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Sunday, January 4, 2004

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By SELENA RICKS, Portland Press Herald Writer

Also on this page:
[SPEED DATING](#)

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It did not take Loni Gervais long to realize that Portland's bar scene is not the ideal place for her to meet a potential mate.

"I'm at the age where most of the places I go out are full of college kids," said Gervais, a 23-year-old graduate of the University of Maine at Farmington. "I'm more likely to meet someone who is immature."

And, adds Gervais' friend Sarah Hopkins, 22, of Windham, "It's hard to meet people when they're wasted."

So on a recent Tuesday, Gervais, Hopkins, and a few of their single friends ditched the frat-party atmosphere found in many Old Port pubs for a new approach in their quest for romance - the speed date.

They were among 20 women and 20 men between the ages of 21 and 32 gathered at Portland's Rivalries, an upscale sports bar and restaurant, to give 8minuteDating a try after paying a \$35 registration fee. Numbered tables for two were set with breath mints and candles, and everyone got eight, eight-minute dates with strangers - name tags gave first names only.

At first, the conversations started



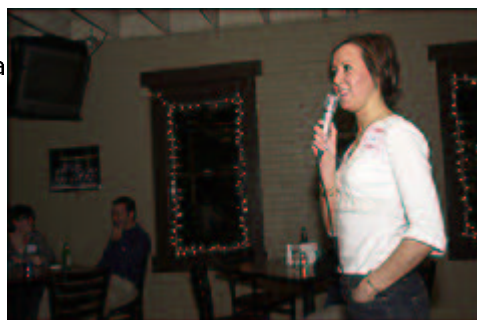
Staff photo by Jack Milton

Loni Gervais, 23, of Portland, talks with Scott Osetek, 26, of South Portland, during a recent 8minuteDating event at the sports pub and restaurant Rivalries.



Staff photo by Jack Milton

Jesse Cyr, 22, of Portland, talks to his second speed date, who did not wish to be identified.



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quietly, with singles nervously sipping cocktails and munching on crudites and cheese. But after about the second eight-minute dating session, the room was abuzz with exchanges of personal stories.

"They're not going to make any dates tonight," said Sarah Martin, co-organizer of the event. "This is supposed to be non-threatening. No rejection. Really there's nothing to lose."

The idea is to avoid the awkwardness of a blind date by keeping the interactions brief, and after the event, participants log onto the Boston-based company's Web site, www.8minutedating.com, to indicate who they would like to see again. If the feeling is mutual, the computer acts as Cupid, providing full names and contact information.

The speed dating concept, started in Los Angeles in 1998, is the latest dating trend among the country's 85 million single people craving instant intimacy. Schedules crammed with business meetings and Pilates classes leave little time for an outing that's less than a sure thing.

After she finishes her workday at a Portland marketing company, Gervais said she does "laundry, dishes and grocery shopping and there's not much left of the day to do stuff."

Since ending a six-year relationship on friendly terms two months ago, Gervais said she's looking for another serious relationship. "I'm mature and responsible enough to seek that again," she said.

But after hitting casual bars such as Gritty McDuff's on Fore Street dancing at the Oasis nightclub on Wharf Street most weekends, Gervais said she is encountering the same singles again and again. She said the scene reminds her of college, where co-eds coupled within their own circle of friends.

The days of finding lifelong love during the college years seem to be waning.

A recent survey of 1,000 college women by the Independent Women's Forum, a conservative group, found only half of the seniors reported being asked out on six or more dates during their entire college career, yet 63 percent said they wanted to meet their future husbands in college. And 91 percent reported a "rampant hookup culture" on campus. Hooking up can mean anything from kissing to casual sex.

So it's no surprise that the no-strings-attached mentality is seeping into the bar scene, where relationship-seeking singles are often disappointed by an environment promoting empty physical contact

Staff photo by Jack

Tina Paquette, one of the hosts of the recent 8minuteDating event at Rivalries in Portland, announces the end of the third eight-minute segment of the evening.

SPEED DATING

Here is a list of upcoming 8minuteDating events in the Portland area. Advance registration is required at www.8minutedating.com.

Jan. 27 - For gay men ages 30-44 and lesbians ages 30-44, 7:30 p.m., Eggspectation in South Portland.

Feb. 10 - For single professionals ages 25-35, 7:30 p.m., Eggspectation in South Portland.

March 9 - For single professionals ages 40-50, 7:30 p.m., Eggspectation in South Portland.

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and emotional disconnect.

"At this point in my life, I want someone who wants to go out and have fun but also just relax," said Gervais. "If you go to dance clubs you're more apt to find college kids who are hammered (drunk) and just trying to get action. It's discouraging to me and my friends."

After hearing about 8minuteDating on a local radio station, Gervais said she and her friends were lured by the promise of meeting single professionals.

"The people I met, for the most part, were well-educated," said Gervais, who has a bachelor's in psychology. "I met four engineers. People who really didn't have time to go out to the bars."

Typically, more women sign up than men, said Martin, so advance registration is required to assure an even number of both sexes at each event. However, speed dating is catching on with more men, and the recent Rivalries event was sold out.

Organizers say 99 percent of singles report enjoying the speed dating events and 91 percent say they met someone they would like to see again, whether for business, friendship or dating. Dozens of success stories of long-term relationships, engagements and marriages as a result of speed dating are posted on 8minuteDating.com.

By the end of the night, Gervais said she did not make any love connections, but she did make some new friends. "My friends and I met two other guys and we're all going to hang out in the next few weeks as friends," she said. "That's the best thing that came out of it."

Gervais said she does not know if she will try 8minuteDating again, but she is looking for creative ways to navigate single life.

"I'm just starting to get used to it again," she said. "It's hard to meet people, but I think meeting other people and sharing yourself with someone else helps you figure yourself out too."

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Reader Comments

What do you think about Speed Dating? Have you tried it? What would keep you - besides not being single - from trying it?

Jen of Yarmouth, ME
Jan 5, 2004 10:35 AM

Dale- Actually if you look at the upcoming events listed you'll see a gay/lesbian event on Jan. 27th!

Lori of Westbrook, ME
Jan 5, 2004 10:35 AM

I have attended one of these events, and actually thought that this was the grandest idea ever in dating! No lastnames are given at the event, and you (as an attendee) determine what you would like your potential "matches" to receive as far as your personal information once the event is over. When you register online at www.8minutedating.com, you choose if you would like a "match" of yours to get your phone#, your email address, cell, etc. So, the ball is totally in your court! And, ONLY the men or women that YOU personally select as wanting to see again will get your contact information (and, that is only if they've chosen you as a "match" as well!). So, really, no fears in anything "horrific" via 8-minute dating!!! Try it, you'll LOVE it.

Dale Jones of Yarmouth, ME

Jan 4, 2004 5:23 PM

Speed dating ... seems rather hetero-centric. Why discriminate?

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