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Dating meets musical chairs

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By Martin van den Hemel

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Staff Reporter

Finding the time and right place to meet that special someone can be a daunting task for the single set.

But a Vancouver dating service is hoping to change that with a fresh approach that brings in speed and eliminates the awkwardness and intimidation.

Simply put, it's dating meets musical chairs. Based on the Jewish speed dating phenomenon developed in 1999 by Rabbi Yaacov Deyo, Rotateadate arranges for 20 singles to meet and chat one-on-one for eight minutes in a relaxing venue such as a quiet restaurant. By the end of the night's round of table-to-table rotations,

everyone's met and participants write down the name of anyone they are interested in. Organizers check if there are any matches and then provide phone numbers within 48 hours to those showing a mutual interest.

Richmond's Myra Naval, a 30-something project co-ordinator for a B.C. telecommunications company, gave Rotateadate's new service a try Wednesday at Chivana Resto Lounge on West 4th in Vancouver. Although she wasn't necessarily looking for Mr. Right, she was interested in meeting new people.



Martin van den Hemel photo

Richmond's Myra Naval liked what rotateadate had to offer.

Tall Ships

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"I just wanted to have a good time that night and have conversations with different people," she says, adding that the night was a birthday gift from her sister.

Approaching someone in a nightclub is much more uncomfortable, Myra says, but at the same time it is excitingly unpredictable, with outcomes going from one extreme to the other.

On this night for 30-somethings, Myra joined 25 other people who signed up for the evening, which started with the company's founders, John Riches and Merle Schwartz, introducing themselves. "Everybody here is in the same boat, so you can relax," Schwartz reassures the casually dressed group, adding that neither phone numbers nor directions home are to be exchanged.

Everyone's given a sheet of form, on which they are encouraged to take notes of their brief eight-minute encounters. Any question can be asked, but none have to be answered, she points out.

The ladies are directed to pick one of 13 candle-lit table in the quiet restaurant, and the guys follow suit before the rotations begin with the ringing of a bell.

"Most people say eight minutes is just about right," said Riches, also a single guy. Woman say that's just enough time to get acquainted and sense if there's chemistry and mutual interests. "Guys tend to know a little more quickly, they're a little more instinctive."

As opposed to the bar and nightclub scene, he said everyone's single at this encounter, removing any doubt about what the other person's looking for. There's no worry that it's a group of married people on a guys' or girls' night out.

"There's no embarrassment here, there's no rejection."

For \$38, you get a glass of wine or two soft drinks to begin the evening and midway through light appetizers such as calamari are served.

At Myra's table, a young man tries out one of his lines.

"You've got a beautiful handshake, you know," he says, eliciting a smile.

The two singles engage in small talk, including the inevitable "Have you tried this before?"

Not a frown is to be found in the entire room, as singles exchange pleasantries and jot down notes about the single stranger across from them.

The room's lighting is soft enough that there's just the right amount of privacy, while at the same time there's enough of a buzz filtering through that it gives the comfortable feel of being in a public place.

On any given night of these twice-monthly arranged meetings, Schwartz and Riches say more than 90 per cent of the people pick at least one person. About half of those turn out to be matches and lead to information being swapped.

One couple, who met through the service, are getting close to marriage.

"Look around you," Schwartz says to dispel the notion that those using the service are somehow desperate, anti-social outcasts. "Do they look like losers?"

Quite the contrary; the room is filled with people that cross the body-type spectrum. There's a broker, a teacher and a construction worker. And there are at least three very attractive women and three handsome gentleman.

"They're just busy and they don't want to do the bars and the don't

want to do the clubs," Schwartz says.

If there's one must-have for participants, it's open-mindedness, she says.

The end of the night brings exhaustion for Myra, who had a good time but feels as if she's survived a lengthy round of interviews for some job. Although she picked one person, she didn't sense a real connection with anyone, she says. She'd rather have met around 10 people, but adds she'd definitely do it again.

Other singles agree.

"You probably have an opportunity to meet more people in an environment like this," says one attractive 27-year-old brunette who asked not to be named. But she found the 30-something age group a little misleading, noting that some participants were in their early 40s. That was too large of an age gap, bringing together people at different stages in their lives, she says. Although she didn't pick anyone that evening, she said she'd sign up again but with a younger crowd.

An attractive blonde woman in her early 30s says this was definitely easier than meeting people at a nightclub or bar.

"There is no pressure and everybody is single," she says, adding that she picked one person to have coffee with as a friend. "I think the concept is excellent."

Two gentleman, who came together, said they each picked three women and would come back again.

"I think it was pretty good," one said, adding that the extra benefit is that it helped brush up one's ability to socialize.

Since Rotateadate opened in June of 2001, some 900 people have signed up.

The company's success has spawned interest from other parties who want to open it in places such as Vancouver Island, Banff, Calgary, Toronto, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

In recent weeks, a greater number of people have signed up, prompting Riches to wonder whether singles, in anticipation of winter, are looking to hook up for those cold evening nights.

Rotateadate (www.rotateadate.com) organizes events roughly every two weeks in Vancouver and Burnaby and is looking to set up a franchise in Richmond.
