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Okay, so maybe it is one of those Hallmark holidays. The newspaper and airwaves are full of ads touting cards, flowers, chocolates and special dinners. But hey, don't let the commercial side of Valentine's Day turn you cynical.

After all, it has been around in some form or another for centuries. Long before Hallmark, FTD and Godiva Chocolates, February, yes February, was a time for romance.

New Hampshire may be covered with snow but in Rome, warmer days and the first spring flowers turn thoughts to love and romance. To welcome the first signs of spring, ancient Romans honored Juno, the goddess of women and marriage, on February 14th. Celebrations continued on the 15th with Lupercalia, a festival of health and fertility. Later, in early Christian times, a kindly priest named Valentine was beheaded on February 14th. His crime; the tenderhearted priest performed secret wedding ceremonies in defiance of the emperor's ban on marriage. After his death, he was canonized and became the Patron Saint of engaged couples, happy marriages, love and lovers.



How will you celebrate Valentine's Day? Will you shower your sweetie with cards, flowers and chocolates or spend some special time together? A day for just the two of you may be the best gift you can give to one another. Turn off the phones, texts, email and any other distractions and give each other the gift of your undivided attention.

Start the day right with breakfast in bed. It doesn't need to be an elaborate feast. A perfect cup of coffee along with bagels or blinis with smoked salmon are sure to please.

Enjoy the fresh air with a romantic walk by the sea or get your blood pumping with a snowshoe romp in the woods. Or spend a few hours on the slopes; what could be better than a cuddle on the chairlift on a cold day?

When you're ready for a break, find a sunny spot out of the wind for a winter picnic. If it's too cold, take your lunch indoors by the fire. Keep it simple and delicious with a wedge of your favorite cheese, a great loaf of bread, some fruit and a glass of wine. To end the meal on a sweet note, bring along some imported or artisanal chocolate to share.

What next? A busy morning and delicious lunch can only lead to one thing – an afternoon nap! Relax, you've earned it.

Refreshed and ready to go, you can change into your best finery and head out to dinner. Or maybe you'd prefer to stay home and cook together. Slip on your aprons and stir up some romance along with your favorite dishes. Just be sure to include an aphrodisiac or two. Legendary lover, Giacomo Girolamo Casanova had a particular fondness for oysters but you might prefer asparagus with truffle oil, anything made with chili peppers and, of course, chocolate.

Whether you spend an evening in or enjoy dinner at a romantic restaurant,

Happy Valentine's Day and bon appétit!

Susan

Sour Cream Cupcakes with White Chocolate-Cream Cheese Frosting

You can bake the cakes ahead of time if you like. Be sure to add a few drops of red food coloring to the frosting for a fun and festive touch! Enjoy.

Makes about 12 muffins

2 cups all-purpose flour
 Grated zest of 1 orange
 1 tablespoon baking powder
 1 teaspoon salt
 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
 1/2 cup (1 stick) butter, at room temperature
 1/2 cup granulated sugar
 1/4 cup brown sugar
 2 eggs
 3/4 cup sour cream
 1 tablespoon Grand Marnier
 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract



Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Line muffin tins with paper liners

Put the flour, zest, baking powder, salt and nutmeg in a bowl and whisk to combine. Reserve.

Using an electric mixer, beat the butter and sugars in a large bowl until fluffy. Add the eggs, sour cream, Grand Marnier and vanilla and beat until smooth. Reduce the mixer speed to low and slowly add the dry ingredients and beat until just combined.

Fill the muffin tins 2/3 full with batter. Bake at 375 degrees for about 15 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Cool the cupcakes completely and then generously frost with White Chocolate-Cream Cheese Frosting.

White Chocolate-Cream Cheese Frosting

1/2 cup (1 stick) butter, at room temperature
 8 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature
 2 tablespoons sour cream
 4 cups confectioners' sugar, sifted
 1 tablespoon Grand Marnier
 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
 8 ounces white chocolate, melted and cooled

Put the butter, cream cheese and sour cream in a bowl and beat with an electric mixer on medium speed together until well combined. Reduce the speed to low, slowly add the confectioners' sugar and beat until just combined. Add the Grand Marnier, vanilla and white chocolate and beat on medium-high until smooth.