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DINING For a Romantic Dinner, a List to Take to Heart



Susan Farley for The New York Times

Lorena's in Maplewood, a jewel box of a storefront.

By KARLA COOK

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RESTAURANT reviewing hasn't dampened my ardor for dining out, but it has tweaked my standards of luxury and its passionate twin, romance. Rack of lamb? Often overcooked. Chocolate and strawberries? Please. Strawberries aren't in season until late May, when I want them off the vine, all by themselves.

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Jason Woodruff for The New York Times

Mehndi is a grotto of a restaurant in Morristown.

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Jason Woodruff for The New York Times

For elegance: The Manor in West Orange.

Likewise, I'm not impressed by gas fireplaces and lace curtains and hearts on the wall. A romantic restaurant is something else. A romantic restaurant is one that does not distract me from my Valentine.

A romantic restaurant takes realistic reservations and seats us promptly. It is neither chilly nor too warm, with lighting that illuminates the menu but softens the effects of too-little sleep for too many years — we're parents, after all. Its tables are far enough apart that I don't have to wonder if the waiter for the next table might sit in my soup.

At a romantic restaurant, the waiters refill my water glass without asking, but not my wine. They do not ask me to hold on to my fork. Nor do they ask me if I'm "still working on that." They know the food and can describe it. And they do not gather around for loud serenades.

Romance wilts in a din, so music is background and noise is dampened by carpets and draperies.

As for the food, it's good enough and plentiful enough to share, but there is not so much that I must haul a bag of leftovers to the car after dinner. It's well paced, well conceived and executed. Art is a plus. So is wit.

Following are a few restaurants that fit the bill, culled from reviews by David Corcoran and me:

Mehndi, Morristown

A transporting tunnel-like mahogany corridor leads the way to a beautiful two-level grotto of a restaurant. It offers skillfully executed Punjabi and Mughlai cuisine from the north of India. Snack-food appetizers — pakoras, samosas, papadum wafers topped with vegetables — carry a heady blend of spices. Tandoori dishes have a mouth-filling tart-smoky character; casseroles are well executed and potently spiced. On weekends, an artist paints henna designs on customers' hands or ankles free.

Mehndi, 88 Headquarters Plaza, 3 Speedwell Avenue (Route 202), Morristown; (973) 871-2323. mehndimorristown.com/main.html. Main dishes, \$11 to \$25. 10/07/07. D.C. mehendimorristown.com. Main dishes, \$23.95 to \$33. 06/04/08. 2008.

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