Let’s be frank, people have been enjoying sex for a very long time. We celebrate our love lives most in February, the month of romance. It’s not all hearts and flowers, but food too. Every Valentine’s Day, the internet is clogged with endless lists of aphrodisiacs – foods that supposedly enhance sexual desire – and restaurants all over the world unveil aphrodisiac-inspired menus.

Aphrodisiacs are as old as civilization itself. They are named for Aphrodite, the ancient Greek goddess of love and beauty. In ancient cultures, human fertility was a moral and religious expectation and certain foods were sought after to help maintain the body’s relevant functions.

There are several categories of aphrodisiacs, says Dr Dolores Lamb, director of the Center for Reproductive Medicine and professor of Urology and Molecular and Cellular Biology at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas. “There are foods where the shapes are reminiscent of sexual organs – asparagus, celery, onions. Other foods have shapes or textures that are thought to underlie their aphrodisiac qualities [oysters and clams],” she explains. “There are also foods that are stimulatory to our senses [pepper], which stimulate or enhance release in the body resulting in sensory changes, increased heart rate and sweating.”

Countless studies reveal the vague potential benefits of aphrodisiacs, Lamb says that, scientifically, very little is known about the control of sexual motivation and desire, but in the case of human sexuality, the psychology is perhaps more relevant.

“In general, there are no evidence-based medicine studies that compellingly show foods have aphrodisiac properties,” she says. “While scientists may discover the molecular factors regulating sexual motivation in the future leading to pharmacologic interventions, clearly there are personal, human issues at play that transcend molecular biology.”

Sexual motivation seems to be primarily psychological. Hong Kong-based psychotherapist Nikki Green says the mind often gets in the way of science, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing. “It makes a lot of sense when you think about how our bodies work, what foods are rich in what, and how that affects our bodily functions,” she says. “But it’s important to recognize the mind is a powerful thing. There’s a placebo effect, so if somebody has oysters and thinks they’re going to become a better lover than they aren’t, that, in itself, is a wonderful thing.”

While Green has never recommended a diet of specific foods to her clients seeking sex therapy, she says food and sex are intrinsically linked, and often suggests starting a night of sexual exercises by eating something light and delicious. “There is something very hedonistic about eating something light and delicious. Starting a night of sexual exercises by eating something light and delicious is a very, very powerful thing,” she says. “It’s about spoiling yourself, knowing that the people who love you are going to take care of you, and that’s really a powerful thing.”

Cancellation of sexual desire – and motivation will be difficult if not elusive to the person-to-person basis for sexual attraction and motivation,” she says. “It’s not just the food, I think, but it’s those romantic moments, you choose somebody special to have dinner with. For me, I like the idea of snacking on oysters, dipping brie and grilled asparagus in hollandaise sauce, feeding each other, enjoying with lots of champagne and finish with dipping strawberries in chocolate, somewhere warm by the beach, pool or in a Jacuzzi.”

Indeed, the search for a magical sex potion or natural one is seemingly endless. Lamb says there is a clear distinction between aphrodisiacs, which increase sexual motivation and agents that help performance. “Although pharmaceutical agents such as Viagra are helpful for some types of erectile dysfunction and are frequently called aphrodisiacs, they impact performance rather than sexual motivation,” she says.

“The person-to-person basis for sexual attraction and motivation will be difficult if not elusive to define on the molecular basis – and that’s why it is so important to understand the mind is a powerful thing.”

Chefs are keen on celebrating romance in the form of aphrodisiac-inspired menus. Among them is Jean-Christophe Novelli, executive chef of GRI Leisure Concept. His Valentine’s Day menu at Café Roma this year includes foamy smoked oyster soup, grilled oyster fillet and scallop coated with almonds, and raspberry chocolate mouse cake.

“A Valentine’s Day menu should be filling, but not so much that it leaves guests feeling stuffed afterwards, so the night can continue,” he says. “I like the idea of gentle techniques, like poaching, lightly marinated, gently sautéed. Absolutely no ingredients that result in a heavy breath. The dishes should also be designed so they are easy to eat, such as nice spoonsfuls, so the conversation is easy and smooth during dinner, especially for first dates.”
1. Artichoke
In Greek mythology, Zeus turned a woman into an artichoke after she rejected him. Tough on the outside and soft on the inside, they symbolise the idea of playing hard to get.

2. Pomegranate
Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, was said to be the first to plant a pomegranate tree. Because of their many seeds, pomegranates are often associated with fertility and abundance.

3. Asparagus
The asparagus is considered an aphrodisiac because of its shape. French couples once drank on three meals of asparagus on the day before their wedding to increase their libidos ahead of the big night.

4. Almonds
Greek and Italian newlyweds hand out sugared almonds to represent the bittersweetness of life and in odd numbers to indicate the couple cannot be divided. Supertition has it that if a girl places an almond under her pillow, she will dream of her future husband.

5. Caviar
Caviar is sturgeon roe and, like bird’s egg, it is associated with man-life. Caviar was a symbol of fertility for many ancient civilisations. The black pearls bursting against the tongue produce a tactile sensation that many consider erotic.

6. Figs
An open fig is thought to resemble female genitalia and is a symbol of fertility and sexuality. Some biblical scholars say the fig rather than the apple was the forbidden fruit that tempted Adam and Eve, who made clothing from fig leaves. The ancient Greeks also considered the fruit a symbol of love and celebrated new crops with a sexual ritual.

7. Honey
While the origins of the honeymoon are unclear, it could stem from an ancient tradition – possibly from northern Europe or Babylon – that involved newlyweds drinking mead, fermented honey wine, every day until the first moon of their new union.

8. Vanilla
With its shape resembling female genitalia, Europeans claimed vanilla as an aphrodisiac, telling stories of how it can transform the ordinary man into a wonderful lover.

9. Avocado
The Aztecs called the avocado the “taste tree” because its fruit hang in pairs. They were so enamoured of the fruit’s aphrodisiac properties that virgin women were not allowed to leave their houses during the avocado harvest.

10. Aniseed
Ancient Greeks and Romans suggested sucking the seeds from the powerfully flavoured fruit to increase the libidos.

11. Radish
In ancient Rome, the god Apollo was said to have left a golden radish at the site of the Oracle of Delphi (the temple whose priestess was believed to make prophecies). In Japan, the radish is also considered erotic.

12. Truffle
Throughout history, truffles have been nicknamed “diamonds of cookery” and “testicles of the earth.” Napoleon was said to eat truffles to increase his masculine capabilities. The scent of truffles is also similar to male pheromones.