



## Dealer's choice

Looking for love is always a gamble. But professional matchmaker **Amy Rolando** is banking on her ability to spark romance with reservations-restaurant reservations, that is.

Dating can be dangerous-and not just to your ego.

Take two recent Minnesota cases of dating run amok: A school board president stands accused of rape by a former girlfriend he met through a computer dating service, whom he in turn accuses of extortion. Last week, a woman and her brother sued a Duluth businessman formerly on dialysis, alleging that he wooed her in order to get her sibling's kidney.

If a business venture posed risks like this, you'd call in a professional. So why not do the same for affairs of the heart?

Enter Amy Rolando, yenta for hire.

In January, Rolando launched Table for Two, a dating service that sets clients up on a single date, after which they're on their own. She chooses one of several participating upscale restau-

rants, makes the reservation under the clients' first names only, and the waitperson is instructed to bring separate checks.

More personal than video or computer services, more intimate than clubs that sponsor group activities, and less random than classified ads, the lunch date-typically lasting an hour-also offers a quick, anonymous escape if things aren't clicking.

Rolando caters to busy professionals in their 30s to 60s (median age is 45), including some high profile Twin Cities movers and shakers. She believes the secrets to her success will be an emphasis on personal contact with her clients, utmost discretion and extreme selectivity, weeding out anyone who has a suspect agenda or gives off a bad vibe.

"I follow my gut," Rolando said.

"People are my assets, and I'm not interested in taking on any liabilities."

But she doesn't rely on intuition for everything, allocating 10 percent of her budget to criminal background checks performed by Professional Research Services of Edina and attempts at verifying each applicant's single status.

The Table for Two concept has been tried with varying levels of success in other metropolitan areas. A company called It's Just Lunch!, which began setting up lunch dates for single Chicagoans in 1992, has more than 20 offices in several urban areas nationwide-including one that opened in downtown Minneapolis last week.

"We did a national survey and found that women take at least an hour to decide whether they'd want to date a guy a second time, but men make up their mind in 15 minutes," said Andrea McGinty, founder of It's Just Lunch! "So the lunch date is the perfect, safe, time-limited way to go."

Table for Two charges \$975 for a one-year membership; It's Just Lunch! offers three "dating packages" ranging from eight dates in six months (\$725) to 16 in one year (\$1,000).

### Picky, and personal

In contrast to the high-pressure commission sales tactics of many dating services, Rolando won't accept a fee for its sake alone. Of the approximately 600 interviews she's conducted so far, half have resulted in contract signing. Of the remaining 300, "half felt it wasn't right for them at this time and half were declined by me because I didn't feel my service was right for them," she said.

She turned down a woman who seemed more concerned about the depth of a man's pockets than his character, and a man who was in his 50s who said he was interested in dating women only in their 30s: "He was looking for Kim Basinger, and he's not even close to Alec Baldwin."

Rolando doesn't check credit history, nor does she ask clients for income information. Growing up in Golden Valley, she was told by her father, Charles, to "never tell people they look tired or ask how much money they make."

Clients who wouldn't join a dating service or answer a personals ad say that Rolando's ability to engender

trust-both that she will keep relationships confidential and make appropriate matches-was her crucial selling point.

"Amy's skills and personality were the key factor," said a 30 year-old man who works as a risk-management consultant for a major financial corporation and has had two lunch dates he characterized as good matches, though neither developed into a relationship. "I separate my social life from my work life, and my lifestyle and professional priorities are just not conducive to meeting decent, intelligent people with similar goals and interests as mine on my own."

A frantic publicist said-out of breath and long-distance from an airport in Washington, D.C.-that she considers Table for Two "a relief! Whether or not your looking for a long-term relationship..., it's great to have someone else setting it all up, someone who gets it."

Rolando employs two assistants in her Warehouse District office, but she conducts all interviews herself, at the prospective client's home or office. Her open-ended, roundabout style is designed to coax people into revealing what they really want instead of what they think they *should* want. She also tries to follow up on feedback from both parties after each date, which is getting difficult to manage the more clients she takes on.

In return for signing a one-year membership contract, a client is promised eight to ten lunch appointments; memberships may be put on hold for up to two years to accommodate the fluctuating schedules of busy, traveling professionals.

While Rolando is careful to call the eight to ten estimates a "goal" as opposed to a certainty, she stressed that she will do whatever it takes, within reason, to ensure client satisfaction.

"The main difference between me and other dating services is that I hold myself accountable," she said.

About 70 percent of clients end up exchanging phone numbers, whether they're interested in friendship or romance, and several have put their memberships on hold because they are exclusively dating someone they met through the service.

Sixty percent of clients are women,

## Individual attention is the aim

**A**my Rolando's follow-up, attentiveness and diplomacy are of the highly personalized sort you expect for paying retail. One caveat: She'll have to figure out a way to maintain quality control in the face of rapid growth, since her success depends so heavily on her own intuition and lavishing clients with individual attention.

### Who is this service for?

◆ **Commitment-phobes.** All you're saying "yes" to is one lunch, not an in-sick-and-health oath.

◆ **People who value both independence and togetherness.** Whether divorced or never married, most of Rolando's clients are looking to become part of a pair that's joined at the heart, not the hip.

◆ **People who feel the urge to giggle maniacally at the idea of actually going on a "date."** Simply chant this mantra on the way to the restaurant: "It's only lunch, not my life, on the line."

◆ **People willing to fork over \$975.** A hefty price on some budgets, but less expensive than the average

video-style dating service (\$1,200-\$3,000), which offers no guarantee that you'll get even one date out of the deal.

### Who it's not for:

◆ **People who have tried every other kind of service and been unsatisfied:** Chances are you're setting the bar a little too high. Adonis and Aphrodite haven't been around for quite some time now. And last we heard, Michael Jordon, Shania Twain and Antonio Banderas are all married.

◆ **Dating desperados:** This does not mean you must have been voted Minnesota's Most Eligible Mate this year, just that you've got something going for yourself already.

◆ **People who misrepresent themselves:** Sorry, truth-stretchers and outright liars. Rolando has a sharply honed BS detector. And while she's only human when it comes to knowing with certainty whether a romantic flame will spark in between the bruschetta and tagliatelle, she also does a criminal-background check before she'll take your check.

35 percent hold postgraduate degrees and about half have never been married. Many have started their own businesses. At this point, most are white, and all are heterosexual: "I'm keeping a waiting list of people of color who prefer to date within their own race or ethnic background," Rolando said. "But it would be unfair to take somebody's money before I have a sufficient number of potential matches.

### More than one *metier*

Table for Two isn't the 27 year-old Rolando's first entrepreneurial effort. She was a meteorologist for WCCO-TV before founding Weather Watch, a company that informs such customers such as the city of Minneapolis when a storm is about to hit so they can rev up the snow plows.

I'm following the same business philosophy for my dating service as I do for Weather Watch-find your niche, don't try to be everything to everyone and keep it local," she said.

Actually, she's planning on expanding to up to five other cities beginning

next year, but said that hinges on finding office managers native to that community and with strong business ties.

Interested in Table for Two, but short on cash? On rare occasions, Rolando has been known to do trades-a graphic designer, market researcher and publicist have all swapped their services for free dates.

One can't help but notice the glittering diamond on Rolando's engagement finger. Was it a case of a prospective client needing to look no further?

"No," she said with a laugh. "My fiance is an old high-school friend I reconnected with three years ago. But at least now people don't suspect a different motive for my being in this business.

**Table for Two:** 924-9790; 119 North 4th Street, Suite 206, Minneapolis.