

# Indulge

## Table for two

5 restaurants to visit on Valentine's Day

Sarah Griesemer Asbury Park Press | USA TODAY NETWORK - NEW JERSEY

Valentine's Day can be overwhelming, don't you think? Expectations are high. Did you choose the best chocolates? Order the prettiest flowers? Reserve the best table at the perfect restaurant? • Sadly, we can't help with the first two items. But if you haven't yet made a reservation for Thursday, read on for details on five Monmouth and Ocean county restaurants that are sure to impress your Valentine.

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## Restaurants

### Sirena Ristorante, Long Branch

While Laurita Winery offers views of the vineyards, Sirena Ristorante, a long-time favorite for upscale Italian cuisine, delivers a floor-to-ceiling view of the ocean from its location at the south end of the Pier Village boardwalk. (Its sister restaurant, Stella Marina, does the same on the Asbury Park boardwalk.)

On Valentine's Day, Sirena Ristorante will be open from 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. and will serve its regular menu - favorites include housemade cavatelli with brown butter sauce and smoked mozzarella (\$24), chicken scarpriello (\$27), and pappardelle with Bolognese of beef, veal and pork (\$26) - along with a specials menu that includes Wagyu beef carpaccio; beet and citrus salad with ricotta salata; housemade gnocchi with lump crab; filet mignon; and lobster tail arrabiata with mascarpone risotto and butter-poached asparagus (\$16 to \$40).

From the bar, try the chocolate-covered strawberry cocktail, made with vanilla and strawberry vodkas, butter-scotch schnapps, chocolate liquor and pureed strawberries.

Go: 27 Ocean Ave.; 732-222-1119, sirenaristorante.com. As of press time, general open seating was available.



A seafood entree at Sirena Ristorante in Long Branch. For Valentine's Day, the restaurant will serve its regular menu, along with specials. COURTESY OF SIRENA RISTORANTE

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## Rumson House, Rumson

If you celebrated Valentine's Day at this Ridge Road restaurant last year, it was known by a different name, one it carried for nearly 50 years: Fromagerie.

A favorite for fine dining since brothers Hubert and Markus Peter opened their restaurant in 1972, the name change is the most recent in a string of updates at Fromagerie. Restaurateur David Burke bought it in 2006, ushering in nearly a decade of fine-dining dishes served in his signature whimsical style (With his pastrami salmon and cheesecake lollipops, Chicago Tribune once called him the P.T. Barnum of chefs.)

Diners were stunned when Burke sold the restaurant in 2015. It reopened in 2016 under the ownership of Steven Botta, Angelo Bongiovanni, and Paul and Enilda Sansone. Botta and Bongiovanni have since parted ways with the Sansones, now the sole owners of their newly renamed Rumson House. Gone are Fromagerie's white tablecloths, and with them the notion that the restaurant, for some, was only for special occasions.

"We're still retaining the old glory of the service and the food," said Vicki Kapish, who works in various capacities at the restaurant, which announced its name change via social media in early January. "The quality is still the same. But we don't want to always be considered a destination spot. We don't want people to think they can only for an anniversary or a birthday. We don't want to make anyone feel that they can't just drop in."

For Valentine's Day, Executive Chef Michael Dunst, who was in place before the change, will offer a four-course meal highlighting Rumson House's new focus on seasonally inspired cuisine. Dishes include leek bisque; local greens with pistachio-crusting goat cheese and hearts of palm; suckling pig pork belly with edamame; tartare prime tenderloin with quail egg; vanilla-poached lobster with tarragon risotto; osso bucco; and creme brulee, cheesecake or peppermint pot de creme (\$99 per person).

Go: 26 Ridge Road; 732-852-2650; rumsonhousej.com. Reservations suggested.

## Laurita Winery, Plumsted

At this 40-plus acre vineyard, which rises above a winding country road in the New Egypt section of the township, Valentine's Day is more than just one day.

Today and Sunday, the winery will host its Wine and Chocolate Trail Weekend, a free event that features music, chocolate vendors, wine and chocolate tastings, and vow renewals. The weekend is part of a statewide event sponsored by the Garden State Wine Growers Association.

A Valentine's Day brunch will be served Sunday, beginning at 10 a.m. (\$47, \$27 for children 6 to 12).

As for Valentine's Day itself, the winery will host a four-course dinner prepared by Branches Catering of West Long Branch. Dinner begins at 7 p.m. and the menu includes a winter salad with cranberries, pecans and brie; penne a la vodka; Chateaubriand with mashed potatoes; pistachio-crusting salmon with dill beurre blanc; and chocolate lava cake for dessert (\$65 per person). The meal will be served Feb. 15 as well.



A seafood entree at Sirena Ristorante in Long Branch. For Valentine's Day, the restaurant will serve its regular menu, along with specials. COURTESY OF SIRENA RISTORANTE



The eggplant Napoleon, layered with ricotta cheese, from Nauvoo Grill Club in Fair Haven.

COURTESY OF NAUVOO GRILL CLUB



Pan-seared dayboat scallops with escargot, parsnip puree and lobster bordelotto at Rumson House.

COURTESY OF RUMSON HOUSE

a menu that is gluten free and Paleo friendly.

"One of the things I hear most often is, 'Why do I feel good when I leave here?'" said Stehle, who opened Cavé in 2013. "Because you're eating good food. Our focus here is good, whole foods prepared with a high level of culinary talent in our kitchen from scratch."



The dining room at Laurita Winery in Plumsted. COURTESY OF REBECCA BARGER

## COMING THIS SUNDAY

Dr.

Go: 85 Archertown Road; 732-542-5050; lauritawinery.com. For reservations, call Branches at 732-542-5050.

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#### Cavé Bistro, Avon

For an indulgent meal in a cozy restaurant, reserve a table at Doug Stehle's restaurant, which just happens to serve

through."

For Valentine's Day, Stehle will serve a three-course menu during seatings at 6 and 8 p.m. (\$75 per person) The dinner includes seared dayboat scallops with lemon-kale pesto or Iberico pork ribs with cucumber-jicama salad, and sous vide filet mignon with bacon and cacao-roasted sweet potato or roasted Ora King salmon with potato and leek ragout. For dessert, a dark chocolate bomb with salted caramel or ricotta cheesecake with brown butter cashew crust.

Go: 515 Sylvania Ave.; 732-776-8556, www.cavebistro.com. Reservations required.

#### Nauvoo Grill Club, Fair Haven

Nauvoo Grill Club may be known best for its banquet spaces – together with nearby sister restaurant Raven & The Peach, they have 10 – but diners looking for a romantic evening can set the scene at this ski lodge-style New American restaurant. A tip: Do your best to nab a table near the stone fireplace in the cozy dining room.

The a la carte Valentine's Day menu, which will served from 5 to 10 p.m. Feb. 14 and available the following weekend as well, begins with truffle mac and cheese with smoked bacon, an eggplant Napoleon, and meatball crostini, among other dishes (\$11 to \$14).

Entrees include filet mignon with black truffle butter, veal porterhouse, pepper-crusted tuna and handmade gnudi (\$25 to \$38).

Go: 121 Fair Haven Road; 732-747-8777, nauvoogrillclub.com. Reservations recommended but not required.

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