



Point. Click. Date.

Online dating started in Dallas, and it's now a socially acceptable way to find a mate. But the industry has hit middle age, and two local companies are fighting over the last singles left looking. PLUS: confessions of an online dater, real-life personal ads, and a quick guide to the best dating web sites.

By by Kathryn Jones

BY 6:30 p.m., AL BIERNAT'S on Oak Lawn is jammed. Patrons queue up to valet park their BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes while they yak on cell phones. At the bar, they sip martinis and check out the well-heeled clientele streaming in from downtown skyscrapers and nearby Highland Park high-rises for après-work cocktails. The scanning eyes fall on an attractive young couple chatting at a nearby table. She has shoulder-length strawberry blond hair, Lisa Loeb glasses, and a slim figure wrapped in a dark business suit. He's got a fashionably shaved head, goatee, and the casual air of a guy who doesn't take himself too seriously. Their shining eyes say it all: they're in love.

Other smitten singles eyeball each other across their olive garnishes while waiting for a table at Al's, but Jazz Dunn and Kyle Kepner didn't first meet in a bar or restaurant. They clicked the way lots of Dallas couples do these days—online, with computer processors playing matchmaker. "I was a serial dater and had dated a lot of great women," Kepner tells me with a smile. He's 34 and the general manager and sommelier of the new Cascades restaurant opening downtown this summer. "Then, when I met Jazz, I knew she was the one."

"Now he's telling me," Dunn shoots back with a laugh between bites of calamari. Encouraged by a friend who found love on the Internet, Dunn, who's 31 and a sales manager for Marriott Hotels in Dallas, also decided to play the online dating game on Matchmaker.com. After the site matched her profile with some men who were deemed compatible, she went on several dates, including one with a guy who turned out to be more interested in her shoes and confessed he had a foot fetish. But soon enough she found what she was looking for: Kepner. Love blossomed. Kepner was the first guy she initiated contact with after being matched, Dunn recalls. "I e-mailed him something like, 'Hi, I looked at your profile, and it seems like we have a lot in common. Thanks and have a good day!' Then he didn't e-mail me back for two weeks."

"My aunt had died, I sprained my ankle, and I had lost my phone," Kepner says with a sheepish grin. "I'm surprised she didn't say, 'That guy's a wacko.'"

"No, I swallowed my pride and e-mailed him again," Dunn says. Right before Christmas 2003, they went on their first date, to Avanti Euro Bistro in Addison Circle. They talked until the place was about to close.

"It was a perfect thing for us," Kepner says of their match made in cyberspace. "We've been inseparable ever since."



And, they hope, forever. Their wedding is set for August.

Dunn and Kepner could be the poster couple for online dating. Good-looking, intelligent, articulate, and personable, they shatter the stereotype that the “web personals” are a last resort for singles and a haven for stalkers, criminals, desperate losers, or married folks looking for some action on the side. (Although there are still plenty of those on the Internet, too.) Indeed, finding romance online has become so socially acceptable that it might not surprise you to learn that Kepner’s brother Peter met his wife on Matchmaker. And their father Kep met his girlfriend there. Oh, and Dunn’s friend Melodi met her husband through the site.

Thousands of Dallas singles, from twentysomethings to seniors, are bypassing the bars, nightclubs, and even the produce section at Central Market. Not that Lower Greenville and the West Village are exactly deserted these days, but lots of singles are searching for the perfect date or mate much the way they shop for a car or a book or an airline ticket: browse, point, click. Then, when both parties agree to meet and exchange personal information, they can Google each other all night long.

Dallas is something of an online love nest. All the major national Internet dating services count Dallas as a big market, including Yahoo Personals, Lycos’ Matchmaker, eHarmony, and Lavalife. (More than 800 such services now exist.) In fact, it can be argued that online dating actually started here. Richardson-based Match.com, the industry leader with 14 million users, brought the concept to the mainstream a decade ago.

But while Dallas is a love nest for online daters, it’s also ground zero for a business war that has spilled into the courts and the national media. At stake are the hundreds of millions of dollars to be made from the 61 million people who log on to a dating service every month. The competition has grown more intense because the companies have realized that the number of online singles, while large, is not growing as it once was. The only way the services can expand their domestic business is to poach from each other.

On one side of the battlefield is Match.com. On the other, True.com, across town in Las Colinas, where the upstart company is trying to change how the entire online dating business operates.

THE CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS of the company that brought online dating into the mainstream are pretty unromantic. Match.com’s building is like many in Richardson’s high-tech corridor off the George Bush Turnpike—plain and functional, with a sea of cubicles and computers inside. But the meeting rooms sport cutesy names like Pookie, Baby Cakes, Cutie Pie, and Snuggle Bunny. The lunchroom is called Cafe Amore. Managers hunker down in a conference room that looks like a giant red drum; it’s dubbed the Love Bunker.

Whimsy aside, the business of love is serious stuff. In 1995, when online matchmaking amounted to little more than electronic bulletin boards, Match launched the first full-scale online dating service. “Back then, no one really had thought about online dating as a business,” says Trish McDermott, who was part of Match’s start-up team and who holds the intriguing title of vice president of romance. But she and Match’s founders, many of whom were women, saw a business model that not only could make money on the Internet, but also improve people’s lives. “I was somewhat of an evangelist from the beginning because I felt it could really revolutionize the dating scene for single people,” she says. “The Internet provided the opportunity of opening the door to romance for everyone.”

The door is opening a little wider each year. JupiterResearch, a New York-based Internet research firm, estimates that people in the United States spent about \$473 million on online dating personals last year and will spend \$623 million in 2009. “Online dating has hit critical mass,” says Nate Elliott, JupiterResearch’s associate analyst who tracks online marketing and media. “Now you’ve got two out of every five singles looking at these sites.”

Match is the industry heavyweight, with more subscribers than any other site. A million people pay \$24.95 a month (less if they sign up for a three-month, six-month, or annual contract) for access to Match’s huge pool of eligible singles and other services, such as dating advice. Match’s success caught the eye of media mogul Barry Diller, who added the company to his empire, New York-based IAC/InterActive Corp., in January 2003. (Other business units include Expedia, Hotwire.com, Home Shopping Network, Ticketmaster, LendingTree, and Dallas-based Hotels.com). Match has expanded all over the globe, with members in 240 countries, and has one of the industry’s most successful track records. Last year, more than



Match.com CEO Jim Safka

200,000 people reported they found the person they were seeking on Match. McDermott says she regularly receives wedding announcements, honeymoon photographs, and baby pictures from couples who met on the site.

Match's large and diverse database was part of the allure for Colette Malizzo, a 33-year-old newspaper advertising manager and aspiring writer. Stunningly pretty, with long blond hair, a shapely figure, and a sunny personality, she joined Match last summer. Within two weeks, she received 200 e-mails from interested guys. "I call this the dating Olympics," she says with a laugh. She found the attention flattering, but most of the would-be suitors weren't exactly what she was looking for—a man with similar long-term goals (she wants to get married and have children someday) and common interests (she likes hiking, riding her Harley, and loves her Labrador-mix Jimmie). After two dead-end dates, she met Mike, whom she's dated for several months. "He has a dog; I have a dog," Malizzo says. "Our first date was at a dog park. The third time on Match was a charm."

But Match could find it harder to attract more new subscribers like Malizzo. JupiterResearch estimates that 5.9 million people in the United States paid to subscribe to an online dating site last year. But the gangbuster growth of several years ago is winding down, and the industry is starting to mature. In recent years, revenues across the industry were rising at 75 percent a year; Jupiter predicts a rise of only 9 percent in 2005. "The pie is not going to grow that much," says Jupiter's Elliott. The online personals business also has the paradoxical problem of what it calls "good churn"—as subscribers pair up and get engaged, they don't need the sites that fixed them up anymore. The most satisfied customers don't come back.

Match's financial growth also stagnated last year. Its 2004 revenues flattened, and operating income didn't improve. Considering that Match gets a large share of its revenues from powering Microsoft's MSN Dating & Personals and [Love@AOL](#), performance was pretty shabby. Diller, who's known as a results-oriented, cutthroat competitor, wasn't happy. In September he replaced chief executive Tim Sullivan with Jim Safka, who's 36 and the former vice president and general manager of e-commerce for AT&T Wireless. Match also axed about 30 jobs, or 10 percent of its workforce, in its events and new product areas. Some of those who attended a company-wide meeting at the Angelika theater to outline changes in direction say that IAC, displeased that Match wasn't on track to meet ambitious revenue targets, "was looking for some heads to roll," as a former employee put it.

Safka, who reports directly to Diller, says he still sees plenty of opportunities for Match to grow. "We feel like we're in the first or second inning of a nine-inning game," he tells me. He's particularly hot on the international market, especially the Asia-Pacific region. "We're right at the beginning of it, and the opportunity is a global one," he says.

Elliott agrees that online dating sites can boost their subscriber bases by expanding internationally, but he adds that competition is only going to get more intense as other sites try to steal market share and offer premium services for higher fees. "The sites just can't drive up subscriber fees because they want to," he says. "They have to provide more value."

That's why Match will soon add services such as relationship coaching and counseling for its members. In December, its home page and registration process got a makeover to make them easier to use, and a new product called [Success.match.com](#) will roll out in time for Valentine's Day. It will showcase stories of engaged or married couples who met on the site. Safka says the idea is to take Match from a one-dimensional service to a three-dimensional one to help singles become better at relationships in general. And it will offer a more customized experience for some segments of its large and diverse subscriber base to better compete with the niche players. Jewish or Hispanic members, for instance, will have special places on the site. "So as we get bigger, we're also going to get smaller," Safka says. "The bottom line is love is complicated. Match wants to be simple."

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF DALLAS, entrepreneur Herb Vest has got Match and other competitors in the cross hairs from his 16th-floor office in Williams Square. After he sold his financial services firm, H.D. Vest Inc., to giant Wells Fargo in 2001, Vest was looking for someplace to invest his millions. He took a cue from his personal life. Divorced in 1990, he spent 12 years as a bachelor before he met his wife Kerensa on a blind date. "Before then, I'd had a whole lot of blind dates, and some turned out to be nightmare dates," Vest says. "It was a very ineffective method of courtship."

Dismayed at the nation's high divorce rate and intrigued at what made two people compatible, he commissioned a team of psychologists and relationship experts to interview successfully married couples and see what made them click. The team identified 99 factors. Its report became the basis for True.com's comprehensive compatibility test and psychological matching system. "It gives you a psychological profile of your ideal soulmate," Vest says. "And it virtually eliminates the nightmare date." He launched the web site, initially called TrueBeginnings.com, in January 2004.

Vest, who's known as a savvy marketer, differentiated True by attacking one of the biggest concerns many singles have had about online dating: that it wasn't safe. True contracts with an outside firm, Rapsheets Criminal Records, to screen its members. Moreover, Rapsheets checks marriage records to try to weed out would-be philanderers. "WARNING!" a yellow headline on True's home page blares. "Married people need not apply."

The background checks make singles like Stacey Gibson feel more comfortable about turning to an Internet site to meet people. Gibson, a 29-year-old Uptown resident, switched from Match to True about a year ago. Even with the screenings, she still takes precautions when she meets someone new and insists on meeting in a public place (which many sites recommend). "True makes it so much easier to filter out" some of the undesirables, she says. "If you go to a bar, or even to a church or to some other social setting, how do you really know if the person you meet is telling the truth about himself?"

True has proposed legislation that would require all online dating services to conduct such background screenings or disclose that they don't. It claims to have support in five states, including Texas. "We hope to make it the industry standard," Vest says. "It's going to make the environment much safer."

Which brings us to the catfight between Match and True. In October, Vest fired off a strongly worded open letter to Diller that ran as an advertisement in *USA Today* under the headline, "What Is Barry Diller Hiding?" It took issue with Match's opposition to legislation passed by the Michigan House of Representatives requiring online dating services to disclose whether they perform criminal background checks on members. The letter read, in part: "In light of recent reports of alleged rapes and murders perpetrated against subscribers to Internet dating sites, I am baffled at Match.com's opposition to legislation aimed at better protecting Internet dating subscribers. ... Mr. Diller, my own father was murdered by thugs when I was a baby. One of our employees at True.com was raped when she was 18. We at True.com can testify from firsthand experience to the devastating effect that violent crime has on victims and their families."

That was Vest's third open letter to Diller. The first ran in June in the *Dallas Morning News* after Match came out against legislation to make online dating safer. The second, published as full-page ads a couple of weeks later in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Morning News*, was headlined, "What Is Barry Diller Afraid Of?" The second and third letters were in response to Match subpoenaing True employees and accusing them of sharing trade secrets. Eight former Match employees were deposed. "Let me assure you that Match.com has no 'secrets' that [True.com] would want," Vest wrote in the letter. "Mr. Diller, I will not allow you to intimidate the employees of [True.com]. To get to them, you must, first, come through me."

Publicly, Match officials say that the legislation isn't necessary because there's no "rampant abuse problem" in online dating and that True is attempting to "have the government endorse its business model through legislation." Privately, they say the open letters were publicity stunts, and Diller hasn't responded to them.

Like Match, True has recently had to trim its staff. A week after Match announced its layoffs in September, True revealed plans to cut 90 employees, or about 60 percent of its workforce, mostly people in marketing and event coordination who set up parties and speed-dating activities. True explained the layoffs as part of a "refocusing effort" on its core business. But industry observers say Vest has put much of his own money into the company, and it has yet to be profitable. Unlike Safka, though, Vest doesn't have shareholders or Barry Diller breathing down his neck. "Business is business," Vest says. "I've got to believe in what I'm doing."



VESTED: Investment mogul Herb Vest jumped into the online dating game in January 2004 with True.com.



MATCHMAKER, MATCHMAKER: Kyle Kepner and Jazz Dunn met through Matchmaker.com and plan to marry in August. But they're not the only ones who found love online. So did Kyle's brother Peter, their dad Kep, and Jazz's friend Melodi.

ODDLY ENOUGH, though online dating started in Dallas and the industry's most public battle is being waged here, the town turns out to be a tough one for singles to find each other. Forbes.com, which annually ranks the best cities for singles, in 2004 put Dallas-Fort Worth 12th on its list of the top 40 metro areas in terms of nightlife, culture, job growth, number of singles, and other factors. (Denver-Boulder was tops; Austin, which has the highest national ratio of people above the age of 15 who've never been married, was third.) A closer look at the data reveals that while singles may have a lot to do in Dallas—the city ranked in the top 10 in culture and nightlife—there aren't enough of them. Dallas was near the bottom—33rd, tied with Pittsburgh!—when it came to the number of single people. Unlike Austin, Dallas doesn't have hordes of unattached young hotties.

Factor in the frenzied schedules and long work hours of busy professionals like Dunn and Kepner, and it's no wonder that Dallas singles are looking to the Internet to improve the odds of finding that needle in the haystack, that special someone who's supposed to be out there for every singleton. It's rough going.

The online personals worked for Kepner and Dunn. Rather than feel embarrassed about that, they say they look forward to telling people how they met, especially their future children. "We've already picked out some baby names," Dunn told me as we waited for the valets to fetch our cars at Al Biernat's. The Internet may have brought the couple together, but the two are ready for the next step: to take their match made in cyberspace offline for good.

Kathryn Jones is a contributing editor for *Texas Monthly* and a regular contributor to the *New York Times*.

GETTING PERSONAL

Real people. Real ads. Really.

Spend enough time browsing online personals ads and they all start to sound the same. Everyone is laid-back. Everyone loves to laugh. Everyone likes to go out on the town. And travel. And just curl up and watch a movie at home. But every few hundred ads or so, one will stand out. Maybe it's because the girl has a finger in her nose. Or maybe the guy admits his former friends say he's a backstabber. Whatever. • Here is a happy selection of just such ads from people in the Dallas area. We found them on Yahoo Personals. We didn't edit their words or correct their grammar or fix their typos. The only thing we did was trim for space. And, if needed, we gave them some lowercase letters. We, too, are laid-back and love to laugh. But there's nothing funny about typing in all caps. —*Tim Rogers*



Subversive Yet Supportive of Authority

Age: 41

Drinking: drinks regularly

In my own words: Architecture, Questioning, Economics, Nina Simone, Dry, Cream is important for a lot of recipes, Johnny Cash, English Cocker Spaniels are a much better dog than the American most people know, Former friends say I come across as shy and unassertive at first but quickly become opportunistic and backstabbing, Can have a good time at home or in boots and jeans at a dive but unfortunately don't own a little black dress for a night out on the town so I can't make that transition like so many women on these sites can, college football, Belgian beer

Can I Trust You?

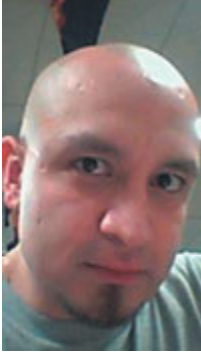
Age: 31

Income: \$100,000 to \$149,000

In my own words: I am an open-minded boy, who is caring, sweet, and loving. I love to conversate over some wine and build in depth relationships. I like to stay active mentally, as well as physically.

I am looking for someone who is also open-minded and for one that I can trust with this secret—no, it's not a 24/7 thing....lol If I haven't already scared you away and you ask, I will send pics of me dressed in my daily clothes.





Going swimming ...

Age: 31

TV watching: Sports Nut, Movies, Documentaries

In my own words: Hello to all. My name is Mondo. My idea of a romantic date is making dinner, dropping by the grocery store and picking out what I need, letting the menu take shape in my head. I get home and pick out the music that I love, that fits the mood: everything from trance and ambient to folk and classic rock. Barbequeing to Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, baking chewy chocolate cheesecakes to Dave Matthews, making a lasagna to Paul Van Dyk or Faithless, or even just throwing together a salad to Ani DiFranco.

Truth in Advertising?

Age: 33

Body type: Athletic

In my own words: Things my friends might say about me: 1. A surprisingly delicious blend of anal-retentive and don't-give-a-damn. 2. A bit of an 'enthusiast'. When I figure out that I like something, I tend to do that...a lot. I prefer to think of myself as 'focused', not 'obsessed'. 3. I qualify almost everything. See? 4. Optimistic. For instance, I listed myself as appearing 'athletic'.



I tend to do that...a lot.



No Goofing Around, lets Golf Around

Age: 32

Drinking: Doesn't drink

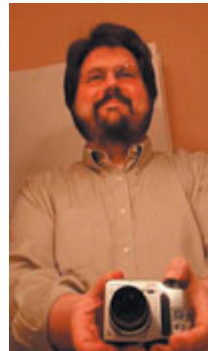
In my own words: I would really enjoy meeting a woman that plays Golf. Do you play Golf? Have you ever seen any single African American women that play Golf? Do they exist? Honestly, I know it's hot in Texas. But as if meeting attractive quality women that can carry as well as institute good conversation isn't hard enough to find, try adding in the variable of finding those with qualities as such that aren't afraid to go out in the heat and sweat. Man, a person would have better odds finding Bin Laden in a McDonalds, butt naked, being fed french fries by Mahailia Jackson, across the street from the White House, giving a seminar to kids at a P.T.A convention. Kind of difficult huh?

What complete strangers say about me ...

Age: 34

Body type: Thick

In my own words: I decided to let some complete strangers tell you what they think of me. The guy working at the gas station said I "like to wear blue shirts" (I was wearing a blue shirt that day.). This dude outside the 7-11 that asked me for some money for the bus said that I was "intelligent, charming, witty and easy to talk to." (I think he was hitting on me.) The lady at the check-cashing place said, "You a crazy man! Why are you waving that umbrella in here? Get away from me!"



YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE

Age: 22

Living situation: With roommate(s)

In my own words: The most important thing to me is to enjoy life. I do not have time for neg. people or do I have time for idiots. I do not have a goal to be married in the next year, so guys don't worry I will not start planning a wedding as soon as we talk.

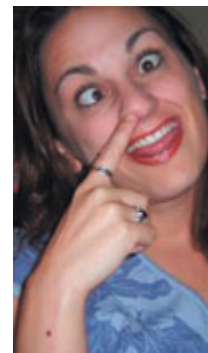
It's about time you showed up ...

Age: 30

Political views: Not political

In my own words: ... Come on in! Relax, take your shoes off and stay a few :) Ok ... about me ... I'm blessed with a good sense of humor, giving and receiving, and can find almost any situation comical, I mean you HAVE to

these days or your liable to start knocking people off left and right! I'm very playfull ... hiding in your closet, waiting to scare you or dumping a glass of ice cold water on you when you're in the shower ... I'll mention also that I'm contemplating a second tatoo and I have a piercing, which there will be no more of (ouch).



Not Looking For Love, Just a Good Life

Age: 28

Attend services: Never

In my own words: I am 28; short (4'9") and thick (150 lbs). I live in Dallas. My only love & life is my 12 yr. old daughter. I am very ill tempered, don't tolerate nonsense & I hate a liar with a passion. Come straight & direct with me at ALL times I am very spoiled & love to be pampered. Of course like any woman would ask for, an honest, loyal, respectful, loving, romantic, faithful, etc...etc...etc. Reality is, that's not happening. A man will always be a man. Since I'm not getting what I want, this

is what I need: A, Joe Millionaire (what...it's wishful thinking). I don't like drama especially "BABY MOMMA DRAMA", I have enough drama of my own, so; please don't bring it with you. I can do without; TRUST ME!

Make It Alright

Age: 33

TV watching: Sitcoms, I don't own a TV

In my own words: In my years of dating, I've NEVER encountered the type of man that I am interested in sharing forever with. I don't think my requirements are unattainable, he needs to possess the four basic animal characteristics: HUNT, KILL, PROVIDE and PROTECT. If that's you, come through and make it alright.....



queen seeks king!

Age: 24

Living situation: Alone, with kids

In my own words: I want to be that spiritual light that ignites everyone's souls from the inside out. I want to be that unknown passionate source that instantly puts a dimly lit soul into the brightness that is noticed by all. I know my soul is deep, sometimes too deep for those that are scared to reach beyond the surface. My goal is to get everyone to reach further than they imagined. It is possible, trust me. The beauty you will find there is so rare.. there is only one. The beauty, is the soul of you. The soul that has been yearning to be played with, touched, inhaled. It wants you to nourish it and watch it grow. Don't allow the unknown to scare you and keep you locked away from all its mysteries. There is no better fulfillment than of one in which you've reached inner peace. Inner understanding. It's all about you. Don't let yourself down.

CLICK HERE OFTEN?

Grab a 10-year-old picture and a thesaurus. (You'll need a half-dozen synonyms for "laid-back.") Here's your guide to some of the hottest dating sites on the web. *by Laura Kostelny*

Yahoo Personals

(personals.yahoo.com)

This is the baby pool of dating web sites. **Sign-up Process:** Approx. 15 minutes. Ideal for a commitment-phobe, the site asks the standard questions (education, ethnicity, religion, hair color, salary, etc.) but offers the glorious "I'll tell you later" option for every question except sex, age, and ZIP code. This is perhaps the only site to recognize that the prose is less important than the photo. **Cost*:** one month, \$19.95; three months, \$44.95; 12 months, \$99.95. **Serious Factor:** Get serious. This site is populated by people who enjoy free Yahoo e-mail. It's more of a lark than a quest for "the one." **Drawback:** The site is a bit terse, sometimes offering only three choices (and no opportunity to elaborate) for a given question. For example, "I drink no/socially/daily." Where's our "three times a week" option? **Advantage:** Online dating is a modern, acceptable, logical way to meet new people. Still having trouble swallowing that? This is a good way to get your feet wet.

Match

(www.match.com)

Name recognition alone makes this site the king. **Sign-up Process:** Approx. 45 minutes. In addition to asking for a paragraph-length self-description and a write-up about what you need in an ideal mate, the site offers an opportunity to elaborate on multiple-choice answers regarding job, education, ethnicity, and religion. After completing your profile, Match claims to check it for inappropriate content before posting. Judging from the number of people who use "LOL" in their headers, the web site's definition of "inappropriate" is questionable. **Cost:** one month, \$24.95; three months, \$44.85; six months, \$65.70. **Serious Factor:** Semi-serious. People come here in part because of the site's claim of hundreds of thousands of matches. **Drawback:** There's no spell-check, so the profiles of presumably educated people read like those of foreign illiterates. **Advantage:** Dating is a numbers game—and Match.com has a gazillion members. We all know someone who has had at least a little luck with this site—not some friend of a friend in New York or LA, but a buddy right here in Dallas.

True

(www.true.com)

Billed the "safer dating" web site, criminal background checks are standard. **Sign-up Process:** Approx. one hour. The multiple-choice questionnaire regarding self and potential mate is a snap. The psychological profile is more taxing. Expect to answer questions about everything from abortion to sex toys—and prepare for the answer matrix's disconcerting shape (a blue mini-pad). **Cost:** one month, \$29.99; three months, \$59.95; six months, \$99.99.

Serious Factor: Dead serious. Participants must pass a background check (though the site kindly allays those fears about that DUI back in '99). Further, the site warns: "Married people will be prosecuted." Jail sentences of up to five years and \$250,000 for trying to get a little on the side? **Drawback:** For the time and energy it takes to answer the questions, the psychological profile results seem a bit simplistic, i.e., "You are relatively liberal in your sexual attitudes." **Advantage:** Our queries for men in the area between the ages of 30 and 40 resulted in 243 matches. Compared with more than 1,000 for Yahoo Personals and Match.com, it's much less overwhelming. And honestly, the background checks are somewhat comforting.

eHarmony (www.eharmony.com)

The premise here is that finding a mate is "more science than art." **Sign-up Process:** Approx. two hours. We have experience filling out extensive job applications and have been in therapy for years, but we were still woefully unprepared for the battery of tests. **Cost:** one month, \$49.95; three months, \$99.95; six months, \$159.95; one year, \$249.95. **Serious Factor:** Nothing funny here. The process is exhaustive, but this site asks some decent relationship questions. It's probably smart to give some thought to the five things you can't live with and five things you can't live without in a partner. The psych profile is less trite than that of True.com. **Drawback:** eHarmony is expensive and time-consuming. We found answering all of those questions was less cathartic than depressing. **Advantage:** Same as the drawback. The cash and time investments fend off predators. It's highly unlikely anyone will use this site for booty calls.

ChristianSingles.com

The Mission: Christians searching for other Christians for Christ-centered relationships. The tagline "never lonely again" makes us sad. We think "never go to Sunday school alone again" is cooler. **Sign-up Process:** That depends. Before signing up, the site recommends you read five Bible verses. It also has a lengthy disclaimer that warns you that, among other things, this is not a site for sexual advances via e-mail. We skipped that part, and it took us about 10 minutes to answer multiple-choice questions about our job, faith, and amount of time we spend reading the Bible. **Cost:** one month, \$10; three months, \$25; six months, \$45; one year, \$85. **Serious Factor:** Hand-to-God serious. The site informs that it's only for "meeting marriage-minded members." The questions are a bit odd, though. Why is "Do you put on eyewear?" pertinent? **Drawback:** The only site to ask flat out: "What is your weight?" Pretty nerdy and not something Jesus would ask, in our opinion. **Advantage:** If you're cool with people who want to talk about "Who is first in your life?" then you have found your home.

RateMyBody.com

Are you bi-curious? Have a yen for some group sex? Log on in. **Sign-up Process:** Approx. 15 minutes. **Cost:** one month, \$24.95; three months, \$39.95; six months, \$74.95. **Serious Factor:** Seriously entertaining in a *Dallas Observer* classified-ad kind of way. **Drawback:** It's very hard to believe that people actually use this site to hook up, let alone find a soulmate. **Advantage:** Interesting to note that this web site is all about getting naked, but, unlike ChristianSingles.com, a weight is not requested. Good people, these.

* All of these sites are free to join, but if you find someone you want to contact, you'll have to pony up the plastic.

THE MEN IN MY MAILBOX

Confessions of a middle-aged online dater.
by Nancy Nichols

Standing on the patio of Kenichi, a swanky sushi spot at the base of Aspen Mountain, I swirled a pretentious Chardonnay and surveyed the scene. It was a spectacular evening in mid-June, and foodies from Texas had migrated to this playground for the rich and famous for the annual Food & Wine Magazine Classic. Somehow I found myself chatting with two Dallas women in their early 50s, both with quarter-size diamonds on their left hands. "Where do you live?" I asked.

"My husband and I have a house in Highland Park," they chirped in unison, "but we summer at our home here in Aspen."

In jest, I asked if their husbands had any fathers or sons



whom I could date. "Oh, we both met our husbands on Match.com," they sang as they clinked their wine glasses. "Just sign on and search 'Aspen.' It's the only way to meet the perfect Dallas man."

I saw my reflection in their Revo sunglasses: a 49-year-old divorcée who hadn't had a significant other since the first George Bush was president. My 50th birthday was approaching as rapidly as my odds of meeting Mr. Right were declining. Hanging out at upscale bars was not working, and my friends had been useless—despite my offering them 10 percent of my prenup. By the time I hit Aspen, I'd given up. My dating skills and butt muscles were atrophied beyond repair.

But buoyed by my newest best friends' success, I returned home and snuggled up to my PC. I spent several hours filling out exhaustive profile questions while trying to be honest, funny, and flirty without using the phrase "beautiful on the inside." Not wanting to appear prejudiced about the income of a potential spouse, I clicked the "Any" box.

That was my first mistake. Almost immediately, a potential suitor "winked" at me, which means he sent his profile without an e-mail message. My call for a soulmate who loved to travel was answered by a retired trucker. He promised to "take me on the ride of my life." Not ready to cook with a toaster plugged into a cigarette lighter, I changed my preferences. I typed, "NO ONE MAKING LESS THAN \$100,000 A YEAR NEED APPLY."

Things didn't improve. The next three winks came from men I already knew. They were followed by a "sarcastic 60-year-old New York Jew" who was looking for "a hip, funny partner." I winked back, but his response was crushing: "Sorry, I am not interested in dating anyone over 35." Ouch. It was unnecessary roughness. The "ease" of online dating comes from *not* replying to profiles that don't interest you. No response is answer enough. This Yankee went out of his way to be mean. I decided he must be terrible with children and lousy in bed.

Undaunted, I kept perusing the endless web pages filled with photos of men reeling in marlins off the shore of Mexico, hitting a golf shot at Pebble Beach, flexing their pecs at the gym, sampling marinara sauce, and polishing their Corvettes. Men were pictured with their dogs, cats, horses, tractors, race cars, Harleys, children, grandchildren, and stamp collections. Mountain climbers, heli-skiers, gourmet cooks, Baptists, and beekeepers—so many men with so much time.

Another day, another wink. "Hey, you look like a woman who wouldn't use a cell phone in a restaurant," read one e-mail. I thought *that* was a bad opening line until I read, "Hey, babe, did anyone ever tell you that you look like Laci Peterson's mom?"

Then came the sleazeballs. One wondered if I wore thong panties. Another asked, "Do you like dressing up in stockings and dancing barefoot?" How could I forget the dude who was almost nude? I liked his cowboy boots, but the Speedo didn't work for me.

Have I mentioned the wimps? Like the insurance salesman from Wichita Falls who "loved to cuddle" or the yoga instructor who liked to "cook seafood" and give "nice feet massages." What about the guy who claimed that "the good Lord made me a dead ringer for Dr. Phil"?

"Good Lord, where do these men come from?" I asked myself. But I should have known. I was searching for what I've always considered an oxymoron—the perfect Dallas man.

And that's when it happened, a searing connection in cyberspace. He was a property developer who "used to live in Dallas" (perfect!) and was "currently living in New Mexico" (oh, yes!) but he "visited Dallas regularly" (what a deal!). Like me, he yearned to hike Kilimanjaro. (Oh, my God, we could train together!) He was in town and wanted to know if I could meet for coffee. I called my mother and told her I'd found the perfect man.

The next morning I arrived fashionably late at Starbucks. I stood looking around for someone looking around. My throat tightened; I couldn't breathe; I turned to run. And then our eyes met.

The next hour was a blur. He was charming and handsome. The pressure was immense; I felt like I was auditioning for a part in a life play. My head throbbed. I chatted incessantly. I really liked him. We'd get married in the mountains and raise rescue dogs.

I never heard from him again.

It took a few months before I ventured back online, where I was greeted with a mailbox full of losers: the guy who "loved looking for rocks," the captain looking for his first mate, and the ubiquitous gentlemen looking for "someone to grow young with." For a year I winked myself nauseous. Not once did someone who interested me come across my screen. Except for Wendy.

"I've watched your profile for a long time," she wrote. "I love your eyes, and I wonder if you'd be willing to make a lifestyle change." After a double take, I checked out her profile. Well, she made more than \$150,000 a year as a financial analyst. And she liked adventure travel and played golf.

If only Wendy had had houses in Highland Park *and* Aspen.