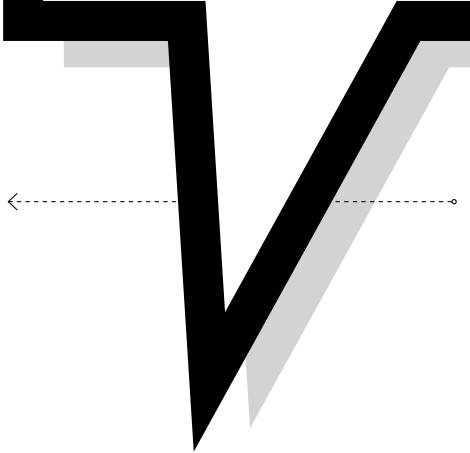




It's a *DATE!*



Celebrating an anniversary? Taking your crush on a first date? Want to rekindle the spark? Funky eateries, cozy hideaways, outdoor adventures, the perfect night in—we've planned for every occasion. We'll leave the hard part (finding that special someone) up to you.

—EDITED BY JULIE DUGDALE—

Illustrations by Zohar Lazar

-THE OCCASION-

THE 1st Date

- YOU WANT -

A casual, no-pressure excursion that encourages conversation and interaction but isn't too intimate.

- THE ITINERARY -

LoHi Steakbar balances a laid-back neighborhood eatery vibe and a polished, upscale bar ambience. When you arrive—if you've driven over together—bypass the scour-the-side-streets-for-parking routine by dropping your ride with LoHi's valet (Friday and Saturday nights). The crowd inside is jovial and social, so if a two-top seems too cozy, stake out some real estate at the long, bar-style center table. You'll be close enough to chat easily, but the community seating keeps the vibe light and fun. Plus, the table's central location makes for convenient people watching—an easy conversation starter if your dialogue stalls. Menu-wise, LoHi's unpretentious yet unexpected options, like classic steak and eggs and a delicate broiled scallop salad, will work for anyone.

Save room for dessert, though: **Little Man Ice Cream** is just a couple of blocks away. Order a scoop of salted Oreo and stroll the Highland pedestrian bridge above I-25 for a killer view of the city skyline. If you're not ready to call it a night, cross **Commons Park** and grab a nightcap at **McLoughlin's**—but keep it quick; you don't want to push your luck.

• TIP

Want to steer the conversation so you can mention your love of travel or show off your oh-so-sensitive humanitarian side?

Little Man's Scoop for Scoop program lets the company match every ice cream scoop it sells with a donated scoop of rice to a village in need in the developing world.

Make it happen: *LoHi Steakbar, 3200 Tejon St., 303-927-6334, lohisteakbar.com; Little Man Ice Cream, 2620 16th St., 303-455-3811, littlemanicecream.com; McLoughlin's Restaurant & Bar, 2100 16th St., Ste. 145, 303-573-5131, mcloughlins.us*



-THE OCCASION-

THE 4th or 5th

- YOU WANT -

A lively outing that brings out your playful side. You're less self-conscious at this point and ready for an activity that lets you relax and be goofy while you get to know each other better.

- THE ITINERARY -

Everybody digs a good brewery tour...but visiting *four* in one afternoon? Yes, we agree: best date ever. Sign up for a 3 p.m. Saturday excursion with **Denver Microbrew Tour**, and wear your walkin' shoes. For \$25 apiece, you'll take a two-and-a-half-hour guided stroll (1.5 miles) through LoDo and the

Ballpark neighborhood, starting with Breckenridge Brewery and then hitting Wynkoop Brewery, Falling Rock Tap House, and Rock Bottom Brewery along the way. You'll sample 10 handcrafted local brews and end on a pint of your choice; plus, get your fill of suds trivia and juicy historical tidbits about LoDo's scandalous brothels and saloons. If you're both beer geeks, this just might be the day you fall in love.

Stick around downtown when the brew-hopping is over and grab a bite at a casual (and beer-friendly) joint like **Euclid Hall Bar & Kitchen**, just a few blocks away from the

TIP
Planning your brewery date for warmer weather? The tour ends in just enough time to catch the first pitch of a Rockies game after a pit stop at Biker Jim's Gourmet Dogs down the street from Coors Field.

free outdoor ice skating rink in **Skyline Park**. We know, straight out of a chick flick, but really, when else do you have an excuse to do this? Forget your klutziness—better yet, laugh at it together—and skate to live music till 11 p.m. on Saturdays from late November through Valentine's Day.

Make it happen:
Denver Microbrew Tour, 303-578-9548, denvermicrobrewtour.com; Euclid Hall Bar & Kitchen, 1317 14th St., 303-595-4255, euclid-hall.com; Southwest Rink at Skyline Park, 16th and Arapahoe streets, southwestrink.com; Biker Jim's Gourmet Dogs, 2148 Larimer St., 720-746-9355, bikerjimsdogs.com; Coors Field, 2001 Blake St., 303-292-0200, coloradorockies.com



BEST DATE

“ Before my wife and I got married, we traveled to Boulder to see if it was a place where we might want to live. On a beautiful summer afternoon, we enjoyed a picnic, several glasses of wine, then tubed down Boulder Creek. Inspired by that day, we soon moved to Colorado. ”

—John Shors, author of *Cross Currents*, *The Wishing Trees*, *Beside a Burning Sea*, and *Beneath a Marble Sky*



-THE OCCASION-

THE Proposal

- YOU WANT -

Something unexpected and, dare we say, magical. Think whimsical, romantic—a move that takes her breath away. (And, please: not because

she sees those four little words on the Jumbotron at the Pepsi Center.)

- THE ITINERARY -

Never underestimate the element of surprise;

that's why starting your night at a nice—but not *too* nice—eatery like **Encore on Colfax** is a good strategy. It's loud and not overly romantic, but it's swanky enough that when she tells the story later you'll feel good

WORST DATE

“It was a memorable first date with a flight attendant, who drank quite a bit at dinner. We then walked to Comedy Works in Larimer Square, where she considered the two-drink minimum a nice start. When the night's headliner lampooned 'stewardesses,' my inebriated date was on her feet, yelling at the stage that they were FLIGHT ATTENDANTS, dammit, not STEWARDESSES! My good friends at Comedy Works tugged my sleeve and said, 'Dom, please take your friend out of here.' Uh, there wasn't a second date.”

—Dom Testa, radio personality, Mix 100



The bar at Encore

about your choice. Reserve one of the cozy booths so you can hear yourselves talk and be close enough to hold hands. When the bill comes, casually bring up some post-dinner options: maybe a walk outside would be nice. Then, you can point out—like it just occurred to you, of course—that the **Denver Botanic Gardens** is just a 15-minute walk away, and probably beautiful this time of year. If you've timed it for December (in which case, hop in the car to drive over after dinner), the Blossoms of Light display is a perfect excuse.

Take her by the hand as you do a loop, enjoying the serenity of the gardens in summer or the magic of the lights over the holidays. Make sure you know where you're going (find a map on the gardens' website), because you'll eventually want to steer her to the **Romantic Garden gazebo**. Lead her in, get down on one

knee—yep, ladies still love that move—and ask her to be your wife in an enchanted moment she never saw coming.

—Stephanie Richards

Make it happen:
Encore on Colfax, 2550 E. Colfax Ave., 303-355-1112, encoreoncolfax.com; Denver Botanic Gardens, Garden Rentals Department, 1007 York St., 720-865-3590, botanicgardens.org

• TIP

Ask the staff at the gardens to decorate the gazebo in tiny white lights. Have two cupcakes, a bottle of sparkling cider (booze is not allowed), and a bouquet of flowers arranged on the table inside.

-THE OCCASION-

THE Birthday

- YOU WANT -

A bit of throw-down fun—maybe off the beaten path—for a spirited celebration.

- ITINERARY -

Check out some new places on the South Broadway circuit for a lively time. The **Crimson Canary**, which opened in fall in the old Mona's space, is a "swanky hideout" with an Italian-American menu. But don't expect the same old spaghetti and meatballs. Start with the baked burrata and move on to a sophisticated take on old favorites, like the pork osso bucco with escarole and pappardelle.



Crimson
Canary

Next, scoot down the street to try the new **Black Crown Piano Lounge**. Be warned: This is no quiet, sip-your-vino joint. The two-story bar is nothing if not eclectically fun, from the diverse and exuberant clientele to the Victorian-baroque-contemporary decor to the entertainment (when was the last time you saw darts and Yahtzee at a piano bar known for its show tunes?). If you're into the whole canoodling-in-dark-corners idea, Black Crown has plenty of nooks to park yourselves. Or, in the spirit of celebration, invite some friends to join later in the evening for an epic cocktail-induced sing-along as a grand birthday finale.

Make it happen: Crimson Canary, 141 S.

Broadway, 303-

284-9026, crimsoncanarydenver.com;

Black Crown

Piano Lounge,

1446 S. Broadway,

720-353-4701,

blackcrownlounge.com;

Custom Singing

Telegrams,

303-931-8466,

customsingingletras.com

-THE OCCASION-

THE Wedding Anniversary

- YOU WANT -

An intimate escape to focus on each other.

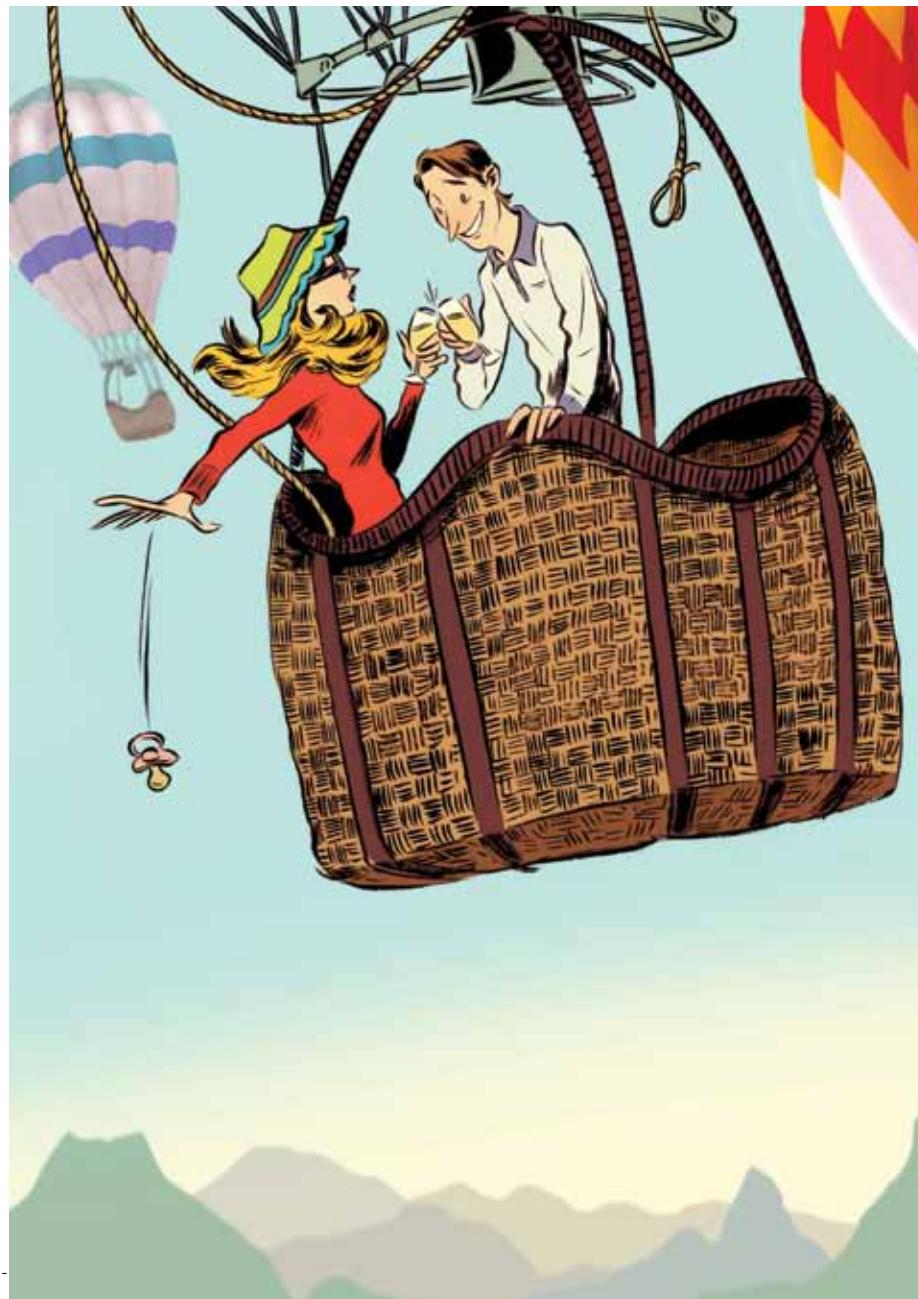
- THE ITINERARY -

Splurge and book Evergreen's charming High-

land Haven Tree House

along Bear Creek, a rustic, secluded villa wedged between two 60-foot blue

COURTESY OF KRISTEN PERSON



TIP

If you're the kind of couple with a silly sense of humor, call up Denver-based Custom Singing Telegrams for an old-school way to invite your date out. Order a gorilla in a tutu or Tuxedo Tony and your character will show up with balloons and a slapstick ditty.

TIP

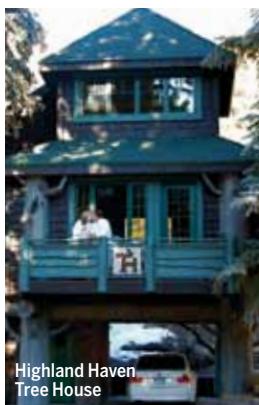
If you want to go all out, ask the inn to deliver a Romance Tray (\$85) to the Tree House: chilled champagne, imported chocolates, flowers, and a "cuddle blanket."

spruces, which opened last May. Indulge in a steam shower or soak in the "champagne bubble" hot tub on the third floor. Then curl up by

the fireplace or pop in a DVD from the library of romantic movies.

If you can drag yourselves away, **Creek-side Cellars** winery in downtown Evergreen is within walking distance. Highland Haven guests receive complimentary wine tastings. Afterward, grab a bottle of Petit Verdot and the antipasto platter to-go,

and enjoy your feast on the Tree House deck. Or, check out the French-inspired **Kitchen at the Creek**, Evergreen's newest addition to its dining scene. And rest assured, you won't go hungry in the morning with the inn's mouth-watering house-made breakfast, made from owner Gail Riley's cookbook *Colorado Cravings*,



Recipes, and Romance.

Make it happen: The Highland Haven Creekside Inn, 4395 Independence Trail, Evergreen, 303-674-3577, highlandhaven.com; Creekside Cellars, 28036 Highway 74, Evergreen, 303-674-5460, creeksidecellars.net; the Kitchen at the Creek, 27845 Highway 74, Evergreen, 303-679-1903

-THE OCCASION-

THE All-Day Babysitter

- YOU WANT -

Adult conversation. A day without diapers. The pleasure of pure quiet—no crying, no whining, no carpooling to ballet class. In other words: alone time to recharge and catch up with each other.

You know those things on your bucket list that always seem just out of your grasp now that you have kids? Well, today's the day. Reserve an early-morning balloon ride just after sunrise with **Fair Winds Hot Air Balloon Flights** in Boul-

der. After a continental breakfast, the wind will carry you 10 or so miles in up to 1.5 hours. Revel in the silence of the stunning Rocky Mountain horizon from Pikes Peak to the Wyoming border. If you don't mind a group, you'll fly with about a dozen other passengers. Otherwise, spring for the VIP private flight (\$375 apiece), which includes a bottle of champagne and two glasses for your journey.

You'll be back on the ground well before lunchtime, with plenty of time to swing through Boulder for a leisurely bite along

Pearl Street before continuing up U.S. 36 to Lyons. Here, treat yourselves with a spa-and-wine package at **Rock n' River Day Resort's La Bellezza Spa and Ciatano Winery**. We suggest the Celebration: a relaxing steam sauna and hot tub session, followed by two 50-minute therapeutic massages and, eventually, a trip next door to the winery. Choose five pours from 10 varieties for your tasting, and leave with a bottle to savor later. You'll return home rejuvenated, ready to run soccer practice the next morning.

Make it happen: Fair Winds Hot Air Balloon Flights, 6375 Nautilus Drive, Boulder, 303-939-9323, hotairballoonrides-colorado.com; La Bellezza Spa (303-823-5006, labellezzaspa.com) and Ciatano Winery (303-823-5011, ciatanowinery.com), both at Rock n' River Day Resort, 16858 N. St. Vrain Drive, Lyons, rocknriver.com

TIP

The Fair Winds balloon operators will work with you to make your experience memorable. Guys, if you want to have flowers or something special waiting in the basket, just put in a call beforehand to work out the logistics.

-TO EACH HIS OWN-

Every year on our Top of the Town ballot we ask our readers to tell us their very best first date ideas. Here, a few of your most, er, creative responses.

READER VOTE:
JumpStreet

JURY SAYS:

Sweaty kids, flying dodge balls...ahh, what ambience.

READER VOTE:
Skydiving

JURY SAYS:

You're right. Skip the small talk.

READER VOTE:
Casa Bonita

JURY SAYS:

Please tell us you're bringing the rug rats.

READER VOTE:
Mountain Air Ranch—Colorado's Family Nudist Resort

JURY SAYS:

Uh, we hope this is a joke.

DREAM DATE

“Get a babysitter, have dinner somewhere off the beaten path, like the Queen of Sheba Ethiopian Restaurant on Colfax Avenue, and head to a theater for an evening movie. With three kids, I can't remember the last time we saw something together that wasn't animated.”

—Matt Selby, chef/owner, Vesta Dipping Grill and Steuben's

-THE OCCASION-

THE Group Date

- YOU WANT -

A social, interactive outing conducive to several couples—think lighthearted, adventurous pursuits.

- THE ITINERARY -

You've probably seen it around town since it launched last May—and likely, wished you were on it. **Pedal Hopper Denver** is the covered, pedal-powered, 16-passenger mobile "bar" that rolls from watering hole to watering hole in a three-stop pub-crawl (yes, there is a sober Pedal Hopper company "driver" to steer). We suggest the South Broadway or Uptown routes.

Caveat: Per open container laws, there's no booze allowed on the actual "vehicle"; the company is working with the city to obtain permission. But that doesn't diminish the spirit—especially with the stereo, disco ball, and bar lights. Grab some friends and their significant others and rent the entire contraption for a couple of hours.

Keep the party going at the retro-cool **Punch Bowl Social**—a diner/bowling alley/bar (opening next month) that turns these concepts on their heads. The upscale, from-scratch menu is from chef Sergio Romero of Le Grand Bistro & Oyster Bar and Argyll fame, and the eight lanes of bowling are just what the crew needs to keep the tempo up. *Pssst:* Grab your date and steal away to the Ping-Pong tables and vintage '80s video arcade on the third level for a little one-on-one action.

Make it happen: *Pedal Hopper Denver, 303-753-3569, pedalhopper.com; Punch Bowl Social, 65 Broadway, 303-765-2695, punchbowlsocial.com*

• TIP

What you can bring aboard the Pedal Hopper are all the rehydrating beverages and snacks that you want. Stock up, especially during hot weather.



The Pedal Hopper

-THE OCCASION-

Just Because



Hosea Rosenberg

- YOU WANT -

A great night in, because getting dolled up to hit the town seems like a hassle.

- THE ITINERARY -

Leave the planning to **Blackbelly Catering** and Bravo's *Top Chef* season five winner Hosea Rosenberg. Rosenberg and mixologist James Lee will bring their talents directly to your kitchen for a personal culinary and cocktail lesson, plus a divine home-cooked meal to follow. Be as hands-on as you want; in fact, Rosenberg suggests that you accompany him to your neighborhood farmers' market or Whole Foods

(allow one to two hours for shopping) for ingredients. He'll show you how to select the freshest produce and cuts of fish or meat, and how to craft a dinner from what looks best at the market instead of a pre-conceived menu. (You can even tour the Blackbelly pig farm in Longmont.)

Plan on four or five hours, and get involved. Have Rosenberg teach you how to fillet a fish properly, or how to retain juices when grilling. While dinner is simmering, get a cocktail rundown from Lee and try your hand at the art of mixology—you'll have a killer drink to serve next time you host. When

• TIP
As you cook, ask for easy ways to make the menu seasonal. After all, an August patio party should look a little different than your February feast.

the grub is ready—perhaps Rocky Mountain trout finished with almond-lemon sauce and roasted cauliflower—the Blackbelly fellows will clink glasses with you and partake in the feast, but they'll leave you with plenty of time (recipes in hand) to linger by yourselves over your meal.

Make it happen: *Blackbelly Catering, info@blackbellycatering.com, blackbellycatering.com*

DREAM DATE

“ Fly fish on the Arkansas River in the morning, soak your muscles at the Mt. Princeton Hot Springs in the afternoon, and savor a private dinner. A relaxing day on the river with just the two of us and no other obligations is divine. ”

—Cindy Johnson, co-owner SOL



D Bar Desserts

-THE OCCASION-

THE Blind Date

- YOU WANT -

A neutral setting that allows you to assess whether or not there's any chemistry, with options for prolonging the date if you're feeling butterflies—or an easy out if you're not.

- THE ITINERARY -

The first rule of blind or online dating: Don't start with a meal. The ironclad laws of attraction dictate that you'll realize within minutes if this is someone you'd like to know, so why

assume the time and expense of dining if there's a risk of feeling stuck halfway through? The second rule: Choose a place where you feel comfortable, even if it's not original. Save creativity for next time.

If it's nighttime, you

WORST DATE

I met a girl in LoDo and we decided to go to dinner the following Saturday. She asked if we could take her car and I agreed. As we pulled out, she said, 'Oh no, I'm almost out of gas...we'll have to stop.' At the station, she had another revelation: She forgot her purse. I paid for the gas and as we drove away, she got an emergency call from a friend and informed me that we'd have to postpone our date. I never heard from her again...I assume because she was stranded on the highway as far as one tank of gas could get her. Ouch!

—Slacker, radio personality, Alice 105.9



rhythm's right, roll a few doors down to **Trattoria Stella** for an unpretentious lunch (try the patio if it's warm). If all goes well...Sayonara, Match.com. —Luc Hatlestad

Make it happen: Irish Snug, 1201 E. Colfax Ave., 303-839-1394, irishsnug.com; Parallel Seventeen, 1600 E. 17th Ave., 303-899-0988, parallelseventeen.com; D Bar Desserts, 1475 E. 17th Ave., 303-861-4710, dbardesserts.com; Common Grounds, 3484 W. 32nd Ave., 303-458-5248, commongroundscoffeehouse.com; Trattoria Stella, 3470 W. 32nd Ave., 303-458-1128, trattoriastella.squarespace.com ▲

TIP

Blind dates are long shots by definition, and it's easier to extend a date than it is to wriggle out of uncomfortable obligations. A one-stop agenda is all you should start with. Keeping It Simple, Stupid is the best way to get a K-I-S-S.