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[head] **On the Clock**

[subhead] Fast talkers are rewarded in dating meet-and-greets
by Jennie Orvino

front pages teaser: Attention Deficit Dating p. 25

[Original title: Ready, Get Set, Date!]

The room is all ours. Tables are numbered 1 to 20 in black magic marker on white cards. I get my name tag and go to number 7, lucky, right under the heater. In summer this is courtyard seating at Acapulco Restaurant & Cantina. Now, in late February, the roof is black plastic and there's a chill.

Some of the women have tiny plates of happy-hour snacks and are ordering margaritas. On each table sit tall glasses of water, pots of salsa and a basket of chips. I just brushed my teeth, rinsed with Scope and put on two layers of lipstick. No way I'm going to eat... or drink alcohol either, even though I'm a little antsy.

Early bird males have been chatting with women at tables one through three. Just after 7pm everyone arrives at once and a line forms into the hallway. There were no age categories in this first Santa Rosa edition of "North Bay Fast Dating," but most of the people appear to be in their mid 40s. In my 50s, I seem to be at the upper end. Looks like there's more variation in the men—some are older than 50, some younger than 40.

The noise level is rising, and a clean-shaven, strawberry blond guy sits down across from me. Nate (not his name) likes sports, hiking, skiing. Good posture, slim and bemused. He says, "Wow, you're quite the creative type, aren't you?" I don't take this comment as a good sign.

Our hostess has a piercing voice, necessary I suppose in her line of work. The man across from me cringes when she yells out, "OK guys, move to the next table in sequence." I shake hands with Nate and write his name on my card. Under the heading, "Want to see again?" I don't circle "yes" or "no." I need data on the entire field.

When I turn in my match card at the end of the night, if I have said yes to someone who said yes to me, we're eligible to receive each other's number. This information will come via phone from the program's host within 36 hours. We are discouraged from disclosing last names or contact information during the conversations.

I used the generic descriptor "speed dating" to tell my friends about my plans for the evening, but SpeedDating is actually a copyrighted name and just one of the many services that offer similar experiences. The one I attended was organized by California Fast Dating. SpeedDating parties allow the participant to have seven one-on-one conversations of seven minutes each.

There are other options: the format for 8minuteDating is self-explanatory, and FastDating allows nine minutes before ringing the bell. There may be a niche left for a four-minute version, but HurryDate has them beat for brevity. This franchise allows the prospective daters to chat for only three minutes, a scheme that facilitates eyeball-to-eyeball meetings with 25 members of the opposite sex in one session.

Even if ten minutes seems too brief to “get to know someone,” that’s not the point. The encounter, like a resume, serves to facilitate the next step: the interview, the phone call, the coffee date, the meet-for-a-drink. In this time frame, you can still gather important information: ease of eye contact, nature of the smile, clashing or meshing of interests, and a decent guess at the neuroses.

After my fourth guy, I start to ask more adventurous questions, “How do you feel about black leather teddies?” “Is there anything you really, really regret?” I need to do something to keep from getting exhausted. How many times can I say what I do without boring myself?

Some quick date events provide user-friendly tools: a ballot (not a score card) for taking notes, and a prompt sheet for when the inquiring mind goes blank. Sample questions include: “If you were assured of success, what thing would you do that you haven’t done yet?”; “If you could invite someone from history to dinner, who would it be and why?”; and “Tell me one good thing that happened to you today.”

“We give a variety of prompts, but most people already know what they want to ask,” says 53-year-old Joel Koosed, who began The Meeting Game Salon in 1999. He gave up on Sonoma County after hosting a few sparsely-attended singles events here, and is finding a niche in San Francisco and the cities of the east and south bay. His organization has become popular for its varied offerings, from structured, thought-provoking group conversations with up to 100 people, to intimate gender-balanced dinners at stylish restaurants. The Meeting Game also hosts gatherings specifically for Asian, Jewish, Gay/Bi and Lesbian/Bi singles.

“I’ve always been interested in building community,” says Koosed, who operated a Bay Area roommate service and the Avenue Ballroom dance studio in San Francisco before the singles venture. “Temperament will determine whether a person chooses a Salon, 10-Minute Dating or Dinner Date. In all of them, the structure gives you the ability to smoothly and politely disengage when you’re ready, with no hurt feelings on either side.”

Internet personals can offer the same low-risk, high volume matchmaking. But when I asked my 43-year-old, never-married musician friend about his online vs. speed dating experience, he replied, “Internet dating seems good initially because it’s always there (like late at night) and it seems like it’s being proactive, but sometimes getting a reply is like playing the lottery. It’s fun to have all those desirable prospects, but a drag to get so few replies.”

Andrew Kiken, owner of California Fast Dating, who organized the Acapulco event, says his business is growing because people want to get back to meeting in person. “True, it takes a degree of self-esteem to come to our event; some of the people who do online personals just don’t have the nerve. But I’ve talked to people who says they’ve spent weeks or even months communicating by email and when they meet... no chemistry.”

Kiken is a 32-year-old fast-talking New Jersey native who lives in San Diego and whose parents own a vineyard in Calistoga. He produces Fast Dating parties in Santa Rosa, Sacramento, Marin, San Francisco, San Jose, Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara, Fresno, Orange County and San Diego.

Kiken chose to enter the North Bay market because franchise operations have considered Sonoma County too small to target, but there are “still plenty of interesting single people.” He adds that people often pretend they don’t care whether they have a sweetheart or not, but his experience indicates otherwise. “If folks say they’re not desperate, they’re kidding themselves.”

Since the first Santa Rosa event (and the start of the war), Kiken says that registrations have plummeted; he is not planning to continue in Sonoma County, although he has events planned in Marin. "I might just stick to San Diego, Orange County and Sacramento," he says.

My two hours of speed dating speeds by, for the most part. The one exception: Tommy (not his name) who hunches over our table, and keeps jerking his head to reference the rest of the room. He says, "Well, this beats calling 900 numbers."

I didn't sit with *every* man in the room, but I did meet 13 available males in a safe and efficient way. It was a "quantity encounter," as a singles guru described it in one of the books I've read on the subject. Ultimately, I made one match. He was my favorite of the four men for whom I'd circled "yes." We're meeting on Saturday for a cup of tea.

As I'm leaving, a pair of documentary filmmakers from the Community Media Center ask to interview me. Since I'm treating the singles search like a creative project that has the same requirements and rewards as any kind of art, I say yes. The singles scene demands focus and enthusiasm. You learn to weather doubt and discouragement. You find agony and ecstasy.

They like what I have to say. "You are quite the unusual spirit," the cameraman says, and takes my phone number.

A number of companies have Bay Area and North Bay events: www.northbayfastdating.com; www.themeetinggame.com; www.hurrydate.com; www.speeddating.com; www.8minutedating.com; www.matchlive.com. The next California Fast Dating is Tuesday, April 22, 7-9pm (ages 45-60) at the Broken Drum Brewery, 1132 Fourth St., San Rafael.