

THINKING OUTSIDE THE HEART-SHAPED BOX

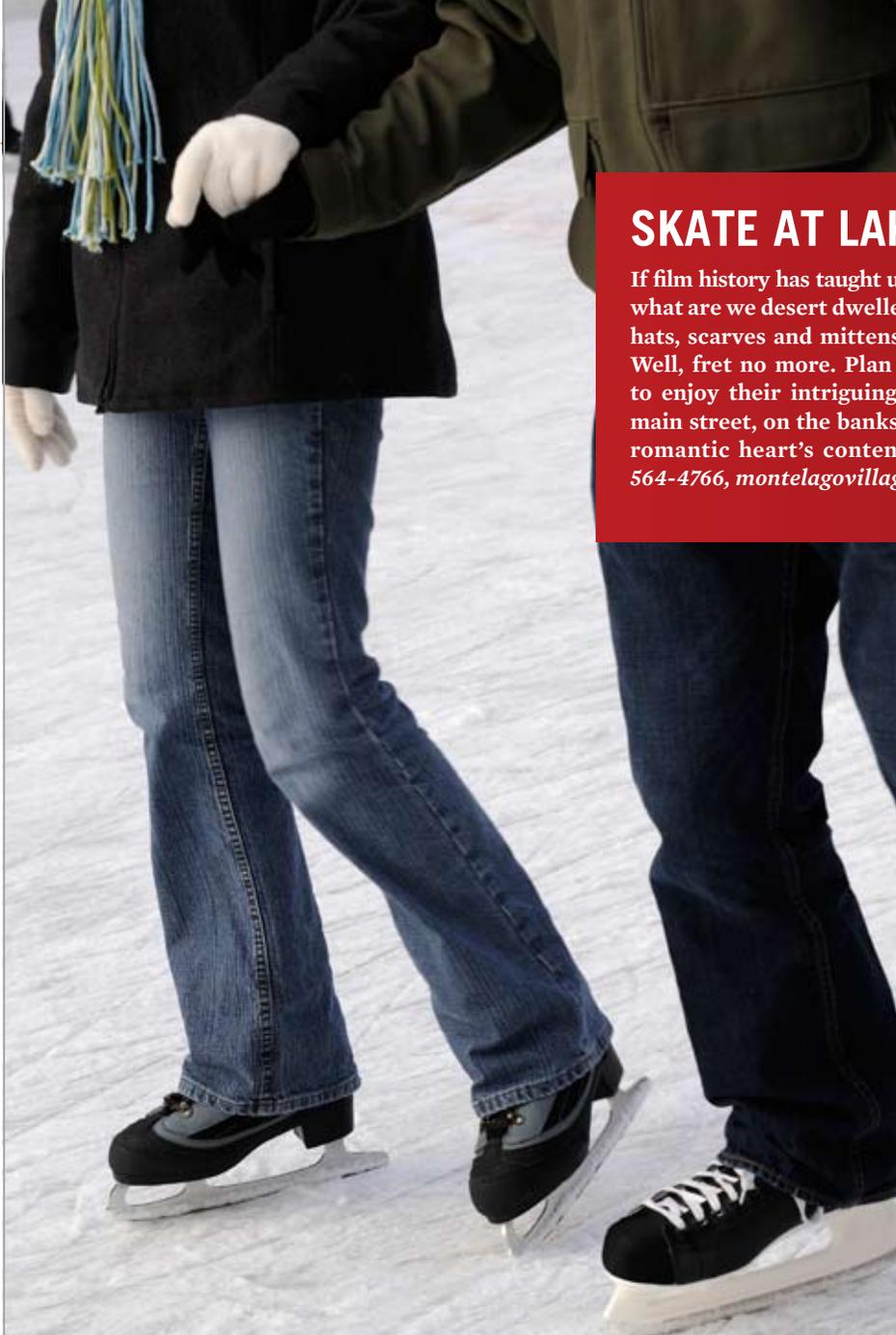
AS THIS CAN BE QUITE DIFFICULT TO DO IN LAS VEGAS,
HERE ARE A DOZEN ALTERNATIVE
ROUTES TO ROMANCE.

BY REBECCA ZISCH

I always have high expectations for romance, but living in a city that outsiders associate with romantic adventures doesn't help the cause. How do we locals compete in a place where people flock from all over the world to flamboyantly exchange vows, smooch cinematically at the top of the Eiffel Tower or snuggle through a show called *Love*?

First, know that we can do better than standing hand-in-hand at the Bellagio fountains (although it is sort of lovely). There's so much more in Las Vegas than what's listed in a concierge's brochure. You just have to be creative to find it. Believe me, the extra thinking will pay off—in hearts.

But just in case you need help—if you haven't made plans for Valentine's Day (it's February 14, by the way!) or if you'd just like to do something more romantic than a Hallmark card or heart-shaped box of calories—here are a dozen ideas that are far from predictable.



SKATE AT LAKE LAS VEGAS

If film history has taught us anything, it's that ice skating is romantic. But what are we desert dwellers to do when we want to bundle up in woolly hats, scarves and mittens and glide hand-in-hand with a sweetheart? Well, fret no more. Plan an evening excursion to MonteLago Village to enjoy their intriguing floating ice rink. At the end of the village main street, on the banks of Lake Las Vegas, you can ice skate to your romantic heart's content until 9 every night through February 19. 564-4766, montelagovillage.com

Hollywood is releasing two romantic comedies based on best-selling books just before Valentine's Day: *He's Just Not That Into You* (February 6) and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (February 13).

ENJOY THE VIEW

One of the most romantic dates I've ever had was a trip to the Mount Charleston Lodge. On that occasion, my beau and I took a leisurely drive up to the 7,700-foot elevation to enjoy the snowcapped vista and a quiet evening of dinner and cocktails in the lodge's dining room. For Valentine's Day, you can book a dinner package, including a six-course meal designed by chef Simon Tozzi. But a trip up the mountain can be much more than dinner. Each "honeymoon" log cabin is 500 square feet of inspired getaway nestled among the pines of Kyle Canyon's Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. The romantic features include a double-wide whirlpool tub, California king-size bed, private balcony and fireplace. 872-5408, mtcharlestonlodge.com

HIKE TO THE HOT SPRINGS

An aimless hike with a sweetheart is a wonderful treat. What's even better is when you have a steamy destination in mind. About four miles past Hoover Dam is a small parking lot that serves as the trailhead to Arizona Hot Springs, a cluster of natural baths averaging a balmy 111 degrees. It's a moderate three-mile hike to get there, and once you do, a 20-foot ladder leads down to the best spring. Be sure to bring candles and matches—as you'll notice, it's a tradition. nps.gov/lame/planyourvisit/hikeazhot.htm

CUDDLE AT THE MOVIES

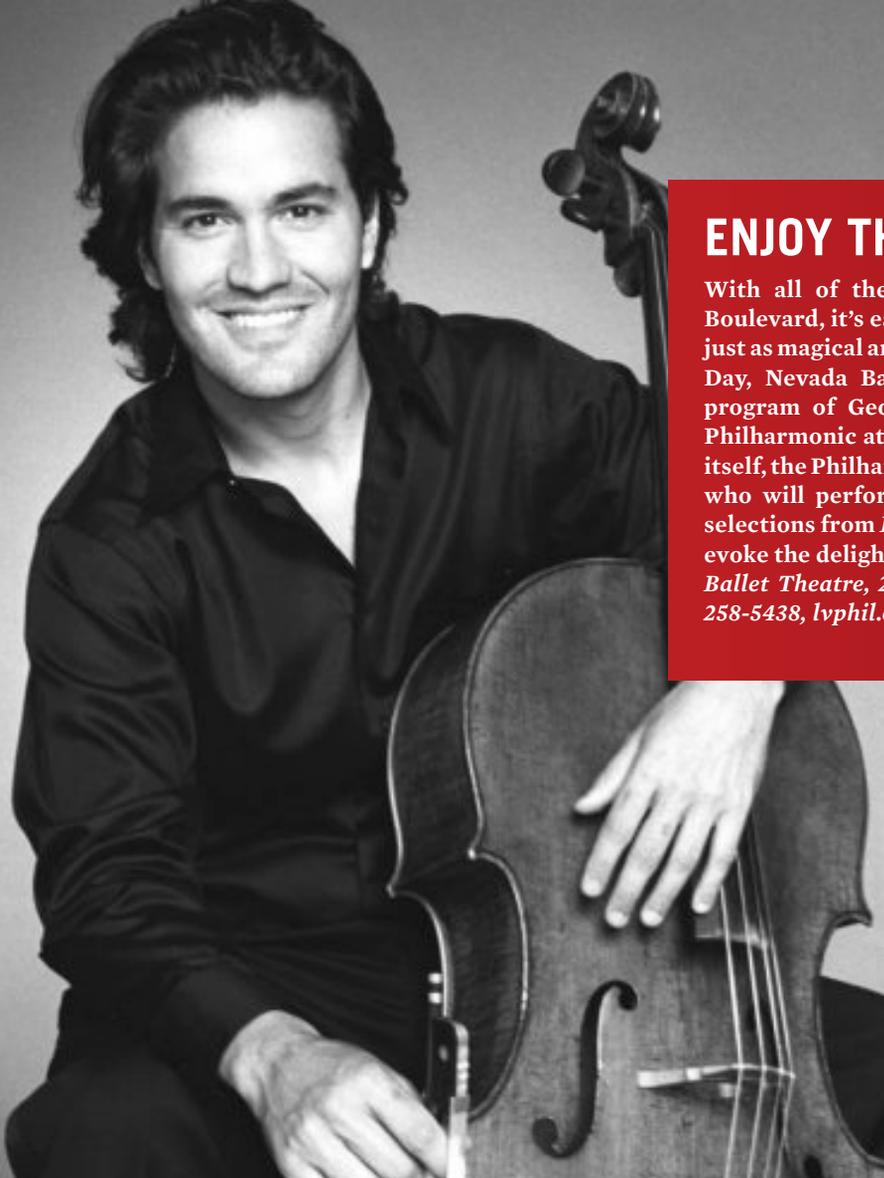
The Orleans, South Point, Suncoast and Sam's Town theaters advertise that they have "rockers & love seats." Although this is just a swanky way of saying that the armrests go up and you can lean back in the seats, it does make a big difference when it comes to snack-sharing, hand-holding and cuddling. And right on cue,

EMBRACE INSANITY

If cuddling at the movies sounds too pedestrian, how about a near-death experience to get your hearts beating as one? Insanity is that green, claw-like thrill ride that hangs 64 feet over the edge of the Stratosphere, and as a connoisseur of roller coasters and romance, I highly recommend it for combining both sensations. While dangling you two lovebirds 900 feet above the ground, Insanity spins up to three G's at a 70-degree angle. Of course, this is not for the faint of heart—or anyone who has eaten recently—but the cling factor makes for a good test of your relationship. Especially since this Insanity is only temporary. 380-7711, stratospherehotel.com/thrills/insanity_the_ride.cfm

GET WINE AND DINE

The process of shopping for wine—holding the bottles, reading the labels—is an interesting way to learn about someone else's tastes



ENJOY THE CLASSICS

With all of the enormous productions up and down Las Vegas Boulevard, it's easy to forget that other types of live performance are just as magical and engaging. For example, the week before Valentine's Day, Nevada Ballet Theatre will perform an enchantingly lyrical program of George Balanchine choreography with the Las Vegas Philharmonic at Artemus Ham Concert Hall. And on Valentine's Day itself, the Philharmonic will host exciting American cellist Zuill Bailey, who will perform an all-Tchaikovsky concert featuring passionate selections from *Romeo & Juliet* and others. Both evenings are likely to evoke the delight and dreaminess we associate with romance. *Nevada Ballet Theatre, 243-2623, nevadaballet.com; Las Vegas Philharmonic, 258-5438, lvphil.com*

creating sweet delicacies for Lake Las Vegas visitors. But recently, for his own anniversary, he re-created his wedding cake in 12-inch miniature as a surprise for his wife. A member of the 2004 world champion pastry team, Hanmer knows that not everyone can pull off something so intricate. "It's the intention and the spirit behind any effort that makes it romantic," he says. "Just trying something is enough. Even icing a cookie that you make with frozen dough, if you do it creatively, then it's romantic." He was sweet enough to share with us his recipe for white chocolate panna cotta with fresh strawberries (see sidebar on the next page). If you mess it up, you can always drive down to taste the real deal at the Club Lounge. 567-4700, ritzcarlton.com

and interests. And it's an especially romantic experience when you drink the wine someplace besides home. Here are two choices on opposite ends of Southern Nevada: Marché Bacchus in the Lakes or Milo's Cellar in Boulder City. Both are retail wine establishments attached to lovely restaurants. (I suggest Marché Bacchus when there's good alfresco dining weather, and Milo's when a darker, more intimate ambiance is in order.) After choosing your wine, bring it to the dining table and, for a \$10 corkage fee, enjoy it over dinner cooked by someone else. *Marché Bacchus, 804-8008, marchebacchus.com; Milo's Cellar, 293-9540, miloswinebar.com*

PREPARE A MEAL

Instead of spending money on dinner, make a reservation at the Three Square food bank and prepare a meal for our community's at-risk youths. The nonprofit's Backpack Program is an upbeat opportunity (5:30-7:30 p.m. Tuesdays) for volunteers to package weekend meals for children who rely on the National School Lunch Program. And there is still plenty of time for you to grab a bite to eat afterward. 644-3663, threesquare.org

COOK UP SOMETHING SWEET

Chris Hanmer knows a little something about romance: As executive pastry chef at the Ritz-Carlton, he spends his days

PLANT A VALENTINE BUSH

The traditional last-minute Valentine's Day gift—a bouquet of roses from the gas station that will die in a couple of days—isn't a great metaphor for a relationship. But planting flowers can be just the opposite. As KNPR "Desert Bloom" commentator Norm Schilling says, "Gardening is patience, foresight and hope." To achieve a lasting result, he recommends a particularly gorgeous

REJUVENATE AT RED ROCK

The Spa at Red Rock has re-energized the clichéd couple's massage experience by packaging rejuvenation with exploration. Your "Adventure Spa" might include a peaceful sunrise horseback ride at Red Rock followed by body scrubs and facials to cleanse away the trail dust. Or you could try some guided rock climbing, then retire to the spa for well-deserved pedicures and deep-tissue massages. Many other combinations are possible. Just be sure to call early to reserve the VIP couples suite—imagine your own spa room for an entire day! 797-7878, redrocklasvegas.com/spa

and aptly named drought-resistant perennial: the Valentine bush (*eremophila maculata valentine*). This shrub usually starts blooming in February and its deep red flowers often show through midsummer. And it will be a Valentine gift not only this year but for every year after—unless, of course, it dies. But Schilling offers wisdom for that possibility, too: “It used to break my heart, but now I see it as an opportunity to learn, regenerate and plant something new.”

ADOPT A SOUL MATE

Here’s a way to bring love into your house, even if you don’t have a human valentine. The Nevada Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is promoting the adoption of “bonded pairs” or “soul mates,” animals that have come into the no-kill shelter together and would suffer emotionally if they were separated. Pairs of dogs, cats, rabbits and even devoted mixed-species couples are available for adoption. If people adopt new furry friends, then doesn’t that mean there’s just more love to go around? 873-7722, nevadaspc.org

Rebecca Zisch can be heard occasionally on Nevada Public Radio commenting on popular culture. You can download archived commentaries at knpr.org.



[CHEF HANMER’S SWEET RECIPE]

White Chocolate Panna Cotta With Fresh Strawberries

Serves 6

INGREDIENTS for Panna Cotta

- 2 sheets of gelatin
- half vanilla bean
- half lemon zested
- 14 oz cream, divided
- 1 oz sugar
- 5 oz white chocolate

the chocolate has melted before proceeding to the next step.

6. Add remaining cream to sauce pan and strain to remove the vanilla bean and the lemon peel.
7. Pour into glass and refrigerate for a couple of hours.

INGREDIENTS for Strawberry Sauce

- 1 oz strawberry purée
- 1 oz cranberry juice
- 3 oz sugar
- 3 oz light corn syrup
- 10 oz diced strawberries
- 1 tsp lemon juice

DIRECTIONS for Strawberry Sauce

1. Carefully bring the strawberry purée and cranberry juice to a boil.
2. Slowly add sugar and corn syrup. Keep mixture on a low flame to avoid scorching.
3. Boil for another minute, constantly stirring.
4. Dice strawberries into 1/4-inch pieces.
5. Add diced strawberries to sauce pan, as well as a teaspoon of lemon juice. Continue cooking for another 3 minutes until berries reach a soft and pleasant texture. Cool in refrigerator.

DIRECTIONS for Panna Cotta

1. Soak gelatin in cold water. This allows the gelatin to soften and usually takes a few minutes.
2. With a small knife, split the vanilla bean in half and scrape out the seeds. Set aside.
3. Zest the lemon.
4. In a saucepan, combine one third of the cream, the split vanilla bean, the sugar and the lemon zest. Slowly warm up.
5. Strain the gelatin and press firmly to release any excess of water. Add to the warm cream and stir until dissolved. Add the white chocolate. Be careful not to get it too hot. Make sure all

DIRECTIONS for Finishing

When the panna cotta is set, spoon strawberry sauce on top and finish with a spoonful of soft whipped cream on top of the strawberry sauce. Garnish with a sprig of fresh mint and a strawberry cut in half.