



Francine Segan

Aphrodisiacs are this food historian's bread and butter. BY KELLY ALEXANDER

Fine Cooking: What exactly is an aphrodisiac?

Francine Segan: The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that an aphrodisiac is a drug, a preparation, or a food that invokes lust. I say it's anything that gets your blood going.

FC: Which foods "get the blood going"?

Segan: There are a few categories: First, foods that make you tingle, like sparkling wine. Second, foods that make you warm, like cinnamon, nutmeg, and cayenne. Last, there are foods with suggestive shapes, like tiny strawberries, asparagus, figs, and vanilla.

FC: Vanilla?

Segan: It grows in long pods, so historically, people thought it was an aphrodisiac because of its shape. In fact, scientists report that the aroma of vanilla does appeal to women. Men should stop wearing cologne and wear a little vanilla extract instead.

FC: What's the strangest aphrodisiac you've come across in your research?

Segan: The Greek goddess Aphrodite—for whom aphrodisiacs are named—supposedly rose from the sea on an oyster shell, holding a sparrow. So not only are oysters aphrodisiacs because of her, but sparrows' brains are thought to be potent, too. Rhinoceros horn is another weird one. About 2000 BC, people believed it was a great aphrodisiac because the rhinoc-

eros was so aggressive and its horn had that shape. You can still get ground rhinoceros horn in Chinese apothecaries.

FC: Is that where you go when you want to buy aphrodisiacs?

Segan: No, I prefer the super-market. But I did once go to a Chinese pharmacy in Queens, and there were these fried garlic chips behind the counter that I wanted to buy. But the owner wouldn't let me; he kept shaking his head "no." Turns out that the garlic chips were actually sliced deer antlers, and he wouldn't sell them to me because they're an aphrodisiac for men.

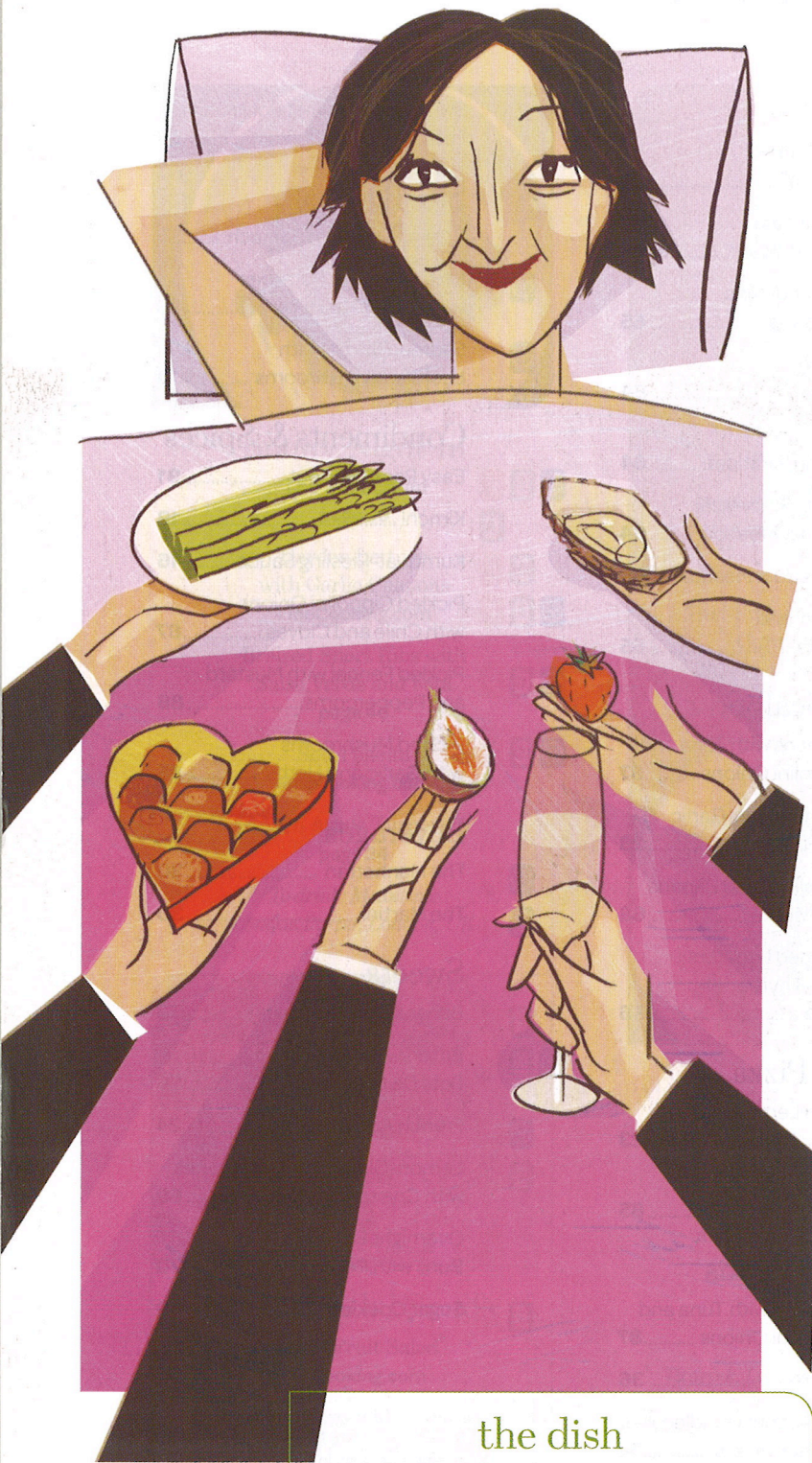
FC: You're a very popular speaker come Valentine's Day. Is it your favorite holiday?

Segan: I love it. I usually talk about chocolate's history as an aphrodisiac. When the Europeans discovered chocolate after the Renaissance, it became popular as an energy food. Then, during the 18th century, chocolate got a reputation as an aphrodisiac from Casanova, who wrote in his memoirs about using it to seduce women.

FC: Is chocolate your aphrodisiac of choice?

Segan: No, mine is Asti Spumante. It tingles, it's sweet, and the bubbles pop and touch your face like little butterfly kisses.

Kelly Alexander is an award-winning food writer who lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.



the dish

Name: Francine Segan

Occupation: Food historian

Age: "A girl sure hates to tell..."

Started: 2001

Where: New York City

Known for: Scholarly knowledge of aphrodisiacs

Find out more: francinesegan.com