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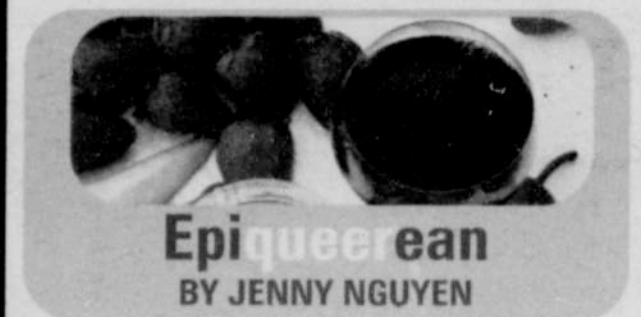
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Epiqueerean
BY JENNY NGUYEN

The Culinary Cupid

In case you didn't get the nookie you were hoping for this Valentine's Day or you didn't play your heartstrings to the tune of a commercialized Cupid, I've compiled a tiny list of three locales dedicated to well-known aphrodisiacs: oysters, chocolate and chilies. Because really, there's always a time for...love.

Alberta Street Oyster Bar & Grill • 2926 N.E. Alberta St.

Not only does Alberta bring the freshest pearl purses, but they also have an admirable selection. We were met with seven varieties from Hood Canal to British Columbia to Maine. Served with four different mignonettes, half-dozen prices (around \$16) were well worth the extra buck. Don't let the name fool you: From seared scallops with beluga lentils to perfectly cooked monkfish with braised oxtail, nearly every item on the menu is stellar. Portions are small and prices are steep, but with every aspect of every dish done to perfection, money really is no object. For those in more of a hurry to eat out, happy hour from 4:30 to 6 p.m. and from 10 to 11 p.m. is off the hook. Come in Sunday or Monday and eat at the bar all day for happy hour prices. They'll have you sucking, shucking and eating 'em raw in no time.

Pix Hawthorne • 3731 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd.

Just when you thought you'd heard enough about Cheryl "I Can't Stop the Baker" Wakerhauser and her Pix Patisserie empire, BAM! She quickly flipped her previous partnership, Bar Pastiche, into another cute little venue for petit pastries. For Bar Pastiche fans, there's still the great wines, ports and bar displaying a smaller *tapas* selection and flamenco events. But one of the best features of this chocolate destination location is its dedication to the idea of *tapas* or "the small plate." Many of the most popular desserts have miniature versions of themselves so that you really don't have to choose just one or two (or three). Now you can literally have your cakes and eat them two...at a time.

Autentica • 5507 N.E. 30th Ave.

My newest crush, the Mexican restaurant Autentica, has it all—the perfect bod in a growing neighborhood, warm and cozy atmosphere, knowledgeable staff and tastes to tantalize the tongue—making me feeling giddy inside. The *ceviche* is perfectly balanced with seafood, fresh chile and lime. The corn tortillas are homemade and brought out hot to every table. The *taco al pastor* is tender and full of flavor, and the *tostada* with shredded chicken is superb with cabbage, radishes and guajillo pepper. The standout dish is the *lomitos de puerco en mole verde*, meltingly tender pork medallions served in a green mole made with pumpkin seeds, tomatillos and Serrano chiles. Although Autentica's food isn't necessarily spicy hot, its perfected use of chilies could just spark a certain other type of fire. 10

JENNY NGUYEN is a freelance food writer, which means she needs your comments to help guide her. Help her help you by writing to epiqueerean@comcast.net.

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