



FEATURE

Is the "Romantic Restaurant" a Thing of the Past?

BY PRIYA KRISHNA | FEBRUARY 6, 2017



Is romance dead? When it comes to choosing a restaurant on Valentine's Day, perhaps.

February 14 is the second busiest day of the year for restaurants (right behind Mother's Day) — so places tend to go above and beyond to create a romantic atmosphere and make their spot stand out, whether it's intimate lighting, chocolate fountains or a sultry playlist.

But these days, a lot of those efforts may be in vain. In a survey conducted by Zagat, only 16% of people listed romantic ambiance as their top priority on Valentine's Day, whereas 51% said they most value going to a place where they know the food would be great. Forty-three percent of people didn't even list romantic ambiance within their top three priorities — leading us to believe that the traditional notion of the "romantic restaurant," candlelight, violins, shared spaghetti and all, might now just be an outdated one. In the search to find the best Valentine's Day restaurant, people might only be interested in having the best possible food experience (Italian is the most popular V-Day cuisine by the way, according to our survey).

Industry folks too, have noticed a similar trend in their restaurants, and not just on Valentine's Day. "Diners these days are much more informed about where their food comes from, and its quality," says Josh Boissy, co-founder of [Sauvage](#) in New York. On Valentine's Day in particular, he adds, "I have seen a distinct move away from restaurants that try to do a theme and more towards places that just aim to serve good food and drink." Nathan Duensing, chef of [Marsh House](#) in Nashville, has noticed that for his guests, the quality of the food — more so than any outright romantic elements — does the most to set the tone for the evening. While it's important that the restaurant is "aesthetically pleasing," he says, "the food is always the driving force behind a great experience."

But even if the romance factor is waning on Valentine's Day — chefs and restaurateurs still tend to keep the notion in mind when creating their spaces. During the design process for the Brooklyn Italian spot, [Barano](#), chef/partner Albert Di Meglio went so far as to say that "romance was among one of our top considerations. When you walk into Barano, we want it to feel like a warm embrace. We included a lot of two-tops, for couples, and there are a lot of secluded, intimate spots to sit, which was very much a design choice." In Chicago, [Swift & Sons](#) general manager Matt Sherry's theory is that while ambiance is still an important concern for restaurants, the definition of what counts as "romantic" vibes has changed. "It used to mean white tablecloths and stuffy waiters," he says. "Now, the lines are blurred. It can be more comfortable." Boissy's take on romance at [Sauvage](#) is the opposite of stale and old school: "It's about youthful energy," he says. "We are inspired by film, theater, art and music. Details like scented candles, good hand soap and fresh flowers are all part of the environment we offer."

Conclusion: Diners may be prioritizing food quality much more than they used to — but the romantic restaurant isn't totally dead...it just looks and feels different than it used to.

Jake Novick-Finder, chef of [Gristmill](#) in Brooklyn, puts it this way: "Most diners really care about the food, but the ambiance can be a deal-breaker. There's an abundance of great restaurants with delicious food, so especially on a night like Valentine's Day, guests are always going to shoot for the best of both worlds."

To view the full results of our 2017 Valentine's Day survey, [click here](#).

PLACES MENTIONED

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