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The dating game

BY ANNA WHITELAW
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It is a Thursday night, and in a hard-to-find cocktail bar in Chinatown a few dozen single Melburnians are going speed dating. Despite being in their 40s, they act like teenagers, nervously chatting, wearing name tags and holding scorecards.

The host, Tina – according to her name tag – tells the women to spread out to find one of a dozen numbered seats. She rings a bell, and so begins the first of a dozen six-minute dates. At the end of each date, the men switch to the next table, working their way around the room full of women.

At table 11, a sassy dyed-blonde divorcee called Sonia has yet to meet a man who gets the tick of approval. "That was the longest six minutes of my life," she sighs, as one unlucky gent rotates to the next table.

It is her first time, and she has come alone. "I thought, what the hell?" she says. "It feels like a job interview, but it's this or the net."

Of course, it isn't just 40somethings who are single. Port Melbourne teacher Melissa Pearham, 28, had been single for 2½ years and recently moved back to Melbourne from London. "I found a lot of my friends were starting to get married and have children, and I didn't have single girlfriends to go out with."

On a whim, she went to a speed-dating night aimed at people aged 22 to 33. There she met her beau, Michael O'Regan, 30, an air force officer.

"I saw him straight away when I first walked in, and thought he was cute, but as it turned out, he was my last date of the night. It was really instant. When the bell rang, we just kept chatting, and ended up talking for around half an hour."

As it turned out, the couple – who have now been together for a month – are neighbours. "It's quite funny because we both go to the same coffee shop, and we live around the corner from each other."

Welcome to dating in the 21st century. Once upon a time we met our significant others at uni, through friends, at the office Christmas party or, in my case, on the dance floor at the Peel. Nowadays, in the age of sexual harassment suits, long working hours and high divorce rates, singletons of all ages are increasingly turning to new and novel ways to find love.

While speed dating seemed like a gimmick in the 1990s, Fast Impressions now hosts speed dating every night of the week, catering to everyone – gym junkies, professionals, foodies, even "tall men" and "slender women".

Elsewhere, millions of single Australians have gone online looking for love. Since Australia's most popular online dating site was founded in 1997, online dating has flourished, with dozens of sites dedicated to everyone from Christians to lesbians.

RSVP spokeswoman Lija Jarvis says online dating has become more mainstream in recent years. "I think we are definitely seeing the removal of the stigma of online dating. It is much more acceptable."

More than 1.6 million people are registered on

RSVP alone. A recent survey of 7000 Australians found 20 per cent had tried online dating, and a quarter knew a couple who married after meeting online.

Back in the Chinatown bar, speed-dating host Tina, a bubbly, fit 33-year-old, confesses she has been dating online for three years. Having been in long-term relationships throughout her 20s, Tina joined RSVP after she found herself suddenly single at 30.

"I joined after I encouraged an old flatmate of mine who hadn't had a boyfriend in seven years to try it. Now, she is married and expecting a baby with a guy she met online.

"I had never really dated in my adult life, and lots of my friends were coupled up or married, so I didn't know where to start. I thought, why not? We shop for everything else online. Why not shop for a partner online, too?"

Rosalind Baker, a dating expert who runs introduction agency Entre Nous, says technology may be convenient, but can be a barrier to intimacy. "Online dating doesn't suit everyone. It is hard to tell what someone is really like just by reading a profile. You can never really tell whether someone is genuine, and whether they are looking for a relationship, or whether they are actually married or just looking for sex."

Indeed, several people I spoke to told of fake profiles, time-wasters, stalkers, "athletic" men turning out to be overweight.

"You get pretty savvy," Tina says. "I learnt to always call a guy first, on a private number, and meet somewhere public first for coffee, so I could make a getaway if it didn't work."

As if online dating wasn't high-tech enough, there are even mobile apps for dating. Grindr, an iPhone app for gay men, uses GPS tracking to show fellow users who are nearby. By downloading the free app, you can search through the profiles of thousands of men, some mere metres away. Frustrated with online dating, Grindr's founder Joel Simkhai says: "I knew there would be gay guys who lived in my building or on my block. I always thought there had to be a better way to meet people."

Since Grindr was created in 2008, it has attracted a million users worldwide – 18,000 of them in Melbourne alone.

Now, Grindr is working on a version of the app for heterosexuals and lesbians, expected to go online in the coming months. While Simkhai is confident Grindr's appeal can cross over, a lot of women I spoke to are suspicious. One single friend put it aptly: "The idea of guys who live around the corner from me peering on me online is creepy."

But while Grindr may be the future, some are still seeking old-fashioned ways to find love. Rosalind Baker's introduction agency Entre Nous has been matchmaking for 21 years. Single professionals fork out from \$2000 to \$10,000 to be hand-matched with prospective partners and coached through the dating process for 12 months. The agency claims to have had 1300 marriages and only 11 divorces, and has a 75 per cent success rate.

If a dating agency seems too steep, Melina Schamroth has a feel-good way for singles to meet.

Jaded from online dating, she invited a bunch of single guys and girls with a social conscience to help out in a soup kitchen.

"I was looking for a boyfriend, and I wanted to meet like-minded people." Six months later, Schamroth met her boyfriend "cracking eggs and cracking jokes". What started as a social experiment has now evolved into a thriving business, with Schamroth organising regular single volunteering events for a range of charities.

"It isn't just about being single, it is about doing something good, and having a good time."



Melissa Pearham and Michael O'Regan. Picture: Darren James



Rosalind Baker from Entre Nous. Picture: Steve Lightfoot



Melina Schamroth. Picture: Darren James