

Around Town

A change of heart

Surprise your significant other this Valentine's Day – yes, it is possible. **Michael Franco** offers a loving cup full of nifty ideas that *don't* involve Hallmark cards

Lingerie, a heart-shaped box of chocolates, red roses and – *yawn* – a candlelit dinner. Oh, sorry, did we sound bored during that litany of the usual Valentine's Day treats? You betcha. And if we're yawning, just imagine how your special someone will feel when you come forth with the same old same old this year. Here are a few twists on the traditional that will hopefully replace yawns with that other activity that usually happens in bed.

Instead of red roses...

During the 'season of love', florists are pumping out arrangements faster than Britney makes headlines. The result is identical bouquets that often resemble last year's models. Freshen things up by heading to the **Mandai Orchid Gardens** (200 Mandai Lake Rd; 6269 1036, www.mandai.com.sg). This colour-splashed oasis has over 200 species of orchids with names that sound like they come from the *Kama Sutra*: Mokara, Vanda, and Renantanda. If this isn't enough to get you in the mood, there's always the fact that orchids have a tendency to resemble certain body parts. Satisfy your hunger by dining at the on-site Vanilla Pod Restaurant, and top the day off by purchasing some orchids that are bound to beat any home-delivered bouquets.

Instead of lingerie...

Getting lingerie on V-Day is a bit like getting a hangover from too much cheap tequila: it's hardly a surprise. Don't get us wrong – we're all for barely-there couture, but why not purchase a silky little number some other time, when he or she is least expecting it. This year, make it a *real* adventure by paying a visit to **Mr Cosplay's Otaku House** (#03-089/089A Suntec City Mall, 3 Temasek Blvd; 6887 4381, www.myotakuhouse.com) to choose matching his and her anime costumes. Then run along home and show each other your special powers.

Instead of a heart-shaped box of chocolates...

In ancient Mayan society, couples would drink cocoa as part of their wedding ceremonies. The Aztecs believed the dark gold was a gift from the gods. And one mouthful of chocolate contains over 500 flavours. So why not give chocolate the respect it deserves? Treat your sweetheart to a sweet feast at the **Fullerton Hotel's Chocolate Buffet** (1 Fullerton Sq; 6533 8388, www.fullertonhotel.com). The spread contains more than 20 varieties, including a liquid chocolate fountain and a hot chocolate station, so you're both sure to find something dark and luscious to suit your desires. The Buffet's available every Thursday, Friday and Saturday night (including the 14th) from 8-11pm, and costs \$38 per person. By the way, did we mention that Emperor Montezuma used to consume copious amounts of chocolate to fuel his sexual escapades?



Instead of a candlelit dinner...

Anyone can make a reservation for dinner. But creating a moan-inducing meal at home takes talent. Try spending a few hours at one of Singapore's culinary classrooms. **Shermay's Cooking School** in Holland Village (6479 8442, www.shermay.com) will give you new skills to whip up old-style Nyonya cuisine in a relaxed environment. **The Coriander Leaf** at Clarke Quay (6732 3354, www.corianderleaf.com) lets you cook like a Moroccan, Turk, Thai or Frenchman even if you've never left Singapore. **The Culinary Academy at Raffles Hotel** (6337 1886, www.affles.com) has a particularly enticing dessert class – imagine showing off your very own cannoli on the big night? For more simple homely pleasures, check out **Cookery Magic** (6348 9667, www.cookerymagic.com) for daily, ethnic-themed cooking classes. They also offer private lessons in your own home. So you've really got no excuse not to pick a class and really spice things up this Valentine's Day.

Instead of a Valentine's Day card...

You could go to any stationery store and buy a Hallmark card. And yes, you could even make the generic message in the card sound a little nicer based on your inscription. But how about making your declaration of love on something to truly – erm – write home about? Bring a picture of you and your special one to the **Singapore Philatelic Museum** (23B Coleman St; 6337 3888, www.spm.org.sg), and they'll turn it into a unique, custom-made stamp that will adorn your envelope and the sentiments inside in a truly unforgettable way. Your image needs to be in digital format either on a CD, memory card or portable drive. A sheet of stamps costs \$15.50 – the number you actually get varies according to the size of your photo, so choose wisely.

Instead of a limousine...

No one is looking to relive prom night, no matter how magical a time it seemed way back when. Instead, why not take to the seas for a romantic cruise? The stars will be (fingers crossed) shining and if it's cloudy, there's always the enchanting glow of the CBD to set the mood. You can hire your own boat by contacting one of the many yacht-chartering companies around town, such as **SG Yacht** (6100 2528, www.sgyacht.com), **Seaborne** (6777 6760, www.museaborne.com), or **Sailing Yacht Charters in Singapore** (6466 0716, www.cutterketch.com). For a more affordable, albeit much less exclusive option, the **Admiral Cheng Ho** (6533 9811, www.watertours.com.sg) offers a dinner cruise on a reproduction Ming Dynasty imperial ship. It departs from the Marina South Pier at 6.30pm and costs \$55 per person. So grab your first mate and get ready to feel like the captain of the love boat.