

Table for *Two*

Cupid will undoubtedly show up at your dinner table if you create these passion-inducing meals. Oh, and don't forget the music and candles!

by Megan Swoyer

When my husband and I were dating some 20 years ago, I decided to try to impress him with a home-cooked meal. The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, right? And I knew my man's stomach was no exception.

When it came to culinary prowess and affairs of the heart, my parents were my best teachers. In my early twenties, I even made a cookbook (for my seven siblings and me) filled with my mother's recipes — many of them could be considered “romantic.”

I knew then that the cookbook would come in handy at numerous times in our lives and our children's lives. In fact, it was just around this past Christmas when my brother-in-law put out an all-points-bulletin for my mother's corn casserole recipe, a family favorite that made the book's cuts way back when. He'd misplaced his cookbook, God forbid!

But back to that morning two decades ago when I sat in my little apartment kitchen wondering what to make my boyfriend. I pulled out the cookbook with my mom's recipes to see if there was something that might add a flame or two to the evening date at hand.

Ahhh yes, “Baked, Stuffed Shrimp” — perfect! (See accompanying recipe.) A few hours later, and I was placing a mixture of Parmesan cheese, Italian breadcrumbs, lemon juice, fresh parsley, butter, paprika and sherry — or did I use white wine? — onto fresh, split shrimp. Just like I'd seen my mom do for my dad (and us kids) so many times before.

Before baking the shrimp, I threw together a homemade brownie cake and tossed some potatoes into the oven. While the shrimp was baking, I steamed some asparagus, whipped up some hollandaise sauce and ... romance is served!

Oh, and I played classical music, built a fire, poured white wine and lit candles, too.

“Wow,” my guy said, as he polished off shrimp No. 7. “What's the occasion?”

“The occasion,” I told him, “is nothing.”

“Then I'm all about nothing,” he replied, taking a sip of the crisp, cold wine and looking at me over the candle flames.

I then explained my parents' philosophy. “My parents ate like this often. And I grew up with lit candles and classical music at dinner almost every night. There doesn't need to be a special occasion to celebrate life.”

“Then I'm in love with your parents,” he said with a laugh.

Enough said. That meal could certainly be considered the hook! Or at least it set the hook in motion. Incidentally, I met my husband at a chocolate festival, so you can see how much the intertwining of food and romance played a role in our early relationship (and still does!).

Baked, Stuffed Shrimp for Two

From Megan Swoyer's mother, Ginger Swoyer

Ingredients

10-12 large, fresh shrimp
½ cup Parmesan cheese
½ cup Italian breadcrumbs
¼ cup lemon juice
¼ cup fresh parsley, chopped
garlic clove, chopped
½ stick butter, melted
sherry or white wine
salt, pepper, paprika

Directions

Split shrimp (not all the way through) and flatten somewhat. Mix ingredients (except paprika and liquid) and fill shrimp. Spoon a little sherry or white wine on each shrimp, some additional melted butter and paprika. Bake in buttered dish or in foil-lined pan at 350 degrees about 15 minutes, basting with wine or sherry as desired.





Birmingham's Townsend Hotel Chef Jim Bologna knows all about dining room romance.

"As a chef, it's always fun to cook for the ones you love," says Bologna, a Beverly Hills resident and self-proclaimed diehard romantic. "My first date with Suzanne (his wife) was renting a room that had a kitchen and making her a candlelight dinner."

To stoke a romantic fire, Bologna highly recommends Lamb for Two with a Minted Risotto. (See accompanying recipes.) "Suzanne is a vegetarian now, but loves the minted pea risotto," he says, "and given our current family size I set a couple of handfuls of peas aside for our 6-month-old son." Bologna recommends serving the lamb with a fresh green salad with a balsamic vinaigrette.

As for wine, the astute chef says you can't go wrong with a Cabernet, which has always been a standard go-to. "The Rugby Grille (at The Townsend Hotel) also recommends Rhone reds (typically Syrah or Grenache)," he explains. "The earthiness of a great Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape or Gigondas is a perfect, well, marriage, for the fatty and subtle gaminess of lamb."

And, of course, don't forget the candles. "Nothing is more romantic than a candlelight dinner," says Bologna, "over a bottle of red wine with someone you love."

Lamb for Two with a Minted Risotto

From Chef Jim Bologna of The Townsend Hotel

Ingredients

1 quart chicken stock	2 tablespoons minced flat-leaf Italian parsley
2 tablespoons olive oil	6 lamb chops, each 1 1/2 inches thick
3 tablespoons butter	1 shallot, thinly sliced
1 small diced small onion	1/2 cup black cherry all-fruit preserves
2 minced cloves of garlic	3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
1 cup Arborio rice	1/2 teaspoon cracked black pepper
1/2 cup white wine	1 tablespoon chopped fresh mint leaves
1 cup peas (fresh English peas if available)	
1/2 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano	

Directions

FOR THE RISOTTO

Place the stock in a small pot and warm it up over medium low heat. Heat 1 tablespoon olive oil with a tablespoon of butter in a medium pot over medium-high heat. When the pan is hot, add onions and garlic and cook for 2 to 3 minutes, then add Arborio rice and cook a minute more to lightly toast the grains. Add white wine and cook for 1 minute. Add a few ladles of warm stock and let the rice absorb it, stirring occasionally. Add another ladle of stock after the first is gone. Allow the stock to be absorbed again then add a 1/2 ladle until risotto is starchy, creamy and cooked to al dente. The risotto will take about 20 minutes to cook in total. Season the risotto with salt, pepper and a little butter. Just before serving add peas, cheese, chopped mint and parsley.

FOR THE LAMB

When the risotto is half-cooked, 10 minutes from being done, drizzle the chops with extra-virgin olive oil and season with salt and pepper or your favorite seasoning mix, then place the chops on a slotted broiler pan. (You can grill the chops if you prefer). Place chops in oven under hot broiler and cook 8 to 10 minutes for medium rare (120 degrees if you have a thermometer).

FOR THE CHERRY GLAZE

Place a small pot on the stove over medium heat. Add 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil and shallot to the pan. Cook shallot 2 minutes until translucent, then add the preserves, and whisk them together with balsamic vinegar and black pepper. Heat to just a boil, then remove from heat and add a pat of butter. Whisk butter into sauce.

FOR SERVING:

Place a serving of risotto into shallow dinner bowl. Arrange 3 chops on each plate alongside the risotto, drizzle the black cherry glaze over the chops and garnish plates with extra sprigs of mint.

