

## Valentine's Day aphrodisiacs: Chocolate, yes, but sparrow brains?

By Vicki Hyman/The Star-Ledger

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Pan forte, or "strong bread," a mixture of bread, honey, nuts and spices, was prescribed centuries ago to help women conceive.

Once, on a foodie mission to Flushing, Queens, **Francine Segan** came across a bag of what appeared to be fried garlic chips (yum!) at an Asian storefront. But the clerk refused to sell it to her, and initially wouldn't say why. Finally, the woman behind the counter began making gestures. When Segan continued to look puzzled, the gestures became more, shall we say, graphic. The coin dropped.

Segan, a culinary historian and food writer, wasn't holding garlic chips. In the bag were shavings of deer antler, a reputed aphrodisiac usually sold only to men.



Culinary historian Francine SeganThe reasoning behind some legendary aphrodisiacs is not terribly sophisticated. Body parts from virile animals -- Segan has also been warned away from ground tiger privates she mistook for dried mushrooms -- will make men more virile. Phallus-shaped veggies are thought to boost women's satisfaction. In her book "**Shakespeare's Kitchen**," Segan includes a recipe for "courage tart" (back then, courage meant sexual potency) that calls for sweet potatoes, raisins, wine and cinnamon and nutmeg -- those spices have traditionally been thought to boost the libido. "Anything that tingles your tongue," she says, "they felt would tingle ... other ... parts."

The word aphrodisiac derives from Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. The myths surrounding her have spawned long-standing beliefs about libido-boosters, says Segan, who also authored "**The Philosopher's Kitchen**," about cooking in ancient Greece and Rome.

Aphrodite has often been portrayed rising up from foam in a scallop-edged shell, which may explain why oysters have long been associated with increased sexual drive. Her



sacred bird was a sparrow, and for centuries sparrow brains were also considered an aphrodisiac.

But visual cues are most often a factor. It seems that any food that bears a passing resemblance to genitalia gets labeled an aphrodisiac: carrots, asparagus, celery, figs, raspberries (they used to be called "nipple fruit") and avocados, which grow in pairs and whose name comes from the Aztec word for "**testicle tree.**"

During the Renaissance, cucumbers were banned from nunneries so as not to overly excite the residents. According to Central American folklore, the vanilla plant, with its long, curved stalk, was said to have been created by a goddess who couldn't marry her human lover, so she turned herself into a plant so all women could enjoy sexual pleasure, Segan says.

The meaning of aphrodisiac seems to have changed over the years; centuries ago, the term was applied to foods that would cure infertility. In the Renaissance, Italians developed pan forte, a bread covered with honey, nuts, sugar and those "tingly" spices -- kind of like today's holiday fruitcakes, only edible, says Segan, who is also the spokeswoman for Dolce Italia, Italy's Confectioners Association. The "strong bread" was prescribed like a medicine for couples who wanted to conceive.

Now the word aphrodisiac is generally associated with libido-lifters and stamina-boosters. And while the Food and Drug Administration has long pooh-pooed any claims connecting foodstuffs and virility, there is a bit of science behind some acclaimed aphrodisiacs. Oysters are high in zinc, which is crucial to testosterone production, and garlic and ginger both stimulate blood flow, which can be critical for men.

The consumption of chocolate has been found to stimulate endorphins, the body chemicals that make us happy, similar to the storied "runner's high." A 2006 study by Italian researchers in the Journal of Sexual Medicine found that women who ate chocolate on a regular basis had a better sex drive and easier time reaching orgasm (though the chocolate lovers were all younger, so age could have accounted for the difference).

But there are just as many, if not more, fruits, veggies, spices and proteins that are good for you but whose reputations for lust-making are unwarranted -- bananas, figs, tomatoes, olives, and even New Jersey's state fruit, the blueberry.

"That I am not familiar with," says **Nicholi Vorsa**, the director of the Marucci Blueberry and Cranberry Research and Extension Center in Chatsworth, when asked about the blueberry's reputation as an ardor actualizer.

After a pause, he ventures, "Blueberries are good for eyesight."

In other words, the opposite of beer goggles.

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