

Desserts make dinner complete

On Valentine's Day, courting over a good meal is more than an expectation, it's a tradition. Restaurants in the valley celebrate with special menus, many of them featuring such well-known love fare as oysters, foie gras, asparagus, berries and, above all, chocolate.

To me it's the sweet course that counts the most: it doesn't matter how many oysters may slip down your throats or what interesting sauce you dip your asparagus spears into, a romantic dessert is what clinches the meal.

When I think of love and romance, the first dessert that comes to my mind is the jalapeño-spiced chocolate mousse at Johannes in Palm Springs. It captures the exciting contradictions and clashes that are typical of a really interesting relationship. It's smooth, gently sweet and rich, and has a heat that grows in your mouth unexpectedly.

I checked in with Johannes Bacher to see if he'd be serving it. It isn't on his actual Valentine's menu, although there are some intriguing dishes there, including a curried butternut squash and pear soup with mint and a raspberry crème fraîche, and a foie gras mousse-crusting beef fillet mignon. He promised that all his regular desserts were also available, and that includes his super-romantic chile and chocolate mousse.

Decadent desserts

The problem with a lot of Valentine's Day desserts is that they tend to be sweet and pretty. *Just sweet and pretty.*

You need a little spice — like that chile. I decided to check with three of my favorite sources to see what they'd be doing to mark the day.

At the French Corner Café in Palm Desert they'll be serving cassoulet as their special entree, which I've always thought of as earthy rather



henry fenwick

than sexy. But there's nothing wrong with earthy in a romantic context — actually it's rather a good idea. And for their special Valentine's pastry, Chef Almeric Davy is making a large, heart-shaped macaroon flavored with rose petals, raspberry and lychee.

"It's very beautiful," owner Marc Davy told me. It sounds it and the combination is unusual, sweet and tart, and exotic.

Christophe Douheret and his wife, Jennifer, usually close their Palm Desert store, Clementine, on Mondays, but since it's Valentine's they are staying open. They're planning on having "a major load of Valentine cupcakes," Douheret said, including a wide variety of flavors such as dark chocolate raspberry, wild strawberry champagne, peach and cream, and a white chocolate cosmopolitan that is a key lime cupcake with a hint of vodka and cranberry in the white chocolate cream. Berries, chocolate and alcohol — what could be more celebratory than that?

They're also featuring some very pretty, variously flavored petits fours in heart shapes, special Valentine's packages of macaroons and a pyramid noisette: a pyramid-shaped marble chocolate shell decorated with a white heart and filled with hazelnut mousseline.

John McAvoy, owner of Café Chocolat in Palm Springs, is used to me coming in on Sunday afternoons, when my wife can't bear to be without his salt-caramel chocolates for another moment. The place will be even more magnetic on



COURTESY PHOTO

Pyramid Noisette from Clementine

Sweet spots

CAFÉ CHOCOLAT, 515 N. Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs; (760) 320-8889, www.cafechocolatps.com

CLEMENTINE, 44250 Town Center Way, #C3, Palm Desert; (760) 834-8814, www.clementineshop.com

FRENCH CORNER CAFÉ, Desert Crossing Center, 72423 Highway 111, Palm Desert; (760) 568-5362, www.frenchcornercafe.com

JOHANNES, 196 S. Indian Canyon Drive, Palm Springs; (760) 778-0017, www.johannesrestaurant.com

Valentine's Day. He's stocking some extremely pretty petit fours in seven different flavor combinations, including champagne strawberry butter cream, bittersweet truffle cream on chocolate cake, milk chocolate truffle cream on almond cake, a tart raspberry and vanilla butter cream with vanilla cake, and a vanilla cake with milk chocolate truffle and apricot.

"They're not sticky sweet," John said approvingly. With flavors like that you can count on it.

But for me, the overwhelming thing is the array of chocolates, which come from Illinois chocolatier Anna Shea. They can only be described as seductive. Heart-shaped, one is dusted with gold, another covered with a leopard pattern, another with a dark blush color.

"Most chocolates look masculine," John commented. "Hers are very feminine."

That doesn't mean that the flavors aren't intense. There's a wide range but the two that caught my attention were the blood orange caramel (it looks stunning!) and the passion fruit. Both promise that juxtaposition of tart and sweet. I, for one, won't be able to resist.