearingly solicitous of his wife as her attention is pulled in several directions—four years ago in Aspen, where they were introduced over Christmas break by a mutual friend. He clearly got the measure of her, pretending he didn’t know how to ski so she could teach him. But once they were up the mountain, he shot past her, laughing as he skied backwards. Wolfe Herd credits him with helping her stay strong and regain her [CONTINUED ON PAGE 258]
away from me. J Lo! I used to lip sync to her with my girlfriends at sleepovers! But then I come home to my dog and my husband. We took his grandfather to dinner last night. I do everything exactly as I would have if there was no Bumble, no Tinder.

Still, as low-key as she seems, it’s hard to wrap your head around her circumstances. She has enormous presence for one so young, a presence I suspect comes from her Tinder experience, so I press it. Was there ever a moment she couldn’t believe this was happening? “The whole thing is surreal. But I also can’t believe my husband almost died in a car accident. I can’t believe my dog’s already seven. Life is so much more than just work. And that’s also how I live the business. It’s about this 360° approach. I want us to serve every corner of a woman’s life.”

Wolfe Herd changes into a beautiful Altuzarra gypsy dress and prepares to climb into a giant, muddy tractor on a sun-dappled dirt road; we can hear wild baby pigs (and later encounter several varieties of snake). “My grandma said something to me a couple of years ago. ‘We were having dinner in a restaurant and she said she wished Bumble had existed when she was younger, that her marriage had been miserable her whole life. She said, ‘If your grandfather called and said, ‘Have a chicken ready in an hour. I’m bringing six people home from work.’ I had a chicken ready in an hour and there were six people from work.’ She was constantly at the whim of his wants, his desires. She said, ‘Don’t you ever let a man tell you what to do. Be the boss. Make your own money. If I had had that opportunity as a young woman, I would have loved it.’”

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 219] move forward, I had to think differently and embrace what had happened, and instead see it as signal from my body that I need to look after myself, mentally and physically. It may sound like a small thing, but it was a significant moment.

I lost a few pounds at the spa and a few more in the following weeks thanks to a combination of diet and a couple of hours a week on an exercise bike, which doesn’t hurt my feet. I am now nearly 11 lbs lighter than I have been for a decade. I also see a life coach and I feel calmer and happier. My symptoms are much better, but I still find myself reaching out for the Actretin when it flares up.

Then a colleague told me she had heard of an incredible doctor in Hove who specializes in Traditional and Modern Chinese Medicine treating chronic skin conditions. Keen to find out more, I made an appointment and hopped on a train to the south coast.

Dr Marzio Al-Khalfaji was the first doctor I met who explained psoriasis to me in a clear and thorough way. He also asked more questions than anyone I have seen, assessing my family dynamics, the pressures of work, diet, exercise levels, and my emotional and mental state. He has been practicing for more than 30 years and is a recognized global authority in TCM with a focus on skin allergies, autoimmune and inflammatory conditions. He is highly respectful of Western medicine and says it is effective for many conditions, but believes that the complexity of autoimmune diseases is better treated with Chinese medicine. “Western medicine targets one issue, but autoimmune diseases such as psoriasis are more complicated,” he said. “The condition can also manifest in several ways, so the morphology of the lesions is very important.”

After a good hour’s full consultation, including a thorough examination of my feet, he formulated a medicine made up of more than 15 herbs and gave me two herbal tea and night creams. The medicine tasted horrible at first (although they do come in user-friendly liquid sachets), but after a week I could knock it down effortlessly.

As I finish this article, it is three weeks since I saw Dr Marzio and 19 days since I began taking the medicine. It’s still early days, but I am astonished at the dramatic change in my feet. My heels still have a few small cracks and my nails will take longer to repair, but the skin is clear for the first time in years, and miraculously, to my mind at least, the psoriasis looks like it has completely disappeared from my hands.

After the long journey I have been on to find a solution, I am not the least bit complacent and plan to attend a second consultation, where, depending on how the symptoms present themselves, Dr Marzio will alter the formulation to get me to the next stage of recovery. The one thing that keeps ringing through my mind, however, is his belief that psoriasis does not need to be “managed,” can actually be cleared up for the long-term and hope, real hope. Yes, there has been a great several months, but the upside, and yes truly is one, has been that I have gained a better understanding of my body, emo and overall health, and now feel a duty to create boundaries when it comes to stress and look after myself properly.