

Table for Four



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A Romantic Menu for Lovers (and Friends)!

No time of year embraces love (and lovers) more than Valentine's Day, and much of the holiday seems to be tailor-made for two. Sure, everyone enjoys the whispering of sweet-nothings and amorous alone time with one's sweetheart, but this year, consider breaking with tradition and making Valentine's Day a bit more inclusive. One way to do Valentine's Day a little differently is by eschewing the typical table for two and cooking for friends at home.

Matthew Ingalsbe knows a thing or two about entertaining. As owner and executive chef of Simoson's in Harrisburg, Ingalsbe is loathe to encourage people to not patronize his cozy Midtown restaurant, but he does see the perks to staying in and cooking a special meal instead. "You don't have to worry about traffic, parking, waiting for a table," he says, quickly adding, "though at Simoson's we try to make sure that doesn't happen. But if you don't go out, you can eat at home and be more comfortable. And you don't have to worry about driving if you plan to drink."

Ingalsbe created a four-course menu for four that combines a multitude of tastes and textures in every dish. Each recipe includes lots of Valentine's Day-appropriate ingredients — particularly ones that are red and ones thought to be aphrodisiacs, such as lobster, strawberries, almonds, pomegranate and even arugula.

Each dish is well balanced in itself, and as part of a larger meal. Both the grilled-shrimp appetizer and roasted-red pepper bisque, for instance, burst with flavor while being very light — perfect for one part of a four-course meal. Ingalsbe pairs ingredients that may, at first glance, seem unusual — even mismatched — but the results are extraordinary. The appetizer, for instance, combines the sweetness of strawberries and star fruit, the fresh leafiness of watercress and the bite of balsamic vinegar with savory grilled shrimp.

Bisque often gets a bad rap for being very creamy and very heavy, but that's not necessarily the case. "Bisque" also denotes soups made from a base of pureed vegetables. Ingalsbe's roasted-red pepper version utilizes both cream and a vegetable puree, and the result is delicate and airy, not too creamy nor too brothy.

Ingalsbe's third and fourth courses offer a nice balance of seafood and game, pairing warm Granny Smith apples, toasted almonds, tangy Belgian endive and steamed lobster in the salad, and rich duck breast with a creamy wild-mushroom risotto as the entrée.

The 28-year-old Hummelstown native calls his Valentine's Day menu for four "sort of intimate, but appealing, colorful, relaxing, and, of course, tasteful." The meal, however, wouldn't be complete without wine. A crisp Pinot Grigio would work well with the grilled-shrimp appetizer, and Ingalsbe recommends a light white, such as a Riesling or Chardonnay, for the next two courses. Red wine should accompany duck and other game, however; Ingalsbe suggests a good Pinot Noir.

And for dessert? The obvious choice is chocolate, or something equally rich and dense. After completing all the preparation involved in dinner, our simple suggestion this year is to eschew baking altogether and drop by your local chocolatier to pick out a selection of extravagant truffles (just try to keep your fingers out of the middles).

The trappings of Valentine's Day — the sappy greeting cards, the heart-shaped boxes of chocolates, the kitschy Cupid decorations — rarely change, but the traditional dinner for two can be inviting another couple (or a group of single friends) over to prepare and eat a sumptuous meal together. After all, the way to most anyone's heart is through the stomach. But, rest assured, if four seems like a crowd, each of Ingalsbe's recipes can be halved for two. **SS**



COURTESY PAUL EMBERGER

Simoson's chef Matt Ingalsbe



Grilled Shrimp Appetizer

1 liter balsamic vinegar

For the relish:

12 strawberries, each halved & sliced thin
1 star fruit, halved and sliced thin
1/8 red onion, sliced very thin
2 Tbs. rice-wine vinegar
2 Tbs. granulated sugar
12 mint leaves, chiffonaded
12 shrimp, peeled & de-veined, tails on
salt and pepper
1 bunch fresh watercress

For the balsamic reduction, pour balsamic vinegar into a pot and simmer until it reaches the consistency of honey. For the relish, mix all ingredients together and let sit for an hour to blend flavors. Season the shrimp with salt and pepper, and grill until fully cooked.

Make a bed of watercress on each plate, and top with the relish. Place three shrimp on top, and drizzle with balsamic reduction.



Warm Apple & Lobster Salad

1 Granny Smith apple
butter
sugar

3 red Belgian endives
1 bunch arugula salad
10 cherry tomatoes, halved

1 large lobster tail,
steamed & diced
1/3 cup toasted almond slices
1/4 cup asiago cheese, grated

For the vinaigrette:
1/4 cup Champagne vinegar
3/4 cup olive oil
1 tsp. thyme
1 tsp. roasted garlic
1 tsp. basil, chiffonaded
1/4 tsp. honey

Caramelize the apples in butter and a little sugar. Wrap up and keep in a warm area of the kitchen. Separate leaves of the endive, and place in the bowl with arugula and tomatoes and set aside. Mix all the ingredients of the vinaigrette together very well. Dress the salad in the bowl as desired, and place on salad plates. Garnish with the apples, lobster, asiago cheese and almond slices.

Roasted Red Pepper Bisque

1 large sweet onion (Vidalia preferred)
12 red peppers, roasted, with skins &
seeds removed
4 garlic cloves, minced
1 tsp. fresh thyme, minced

1 cup white wine
2 qts. vegetable stock
2 cups heavy cream
1 cup roux (mixture of one part flour and
one part butter, for thickening)

4 Tbs. unsalted butter
1/2 cup crème fraîche (or sour cream)
2 Tbs. basil, chiffonaded

Caramelize onion in a stock pot. Add peppers, garlic, and thyme, and sauté for 5 minutes. Add white wine and reduce by half. Add vegetable stock and bring to a boil, and then simmer for 30 minutes. Pour into a food processor and puree, or blend with hand-held blender. Return to pot, and then add cream and bring to a boil. Add roux in small increments, and mix thoroughly to prevent lumps. Season to taste and finish with the butter until melted (adds a velvety finish to the soup). Garnish with a dollop of crème fraîche and basil.

Pan-Seared Duck Breast

For the duck breast:

4 duck breasts
salt and pepper, to taste

Score the fat of the duck breast, and season with salt and pepper. Place fat side down into a hot sauté pan, and render the fat from the skin. Finish cooking duck in the oven at 375 degrees; 4-5 minutes for medium rare, 5-10 minutes for well done.

For the glazed carrots:

15 carrots, peeled, diced into large pieces
1/2 qt. vegetable or chicken stock
1/4 cup sugar
2 Tbs. butter
1 Tbs. honey
1 Tbs. fresh thyme

Add all ingredients to a sauce pot and bring to a boil. Reduce until the liquid becomes a glaze. Set aside.

For the risotto:

1/4 sweet onion (Vidalia preferred)
2 cups roasted Arborio rice
1 qt. vegetable stock
4 portobello mushroom caps, gills removed and thinly sliced
12 shiitake mushrooms, stems removed, quartered
1/2 cup asiago cheese
2 Tbs. unsalted butter
salt and pepper, to taste

Sauté the chopped onions until clear. Add rice, and lightly toast in pan. Add half the vegetable stock and stir constantly, gradually adding more stock into the risotto until the rice becomes al dente. Add mushrooms, cheese, butter, and salt and pepper. Set aside.

For the pomegranate beurre blanc:

1/2 cup white wine
1 Tbs. lemon juice
3 sprigs of thyme
5 whole peppercorns
1 bay leaf
1 garlic clove
1/4 cup heavy cream
1/2 lb. unsalted butter, softened
3 tsp. pomegranate syrup

For the reduction, mix white wine, lemon juice, thyme, peppercorns, bay leaf, and smash the clove of garlic. Reduce until there is very little liquid left. Strain, return to pan, and add the cream. Bring to a boil and reduce until reduction is thick. Turn off the heat and whisk butter into the reduction until butter is completely melted. (Be careful of too much heat; keep the sauce at 100 to 120 degrees.) Add pomegranate syrup and mix well.

