

DARBLING, PASS THE XANAX

Trading prescription painkillers and sedatives is the latest trend at parties. Susan Kirschbaum reports. Photographed by Richard Burbridge

ne spring evening, eight guests gathered at a perennially hip Manhattan eatery for a birthday celebration. They sat around a long table with glass bowls of lilies marking the place settings. After seared tuna, steak fries, and several bottles of merlot had been consumed, the evenings' 28-year-old honoree pushed forward a Hello Kitty pillbox that had been nestled in her Louis Vuitton shoulder sack.

"Anyone want a happy pill?" she asked, exposing three tiny tablets in pastel blue, green, and yellow—different dosages of Xanax. The stash had been acquired from her aunt, a doctor living in Los Angeles. Another attendee, an artist, tossing her happy pill." She opened her hand to reveal five fat white pills. (A thin blonde in a black Calvin Klein halter at the end of the table didn't seem keen on trading. She quietly showed a bottle of Vicodin to her companion and popped one discreetly.) For 10 minutes, transactions were made and candy was

ingested. Then, pill talk subsided. Though the swapping had been impromptu, nearly every guest had indulged. Some had gotten their hands on a drug that would give them a quick fix for chronic stress and make them feel "warm and relaxed." Others sampled a pill other than the one they brought, since different opiates and sedatives have slightly different effects. Though drug parties certainly are nothing new—after all, people have been sampling substances together for decades—what's different is that the drugs of choice are now prescription medications, particularly painkillers and sedatives. Why are they suddenly so popular?

For one thing, they are much easier to obtain than illegal drugs—and are becoming increasingly so since September 11. "These days, some doctors hand out prescriptions left and right, and patients know exactly the symptoms to cite to get one. If you say you're having insomnia or panic attacks or feel stressed, you can get a prescription for Xanax," says Bryan, director of the Beachcomber Family Center for