

Try these couplings

For Valentine's Day this year, skip the flowers and say it with asparagus spears and two goblets of Italian pinot grigio instead.

Nothing sets a course for romantic adventure like Love Potion No. 1—wine—coupled with classic aphrodisiacs. (Asparagus qualifies, thanks to anatomically suggestive shape and vigor-giving vitamins.)

Master sommelier Andrea Immer Robinson and Martha Hopkins, author of "InterCourses: The Aphrodisiac Cookbook," played matchmaker with a few love foods and tonics.

Oysters and champagne

Oysters (right) are loaded with zinc, credited with increasing the sexual health of men and women. Immer Robinson advises serving them with a blanc de blancs Champagne or sparkling wine.



Chocolate and malmsey Madeira, Italian amarone or tawny port

Chocolates are suited to a number of wines under one guideline: "Generally, what works best is if the wine is slightly sweeter than the dessert," Immer Robinson said. That's why she suggests deeper, bittersweet

chocolate with the following: For a toffee twinge, try malmsey Madeira from Portugal. To emphasize dried-fruit flavors, try Italian amarone. On the nutty side are tawny ports.



Chiles plus rieslings

Eat a chile (left) or another intensely peppered food and the blood rushes and the face flush-

es—"reactions strangely familiar to what one can experience from even just a good-night kiss," Hopkins said. Because opposites attract in this case, Immer Robinson says riesling wines make a perfect picañte partner.

Honey and moscato d'Asti

The term honeymoon is said to originate from couples going into seclusion and faithfully drinking honey wine or honey beer for a month's cycle of the moon, believed to boost her chances of bearing fruit. Sounds like a good enough reason for a decadent morning-after brunch, combining honey-drizzled hot cakes with a moscato d'Asti, a slightly sparkling wine ("frizzante").

Basil and cabernet sauvignon

One bit of basil (right) lore holds that a wife with a straying husband would powder her décolletage with crushed basil to entice him back home. Hopkins and Immer Robinson suggest seduction by pesto instead, with cabernet sauvignon. [TRIBUNE]



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If I have the perfect meal and I'm with the person I love most—what more can you want out of life?"

MANEET CHAUHAN
[executive chef at Vermilion]



COVER STORY

Sexual appetite

Do certain foods hold the secret to getting you in the mood?

By Kathryn Masterson
FOR REDEYE

Want to woo your sweetie on Valentine's Day? Feed him or her something sexy.

Chocolate, strawberries, oysters and wine are the most well-known foods believed to have the power to sexually arouse. But they're far from the only edible items considered to be aphrodisiacs—sea cucumbers, mangoes, asparagus and ginger also are said to have passionate effects.

At Vermilion, a River North restaurant known for its Latin-Indian fusion cuisine—and one of many Chicago restaurants featuring seductive menu offerings next week—executive chef Maneet Chauhan has put together a Valentine's Day menu spotlighting ingredients she believes to have aphrodisiac powers, including saffron, nutmeg and cayenne pepper.

Chauhan's research into aphrodisiacs turned up more historical beliefs than science, but the romance she's seen among her diners is proof enough for her to make the aphrodisiac meal an annual tradition.

"I do believe it does have an effect on people," she told RedEye.

While there's little scientific proof that certain foods will boost one's libido, aphrodisiac believers such as Chauhan say there's a lot about a meal that can rev up your love life. "If I have the perfect meal and I'm with the person I love most—what more can you want out of life?" Chauhan said.

Amy Reiley, a food writer and author of the aphrodisiac-filled cookbook "Fork Me, Spoon Me," says a food's appearance, the way it feels in your mouth and a sense of luxury all contribute to its sexiness.

Take, for instance, whipped cream, which Reiley says is a sensual accompaniment to dessert.

"Whipped cream is just sexy—it just looks suggestive," she said.

Food and sex have much in common, Reiley said.

At their most pleasurable, eating and having sex involve all five senses—taste, touch, smell, sight and sound, Reiley

said. And both are essential to human survival.

"I think one can really enhance the other," she said.

Reiley, who also runs an aphrodisiac-food-focused Web site, eatsomethingsexy.com, says much of the mystique surrounding aphrodisiacs is based on qualities of certain foods—sexually suggestive appearances (such as figs and peaches, which some think resemble parts of a woman's anatomy) or the creation of heat (chili peppers, ginger).

Some foods and spices historically have been considered libido-boosters; others, such as chocolate, contain chemicals that can trigger pleasure or create energy, she said.

One of the recipes in "Fork Me, Spoon Me" is for chocolate-smothered brie, which Reiley writes will hit women with a "wash of happy hormones" from the chocolate (phenylethylamine and serotonin, which create feelings of pleasure in the brain) and the cheese (which also increases phenylethylamine, believed to aid in stimulating sexual arousal).

While certain foods can make us feel good—the taste and aroma of vanilla is linked to pleasure centers in our brain while carbohydrates can elevate our mood—the idea that a meal has the power to boost sexual prowess is mostly folklore, food scientist Roger Clemens told RedEye.

There aren't many studies of the psychological or sexual effects of consuming foods believed to be aphrodisiacs, said Clemens, a spokesman for the Institute of Food Technologists. Zinc in oysters, for instance, contributes to reproductive health, but there is no research that shows a few servings will lift the libido.

That won't stop Chicago chefs from loading up their Valentine's Day menus with aphrodisiac-packed dishes to turn on amorous diners.

This year, Vermilion's Chauhan is starting her aphrodisiac meal with oysters—among the most well-known of the purported aphrodisiac foods—and allowing diners to dress the oysters for

their companions with toppings such as garam masala foam, ginger caviar and jalapeno champagne jelly. Other dishes on the five-course prix-fixe menu include lamb spiced with a lentil marinade and a choice of dessert, including a cake made with nuts, saffron and sweetened reduced milk.

"I think food and love go hand and hand," she said.

The Peninsula's Shanghai Terrace will serve a five-course herbal aphrodisiac menu flavored with ginseng, ginger, vanilla and gogi berries.

Executive chef Terry Crandall says the Shanghai Terrace menu (designed by him and his chef de cuisine, an expert in Chinese herbal medicine) contains

many herbs used in Chinese medicine to increase libido and fertility, cure impotence and create love potions.

The double-boiled herbal squab soup is especially potent, Crandall said. It's made with cordyceps, a mushroom believed to improve sexual function, and other ingredients such as sea cucumber, which some say can boost sexual health.

"Walking out the door, you'll feel something—or a few hours later," Crandall said. "Hopefully not in the restaurant."

But for some, there's more to a romantic Valentine's Day than an aphrodisiac-filled menu.

N9NE Steakhouse Executive Chef Michael Shrader's recipe for love goes beyond what's on the plate.

"The conversation, who you're with—that tends to be more of an aphrodisiac than the food," Shrader said.

[KATHRYN MASTERSON IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.]



AMOROUS OFFERINGS

Can aphrodisiac ingredients add spark to your love life? You won't know until you've tried. Check out one of these spots serving special aphrodisiac menus for Valentine's Day.



The Gage

24 S. MICHIGAN AVE.
312-372-4243

Aphrodisiac ingredients such as almonds, fennel, figs (right), onions, truffles and vanilla make chef Dirk Flanigan's Valentine's Day menu at this upscale tavern across from Millennium Park. Look for turbot with saltine-crusted oysters, fennel, apple and salted almond sauce, Tahitian vanilla custard with rose consomme and fig compote, and more. Reservations recommended.

Prosecco

710 N. WELLS ST. 312-951-9500

This new Italian spot in River North hosts a three-night (Thursday-Saturday) Valentine's Day celebration complete with candlelight and an aphrodisiac-inspired menu. Reservations recommended.

Trotter's To Go

1337 W. FULLERTON AVE. 773-868-6510

Can't score a reservation at Charlie Trotter's? Set the mood at home with carryout from the acclaimed chef's Lincoln Park shop. Aphrodisiac options include Kumamoto oysters with sake and cucumber relish, and roasted quail with chocolate mole and rosemary mascarpone-sweet potato pave. Order at least 48 hours in advance. Available through Feb. 17.

West Town Tavern

1329 W. CHICAGO AVE. 312-666-6175

Chef Susan Goss serves a three-course aphrodisiac menu (\$50) for V-Day at this cozy spot. Dishes include lobster cocktail with green goddess dressing and double chocolate mousse in an almond cookie with a grape tartlet. Very limited availability; reservations required.

>> Find more Valentine's Day dining ideas at metromix.com

