

ROMANCE

Four Great Places to Celebrate Valentine's

BY CELESTE MCCALL



Herring salad with glass of gluhwein, warm spiced red wine at Café Berlin. Photo: Andrew Lightman

Here is a three-way meditation on tiramisu part of a three course "Italian Voyage" of "Monde Du Chocolat" at Co Co Sala. Photo: Andrew Lightman



Romance means many things -- a hand-in-hand stroll through Lincoln Park; sharing an ice cream cone on a sunny boardwalk; cuddling up in front of a crackling fireplace. Happily, I've enjoyed many romantic experiences with my husband Peter. We became engaged on Valentine's Day 38 years ago at a long-gone French restaurant called La Nicoise, where waiters zoomed around on roller skates. In 2008 we renewed our marriage vows in Cana, Israel. And this Valentine's Day we plan a romantic dinner at one of our local restaurants. In preparation we made preview trips, looking for:

- * Low lighting, but not too dark to see each other;
- * Low decibel level: but not so quiet you have to whisper;
- * Fireplace (usually), preferably a real one;
- * Service: Pleasant and efficient but unobtrusive;
- * Good food.

German Warmth on the Hill

Ensnconed in three townhouses on Massachusetts Ave, NE, Café Berlin exudes romantic ambience. Cooking is fairly authentic; all three chefs hail from Deutschland. On a bitterly cold night with a single-digit wind chill, Peter and I settled into a corner booth in Café Berlin's rosy-hued dining area. As soft operatic music (Andrea Bocelli perhaps?) wafted in the background, a young couple nuzzled in the far corner. An engagement perhaps? Would a diamond ring sparkle atop her Black Forest cake?

Instead of gawking, Peter and I sipped Gluhwein (tummy-warming spiced red wine), which I remember fondly from German and Austrian Christmas markets.

Peter started with a generous appetizer of Heringstip--marinated herring with apples, onions and sour cream. I opted for Griess Nockerl Suppe, game consomme with a pair of Knoedl (dumplings). In some German restaurants on both sides of the pond, such dumplings could qualify as lethal weapons. Not at Café Berlin, where these feather-light dumplings floated like gossamer on the consomme.

From the winter game menu, Peter ordered roasted loin of venison with mushroom/walnut filling, napped with a Cabernet fig reduction and orange/cranberry garnish. Absolutely delicious. I should have gone with my instinct and gotten wild boar; instead I decided on ostrich medallions, popular a decade ago when these flightless birds were extensively farm raised. This ostrich--accompanied by substantial herbed gnocchi--was tasty but heavily sauced, typical Teutonic treatment. Brussels sprouts provided a welcome taste of green. After the Gluhwein, I ordered a light Austrian red.

We were too satiated for dessert, although the tray of house-made pastries looked tempting. As were paying our \$123 tab (including tip), the young couple across from us departed, hand in hand.

Café Berlin, 322 Mass. Ave. NE, 202-543-7656, www.cafeberlinc.com. Monday-Thurs. 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday-Saturday 11:0 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday 4 to 10 p.m.

La Chaumiere lives up to its moniker—roughly French for “fireplace”—with its square, stone-encased flames in the center of an intimate dining room. Photo: Andrew Lightman



Co Co Sala's Chocolate Dreams

Co Co Sala's lush red and black decor—with jewel tones of gold and chocolate brown—practically purrs. At this year-old chocolate lounge and wine bar, a hip young crowd reclines on plush red cushions, snapping photos of each other and sipping chocolate-spiked cocktails. More patrons perch at two long, sleek bars. Above them, two flat screens display vats of molten chocolate being stirred into delectable delights. The sensuous videos were almost chocolate porn.

Peter, friend Nan and I perused the red-bound menu which is divided between executive/pastry chef Santosh Tiptu's savory “coco bites” and chocolate desserts. I couldn't resist a glass of California Cabernet Sauvignon called “Little Black Dress.” The mellow red complemented our “small plates” and, more important, the chocolate. Meanwhile, chocoholic Nan loved her “Co Cojito—a chocolate mojito made with chocolate-infused vodka and garnished with dark chocolate shavings.

Portions are minuscule, even for “small plates.” Crab cake “lollipops” were three crab cakes tucked in shot glasses, stabbed with tiny skewers. Lobster salad was a tiny mound of lobster and cucumber napped with lemon aioli and chocolate vinaigrette. Mac-and-cheese was made with orechiette pasta with four cheeses and crisp bacon; sliders included swordfish with fennel and pecorino cheese, and cardamom-scented ground chicken.

But most people come to Co Co Sala for chocolate desserts. Some are multi-course extravaganzas. Peter selected the Xocolatl Aztec Experience trio for us to share: a tiny chipotle truffle (nice balance of deep chocolate richness

and just enough heat); cinnamon-coated churros; a miniature chocolate soufflé with gelato; a white chocolate shooter with a chocolate straw. Presentation was amazing; dainty items artfully arranged on stark white plates. “This is an artistic experience,” Nan declared she tucked into her chocolate soufflé. “A museum for food.” Dinner for three came to \$163.

Co Co Sala, 929 F St. NW, 202-347-4265
www.cocosala.com. **Lunch Mon-Fri 11 - 2:30 p.m.; dinner 5-10 p.m. Dinner: Monday-Thursday 5-10 p.m.; Fri-Sat 5 - midnight. Sunday brunch: 11 - 3 p.m.; closed Sunday night. Lounge: Open until 1:30 a.m. week nights; until 2:30 a.m. Friday-Saturday.**

Corduroy, the Hidden Gem

Designed by Core Architecture/Design, Corduroy's earth-toned interior is warm yet modern. Tables are appointed with circular, onyx-like votive candles, casting light on pale walls punctuated with abstract artwork.

On a busy Monday night, most diners were seated in the main level. Upstairs, others were nibbling at the long glossy bar, enjoying the calm, zen-like ambience. Corduroy is one of Washington's few restaurants with a dress code; jackets are preferred for gentlemen.

Peter and I were ushered to a downstairs dining nook, “a love nest,” server Pete explained. Cozy and romantic it was, but we were focused on nourishment. After reading Corduroy's list of snazzy pomegranate Manhattans, lemongrass and Sazerac cocktails, we decided on wine instead.

Owner/chef Tom Power, whom we observed in the display kitchen, apprenticed with Michel Richard, which shows in his marvelous cooking. Peter began with Power's colorful beet, carrot and goat cheese salad, a mosaic-like arrangement ringed a cluster of greens. I opted for a rich, velvety soup made with kabocha squash (Japanese pumpkin) laced with bacon shreds and foie gras.

My entree was Pennsylvania-grown lamb medallions escorted by house-made crepinette-lamb sausage. The lamb was perfectly cooked (medium rare) and the garlic/paprika spiked sausage was delicious. Peter's crispy-skinned Long Island striped bass was poised on a tangle of crab-laced black pasta. The accompanying fish knife is seldom encountered in local restaurants.

We claimed we were too full for dessert, but Power sent over complimentary closers: a sinfully rich chocolate torte with caramelized banana, and pistachio bread pudding made with brioche. Both came with house-made sorbet. We somehow we found room. Our bill came to \$159.

Corduroy, 1122 Ninth St. NW, 202-589-0699
www.corduroydc.com. **Open Mon-Sat: 5:30 -**

10:30 p.m. Happy Hour Monday-Friday: 5 to 7 p.m. Closed Sunday

La Chaumiere, Georgetown's Alsatian Charmer

A Georgetown favorite since 1978, La Chaumiere exudes intimate Alsatian charm. It lives up to its moniker—roughly French for “fireplace”—with its square, stone-encased flames in the center of the dining room. Soft light flickers off rough-hewn wooden beams and stucco walls, the latter covered with copper molds and antique farm implements. Seating is almost too cozy; tables are packed close together.

Chef de cuisine Patrick Orange creates such traditional favorites as lobster bisque, quenelles (pike dumplings), escargot, boudin blanc, cassoulet, couscous and choucroute. Sipping pleasant Sauvignon Blanc and Cote du Rhone, we checked the seasonal menu. I started with iceberg lettuce sprinkled with bacon and confetti-like red bell pepper bits, Roquefort and fresh fig quarters. Peter's mildly seasoned Provencal vegetable soup was similar to minestrone but blended. I succumbed to my favorite entree, cervelle beurre blanc (calf brains sauteed in butter and capers). Peter's sea scallops St. Jacques Provencale, in a light, garlicky tomato sauce, were slightly overcooked. La Chaumiere is a moderately priced romantic interlude; dinner for two came to \$95 including tip.

La Chaumiere, 2813 M St. NW, 202-338-1784
www.lachaumiere.com. **Lunch: Mon-Fri 11:30 - 2:30 p.m. Dinner: Mon-Sat 5:30 - 10:30 p.m. Closed Sunday. ★**

Owner/chef Tom Power hard at work in Corduroy's kitchen. Photo: Andrew Lightman.

