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## Dining Out on Valentine's Day

By Elisa Ung

My husband and I don't eat out on Valentine's Day. The last time we did, several years ago, it was our first Valentine's Day together; he was eager to impress and booked a table at a high-profile, expensive restaurant that we wanted to try. Only problems: The only reservation we could get was at 10:30 p.m., it was a very limited fixed-price menu, and the price tag was even steeper than usual. It was a lovely dinner, but we've stayed home ever since.

Joseph Cerniglia sympathizes with my distaste for dining out Feb. 14. He's the chef-owner of Campania, an Italian restaurant in Fair Lawn, and he won't do special holiday menus on Valentine's Day, New Year's Eve or any other time. Cerniglia thinks they're just a way to unfairly extract extra money from customers. Valentine's Day in his place is just like any other night.

"I could easily go ahead and charge \$100 a couple, or whatever, but I just won't do it. And I think that business will come back to me tenfold. People will appreciate it," Cerniglia said. He said that the first New Year's Eve after he purchased Campania, "we played around with a prix fixe but limited menu. And I caught so much flak from regulars and they made me really question it ... I think it's pack mentality. Restaurateurs feel like everyone's charging double, why not us?"

Now, Campania is a moderately priced neighborhood restaurant with

lots of regulars. When you're a destination restaurant like Chakra in Paramus, which has a deliberately romantic ambience, you may see things differently.

"It's one of our biggest nights," says Chakra's general manager, Bikram Bhandari. He says the restaurant always has offered a fixed-price menu on Valentine's Day. "The focus is the quality of the overall dining experience. The whole thing is to give them something different from the norm."

"From our standpoint ... it gives us a chance to up our check average," Bhandari said. Chakra is charging \$175 per couple for a four-course dinner (\$200 to \$210 with optional wine pairings), compared with the restaurant's usual \$80 to \$120 check average for two (which would include a cocktail or glass of wine apiece). "It's a numbers game, but at the same time it's a quality issue as well. We don't want to come across as herding people in and out."

If you don't feel like shelling out that much for Valentine's Day dinner, many of those items will then land on Chakra's new regular menu, which will change Feb. 15, Bhandari said.

Simon's Café and Restaurant in Saddle River, which opened last year, is offering a fixed-price Valentine's Day menu of six courses, plus an amuse bouche and a free glass of champagne (women

also get red roses). At \$80 per person, the price is way over what you'd generally spend for dinner at the BYO restaurant, whose entrées run \$19.95 to \$28.95. Owner Carlo Orlando says the special menu allows him to poise the new restaurant "to be a little bit more gourmet than we were over in Westwood," where he had closed an earlier version of Simon's.

Jeanne Griffiths, who opened Vista Steakhouse in North Bergen last year, saw it this way: "No one would come here if I just say, 'We're having Valentine's Day dinner.' " So she booked local singer Jason Nazzaro to sing Sinatra tunes and is opening up a dance floor for anyone who comes in for her \$50-a-person, four-course meal with champagne toast. "A lot of places that do à la carte try to get you in and out. We're letting people come in and relax." And the set price allows Griffiths to be sure that she can afford the cost of the entertainment.

"I think people like to know what they're going to have to spend," she said. "We wanted to appeal to this current economy and make people still be able to feel good about themselves without having to shell out a lot. ... Valentine's Day being on a Thursday, people want to celebrate, but they want something to do. Otherwise, they have to make conversation the whole time."