



# Recipe for Love

Food, wine and candlelight are the ingredients for a night of bliss

**F**ebruary is all about romance, and I am definitely a supporter of Cupid and his cause. Too often in life, we stint on injecting romance into our everyday lives. But the 14th of February is your opportunity to have an extra-special night of romance with your little Yum-Yum and make up for some of the passion that is lost in the daily frenzy of life.

This opportunity is not without risk: Like many holidays, Valentine's Day is fraught with high expectations. You can't expect to dump a single ingredient into a dish to make it instantly palatable, and you can't expect a single day of romance to cure a year of disregard. For example, I am the consummate wife, woman and partner for my husband, and our relationship could not possibly leave us wanting more. An observant friend once remarked to my husband, "It must be so much fun being married to her," to which he replied, "It may be one of those situations that just looks like a lot more fun than it really is." I knew that this example of his humor is just one of the ingredients that balance the other flavors in our relationship. Remember that word: balance. Blend romance into your life slowly and gradually, and moments of intensity will be all the sweeter.

But enough therapy! How can you entertain your beloved on this Day of Love? It is easiest to dine out, but what you gain in leisure you lose in intimacy. An intimate dinner at home is logistically more difficult and definitely more effort, but its intimacy is second to none. A home that is cleared of the distractions of the every day—children, pets, work,

toys—is more romantic than any crowded restaurant dining room. So the first step is to find accommodating in-laws or a lonely single friend who will watch the kids, then try to clear away the debris and clutter of your daily life.

Preparation is key. First, turn off all phones, pagers and computers. Lock the doors and turn off the porch light. The next step is to prepare your table. Use your best linens, china, crystal and an abundance of candles and flowers. Prepare a mix of songs that you and your partner find meaningful and select wines that go with each course. And prepare yourself. Look as beautiful and enticing as possible. Remember you are at home, so you can be daring. If the effect is less than perfect, use the dimmer switch—or simply candlelight. After 30, it's your best lighting by far.

The Maven is going to resist the urge to impose a menu upon you this month (although I will suggest a dessert in a moment), because this meal is all about pleasing your beloved, whose favorite meal you know better than I. Keep in mind that the focus is on your mate. As always, plan a menu that allows you to prepare as much as you can in advance of the meal. You will not be tidying as you go or doing dishes on this night. This is a night to enjoy good food and conversation, which means savoring each course and each other.

And at the end of the meal, what could be more romantic than chocolate? (OK, this part is skewed in favor of women, but nothing gets most women in the mood for romance faster than chocolate.) This recipe for

brownies, served with vanilla gelato and port, is a fine end to a beautiful meal and the first course of an evening of romantic bliss.

## Valentine Brownies

- 1 pound unsalted butter
- 1 pound plus 12 ounces semisweet chocolate chips
- 1/4 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 6 extra-large eggs
- 3 tablespoons instant coffee granules
- 2 tablespoons pure vanilla extract
- 2 1/4 cups sugar
- 1 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups chopped walnuts

Preheat oven to 350°. Butter and dust with cocoa a 12-by-18-by-1-inch baking sheet. Melt the butter, 1 pound chocolate chips and unsweetened chocolate over medium heat. Cool slightly. In a large bowl,

stir together the eggs, coffee granules, vanilla and sugar. Add the warm chocolate mixture and cool to room temperature.

In a medium bowl, sift 1 cup flour, baking powder and salt. Add this to the chocolate mixture. Toss walnuts and 1 1/2 cups of chocolate chips with 1/4 cup of flour, and then add this to the chocolate mixture. (Do not add this last part until the mixture is cool.) Pour into prepared pan.

Bake for 20 minutes, then rap the baking sheet against the oven shelf to force the air bubbles to escape. Bake 15 to 20 minutes longer, until a toothpick comes out clean. Cool thoroughly and put in the refrigerator overnight. Use a sturdy, heart-shaped brass cookie cutter to cut as many hearts as possible. Set four aside for your meal and save the scraps in a plastic bag in the fridge for future chocolate cravings. Place four heart brownies in one of those charming decorative baggies, tie with festive ribbon and voila! You now have a thoughtful and delicious gift for your friends on St. Valentine's Day. ●