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San Francisco



\$4.99 February 2008

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Love at first gaze

On your marks, disenchanted S.F. daters—a new craze is leading to a stare-down.

Yes, you can blink. But don't try to gaze into both eyes at once—you'll go cross-eyed. And none of that seductive eyebrow-raising—it's intimidating. Such was the advice offered on a recent night in SoMa, as about 50 stylish twenty- to thirty-somethings gathered in a cozy loft space to try what *Elle UK* recently called "New York's hottest dating trend," otherwise known as an **eye-gazing party**.

Rather than drunkenly fumbling through awkward pickup lines ("Come here often?"), partygoers split into groups and spend two minutes each with members of the opposite sex, silently looking into the windows to their souls and hoping to find a spark, a spiritual connection, or, at the very least, an excuse to start a conversation once the wine sipping begins.

While participants sat cross-legged in two long rows—some twitching, some stoic as Buddhas—it was tough to tell if any love connections were being made, and no interviewees reported meeting a soul mate. But judging from a few make-out sessions in dark corners, some eye gazers saw tongue tasting as a logical follow-up.

Held at AuthenticSF, a relationship workshop center on 10th Street, this was only the second local eye-gazing party held since the concept's founder, 30-year-old Michael Ellsberg, moved back to the Bay Area from New York. But based on the response to the first two, Ellsberg says there will now be at least one eye-gazing shindig per month (and perhaps as many as four) for various age groups and sexual orientations, at different locations.

If the events sound too New Agey for you, they probably are. But keep in mind that eye-gazing parties—which have also been held in Singapore and Australia—started in Manhattan with a group of mostly professionals, such as lawyers and investment bankers. The idea is straightforward, says Ellsberg, a longtime Cuban-salsa teacher with unusually striking blue eyes (perhaps a subconscious impetus for his creation). "I started this because I was sick of having the same old conversations at bars. I mean, has anyone ever had a really fulfilling conversation that started with 'Where are you from?' or 'What do you do?' I noticed from salsa dancing that you could often tell more about someone from their eyes, so I thought, why not cut through all this BS and get right to the point?"

Ellsberg usually MCs the parties, but on this particular night, another facilitator took over, and Ellsberg tried it himself—surprisingly, for the first time. What did he notice? "If you don't have chemistry with someone, looking into their eyes probably isn't going to create it. But if you do, watch out. You're going to feel it really fast." As proof, Ellsberg found a date for the following Friday. ■

JAIMAL YOGIS CHECK EYEGAZINGPARTIES.COM FOR A SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING EVENTS