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TIPS TO MAKE YOUR DATING LIFE FIZZ

Feargal has found the perfect match

by Lisa Brady

IF there's anyone qualified to talk about the messy, marvellously confusing state of Irish dating, it's Feargal Harrington — co-founder of matchmaking agency Intro, veteran of thousands of romantic pairings, and, more recently, the man behind Kombeara, a West Cork-brewed hard kombucha, or hard booch — a fermented tea drink with alcohol that's been all the rage in the US for years, but is only on Irish shores now.

And after more than a decade watching singles search for the one, Feargal has heard every excuse, endured every tragic dating trend, and seen more emotional car crashes than a season of Love Is Blind. Now, as he launches his kombucha with a kick — alsongside his tech entrepreneur wife Rena Maycock and entrepreneur John Power, he's laughing at the similarities between dating and kombucha fermentation.

'It's all about the right mix, isn't it?' he grins. 'You need a bit of patience, the right ingredients, and not too much fizz too soon.' Feargal co-founded Intro back in 2011 — before swiping left was a national pastime.

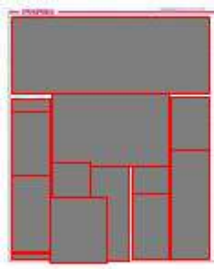
'We're fifteen years going now and still setting up around a hundred dates a week all over Ireland,' he says proudly. 'People are still coming in their droves. They've tried everything — apps, speed dating, divine intervention — and they're exhausted.' He pauses.

'It's that Groundhog Day feeling. They keep swiping, keep starting again, and then wonder, 'Am I the problem?' They're good people, but after being ghosted a dozen times, they start second guessing themselves.'

The model of online dating, while not working for many of us, is making us lazy in real life, says Feargal, who adds that we are a nation of procrastinators—especially in love.

'Everyone finds reasons not to date. They'll say, 'I've young kids' or 'I'm too busy in work' — and I'm like, yu could be busy in work for the next ten years, are you seriously saying you're not going to go for a coffee or drink for an hour on a Friday night?" 'People use any excuse. Fear of failure, fear of the neighbours, fear of being found in a ditch if someone talks to them in a bar — it's mad! We've become so sceptical, so suspicious, that we're cutting ourselves off before we even begin.'

Feargal is in equal parts amused and horrified by modern dating habits.



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'There was a survey recently that found nearly ten per cent of adults in Ireland had a romantic relationship with an AI chatbot last year,' he says. 'People are dating robots,' he says, and this observation is almost comical, if it wasn't actually true.

'People say, "At least the chatbot answers me politely." That's how bad it's got. They'd rather talk to AI than risk being ghosted by a real person.'

Online dating, he says, has become 'a dopamine-driven addiction — just like drinking, smoking or scrolling Instagram. The little buzz when you get a match? That's what people chase. But it's ruining confidence. You're not meeting humans; you're managing algorithms.'

Feargal's golden rule? Get specific, but not delusional. 'We'll have women on the phone saying, 'I play tennis three hours every weekend, so he has to play too.' And I'm like, Mary, who cares? You do your thing, he can do his. You're not cloning yourself.

'The biggest killer of dating success is being too prescriptive — six feet two, Trinity graduate, owns a labradoodle' — come on. The average Irish man is five -seven and a half. I can't make them taller! People need to stop trying to build robots and start looking for kindness, loyalty, and a bit of craic.'

And for those who insist they're 'just not settling'? He rolls his eyes.

'It's not settling, for God's sake — it's being realistic. There's this mad entitlement where people say, "I was hurt before, so now it's my turn to get exactly what I want." Life doesn't work that way. Flexibility and willingness to compromise — that's what gets people into relationships.'

Another tip — stop waiting for perfect timing.

'Women will put career first — which is brilliant — but then hit 40 and say, "Right, now I'm ready." But we have so many women who have taken matters into their own hands and had babies on their own, which is amazing. Meanwhile, men think they can have kids whenever they want, and so have a classic case of arrested development. We're both guilty, men and women alike — and we both blame each other.'

So what does a matchmaker do when he's not setting people up? He brews — or gets a master brewer to do it, in a brewery that we bought in Ballingeary, West Cork. Feargal's latest creation is a lightly alcoholic kombucha that's vegan, gluten-free, low in sugar, and packed with seaweed and probiotics. It comes in three flavours: Mango & Passion Fruit, Grapefruit, Blood Orange & Yuzu, and Blueberry & Sicilian Lemon.

'Everyone's obsessed with wellness — calorie counts, gut health, all that," he says. 'It's double-fermented, naturally done, no hangover, no headache. You still get a bit of a buzz,' he winks. 'It's the perfect pairing — good for your gut, good for your social life,' he says.

Ask Feargal what makes two people truly compatible, he'll tell you it's not about shared hobbies or identical CVs.

'It's about energy, communication, and the ability to laugh. The couples who make it work are the ones who say, "He's decent, he's funny, he's kind." Not, 'He's six-feet-two with a Masters in Finance.'

HE'S equally direct about people who claim to be "too busy" for dating.

'They'll say, "My job's too demanding." I'll ask what they are doing about not being single. And they'll say, 'Nothing.' There's your answer.'

And this is the exact time of year that people start to wonder what it might be like to share their lives with someone.

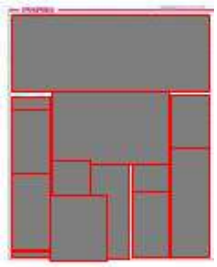
'When the evenings get darker, people want someone to watch telly with,' Feargal shrugs. 'But even summer's busy — when it's bright till nine, people have more time and start thinking, 'Maybe I will meet someone.' There's always a rush of calls after the schools go back. It's hilarious.'

Still, he admits, more than half the Irish adult population is now single. 'Some stay in loveless relationships for appearances, others are terrified to try again. But there's hope. You just have to be brave enough,' he says.

'Maybe dating is a little like brewing. You can't control every variable — but if you put good stuff in, you'll usually get something lovely out.'

So maybe that's the new Irish dating rule for 2025 - ofrget the checklists and if in doubt — bring a bottle of hard booch.

■ *Kombeara is available to purchase nationwide at various off licences, supermarkets and wine merchants Mitchell and Son; RRP €3.95,see kombeara.com for more. See also intro.ie.*



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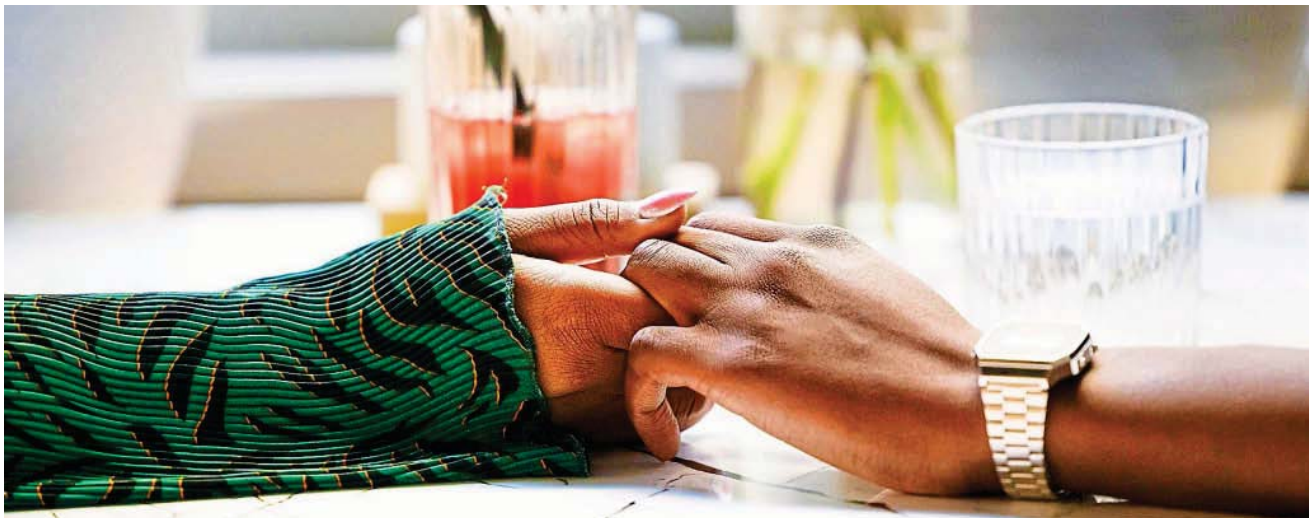
New venture: Feargal Harrington with his drink



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