

Aphrodite's gift to humankind

Aphrodisiacs date back to ancient times. Tantra Restaurant and Lounge pioneered the concept of aphrodisiac cuisine for the modern age

By Jeff Louderback

Miami Beach - In their quest for creating a tantalizing feast for the senses, cultures from around the world have immersed themselves in foods of love since ancient times.

Legend says that Casanova ate more than 50 raw oysters every morning – in a bathtub with the woman he was romancing - to boost his libido. Bean soup was so renowned for its erotic qualities that it was banned from the Convent of St. Jerome in the 17th century. To ancient Teutons and Romans, the bean was a stimulant and its flower symbolized sexual pleasure. Pomegranates have been associated with fertility rites, and in some countries pomegranate seeds are thrown instead of rice at the end of wedding ceremonies.

Named after Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of love and beauty who sprang forth from the sea on an oyster shell, aphrodisiacs are defined as foods, drinks or scents thought to cause or increase sexual desire or sexual response. Studies have shown that many foods possess chemical components that elevate mood, and even create the sensation of falling in love.

Inspired by his passion for Feng Shui and an ancient Middle Eastern philosophy that emphasizes enlightenment through the five senses, Tim Hogle built a restaurant that has helped legitimize aphrodisiac cuisine.

Since it opened in 1988, Tantra Restaurant and Lounge has attracted A-list celebrities, international jetsetters and curious palates with its acclaimed aphrodisiac cuisine, sensual new age music, fragrant incense and jasmine-scented candles. The restaurant's exotic décor includes a live grass floor that is replaced weekly, softly illuminated marble water wall, a fiber optic starlit ceiling, and a copper and mahogany bar.

Though Hogle encountered naysayers who told him the concept would not last, his place immediately attracted A-list celebrities and Miami Beach's beautiful crowd alike from the beginning – and the trend continues seven years later.

Long before Hogle entertained thoughts of opening a restaurant, he earned a dental degree at Ohio State and headed for a warmer climate – which originally was Gainesville, Fla., where he worked at a dental practice in the late 1970s. Within a year, he moved further south – to Miami Beach – and has been there since. It was in Miami Beach where Hogle experienced his first taste of celebrity dentistry.

“In the mid-80s, during the days of Miami Vice, I became friends with Don Johnson and Phillip Michael Thomas,” Hogle said. “Don asked if I was interesting in serving as the official set dentist for the show. I treated actors and also created dental make-up props for the show.”

The entrepreneur's first restaurant was South Beach's first sushi bar – Toni's Sushi, which debuted in 1986. He also was involved in a Mexican restaurant that opened on Pennsylvania Avenue, but when his silent partner chose to leave the venture, Hogle faced a decision – sell the location or open a different concept.

“I have studied Feng Shui for decades, and at the time I was designing my apartment using elements of Feng Shui,” Hogle explained. “Customers of the Mexican restaurant encouraged me to open another concept there rather than move on, so I decided to emphasize the Tantra theme.”

Hogle was one of the first restaurateurs in South Florida to center his concept on aphrodisiac cuisine. It was a natural fit, he believes, since the ancient Tibetan/Indian art of Tantra emphasizes the heightening of all five senses - and the only two endeavors in which a person uses all five senses simultaneously in eating food and making love.

Marketing experts and fellow restaurateurs advised Hogle to scrap the idea of aphrodisiac cuisine when he developed his initial business plan.

“They (advisors) thought it was too controversial and too gimmicky,” Hogle said. “And since it was designed as a high-end restaurant, there was concern (from advisors) that the

aphrodisiac approach would not attract enough volume of guests who would be willing to pay the prices on the menu.”

Hogle ignored their warnings, believing that aphrodisiac cuisine was the perfect culinary element to accompany an ambience where each of the senses are heightened even before the food arrives at the table.

Aphrodisiac cuisine, Hogle explains, results in a combination of sensual reactions - such as the visual satisfaction of the food, the fragrant stimulation of their pleasing smells and oral gratification from the savory dishes – which lead to a state of euphoria conducive to sexual expression.

In ancient times, there was a distinction between substances that increased fertility versus those that simply increased the sex drive. Nutrition was a vital factor then since food was not as readily available as it is today. Undernourishment reduces fertility and creates a loss of libido.

There was not always agreement upon what foods were actually aphrodisiacs or anaphrodisiacs, which decrease potency. Anise, basil, carrots, salvia, gladiolus roots, orchid bulbs, pistachio nuts, arugula, sage, turnips and river snails were among the list of items that the ancients considered aphrodisiacs.

Interestingly, these food substances were first identified and documented by ancient Greeks like Pliny and Dioscorides in first century AD, and later by Paul of Aegina from the seventh century.

“Originally, food was not spiced for taste, but for medicinal purposes and virility,” he said. “Food is a medicine. It is life affirming. It is a lifestyle – a feeling. That is what the restaurant is all about – stimulating all of your senses through the ambience, the atmosphere and the cuisine.”

Tantra has drawn international attention for its Feng Shui elements like the live grass floor, and for its reputation as a favorite destination for A-list celebrities like Jennifer Lopez, Janet Jackson and Usher. They flock here for the atmosphere, the World’s Most Expensive Martini, and the lavish and private VIP room, where the infamous hammock hangs above the tables. Yet the restaurant is also renowned as the “cradle of chefs.”

Since Michael Jacobs crafted the initial menu of aphrodisiac cuisine, Tantra has developed the reputation as a haven for young, creative chefs in Miami. They have garnered awards at Tantra and now occupy the helm at premier restaurants in the United States. Jacobs, for example, was named one of the nation's "rising stars" by Restaurants and Institutions. His successor, Michelle Bernstein, is now the executive chef of Azul and is a Food Network personality. Willis Loughhead, who was nominated for a Beard Foundation National Award, is now an executive chef at the Ritz-Carlton in Coconut Grove.

Tantra's newest executive chef, Sandee Birdsong, worked as a personal chef for 15 years, specializing in dishes inspired by Southern herbs and spices, before joining Tantra. She continues Hogle’s commitment to enhancing the senses with aphrodisiac cuisine.

Birdsong, who was raised in Georgia on St. Simon’s Island, developed an interest for cooking – southern style – at an early age from her family, who operated a restaurant that specialized in southern food.

“My grandmother and mother taught me the importance of herbs and spices in cooking,” Birdsong said. “They are the ones who inspired me to become a chef.”

At Tantra, Birdsong has incorporated her personal approach to using herbs, spices and ingredients known for their erotic stimulation.

Chocolate, for example, contains theobroma, known as "the fruit of the gods." It was consumed by Aztec nobility to ensure fertility. When the Spanish conquered the Aztecs, they brought it home to Spain where it became famous as an aphrodisiac. Spanish women drank chocolate beverages secretly.

Used as a sweetener long before sugar, honey was the nectar of Aphrodite. Its connection with romance includes its role in wedding ceremonies in many cultures. This is where the term “honeymoon” was derived from. Honey and ginger were prescribed to cure impotence by the Arabian physician Avicenna.

Called ahuatl (testicle) by the ancient Aztecs, the avocado was taken to Europe by the Spanish conquistadors. Avocados' fame as a sexual stimulant spread so fast that European Catholic priests forbade the fruit to their parishioners.

Leeks were thought to have aphrodisiac powers by the ancient Greeks and Romans, so much that the Emperor Nero is said to have eaten leek soup every day. Radishes were considered a divine aphrodisiac by Egyptian Pharaohs. Like the oyster, caviar is high in zinc, which stimulates the production of testosterone and is thought to improve male sexual performance. Asparagus was served to 19th century bridegrooms because of alleged aphrodisiac qualities and Middle Eastern sheiks had asparagus recipes for "reviving the enthusiasm of the exhausted lover."

Tantra's menu features flavors and textures that span the globe, and each dish is created with aphrodisiac elements.

The Tantra Love Apple, boasting a sliced ripe Homestead tomato layered with Laura Chenel goat cheese, basil oil, and Cypress Grove Bermuda Triangle garnished with fresh pomegranate seeds, is an ideal starter. So is the Tantra Plate, a unique blend of the most potent aphrodisiacs such as Pacific oysters, tender poached jumbo shrimp, thin sliced Japanese calamari salad, succulent sweet soy grilled eel, twin flash fried Lobster wontons, a large stone crab claw, and a spicy roll of sushi tuna and wakame seaweed with wasabi kiwi sorbet.

Among the main courses are the Chilled Maine Lobster Napoleon, which features steamed then chilled Maine Lobster layered with sliced mango and fresh avocado, a baby green salad, with a black truffle and fresh herb vinaigrette; Pan-seared Hawaiian Ahi Tuna and Foie Gras, resting on stewed Beluga lentils, sauteed spinach, fine diced Asian pear and a truffled Foie Gras sauce; Grilled New England Free Range Filet Mignon with Cuban Coffee Sauce and Toasted Organic Chicken Breast, which is stuffed with winter truffles, Robert Piere cheese and morel mushrooms served with fresh sautéed spinach and tomato timbale finished with a vanilla cream spinach sauce.

"We use only the finest ingredients. Many of our vegetables and meats are organic. So are the herbs and spices," Birdsong explained. "That is an important component of giving each guest a sensory experience."

Even the spirits at Tantra have an aphrodisiac twist. The signature cocktail is The World's Most Expensive Martini. 3 Vodka, White Cranberry Juice, Guarana Syrup, and Inniskillin Cabernet Franc are the ingredients that compose what may be the world's finest cocktail – at least for martini connoisseurs. The cost? \$25. The reason? Inniskillin grapes are exceptional. They are naturally frozen on the vine and hand picked only during the pinnacle of winter in Canada.

The Tantric Kiss, (Vodka, Pineapple, Cranberry and a splash of Peach Schnapps), 25th Hour (Tantra Energy Drink, Orange Vodka and fresh Orange juice), Blissful Chocolate (Vanilla with Godiva White or Dark Chocolate Liqueur), Pure Ecstasy (Vodka laced with Chambord and Pineapple), Sensual Pucker (DeKuyper Sour Apple, Vodka, Midori, Pineapple juice and a Granny Smith Apple slice) and Sixth Sense (Bacardi Limon Rum, Bailey's, DeKuyper Creme de Banana, Malibu Coconut Rum and Pineapple juice) are among Tantra's menu of martinis centered around the aphrodisiac theme.

"From the moment you walk in, Tantra is all about sharpening the senses," Birdsong said. "The décor and ambience heightens the senses. Then the cuisine fulfills the complete Tantra experience."

Hogle has also created a series of innovative events, like the Monday Night Party, which has grown into Miami's highest attended regular gala on that evening. Hogle developed the idea to generate traffic on what was once Tantra's slowest night. The party was crafted into what it is today by his wife, former model and current Tantra entertainment director, Irina Korneeva. Hogle met the Russia native – who has a degree in aeronautical engineering and is a former competitive chess player in Moscow – at the restaurant. They share the same birthday – October 7 – and the same passion for the true meaning of Tantra.

"The only time human beings use all of their senses at the same time is they are consuming food or making love," said Hogle, who still practices dentistry on a limited schedule for undisclosed celebrities. "Many people think that the Tantra philosophy is

just about enhancing your sexual experiences. It's actually about attaining self-realization. Once your senses are heightened, you can reach that feeling."