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Reservations for Valentine's Day Dinner Are Going Fast

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Feb. 14 — the annual celebration of all things romantic, such as candlelight dinners and tables adorned with rose petals — is seven days away.

But some restaurants in the northern suburbs stopped accepting reservations weeks ago. There are still reservations at many other restaurants, though you might not get a table at your first-choice spot or your desired time.

"I've been booked since the beginning of January," said Maureen Steppe, co-owner of Purdys Homestead Restaurant in North Salem with her husband, Charles. "We fill up here so fast ... right now I'm getting bombarded with reservations ... I have 50 people on a wait list."

Restaurateurs say they always do well on Valentine's Day but this is an especially good year because the holiday falls on a Saturday, traditionally the night when couples go out.

"Restaurateurs love Valentine's Day," said Paul Frumkin, editor-at-large at Nation's Restaurant News, a weekly trade publication. "It's a big day."

John Crabtree, owner of Crabtree's Kittle House Restaurant and Inn in Chappaqua, said the industry welcomes Valentine's Day because it comes in the middle of February, which is the slowest time of the year.

"It's cold," Crabtree said. "People don't go out as much. They're still paying off credit cards from December. (Valentine's Day) is a nice little boost for restaurants."

Crabtree said the 12 guest rooms at the inn have long been taken.

"People started making reservations almost on Feb. 15 of last year," he said. "Valentine's Day has become one of the biggest days of the year in the restaurant business. Ten, 15 years ago it was a nice night. Now it's turned into a phenomenon."

Jacques Loupiac, owner of La Panetiere in Rye, said he decided to also serve Valentine's dinner on Friday and Sunday nights as well as a Saturday lunch to meet the increased demand.

Loupiac said the size of his restaurant, which has just 20 tables, is another reason for the expanded hours. By serving his Valentine's Day menu over the weekend, he said, he can accommodate more guests.

"On Valentine's Day we could put tables in the parking lot, on the roof and in the cellar and we would fill up," Loupiac said.

Peter X. Kelly, owner of three restaurants in Rockland County, said he usually does not serve lunch on Saturday. He is doing

so this year at all three restaurants to accommodate the overflow of people who could not get reservations for Saturday night.

Kelly's restaurants are Xaviars at Piermont, the Freelance Cafe — which is adjacent to Xaviars in Piermont — and Restaurant X in Congers.

Among the restaurants in the northern suburbs, which were either fully booked or had a few tables available as of late this week include The Arch in Brewster, Old '76 House in Tappan, Zuppa's in Yonkers, Le Bouchon in Cold Spring and P.F. Chang's China Bistro at The Westchester mall in White Plains.

Lisa Guariglia of Pelham Manor, an illustrator who was shopping at The Westchester this week, said she and her husband, Ed, "almost always" go out for a special dinner on Valentine's Day but they have not yet made reservations this year.

"We usually go into the city and usually try to make (reservations) at an elegant place," Guariglia said.

Not everyone goes out on Valentine's Day.

Marc Baiocco of Ossining, an assistant principal at the Emerson Middle School in Yonkers, said he never goes out Valentine's Day or Mother's Day. At one time he worked in a restaurant and he feels they're just too crowded on those occasions.

Jaclyn Defonce of Briarcliff said she would like to eat out on Valentine's Day but cannot. She's a head waitress at the Olive Garden in Poughkeepsie and must work that night.

"I should get it off," Defonce said with a laugh, "but I don't."

Lara Belmont of West Harrison said she usually goes out with her girlfriends on Valentine's Day. That's because her fiance owns Novita, a bar in White Plains, and he must work Saturday nights.

"So I go out with the girls," Belmont said. "Most people don't want to sit home and feel bad."

She expects that she and her fiance will go out for a special dinner next week.

But for those who do plan to dine out on Saturday, restaurant owners and chefs have been collaborating for weeks to develop special menus for lovers. Among the most popular dishes on menus from area restaurants are rack of lamb, salmon, lobster and filet mignon.

Robert Leggio, owner of Zuppa's, an Italian restaurant in Yonkers, said his Valentine's dinner features a red and white theme. As guests are seated, they are given cauliflower soup with rosewater foam to eat while they read the menu.

A special dessert at Zuppa's is a white chocolate dream cake.

"It's white chocolate with a raspberry center," Leggio said. "We thought that was very Valentine-zee."

A dessert at Old '76 House is long-stemmed strawberries with warm chocolate dipping sauce. Also, the restaurant will garnish all desserts with a white chocolate disc embossed with red hearts.

Restaurants are also making desserts with caramel and, no surprise, passion fruit sauce.

A sampling of area restaurants indicate many have fixed-price dinners in the area of \$49 to \$75.

The National Restaurant Association said Valentine's is the third most popular occasion for dining out behind birthday celebrations, which are first, and Mother's Day.

But Valentine's Day is the biggest day of the year for reservations made with OpenTable Inc., a San Francisco-based provider of Internet services to the global food-service industry. OpenTable has a proprietary electronic reservations book, which took 31,200 reservations nationwide for Valentine's Day 2003 and so far has 35,700 for this year, said Wendy McCarthy, an OpenTable spokeswoman.

McCarthy also said that OpenTable expects many couples to go out Friday and Sunday nights to escape the crowds and fixed-price menus, and has opened electronic reservation sheets for Valentine dinners on both those nights.

But even though demand is enormous for dinner reservations on Valentine's Day, restaurants often serve fewer people than they may on an ordinary Saturday night, said Robert Norden, owner of Old '76 House.

That's because you don't get parties of five or six on Valentine's day, he said. On a regular Saturday night he can seat 200 people at 40 tables where as on Valentine's Day he can just seat 80 people at one time because virtually all reservations are for parties of two.

Leggio of Zuppa's said Valentine's Day often brings in new customers so restaurateurs always want to make a good impression.

"You hope they'll come back for dinner during the week," he said.

Crabtree said even though restaurateurs welcome Valentine's Day any day of the week they probably like it best when the 14th falls on a Wednesday. That's because many restaurants are full Saturday nights whether it's Valentine's Day or not. But when Valentine's Day falls midweek it's a bonus.

"It's like another Saturday night in the middle of the week," Crabtree said.