

Be My Valentine

February 14 is the day when we hope for cupid to point his arrow in our direction, and to help him out, we've decided to write up some more controversial dining recommendations for this romantic day. All complaints are welcome! Words by **Will Peach**.



WHERE ROMANTIC DINING IS concerned, Ho Chi Minh City has plenty to offer. But passionate Casanovas be warned. You'll have to pull out all the stops before getting any bedtime action on this day. Remember it's all about food and atmosphere.

◦ Tucked Quietly in an Alley

What better place to conceal your bursting passion than in the secluded courtyard of District 3's **Hideaway Café** (41/1 Pham Ngoc Thach). But first daters be warned; there's no bail out distractions here. Gazing into the eyes of your companion amidst the rustic but opulent décor is almost *de rigueur*. And with a wide selection of wines to lubricate any faltering libidos, this is a sure fire hit to gain you some action.

Where the menu is more limited than its competitors, there is no faltering in its quality. A combination of western and Vietnamese cuisine means there's certainly something for everyone. Afterwards, why not saunter on up to the upstairs lounge? Comfortable bean bags and sofa beds provide the perfect setting to nestle and while away the rest of the enchanted evening.

Contemporary Vietnamese cuisine is another good option to crank any steamy date up a few notches. Couple this with a lush rustic courtyard complete with a small-scale hanging garden and **Hoa Tuc** (*The Courtyard*, 74 Hai Ba Trung, Q1) is going to have to heave mightily hard to restrain all the starry-eyed lovers.

This charming little place serves up some of the best seafood in town at reasonable prices. Barbecued sea bass in mango salsa (VND120,000), steamed or marinade barbecue prawns (VND140,000) and deep fried soft shell crabs (VND180,000) are just some of the dishes available to get the juices flowing. And while soft jazz lingers in the air and conversation meanders delicately, why not take advantage of the excellent house rosé, the Castano Rosado of Spain, at VND75,000 a glass. If it all does go horribly however, then popular nightclub Vasco's is only next door. A perfect place to cast off your dud of a date and go sharking on the dance floor.

◦ River Gazing

Out in sleepy An Phu there are several options to whet the soul and inject some long lost romance back into the system. **River**

LOVE IS IN THE AIR

Le Toit Gourmand (far left), Hideaway Cafe (centre) and The Deck (below) are just three of the many dining spots that are perfect for Valentine's Day



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Café (Riverside Apts, 53 Vo Truong Toan Street, Q2) is one of them, providing a relaxing patio veranda that overlooks the gently flowing Saigon River. Lunchtime is the best time to visit – grab a deckchair and watch tired old tugboats haul their heavy loads upstream. Check out the specials board atop a big aging barrel or go for something simple like the wood-fired oven pizzas or burgers, both popular choices. Afterwards, why not chill out poolside with cocktails? The only sound disturbing the blissful peace here is the gentle trickle of the outdoor fountain. A perfect spot for some quiet romantic contemplation: shall I ditch him or keep him?

From the moment you walk past the grand palm-fronded entrance of **The Deck** (33 Nguyen U Di, Q2) you know you're in for a treat. This ultra-modern restaurant provides the best view of the river on a smooth wooden platform above the water's edge. Sleek and minimalist, it offers the height of decadence for any would-be Romeo to woo his lady. The wine list alone is reason to pay a visit. With over forty different tipples to rock the boat, Bordeaux's Chateau de Valois at VND1.2 million a bottle is guaranteed to make any lady's heart melt. Chilled out music, a cool plush exterior and a breathtaking view make this the definitive spot to let the champagne flow freely into the evening.

Another spot overlooking the lazy Saigon River, **Boat House** (APSC Compound, 40 Lily Road, Q2) is going all out this Valentine's. Offering a set menu of three courses, guests who book in advance can look forward to a complimentary bottle of champagne to celebrate the day. Its setting within a quiet private compound also means you get that exclusive feel without having to go through the tired process of application. Just send an email beforehand to info@boathouse.com.vn and your details will be listed at the gate. The

Boat House's main selling point, however, is meat. Supplied by Kim Hai butchers, the place offers some of the best steaks in town not to mention some of the tastiest burgers. So if you're a couple looking to over-indulge this Valentine's, this is the place to head.

You'll have to pull out all the stops to get any action on this day

◦ Romantically Fine

Specialising in Vietnamese-western fusion dishes, **Xu** (71-75 Hai Ba Trung, Q1) is sophisticated to say the least. Its cosmopolitan feel and suave décor makes it "the" place to be seen with any glistening arm candy. The neatly arranged menu, separated into meat and vegetarian dishes, showcases its creative use of fresh local ingredients. Tuna spring rolls, salt-water barramundi and goat ragout are some of the more sumptuous dishes available.

The first floor restaurant is separated into two spaces; one dedicated to dining, the other a sultry lounge begging its guests to get up close and personal. Ambient music and low lighting makes seduction seem almost effortless in this classy joint. It's also in a convenient spot for some serious bar hopping afterwards.

◦ French Kiss

Serving quality French cuisine late into the evening, **L'en Tete** (1st Floor, 139 Nguyen Thai Binh, Q1) is the ideal place to go after a jam packed Valentine's daytime. Large comfortable seating and elegantly laid out tables make for cozy and memorable evenings.

Locally-painted artwork hang gracefully above crisp candlelit tables to make for the most intimate of experiences between devotees. Arrive at 8pm to catch live jazz music and soundtrack your evening harmoniously.

The food is good as well. Grilled sea bass, rock lobster, sole fillet and scallops are just some of the dishes on offer. Guests can also look forward to delicious chocolate desserts this Feb.14 with female guests also receiving roses. If your lady needs some serious winning and dining, L'en Tete may be the place.

For those willing to stray a bit further than the dazzling lights of District 1, you could do a lot worse than savour the French-Mediterranean cuisine at **Le Toit Gourmand** (31/4 Hoang Viet, Ward 4, Tan Binh) Housed in an expansive villa complete with a sparkling pool, guests are guaranteed to undergo a gastronomic voyage. French chef Gils prepares his dishes based on the produce of the day, so if it's surprises you're after, then this may be the place. The vibe here is laid back; guests are invited to take their time between each course in order to make the most of their unique surroundings. Gils can also organise a tasting menu for you, matching wines by the glass with the food. For those couples who find it hard taking a break from their hectic lifestyles, this may be the place to escape to.

A little taste of south-western France at **Le Bordeaux** (72 – D2 Van Thanh Bac, Binh Thanh) and you'll soon realise just why the French have a long standing reputation as bold Gallic lovers. Set in a large two-storey building complete with shimmering chandelier and sweeping staircase, oysters and *foie gras* are the order of the day at this luxurious eatery. Chic white furniture and a pleasant tiled floor make this place conventionally romantic. A perfect place to pop the question, should this be the day. **W**