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Dining & Wine

A Viagra Alternative to Serve by Candlelight



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Dana Jacobi, left, samples salmon with flying fish roe during a stop at Russ & Daughters on the Lower East Side, part of a tour focused on foods thought to be aphrodisiacs, led by Meryl S. Rosofsky, right.

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COUPLES hoping to bring Valentine's Day dinner to a satisfying conclusion may be tempted by the special menu offered by One if by Land, Two if by Sea in Manhattan and, in particular, the Black Forest dessert. It's a chocolate pistachio brownie bar with chocolate meringue sticks, crème fraîche ice cream, cherry gel and sweet cherries. But beware! One study found that the scent of cherries significantly decreases sexual arousal in women.

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Nicole Bengenvio/The New York Times (top and bottom); Chris Ramirez for The New York Times

Foods considered to be aphrodisiacs include avocado, asparagus, chocolate and licorice.



There is another issue with the Black Forest — and the gazillions of other forms of chocolate that will be consumed this weekend: chocolate’s reputation as an aphrodisiac is highly exaggerated, food researchers say. Romantic and deeply pleasurable, yes, especially because of its tendency to melt in the mouth at body temperature. And yes, it does contain some chemicals like phenylethylamine, which produce feelings of euphoria. Yet one widely cited study showed that a 130-pound person would have to eat 25 pounds of chocolate in one sitting to significantly alter the mood. But who would be in the mood after eating 19.2 percent of her weight in chocolate?

On the other hand, the chocolate fondue offered on the Valentine menu at MidAtlantic in Philadelphia comes with a possible secret weapon for anyone trying to put a man in an amorous frame of mind: doughnuts. But don’t be too quick to load up, because according to one study, male sexual response was heightened by the scent of doughnuts only if it was combined with licorice, not exactly a standard pairing. (The only combination of fragrances the study found to be more potent is perhaps even less common: lavender and pumpkin pie.)

Of all the legions of purported aphrodisiacs, very few have been proved scientifically to have lingering libidinous effects on certain body parts other than the stomach. But the last decade has brought new attempts to measure sexual response to food, as well as growing research by chefs and academics alike on the connections among aroma, food, emotions and sensual experience.

Chili peppers, for example, quicken the pulse and induce sweating, mimicking the state of sexual arousal, as well as stimulating the release of endorphins, which play a role in sexual pleasure, according to Meryl S. Rosofsky, a doctor and adjunct professor in the department of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University.

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Still, most anyone claiming to know what is or is not an aphrodisiac, from avocados to zebra tongue, will acknowledge that the whole business is highly subjective. As Dr. Ruth has famously put it, “the most important sex organ lies between the ears.”

Culture and tradition play an important part. Certain foods with aphrodisiac status, like basil, rosemary, saffron, honey, grapes and pine nuts, were coveted for their great libidinal powers by ancient Greeks and Romans and medieval Europeans. Or, like foie gras, caviar, truffles and Champagne, they were exalted as romantic gifts because of their rarity and luxury.

Others, like figs, asparagus and cucumbers, have long been seen as erotic because of their resemblance to the male and female sex organs. Some ingredients are considered sensual by virtue of how they are eaten, for example, “sharing food from a common platter,” as Dr. Rosofsky wrote in an entry on aphrodisiacs in the “Encyclopedia of Food and Culture” (Scribner, 2002), or, in the case of oysters, “sucking and slurping seductively.”

Foods with nutrients that could potentially enhance fertility and virility have drawn more interest from researchers, cooks and practitioners of alternative medicine in recent years. Among them is, again, the oyster, which contains zinc, linked to increased sperm production. (However, a zinc-deficient person would have to mow down enormous quantities of oysters before he noticed a difference.) Garlic contains an amino acid that enhances blood flow and could augment erections, according to Dr. Rosofsky.

There are striking differences among cultures in what kind of food is viewed as pleasurable. Rachel S. Herz, an expert in the psychology of smell, wrote in her book “The Scent of Desire” (William Morrow, 2007) that “Asians consider the smell of cheese to be hideous, yet westerners regard it as anything from comfort food to sumptuous indulgence.”

Researchers have uncovered strong links between scent, emotion and sexual attraction. Smell can induce emotion that then triggers neurochemical changes, Dr. Herz said. Of all the senses, she said, it is the only one that bypasses the conscious parts of the brain and goes directly to the limbic system, the region responsible for basic memory, motivation and emotion.

Smell evolved for finding both food and mates, and much research has found that body odor plays a powerful role in human attraction.

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Food cravings act a lot like lust in the pleasure center of the brain, and it also mimics the neurological activity that occurs when addicts yearn for alcohol or drugs.

In one small experiment on sexual response to food scents, vaginal and penile blood flow was measured in 31 men and women who wore masks emitting various food aromas. This was the study that found men susceptible to the scent of doughnuts mingled with licorice. For women, first place for most arousing was a tie between baby powder and the combination of Good & Plenty candy with cucumber. Coming in second was a combination of Good & Plenty and banana nut bread.

The study, conducted by the Smell and Taste Research Foundation in Chicago, also found that the aroma of cherries caused a sharp drop in excitement among women, as did the smell of meat cooked over charcoal.

Alan R. Hirsch, who conducted the experiments, said the responses did not prove that the scent of pumpkin pie was an ingrained physiological response that would lead the average man to enjoy all the benefits of increased penile blood flow. Indeed, he suggested, the scents could have invoked potent memories for his small sample of subjects, like a Thanksgiving-weekend fling many years ago, or a bad experience with cherries.

Dr. Herz said that the study was too limited to lead to any credible conclusions, but she echoed the view that past experiences with a smell are key. “When we smell musky odors, we think of sensuality, she said. “In South America, cleaning products are made with musk, so when a woman smells musk, she is more likely to think of cleaning products than lingerie.”

Dr. Herz calls the process in which smells become positively or negatively ingrained in memory “odor associative learning.” The smell of a hospital can lead to what she calls “surgery worry,” while the scent of doughnuts and croissants stirs up feelings of comfort or glee.

Baked goods have been found to have such positive associations for Americans that some businesses, using a growing strategy known as aroma marketing, pump the scent of chocolate chip cookies or other pleasant odors through their establishments to create happy feelings that they hope will lead to spending.

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The nostalgic recall triggered by odors, known as the Proustian Effect, has been embraced by some chefs who believe that eating should be a full-sensory experience, involving taste, smell and even sound.

Heston Blumenthal, of the Fat Duck in Bray, England, invites diners to write down childhood food recollections and uses those musings for inspiration for future dishes. Grant Achatz, of Alinea in Chicago, has served food on charred logs, in a veil of eucalyptus leaves and on pillows filled with air scented by lavender, coffee or juniper. He pours hot water over hay and uses the liquid to conjure the memory of fall hayrides (or, perhaps, a roll in the hay, depending on the diner).

Those restaurants seem unlikely to put together a Valentine's Day menu, but those that do would be well advised to round out the romance with a little common sense.

At Bar Americain in Manhattan, for instance, the lover's lineup will include oysters with mint mignonette; spice-rubbed filet mignon with hash browns and steak sauce; and red velvet cake.

Amy Reiley, a restaurant consultant and cookbook author who specializes in sensual food and wine, said she appreciated the inclusion of oysters and mint. But, she said, "this is the kind of meal that makes you want to fall asleep afterward, not do the horizontal cha-cha-cha."

Similarly, the dinner planned at MidAtlantic was "wayyyyy too heavy for a pre-coital celebration," she wrote in an e-mail message. In addition to the doughnut dessert, it featured oysters, steak, potatoes, cauliflower gratinée and, in her opinion, too much protein and starch to leave a diner with enough energy for other pursuits.

Ms. Reiley, the author of a recipe book structured like "The Joy of Sex," suggests that restaurants wanting to serve truly carnal cuisine go with guacamole, not only because avocados have long been considered aphrodisiacs.

"To me, one of the most successful attributes of an aphrodisiac meal are colors, aromas, tastes and textures that wake up the palate and challenge the mind," she said. "Guacamole, in the ways it is typically served, offers a silky foil to crunchy chips, a cool, slippery and sexy topping for spicy burritos and tamale pies."

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She also likes to use lots of saffron, mint and vanilla, all ingredients she considers aphrodisiacs, and, of course, chili pepper.

And as Ms. Reiley writes in the cookbook: “Wine is an aphrodisiac. There it is. In a nutshell.”

But anyone acting on that tip should also keep in mind Shakespeare’s warning in Macbeth: Alcohol “provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance.”

