

VALENTINE'S DAY



STEPHEN WHEELER, commercial manager at speciality food company Mise en Place, now part of Cheltenham-based Creed Foodservice, eyes-up aphrodisiacs for Valentine's Day

THE restaurant business loves Valentine's Day. Chefs have the opportunity to sex-up their menus for a busy night with some specially created dishes – usually with the inclusion of foods known for their aphrodisiacal properties. Named after Aphrodites, the Greek goddess of love, aphrodisiacs have enhanced that loving feeling since Adam and Eve. Scientists have come up with drugs such as Viagra to lengthen the sensual experience, but the ancient Egyptians popped salad-radishes as their love tonic, believed to improve the blood flow to all the right places.

The Aztec gods meanwhile favoured chocolate to give them feelings of relaxation and pleasure.

Cow cod soup is the traditional love tonic in Jamaica.

Think cod-pie and you've got the main ingredient from the bull – cooked with bananas and red-hot chillies, in a white rum broth.

Coming across this particular dish in the Cotswolds may be tricky.

At Mise en Place we always see sales of asparagus and strawberries increase around Valentine's Day.

In 19th century France, bridegrooms were served three courses of the vegetable at their prenuptial dinner. Marcel Proust said of asparagus:

"It transforms my chamber-pot into a flask of perfume." Not sure how this chat-up line would go down during a candle-lit dinner nowadays. Strawberries are always a treat, especially if someone else is dropping them on to your tongue – try dipping in melted chocolate for a multiple whammy.

Don't expect them to be English this time of year. Most likely they'll be from Egypt.

Truffles and oysters have erotic reputations perhaps due to their exotic rarity. Last week, on Rungis market in Paris (the largest food market in the world) Italian white truffles were selling at £3,400 per kilo. The composer Rossini said: "I have wept three times in my life. Once when my opera failed. Once when I heard Paganini play the violin. And once when a truffled turkey fell overboard at a boating picnic."

Oysters were once the staple of the poor. In the 19th century, on any day, six million oysters could be found on barges tied up along New York's waterfront.

By the way, aphrodisiacs have the opposite effect – hops and coriander being two examples.

So if your loved one suggests a few pints and a curry on Valentine's night, your evening may not go off with a bang.

Fortune favours bold appetites

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A selection of appetisers

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Red paper lanterns are up for Chinese New Year

THE family-owned Mayflower restaurant in Cheltenham has been serving up high quality Chinese food for more than two decades and it is pleasing to know its high standards have not slipped.

A distinctive blue building conveniently located within short walking distance of the High Street, The Mayflower has become an important part of Cheltenham's culinary furniture.

With Chinese New Year starting on Sunday, it's a great place to enjoy some authentic food in friendly surroundings.

After a lengthy deliberation over the wide ranging menu, I opted for shredded duck with noodle soup for a starter, while my partner chose chicken and sweetcorn soup.

Both appetisers were flavoursome and generous helpings, served piping hot and delivered quickly. They left us looking forward to the main courses and we were not left disappointed.

I went for roast pork with black beans and chilli and boiled rice, which was all perfectly cooked and deliciously spicy, comparing favourably with similar dishes I have sampled at other restaurants.

My partner chose sizzling crispy duck in an oyster sauce and egg fried rice, which was also faultless and a generous serving. The sauce was thick and rich and the duck was sumptuous.

We supplemented our mains with tasty spring rolls and prawn crackers, leaving us more than satisfied.

The service was particularly prompt and efficient on what was a busy evening for the restaurant, without being overbearing or intrusive.

We quench our thirst with a refreshing soft drink, but The Mayflower does boast an impressive selection of wines.

The child-friendly Mayflower also offers ample choice for vegetarians and caters for parties with its separate private dining room, making it ideal for birthday celebrations or work nights out.

There is also a take-away service, but it would be a shame to miss out on the friendly service, relaxing atmosphere and pleasant decor within the restaurant which adds to the whole experience.

While prices may be slightly higher than the majority of other Chinese options around town, it is worth the extra cost for the guaranteed quality and there can be no complaints about the value for money.

With a second restaurant in Sheep Street, Cirencester, The Mayflower is without doubt among the finest providers of Chinese cuisine in Gloucestershire and is highly recommended.

Jon Palmer

Mise en Place
THE SPECIALITY FOOD COMPANY