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## Love on the run

By DOROTHY CASCERCERI

The Intelligencer

The maitre d' seats you and your Valentine at a quiet candlelit table in the corner of an Italian restaurant.

A violinist sprinkles the aromatic air with sounds of "Pachelbel's Canon."

A dozen long-stem red roses in a crystal vase, a small box wrapped with a red ribbon and a 1996 bottle of Chianti wait at the table.

That may just be the perfect Valentine's Day date - if it's with the right person.

But it can take hundreds of Mr. Wrongs before finding Mr. Right.

Not to mention hours of precious time and energy - something people don't have much of these days.

But don't lose hope and guzzle that bottle of Chianti by yourself just yet.

There's an alternative to dating the guy who works in your company's mailroom and spending countless nights in smoky bars figuring out if the attractive man in the corner is wearing a wedding band or a silver surfing ring around his finger.

Speed dating pairs groups of single men and women together and gives them a short period of one-on-one time - anywhere from three to eight minutes - allowing them to decide for themselves if a second date is worth their time.

And there's no sitting by the phone wondering if the other person will call.

This type of service only divulges contact information to participants after the event if both parties request it, so you know there is a mutual interest from the get-go.

And while it's not guaranteed to work for everyone, it certainly worked for 27-year-old Jennifer Surich of New Hope.

Last September, she paid \$30 and signed up for MiniDate at Havana in New Hope with the hope of finding a friend of the opposite sex rather than a boyfriend.

And she says she has found both in 26-year-old Nick Skally.

After talking with 19 different men for five minutes each, Surich narrowed her choice to four.

She submitted her picks to MiniDate, and two days later, the dating service provided her with contact information for three, including Skally.

After a few dates, they fell in love and Surich is planning to move into Skally's Fairless Hills home at the end of the month.

"It's very efficient," Skally says of the process.

"Don't say that," Surich says to him, delivering a playful punch. "I hate when he says that. It's not very romantic."

But the romance isn't meant to be generated during the actual event, according to Bryce Matthews, who founded MiniDate three years ago.

"This is a dating service to provide people with a means of meeting one another," he says. "You still have to go out on a date - and that's where the intimacy comes in. "

Surich describes it as "a weeding-out process."

"If you think about it, I met 19 guys that night," she says. "On a good night, you meet one or two guys. You accomplish in one night what would have taken 12 nights to accomplish."

And, she says, meeting people in a bar often can lead to undesirable surprises.

"When you meet someone at a bar, you don't know what his situation is - if he's married, if he has seven kids," she says.

And while that still can happen at speed-dating events, most of the time, participants are unhitched and looking for a date.

OK, so maybe increasing the number of eligible bachelors or bachelorettes you meet in one night increases your chance of finding that special someone to share that quiet candlelit table in the Italian restaurant.

But how can you decide if you want to see the person again after talking to them for such a short period of time?

Skally says physical appearance and nonverbal cues are most telling about a person.

"You can tell whether you're interested or not," he says. "You get a vibe from people."

Larry Glanz, co-author of "Guy Gets Girl, Girl Gets Guy," says speed-dating participants usually get a certain "feeling" when they stumble upon someone interesting.

"It sort of allows you to quickly assess chemistry," says Glanz, formerly of Newtown. "If you don't have the chemistry and the physical attraction, you don't have anything anyway. If you don't have the mayo, you can't make the chicken salad."

Leonard Scheiner, a psychologist who has offices in Doylestown and Quakertown, says five minutes may be enough time for people to connect and decide if they want a second date, depending on the people.

"It may be that two people have so much in common and they might pick that up and then they're off to a flying start," he says. "I think you can tell if there is some chemistry, but then again, it's only five minutes."

Scheiner says the short window of time people spend talking ties in with the "quick-fix and instant-gratification" culture of today.

"Because we have a fast-paced society," he says, "it's a way to have a pool of people to meet."

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Matthews says five-minute dates provide singles with access to as many people in as short a period of time as possible.

"Most people are extremely busy professional people - very caught up in their career," he says. "If you're a career person, you don't have much time to sit in a bar cruising for members of the opposite sex. It really speeds up the process."

Tom Jaffee designed 8minuteDating.com, based in Boston, Mass., with the same concept in mind.

"We create a scenario where we're maximizing the chances where people will connect and want to go on a second date," he says. "What we have is a fun party where it's highly likely that you're going to make a connection."

The dating service, which sets up people on eight dates that last eight minutes each, holds events in 60 cities, including King of Prussia and Philadelphia, for a wide variety of age groups.

"People are busier and busier in their lives, and there is just not a lot of extra time to take in the dating process," he says. "It's a very time-consuming thing to do."

Not to mention nerve-racking, which is why most speed-dating events prohibit people from requesting contact information during the dates.

"What usually goes on at a singles event of any sort is the people in the conversation have to make sure they want to go out, and then close the deal," Jaffee says. "And that's a lot of pressure."

Skally cites this aspect as a plus.

"There's no real pressure added," he says. "At the end there's no rejection or whatever. You either get an e-mail or you don't."

That's what Deanna Rose, 33, of Wayne, Chester County, likes about it.

"There's no embarrassment," says Rose, who tried many dating methods before meeting her fianc, on the Internet. "It gets rid of those false hopes. When you get older, when you get out of college, it gets harder and harder to meet people when you get busy in a career."

And the more frequently situations don't work out with another individual, the more discouraged a person becomes.

But Scheiner says because speed dating provides many options to a single person, it provides much-needed hope.

"That's the reason why it appeals to people," he says. "Human beings have a desire to love and be loved."

So, you see, you may be able to have that perfect Valentine's Day in that Italian restaurant, after all.

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