

EATING OUT

The sweet truth

Restaurants romance diners with desserts on Valentine's Day

BY NICOLE STAFFORD
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If there's a holiday that calls for going out to dinner, it's Valentine's Day.

But let's be honest. We're not talking about just going out to dinner here. Valentine's Day presses for much, much more.

An extraordinary meal. Hay, candlelight might be nice. And big-time ambience – the kind that transports lovey-dovey couples into a world of fantasy.

Valentine's Day is not about going out to eat, says Marvin Bernstein, owner of The French Gourmet in Ferndale, "it's about dining together."

And dining, particularly between sweethearts, ought to be a sensory experience.

That's why most chefs and restaurateurs pull out all the stops for the holiday.

Chef Marcus Haight at The Lark, for instance, incorporates not only the color and shape of a heart, but also the word – how about artichoke heart soup? – into his Valentine's Day offerings.

"I always do heart-shaped things without getting too corny," says Haight, adding,



"Well you're feeding the eye first. The palate second."

Another necessity

There's another thing about Valentine's Day: dessert is a must for dining couples.

"It's definitely one night out of the year when people save room for dessert," says Michael Laiskonis, pastry chef at Tribute

in Farmington Hills. "It's become such an institution giving candy, sweets and things like that on Valentine's Day."

But, says Laiskonis, there's more than tradition behind Feb. 14 indulgences. "I wouldn't discount the perception that chocolate can sometimes be a very powerful aphrodisiac," he says. "I also think with Valentine's

Day being in the dead of winter, we crave comfort food, and desserts tend to be comforting in that sense."

Sweet truths

Truth be told, says Laiskonis, the word 'comfort' is often code for hedonistic. "Especially with desserts where you have creamy textures and contrasts between hot and cold temperatures."

To put it bluntly, food, and dessert in particular, is a metaphor for, if not sex, then love.

Consider, say, the issue of timing. "Dessert is romantic because it's something you wait for," says Adrian Tonon, owner of Cafe Cortina in Farmington Hills. "And, they say all good things come to those who wait."

Culturally speaking, a man and a woman sharing a dessert – like a chocolate malt in a 1950s diner – is the quintessential image of a romantic date.

Not to mention, dessert, like love, is sweet.

"With Valentine's Day," says Bernstein at The French Gourmet. "It has to do with the sweetness of the day because it has to do with love and lovers."

Sweet offerings

Cafe Cortina, 30716 West 10 Mile in Farmington Hills, (248) 474-3033, hours are 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Friday and 5-11 p.m. Saturday (open for private parties on Sunday). Reservations are suggested and can be made at www.cafecortina.com on the Internet.

Valentine's desserts: *Torta Di Fantasia* Chocolate, chocolate torte with cream anglaise and fresh berries, and *Pera Al Forno Con Una Crema Di Castagne*, poached pear with chestnut cream in phyllo.

Mackinnon's 126 East Main in Northville, (248) 348-1991, hours are 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Thursday and 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, reservations suggested.

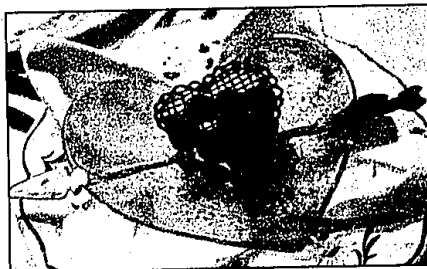
Valentine's desserts: *Frozen Strawberry Souffle*, Banana Wellington and *The Sweetheart*, a heart-shaped, sweet pastry crust painted with chocolate, filled with lemon curd and decorated with chocolate and whipped cream.

Tribute, 31425 W. 12 Mile in Farmington Hills, (248) 848-9393, dinner served starting at 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, reservations are highly recommended.

Valentine's desserts: (From the evening's tasting menu) *Sheep's Milk Yogurt Panna Cotta with Rose Water Celloe*, *Fresh Berries and Edible Flowers*, and *Warm Chocolate Cake with Passion Fruit Caramel*, *Coconut Sorbet* and *Caramelized Baby Banana*.

La Bistecca Italian Grille, 39405 Plymouth Road in Plymouth Township, (734) 254-0400, dinner hours are 5-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday and 5-11 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, lunch is served 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Wednesday, reservations are highly recommended, look for light piano/vocal entertainment and special Valentine's Day menu.

Valentine's desserts: *Tiramisu* and *Crème Brûlée*.
by Staff Writer Nicole Stafford



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLNOR

Shot in the heart: For Valentine's Day, Chef Marcus Haight of The Lark in West Bloomfield takes dessert to the level of art. His *Fresh Raspberry Napoleon* with Vanilla *Crème* in heart-shaped *Candy Dish* with *Cupid's Arrow* will be on display Feb. 14 at the restaurant. Doting diners can indulge in a smaller heart-shaped *napoleon*.

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