

COVER STORY

HOW TO IMPRESS
YOUR LOVE ON
FEBRUARY 14THE COOK
OFTEN LOVE

With Valentine's Day on the horizon, **Simon Wilkinson** seeks advice from chefs on a meal designed for wooing

WHEN Simon Burr was a young duck, fresh out of school, he decided to impress a girl he fancied by inviting her over for a Valentine's dinner.

The house was empty. The garden setting was perfect. The meal? A disaster!

"It was 1982. I still lived at home and I'd never cooked much before then," recalls Simon, now co-owner and chef at The Olfactory Inn, Strathalbyn.

"I was trying to impress this girl, Jenny, and she really liked steak. I'd gone down to the butcher and bought two cracking fillet steaks. The instructions said to season the frying pan by throwing in lots of salt and getting it really hot, which I did. But it didn't say tip the salt out. So I cooked the steaks in the salt—two big scoops full—and served them. "We went out for burgers."

PLAY SAFE
In the years since that first, failed attempt, Simon reckons he has come up trumps on many occasions when using his culinary prowess to melt a heart. So today, in the lead up to Valentine's Day (February 14), he has agreed to share some of his secrets.

The first lesson, Simon says, is the one he learnt with the oversalted steak: stick to what you know.

"Work within your comfort zone," he says. "And, if you're

not sure, have a practice beforehand. Try it out on another friend. Do a trial run."

SMALL TALK
Like many things in life, it is the anticipation of a tryst that can be half the fun.

So put some thought into an invitation, maybe even write a poem, Simon suggests.

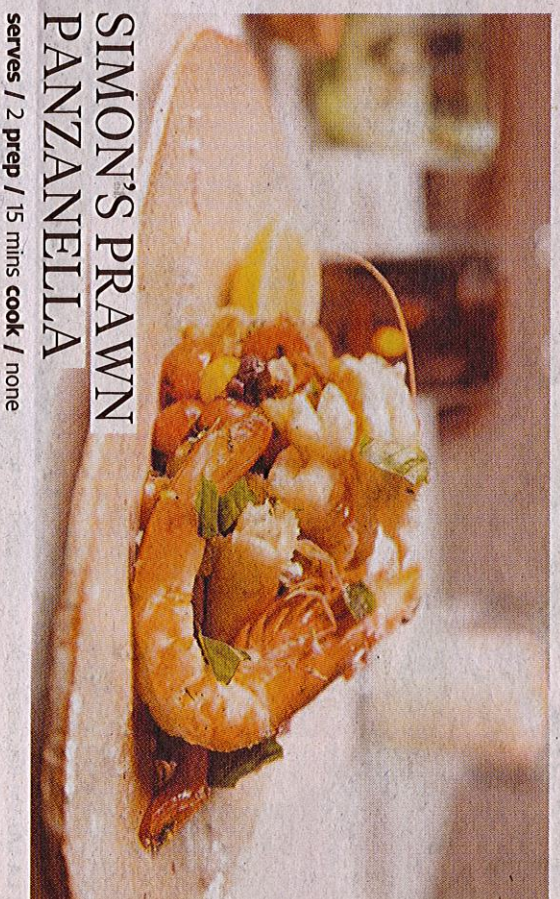
Discuss the meal that you are going to cook—and pay attention to the likes and dislikes of your love.

"The idea of food is quite exciting... just talking about it," Simon says. "It can prolong the whole courting process while gathering your information."

It's about the listening, not the talking. If they're a vegetarian, there is no point cooking a lamb roast.

SET THE SCENE
A meal will be extra-memorable if the setting is special. This could be as simple as a picnic rug and a view if the weather is kind. Set a table under a tree in the garden and decorate it with some of the surrounding flowers or foliage.

Indoors, move the table somewhere different or try a rug on the floor. Find elegant plates, cutlery and glassware from the treasures at a second-hand store. Don't forget the music and, unless your love is a headbanger, ditch the heavy metal. Anything to show you've taken care. For Simon, a meal outdoors is hard to beat. "Perhaps it's just the idea of freedom and back to nature—it

SIMON'S PRAWN
PANZANELLA

serves / 2 prep / 15 mins cook / none

- 1/2 punnets ripe cherry tomatoes (mixed is good)
- 1/2 tsp fine salt
- 3 sprigs oregano, picked
- 1 sprig thyme, chopped
- 3 sprigs parsley, chopped
- 1 red shallot, finely sliced
- 12 olives (a mix is good), pitted
- Pinch of freshly milled black pepper
- 1 thick slice stale bread (sourdough is good)
- 100 ml extra virgin olive oil (the best you can find)

adds to the romantic feel. Maybe it is a table in a magnificent garden or somewhere overlooking the beach."

READY, SET ...
Your dinner is not going to be romantic if you spend the whole time in the kitchen. So if there is any fussy preparation to do, make sure it is finished well ahead of date night.

Restrict the last-minute cooking to either turning on the oven, searing steak or fish in a frying pan or pulling your dish triumphantly from the fridge. "I've had many successes cooking a decent steak or a piece of fish properly and serving with a fresh salad," Simon says. "Or doing pasta really well, especially if you can make your own ahead of time."

ALL IN THE MIND
Simon doesn't pay much attention to the claims of foods that are meant to be aphrodisiacs. He reckons any magic is all in the head.

"It's a placebo effect... but it works," he says. Since February is a poor time for oysters he

- 10 large peeled deveined whole cooked SA prawns
- 6 basil leaves
- 1 lemon

1 Cut the tomatoes in halves or quarters, depending on size.

2 Tear bread into about 20 pieces, about the same size as the cut tomatoes.

3 Place the tomatoes, salt, oregano, thyme, parsley, shallot, olives and pepper in a bowl and mix.

suggests trying instead lightly cooked, raw or cured seafood, for a similar sensual quality. Sharing a platter of sashimi or sushi—particularly if you are adept with chopsticks—can be dead sexy.

TREAD LIGHTLY
Rich, bulky food are the enemy of romance. So is overeating. "You want to leave room for another glass of Champagne and not feel like you need to go to sleep," Simon warns.

PLAY IT SAFE
Steer clear of foods that will make the other person in any way uncomfortable. Unless you know they love hot food, play it safe with spice. And keep the garlic in check. Don't serve anything too messy or difficult.

"Something like crab is probably not a first date item," Simon says. "But if it is someone you know well, and you both like food, crab would be great. It could take you anywhere."

'TIS THE SEASON
Given all of the above—and the likelihood Valentine's Day will

Leave for 10–20 minutes.

4 Add bread and oil and mix well. Taste a piece of bread—it should taste deliciously of olive oil, salt, tomato and herbs. If it doesn't add more salt and oil until it does.

5 Arrange on a plate—place prawns on top and garnish with torn basil leaves and lemon cheek.

RECIPES / Simon Burr
PHOTOGRAPHY / Matt Turner

be warm—Simon has designed a menu that fits the bill.

First, a salad that doesn't involve any cooking. Just buy the best prawns (or other seafood) you can afford.

"It is within everyone's capabilities and has some wow factor," Simon says. "Prawns are a slight extravagance, so that makes it special. You could use any seafood, but listen to your partner."

Follow that with a creme caramel that is the definition of sexy on a spoon. And, while the method is a little tricky, it can be done the day before.

Accompany with a berry compote or plain strawberries. Simon suggests gently rinsing the strawberries in a bowl of water, laying out on a tray and leaving in the sun for a few hours.

"It really brings out the flavour," he says. "Hull, cut them in half and toss with a little caster sugar to macerate for half an hour."

And if the creme doesn't work, the berries make for a lovely finish with whipped cream or ice-cream.



CHEERS' PICKS

ANDY NOWELL, SUNNY'S PIZZA/Keep it simple. Food is only lubricant to woo the one you adore, should be vessed for a good time, no golden ticket. Do something you both be involved in. Pork and prawn pot sticker dumplings with plenty of lemongrass, ginger and chilli. Make per cent of them before your guest arrives, then you are cruising.

DUNCAN WELGEMOED, AFRICA Sophia Loren said: "Everything you owe to spaghetti." Spaghetti is the sensual of foods, especially the act of eating it and tasting the sauce on your lovers' lips.

PAUL BAKER, BOTANIC GARDEN RESTAURANT/Have a bottle of Fr Champagne on ice, a big bowl of spaghetti alle vongole, then choose a piece of cheese that is in mini conchiglie some fresh figs, lavosh and a crusty baguette.

PETER CLARKE, VINTNERS (ANGASTON)/The boys could go fishing and use the catch to make something hot and spicy for the girl like our snapper with tom yum sals

JUSTIN MILES, WINDY POINT RESTAURANT/It just has to be de... Make a chocolate panna cotta, w Belgian Callebaut.

DAN MOSS, TERROIR (AUBURNI (pictured) Victoria sponge cake decked out with strawberries, raspberries, pistachio and a gin in each layer of sponge.

Paired with a rhubarb served in bed



TABLE FOR THREE? Lauren Alexander and Simon Burr's romantic moment is interrupted.

Pictures: Matt Turner