

FONDUE FIRES UP ROMANCE



JEFF LOUGHLIN/The Patriot Ledger

■ Chocolate fondue set up for two at The Wine Cellar in Boston.



By JOOY FEINBERG
The Patriot Ledger

Like a heart pierced with Cupid's arrow, the strawberry hangs on the end of the fondue fork and is embraced by rich and creamy melted chocolate. The warm chocolate drips a little when the first bite is taken.

For a romantic way to say "Be My Valentine," look no further than a shared chocolate fondue. It's the gift of chocolate, with the intimacy that comes when two fondue forks dip into the same pot. And you can linger over fondue, because the fondue pot will keep the mixture warm while your romance simmers.

"It's a different way of dining," said Thierry Charles, general manager of The Wine Cellar in Boston, which specializes in fondue. "It's a beautiful way to be on a date or with your spouse because it's such a social way to dine. It stays hot, so you can take your time eating. And nobody would be shocked if you fed each other."

Originating in Switzerland, fondue comes from the French word *fondre*, to melt. According to one legend, an alpine shepherd originated the dish, when he became bored with his



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■ Just like in baking, use high-quality chocolate when preparing a fondue and avoid high temperatures.

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usual dinner and heated his wine and cheese together in one pot and dunked in pieces of bread.

For classic cheese fondue, Emmental and Gruyère cheeses are heated with white wine, kirsch and seasonings, although cheddar, gorgonzola and Swiss cheeses also are good choices. A second type of fondue, bourguignonne, features cubes of marinated or plain meat cooked in hot oil or seasoned broth, then dipped into savory sauces. Vegetables also can be included.

But the most celebratory is chocolate fondue, which mixes chocolate with some combination of cream, butter, condensed milk and/or liqueur.

"Ninety-five percent of our diners order the chocolate fondue," said Charles, who offers five varieties of chocolate among the restaurant's more than 20 fondues.

The key to a good fondue is to use a chocolate that is 70 percent cacao and to heat it slowly on the stove at a low temperature, stirring to make sure it doesn't burn, Charles said. The fondue is done when the mixture is entirely melted and appears velvety.

"You want a rich, smooth con-

sistency that doesn't break up," said Charles, who uses Belgian chocolate. "If burns or stays lumpy, you can't use it and need

to start again."

If you're new to making chocolate fondue, you can avoid burning it by heating the chocolate in a double boiler. And use tea candles to keep the

chocolate warm in the fondue pot, because heat from a Sterno burner is too hot for chocolate, he said.

Whether you make it at home or dine in a restaurant, you start by selecting the type of chocolate. Dark chocolate is the most bitter; white is the sweetest; and milk is the creamiest. For home cooks, Charles recommends using chocolate chips from Ghirardelli or other premium chocolate makers.

Then experiment with flavor by swirling in peanut butter, marshmallow, caramel and nuts or adding a liqueur like Irish cream, Grand Marnier, amaretto, crème de menthe and Kahlua.

Charles likes to invent fondues, like the Full Moon, made of white chocolate, mango puree and orange liqueur. He's planning a spring fondue with maple syrup.

"I try combinations and see how they taste," he said. "The Grand Marnier brightened and

balanced the flavor."

You also can get creative with the dipping ingredients to make a colorful, as well as tasty, presentation. Beyond strawberries, consider pineapple, raspberries, banana, grapes and dried apricots. The fruit should be cold, which allows the chocolate to adhere to it and brings out the contrasting taste.

Generally, chocolate fondue is served with sweets. The Melting Pot, a fondue chain with restaurants in Framingham and Burlington and a planned opening in Boston, offers marshmallows, pound cake, and brownies. Other possibilities are macarons, sponge cake and vanilla wafers.

Part of fondue's appeal comes from the attractive fondue set with its shiny stainless steel or copper pot and festive long-handled forks. If you don't want to purchase fondue equipment, you could serve chocolate fondue in a crock pot, as the role of the pot is simply to keep the chocolate warm and fluid. Fondue sets range from \$20 to \$210 and are sold such stores as Target, Crate and Barrel, and Williams-Sonoma. The better-quality equipment distributes, regulates and holds the heat better.

Until five years ago, no Boston restaurant served fondue, because it was illegal to cook with flames within three feet of customers, Charles said. Now, Grotto Restaurant, Avenue One in the Hyatt Regency and Shabu-Zen are among the restaurants that offer fondue.

For all his passion for fondue, Charles is not blinded by love.

"The fondue has to taste really good, but you're not going to say, 'This is the best thing I ever ate,' he said. "But you will say, 'This is a really great way to dine.'"

"It's a beautiful way to be on a date or with your spouse because it's such a social way to dine."

Thierry Charles,
The Wine Cellar in Boston



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