

Boca Life

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4 WEDDINGS
INSPIRATIONAL
LOCAL NUPTIALS

MAKE
VALENTINE'S
DAY SWEET

WITH
SHAREABLE
DESSERTS
FROM LOCAL
RESTAURANTS

THE
UNDISCOVERED
GUATEMALAN
PARADISE

LOOKING
FOR LOVE
DELVE
INTO THE
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WORLD

FALL
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PIRATE
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THE SPOT ON
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LAWS OF (ONLINE) ATTRACTION

MILLIONS OF UNMARRIEDS TURN TO THEIR LAPTOPS, CELL PHONES AND SMART WATCHES TO FIND A HAPPY ENDING TO THEIR SINGLEDOM. HERE, THREE LOCAL COUPLES AND TWO RELATIONSHIP PROS WEIGH IN WITH THEIR STRATEGIES FOR WINNING THE ONLINE DATING GAME.

By Kerry Shorr | Photography by Chad Biederman

In Nora Ephron's romantic comedy "You've Got Mail," Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks star as rival booksellers who fall in love anonymously in an online adult chat room. When the movie premiered in 1998, the world wide web was still in its infancy, dial-up was king and the public was trying to make sense out of match.com, a new dating site that launched three years earlier.

Today, romance is blooming online. Sites like eHarmony and PlentyofFish, with their complex algorithms, can pull up matches in milliseconds and have transformed the art of wooing into a \$3-billion-a-year business that's estimated to grow

to \$12 billion by 2020. Smartphones and dating apps like Tinder, which has generated over a billion matches since its debut in 2012, have gone the extra mile of taking matchmaking to mobile.

Nearly 50 million Americans have tried online dating and an estimated 46 percent of dating app users met their current partner online. Still, persisting stigmas warn it's far from a perfect science. According to the Pew Research Center, 54 percent of online daters believe someone else seriously misrepresented themselves in their online profile.

Furthermore, dating sites have become hot-

beds for scam artists. The FBI's Internet Fraud Complaint Center estimates romance fraud causes the greatest dollar loss after investment fraud. Sheryel Aschfort, director of South Florida Introductions in Boca Raton, says some of her clients have tangled with these nefarious individuals.

"There are a lot of criminals, drug addicts and people without jobs who want a roof over their heads, so they hit up women who are older or vulnerable for their homes and money."

She recommends hiring a professional to conduct a full background check to uncover any legal or financial woes before becoming too invested.

Dr. Rachel Needle, a licensed psychologist at the Center for Marital and Sexual Health of South Florida in West Palm Beach, shares Aschfort's opinion that protecting yourself is paramount.

"Online dating is a wonderful way to meet people, but have a phone conversation before you see one another face-to-face," she says. Pick somewhere public and keep the first encounter brief so if there's no spark, you won't feel pressured to stay long. She also strongly advises against using deception.

"Some people are dishonest in their profiles and pictures with the hope they'll get a potential partner to respond to them." She calls this the "foot-in-the-door" technique. "Be honest and if it limits your options, so be it. This way, the person you match with will have chosen you for who you really are," she says.

Experienced in crafting strategic and targeted profiles, Aschfort cautions against crafting a profile that lists anything you're not looking for. "Say what you want, not what you don't want."

She also advises using authentic photos in jeans and T-shirts instead of those in fancy attire at parties with groups of people. "Casual clothes are more approachable, and that's what you want—approachable," she says.

With the proper safety nets and personal practices in place, Aschfort still endorses kicking off real-life relationships with help from websites and apps. "People spend so much time, and effort, and money on travel, and investments, and houses, and cars, but when it comes to the person they might go to bed with every night for the rest of their life, they won't spend the \$30/month on Match," she says.

Whether you're looking for a first date or the last person you'll kiss goodnight, we tapped three married couples who met online for their tips to finding true love on the digital road to romance.

Something they have in common: Watching the Los Angeles Dodgers

Something they don't: Softball and yoga

Most romantic thing he's done for her: Adam made Libby a necklace with a heart-shaped stone he found on their favorite beach in California.

Their craziest experience: Taking a train from Brussels to Paris to watch the World Cup finals after their flight home was canceled.

How he's changed her for the better: Adam has taught Libby how to be kinder.



Adam Gellis was a recently divorced, certified financial planner when he joined match.com. Two weeks in, he met Libby and told her he wasn't searching for anything serious. After a year of dating, the couple broke up. "I just didn't think it was possible that the third person I met after my marriage was going to be so meaningful to me," he says. "It took me about three weeks to come to my senses."

Once he had, "the dynamics of our relationship started over," says Libby Volgyes, a West Palm Beach-based food photographer and owner of Libby Vision. The couple found a shared bond through their two dogs, a pit bull rescue and a



Rhodesian Ridgeback. "I had been in a previous relationship with someone who was very jealous of my dog," Libby recalls. "I wanted a guy that was as in love with his dog as I was with my mine." Their first date was at the Jupiter dog beach on March 14, 2009. After five years of dating, the couple tied the knot in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park in October 2014.

The best rule is the Golden Rule. Libby's dating advice is simple: "Be thoughtful and honest, and don't blow people off."

Leave the baggage at home. Everyone carries around some baggage, just "don't bring your duffel bag of dysfunction on your first date."

Passions are great conversation starters.

"Most people share a passion for travel," Adam says. If you've recently returned from a trip, post some pictures along with an anecdote or two. It's an easy way to get a dialogue started.

Power of a picture. As a professional shutterbug, Libby knows the gravity of a good picture. "I think people respond to beautiful photographs," she says. Skip the selfie and shoot photos in natural light without a flash. If you're passionate about an activity, like camping, share those snaps of yourself sitting by a campfire in the woods.



Common: Surrounding themselves with good friends.

Interests they share: Dining out and listening to The Killers and Kenny Chesney.

How he's changed her for the better: John motivates Jennifer to be the best person she can be. "I married my hero," she says.

Something she does that makes him smile: Jennifer's great impersonations of television personalities, politicians, comedians and pop culture icons.

A personality trait of his she loves: John isn't afraid to be goofy or make a corny joke to get a laugh.

“

had a job that kept me busy in the social scene, regularly volunteered, and attended church, but I still had trouble meeting quality men," says Jennifer Pfaff Smith, Miami and Palm Beach homes editor of *Luxe Interiors + Design* magazine in Boca Raton. In early 2014, after 14 months on Match, she met John Smith, an assistant director of marketing at Duffy's Sports Grill. "He was really cute and had a killer smile that still makes me melt," she says. From his profile, she could tell he took pride in his appearance and his written communication was respectful and thoughtfully composed. "It was also clear he had established a fulfilling life with strong hobbies, a good career and solid friendships."

John still remembers his first impression of Jenn. "She was beautiful, witty and classy." He saw their busy schedules as a good omen and was impressed Jenn always found time to help her community through organizations like the Junior League. Their first date was dinner at Hullabaloo, a buzzy eatery on Clematis Street in West Palm Beach. On March 1, 2015, they were engaged at St. Augustine's Casa Monica Resort & Spa and tied the knot in West Palm on May 28, 2016.

Ghosts aren't just spirits. "The biggest thing I saw [online] was that some people would just drop off the conversation or ghost you," John says. "You have to be prepared for situations like this, so only put your chips in a little at a time."

Listen to your inner voice. "Be true to yourself and trust your gut," he says.

Be careful not to get too attached. "Don't allow online dating to take up all your attention," Jenn says. "There will be weeks when your calendar's full of dates or no one catches your eye. Just allow things to happen naturally."

To spend or not to spend. John thinks: "It's better to use services you have to pay for as those on these sites are serious about finding a companion and not a fling."



While fielding arrows on OkCupid for four years, Ken Franconero had a rule of not squiring his dates to dinner for fear of sitting through a meal that lacked chemistry. Then, the workers' compensation attorney met Stacey Stolman, a culinary consultant and Fun Chefs owner. "Stacey was the exception," he says. "I talked to her way longer than I wanted to before actually seeing her, and then we went out for a long dinner. I broke all my rules with her, but it worked out."

"Yeah, we're rule breakers," Stacey confirms with a smile. With Ken's hectic travel schedule, the couple spent two weeks on the phone, "talking like high schoolers." Stacey liked that they originated from similar backgrounds, had higher educations and were both raising families. They met in December 2011 at the now-shuttered Cantina Laredo in Palm Beach Gardens. Nearly three years later, on Valentine's Day, they got engaged at Four Seasons Resort in Palm Beach. Each year, the couple returns to the en plein air beach bar

to celebrate their anniversary.

Don't become an addict. Online dating has plenty of positives, like the depth and breadth of people seeking happy matches, but the search can become addictive. "It's almost like playing a video game where you feel like the next person around the corner is going to be awesome," Ken says. Stacey stresses that not losing yourself is the main rule, and "don't take anyone too seriously until you've met him or her in person."

Don't mention the D-word or past relationships. "The worst is when people talk about their divorces," Stacey says, a one-time divorcée, as is Ken. "I just want to tell them, 'I'm not your therapist.'" Ken concurs. "When they unload like that, it's just a bad reflection on them."

You'll know when it's a no. It's important to get a sense of someone before meeting them in "3D" as Ken puts it, but Stacey says you'll know pretty quickly whether the water's going to boil or not. "I would know in the first five minutes of the date and then I just felt like, 'Get me out of here!'"

Something they have in common: They're both in love with their black Goldendoodle, Rosie.

Something they don't: Ken enjoys art house movies, Stacey romantic comedies.

Something about her that makes him smile: When she starts laughing and her face turns beet red.

Something they've taught each other: Ken has taught her to slow down and take time making decisions, and Stacey has taught him to speed it up and get more stuff done.

Craziest thing they've ever done: Eloping to New York City and getting married at City Hall.