

Cashing in on playing Cupid

Research shows that many people are disillusioned with the typical Valentine's meal at a restaurant, which means that licensees are in a perfect position to take advantage this 14 February

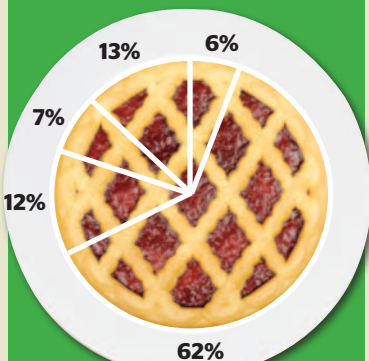
Valentine's Day is becoming ever more commercialised with fresh-faced suitors and long-suffering marrieds alike considering a romantic spending splurge to impress their dates. Can publicans cash in on this market by providing a romantic and unique alternative to the restaurant chains?

HospitalityGEM (formerly The Mystery Dining Company) wanted to find out more about what influences diners when making decisions for Valentine's night, to see if there was a gap in the market that publicans can tap into.

It asked 203 mystery diners about their plans for Valentine's Day dining, with some interesting results.

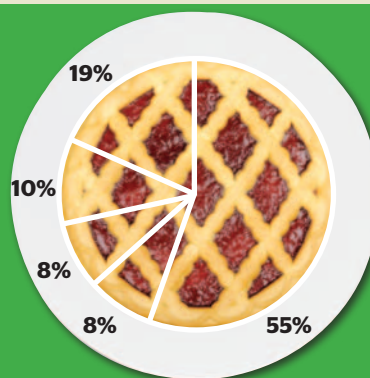
In terms of menu options, which of the following statements is most accurate for you?

I prefer a set menu	6%
I prefer to choose from the full menu	62%
I like a romantic-themed menu (for example, desserts to share)	12%
The price is the most important thing	7%
N/A	13%



What is the most important factor when choosing your Valentine's Day venue?

Good menu	55%
Good service	8%
Cost	8%
Good location	10%
N/A	19%



Love dining out?

With 56% of those surveyed indicating that they were planning on dining out on Valentine's Day, it is clearly a potentially lucrative time.

Sixty-nine percent of respondents said that both they and their partner will be drinking alcoholic drinks with their meals, while 48% said they will be budgeting less than £40 a head for the evening. This gives publicans an opportunity to use their pricing advantage over restaurants to cash in. Deals on aperitifs, digestifs, Champagne and wine could prove fruitful.



The survey suggests that the temptation to compile a flashy set menu may best be avoided

Valentine's Day dining experiences

HospitalityGEM asked diners about memorable Valentine's night dining experiences

- I would never dine out on Valentine's Day. Menus are restricted and the price is always more expensive than the day before. Ridiculous.
- Being presented with a romantic, heart-shaped dessert – I think this demonstrated some creativity and imagination on the part of the chef.
- We dined at the Belvedere Arms in Ascot a few years ago and it was hands down the best Valentine's Day meal I have had,

and possibly even one of the best meals out overall. The service was amazing, the food/set menu was fantastic, we were handed a glass of Champagne as we arrived and it was just a lovely night out for the both of us.

We tend to stay at home and cook and have Champagne. It is much better than having an overpriced and forcefully romantic meal out.

We had a horrendous evening at a Portsmouth Harbour restaurant that had too many tables crammed in and too few staff. It was a disaster from start to finish; the food and service were terrible.

The way to a man's heart

Despite the general perception of the decline of chivalry in this day and age, it is still men who tend to make dinner reservations for Valentine's night. Even so, it is still a surprise to see that the vast majority of those surveyed chose a venue on the basis of a good menu over other factors such as service, location and cost.

Furthermore, the survey suggests that the temptation to compile a flashy set menu may best be avoided, as 62% of those surveyed said they would rather choose from a full





menu, while only 6% preferred the offer of a special set menu.

Home is where the heart is

When asked if they would consider staying at home for a Valentine's night meal, 89% of the diners surveyed by HospitalityGEM said they would. When asked why, most cited the perception that restaurants would overcharge and overcrowd their premises to the detriment of food quality and service.

This represents an opportunity for publicans. By maintaining your

usual menu and prices, with a few special romantic twists, you can tempt those who might otherwise have stayed in for the evening.

The overall impression one gets from the survey results, and particularly from some of the comments received, is that diners are increasingly disillusioned with conventional restaurants on Valentine's night. By getting the balance right between price and offering something special, publicans can enlist Cupid's help and make punters fall in love with their Valentine's offer.



Making the very most of Valentine's Day

Steven Pike
Director
HospitalityGEM



With many people turned off by the perception that restaurants tend to pack in as many diners as possible at beefed up prices on Valentine's night, there is an opportunity for publicans to take advantage. Keep your offer simple, maintain your usual prices, ensure your service is good and personal, and make your venue romantic without going over the top, and you could tempt disillusioned suitors who might otherwise stay at home for a 'dine in for £20' type deal.

Our research shows that a set menu can be a turn off, with the vast majority preferring to choose from a full menu. Perhaps try some romantically themed specials as an alternative approach to the set-menu route that so many restaurants opt for. Naughty desserts to share are always a popular Valentine's option. Get it right and make the correct impression and you could win repeat business. And with many of those surveyed saying

they would consider a venue they frequent at other times of year, tempt your regulars in for a memorable night in their favourite watering hole.

One thing we would always stress to operators, on any of the big dining-out occasions throughout the year, is to plan ahead. People like to get their bookings in early, so make sure you, and your staff, are ready to take those booking calls, armed with all the appropriate information regarding your offer on the night.

More than half of those we surveyed said they will be making bookings at least two weeks before Valentine's night, so if you have a quiet January, make hay while the sun is shining and get your Valentine's plans in place.

Finally, many of those we spoke to had experienced a particularly memorable Valentine's night by receiving a marriage proposal, so make sure you have some Champagne on ice, just in case!



Bubbly night out: marriage proposals call for chilled Champagne

About us: HospitalityGEM is the new business-to-business trading name for The Mystery Dining Company. HospitalityGEM helps restaurant, pub, hotel and catering businesses to grow sales, build brand reputation, analyse performance and develop people through a range of Guest Experience Management services and software. www.hospitalityGEM.com

