

‘He cooks.  
I clean’



THE SIMPLE LIFE OF THE  
GOOGLE POWER COUPLE

*Her husband is Sergey Brin.  
She’s shaking up healthcare. They are  
part of the new philanthropic elite.  
But Anne Wojcicki still shops in  
thrift stores and values motherhood  
more than making millions*

INTERVIEW Tim Teeman PORTRAITS Jean-Philippe Piter

Anne Wojcicki in the  
Bahamas, November  
2011. Opposite: with her  
husband, Sergey Brin, in  
New York, 2008



# 'FASHION HAS NEVER BEEN OUR FORTE... GLAMOUR SOUNDS LIKE A LOT OF WORK'

**A**pen holds Anne Wojcicki's unstyled, scraped-back brown hair in place; she is slight, wearing a simple, scoop-necked black dress and low heels – and this, she grumbles, is only because she was instructed not to wear her favoured uniform of sweatpants for our meeting. “Perfect for when you're pregnant and for after you're pregnant,” she says, laughing drily.

When I ask her about extravagance, she looks genuinely askance, yet Wojcicki is married to one of the richest men in America: Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google, whose estimated fortune is around \$18 billion (£11.5 billion). But you can't see the money on show: Wojcicki looks more busy working mother than tanned and Botoxed chatelaine; her clothes and down-to-earth attitude defy classifying her according to the number of noughts her husband has to his name.

“Fashion has never been our forte,” Wojcicki (pronounced “Wo-jit-skee”) says in her ungrand, raspy drawl. Instead of high-end couture, sleek hair and talons for nails, she appears a driven, unvain, intelligent person who wears blusher only under extreme sufferance – or instruction from her mother; if the geeks really are inheriting the earth, they are doing it without bombast. (When she tells me she wore blue eyeshadow in junior high, it's an agonised confession.) Of looking sexy and striking in the Bahamas in our opening photograph, she says stoutly that she got the dress “for under \$100 and did my own hair”.

Wojcicki is not trying to be “normal” for the sake of image. When I ask about her most reckless research purchase, she admits to “loving costume parties” and spending “\$75 on lots of different hot pink lipsticks”. Is that it? “That's obscene,” she says primly.

We are sitting in an airless office at 23andMe, the genetics testing firm she co-founded in the Californian town of Mountain View, just blocks from Google itself. It looks like a regular commuter town, yet is stuffed to the gills with technology and new-media companies, including LinkedIn and Dell KACE; Nokia, AOL and Microsoft have offices here, too.

The way Wojcicki, 38, tells it is that, yes, she and Brin have pots of money, but they are determined to be “responsible”, to live “a normal life”. They are also determined to



guard their privacy: they rarely give interviews and, while engaging and warm, she is a wary interviewee. It takes about an hour and a half for her to admit they have a private jet. It's a surprise when she mentions their “children”, as the existence of only one child is publicly known. When I seek to confirm the children's names and ages (son Benji was reportedly born in December 2008), Wojcicki says she cannot say: “We don't talk about them,” she mouths. But she reveals she has just returned to work from maternity leave having had her second child, to whom I refer as “a daughter?”, which Wojcicki doesn't correct. They are at home battling colds, she adds, the floors scattered with toys inspired by the film *Cars 2*.

Wojcicki may be serious about “empowerment and health” – as 23andMe shows, she hopes – but she is also a goofball. She and her husband have water guns at their house. They married in the Bahamas on David Copperfield's private island with guests flown in by private jet, but they did it in swimsuits – hers white, his black with white trim, “but not chosen for their colours” – having swum to a sand bar. “After we had said our vows and

kissed, our two best friends threw buckets of water in our faces, and we had a big water-gun fight. I'm not a wedding-dress kind of a person. My goal was not to do hair and makeup. We don't go for glamour; we do fun.”

She proudly confesses to having had the same breakfast – a smoothie with vitamins – for the past ten years. During one downpour, Brin “couldn't bring himself” to buy a \$40 umbrella from a New York department store. “Glamour sounds like a lot of work,” Wojcicki says wearily: she relishes the nerdy fun of strategising and talking ideas. Once, on St Barts, partying on a huge boat, she and Brin joked to their nonplussed, rich host they would happily bed down on deck. When Wojcicki and Brin went to the Oscars a couple of times, “I did wear a nice dress,” she admits, “but no one wanted to sit next to us. It was like being the misfit kid from the other school. We try to be really simple. We both have strong, academic backgrounds. We fight every night over who gets to put the kids to bed, we get jealous when one of us takes a day off to play with them. They are our priority. I think we're incredibly lucky, but we don't take it for granted. We have a house and cars, but we want to make sure our kids are responsible and give back to the world. We've interacted with a few people who are very wealthy who've said that it's easy to give in to your children all the time, but you pay the price many years later, so we don't do that. Our parents live near us. When people ask us to serve on boards, we say no: our children and work are our priorities.”

Still, they were close friends with Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, who gave Wojcicki advice about 23andMe's pricing structure, and “also told me what bassinet to buy for the kids, and to spend as much time with them as possible”. The likes of Tony Blair, Anderson Cooper and media moguls Barry Diller and News Corp owner Rupert Murdoch have attended 23andMe's “spit parties”, where, like the firm's customers, they spat into tubes to have their ancestry or predisposition for 100 diseases, conditions or traits analysed. (The “23” in 23andMe refers to the 23 pairs of chromosomes in a normal human cell.)

Business is steady rather than booming at 23andMe, which was founded five years ago, employs around 80 people and has in the region of 125,000 users on its database. The testing, conducted in a Los Angeles

# 'WE WERE BOTH RAISED TO BELIEVE THAT GIVING TO OTHERS IS IMPORTANT'

laboratory and analysed at the company's HQ, costs \$99 (£64) per person with a year-long subscription for \$9 (£6) a month, because "your genetic information is constantly being curated over that time". Wojcicki initially boasts proudly of doing without a "marketing person", but later admits she is about to employ one, as well as start advertising 23andMe's service. A "link-up" with a TV programme about ancestry is being finalised. "We launched a nerdy product, there's a recession going on, growth has definitely been slower than we hoped and we need to better articulate our value proposition," she says, lapsing into boardroom speak.

When she had her genes tested, Wojcicki found not only she had a "fast twitch" gene common in sprinters, but that she was at increased risk of breast cancer; her mother was diagnosed with it 20 years ago and had it successfully treated with radiation. "I stopped casual drinking, so we'll have wine maybe once a week with friends. I don't have mammograms, because I don't want the radiation, but I go for check-ups. I exercise, watch my diet. I breastfed my children for as long as possible, because that's associated with lowering your risk. We don't have chemical air fresheners or cleaners, we use vinegar and water instead." Their house "doesn't have much sugar in it", adds Wojcicki. A personal trainer comes every morning; they do yoga, Pilates and work out with weights.

Brin's gene test revealed both he and his mother possessed a mutation of the LRRK2 gene, meaning he has a 20-80 per cent likelihood of developing Parkinson's disease in later life. His mother is already suffering from Parkinson's, "though still skis," says Wojcicki. "We heard about this rare link between Ashkenazi Jews [Brin's family are from Russia] and Parkinson's, but doctors said it was so unlikely, what was the point of being tested, and what would we do with the information anyway? That argument drives me crazy, because if you know something, you can do something." Brin, she says, "decided not to work 100 hours a week, take more time off, exercise a lot, eat more healthily and drink more coffee, which is apparently good for him. We don't sit around pontificating 'what if' he ends up with Parkinson's, or what we'll do. I'm sure we'll figure it out."

For Wojcicki, information is power: 23andMe is founded on the principle that



if you know you have a predisposition for type 2 diabetes, you don't freak out, but rather "you can do something to fight against it". The couple have to date donated \$100 million (£64 million) to the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research. Wider philanthropy "will come later", Wojcicki says. (The couple's Brin Wojcicki Foundation supports one other organisation, Ashoka, which supports individuals conducting "inspired campaigns in particular fields".) She and Brin are "very cautious; you can't undo anything, so we stay very focused and say no to a lot of things. But we were both raised to believe that giving to others is important." I ask later, by e-mail, if the couple plan to join 40 of America's other wealthiest individuals in signing up to "the giving pledge", originated by Warren Buffett and Bill and Melinda Gates, in which they commit to giving away the majority of their fortunes to charity. Wojcicki's spokeswoman does not address the question directly, but says: "Most of Anne's philanthropic activities are co-ordinated through the Brin Wojcicki Foundation."

Wojcicki grew up in the middle-class town of Palo Alto, near Mountain View (and again

a town dominated by new media and technology companies, including Facebook and Hewlett-Packard). Wojcicki's father, Stanley, is a physics professor at Stanford, her mother, Esther, a high-school journalism teacher; she has two older sisters. It was, and remains, a close-knit community, notably of Stanford academics and their families. Seventy per cent of her kindergarten class still live in the area; she has the same best friends she had as a girl. She was academic, competitive and an extrovert, she says, who loved soccer and figure skating. Her parents treated their daughters as peers: "There was no talking down." Stanley loves adventure and fine food, Esther "a good bargain. In the sales, she'll find 12 turtlenecks for \$10."

When she was 10 and "benched" at home with pneumonia, Wojcicki's mother introduced her to the S&P 500, one of the most commonly followed equity indices, which got Wojcicki fascinated by the stock market. After graduating with a biology degree from Yale she worked on Wall Street, overseeing healthcare investments, although she rollerbladed to work, took her lunch in brown bags (tofu, brown rice, Brussels sprouts) and was "revolted" by the wealth disparity of a city "where people bought rain boots for their dogs while others had nothing. I would go into [smart department stores] Bergdorf's or Bendel's and be shocked you could spend \$1,000 on a bathrobe." A friend who worked ➔

**Wojcicki and Brin (right) with Google co-founder Larry Page and his wife, Lucy Southworth, 2007**



# 'THE PRIVATE JET IS TOTALLY OVER THE TOP, BUT IT DOES MAKE LIFE INFINITELY EASIER'

in fashion begged her to stop wearing her fleece on nights out. She admits – hurrah, finally – to a weakness for shoes. “They don’t have to be expensive, but I did get excited when Christian Louboutin opened a store opposite my New York apartment.”

Wojcicki and Brin met in 1998 when he and Larry Page were launching Google, renting the lower half of her sister Susan’s house. In Steven Levy’s absorbing story of Google’s history, *In the Plex*, the reader learns the handful of Google employees at the time had desks that were doors on sawhorses. (This later became a company tradition.) One day, Susan was waiting for a fridge to be delivered for herself, but Brin and Page signed for it and it became the Google fridge. But, equally, the Googlers were happy to let in an electrician to fix something if she was out. She liked it that if she was lonely, good conversation and company were always available beyond her kitchen’s screen door.

Wojcicki asked Susan, now senior vice president at Google, to set her up on a date with Brin two years later. “We went rollerblading. In New York, people saw me as this weird, hippy girl, but Sergey [pronounced “Ser-gay”] didn’t seem to have any boundaries. We would go out on dates. He went to a circus school and would be like, ‘Wanna learn how to throw knives?’ We’re unusual, a good match. He left me a message on the phone in Morse code, which took me an hour and a half to decipher – it was to meet him at the Coit Tower [in San Francisco].”

In New York, and later San Francisco, Wojcicki worked as a voluntary patient advocate in the emergency rooms of city hospitals as an “antidote” to her day job. “The conversations you had...” she says, then starts to cry. “In New York, there was a man whose daughter was covered in tubes. He’d lost his two other children and his wife to pulmonary disease and he said to me, ‘She’s so beautiful to me. I can’t lose her,’ and seeing that...” Now she has utterly broken down, sobbing. “Having kids now... losing a child would be horrible, understanding that now as a parent.”

She gulps water, reaches for tissues. “I loved being able to help someone at their rawest point. There was another woman whose mother had been in a nursing home, who had a massive infection in her stomach and was going to die that day...” Wojcicki bursts into tears again. “It makes me so

angry how doctors treat people. It made me frustrated that medicine didn’t focus more on prevention. There are a lot of great doctors, yet decisions in our healthcare system are not being made in the best interests of the patient, but rather on optimising revenue. Bone-marrow transplants are profitable for doctors, for example, but checking someone out for melanoma doesn’t make them any money.”

She is not, however, a fan of the free NHS model (she doesn’t think any healthcare model has proved “100 per cent effective”). “I support a monetised system, but one that emphasises prevention and more freedom to choose,” she says. There should be more “flexible partnerships” between “consumer”, doctor and service providers; the “consumer in charge”.

Wojcicki concedes that 23andMe has been the subject of a congressional hearing into direct-to-consumer genetic testing and is still seeking approval by the Food and Drug Administration for its tests, “but I see this attention as a compliment”, she says. “If you try to bring about change, you attract criticism. I have no desire to be famous; I want to be public in the right ways. Being famous and being rich isn’t that interesting. I want to be famous because I transformed healthcare. The exciting thing for me is, if I have a lot of money, I can take on risk. I can be bold with this company. I want it to bring massive change.”

She “doesn’t really think” about the wealth she and her husband have. He is “far more successful than he ever recognised himself to be”, and recently mulled over the fact with Page that, had they sold the search engine for \$1 million years ago, they would have been “quite happy” becoming academics. Their house isn’t huge, Wojcicki says; they have just bought an electric car and “like any parent, it’s challenging when the children wake up every couple of hours. When you have kids, life is crazy, fun. I used to really love adventure. When I left Wall Street, I went on the Trans-Siberian Express and I was planning to visit all the Stans – Turkmenistan, Kurdistan... But once you have kids, the world goes from being an adventurous place to a scary one. You spend your entire time protecting them.”

If Wojcicki cannot contemplate the failure of her own company (“I won’t let that happen”), she will also not answer questions on Google: the work of the much rumoured “Google X” laboratory, for example, testing out-there ideas (although she does confirm

Brin would like to build a “tether in space to the Moon”). Nor will she discuss controversies around Google and privacy, but she says: “Of course, I feel intensely protective of Sergey. He’s my husband. He’s morally minded and a very good person. He’s from Russia, so human rights and freedom of expression are very important to him. That’s one of the things that attracted me to him.”

Of their wealth, she says: “We shouldn’t waste, but we do. Like, the private jet is totally over the top, but it makes life infinitely easier, especially with children.” Her first jarring, rich person-type remark, and something of a relief. I hear that the jet is a 737 or 747 with bedrooms and bathrooms, but in a later e-mail, Wojcicki’s spokeswoman refuses to confirm this. Do they have a retinue of staff? “No,” says Wojcicki. “Sergey cooks, I clean, but a couple of times a week someone cooks for us so we can have dinner parties and force ourselves to be social.”

Can she imagine giving it all up: him Google, her 23andMe? “No, we really believe in what we do and its potential to change things for the better.” And they’ll never go down the high-rolling, glamour route? Wojcicki laughs. “No, and that bothers one of my New York friends, who was horrified when I insisted I’d get my Oscars shoes at Payless. I didn’t in the end, but it’s insane how much money people spend on things.”

She wants more children – four in total, if possible. “I’d like to start an orphanage, and something else for older people,” Wojcicki reveals. “The idea of kids being abused or abandoned horrifies me. When I stay up at night, I’m thinking of the best ways to help them. I’m getting old, but I love having kids, I love being pregnant. If I could, I would have been a surrogate mother.” But she knows, as she gets older, she needs to “recover” between having children, “and to be as healthy as I can be for the ones I have”. She has had her children’s genes tested, but won’t reveal the results: “That’s up to them when they reach 18.”

As we wander around the graveyard-quiet 23andMe office, Wojcicki says how stimulating and fun Brin is. Recently, picking up passports for their children, he advised the officer of his forms: “Your spacing configuration could be dramatically improved.” She laughs, bids farewell and, one imagines, dashes off to change into sweatpants. ■