

Think outside the heart-shaped box

VALENTINE'S DAY |
Diverse sweet spots
with something a bit
different neat to eat

BY ALICIA ELER

Talk2Us@centerstagechicago.com

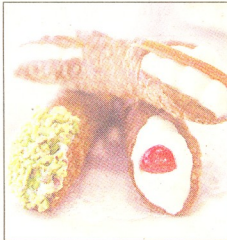
Not everyone wants a cutesy box of chocolates, especially not every year. This Valentine's Day, satisfy your sweetheart's cravings with something that he or she won't soon forget. Our guide to sweet treats from diverse restaurants across the city includes items you might not have considered in February's past. But remember: No matter how untraditional you are, you still have to get a card.

Entice her, Italian-style at **Pasticceria Natalina**, 5406 N. Clark, (773) 989-0662.

It's hard not to drool after walking into this quaint Andersonville Italian pastry shop. Trying to pronounce the names of the goodies is hard enough; choosing one can be near-impossible. So we've selected the best one for you: the Cannoli Siciliani. Every pastry is made by hand, and this one boasts traditional sheep's milk (overnightened from Sicily) wrapped inside a tube of pastry dough and topped with pistachios, candied orange peel or cherries.

Induce raw pleasure at **Karyn's**, 1901 N. Halsted, (312) 255-1590.

Holistic guru Karyn Calabrese knows how to marry flavor and health, especially when it comes to dessert. At the Fresh Corner Cafe, located adjacent to her Living Foods Restaurant, you can get your hands on the tastiest, most alive (read: not cooked or baked) desserts you ever thought possible. Our personal favorite? The carob pudding, made from rich carob, cashews, avocados and honey. It's as thick as chocolate mousse minus the fat from dairy. Then there's the carob pecan pie, a rich blend of fresh pecans and carob whipped into a thick square. We could go on and on, but better that



The cannoli at **Pasticceria Natalina** will delight your sweetie. | CENTERSTAGECHICAGO.COM



Swirlz' cupcakes will have your loved one positively swooning. | JEAN LACHAT - SUN-TIMES

you check out this raw, organic, vegan option.

Get him raving about rugelach at **Kaufman's**, 4905 W. Dempster, Skokie, (847) 677-6190.

Say "I love you" in Yiddish with these rolled-up kosher cookies, available at Skokie's favorite Jewish deli and bakery. Although these sweets are available all year long, a combo of different flavors, coupled with a selection of Kaufman's sugar cookies, makes a perfect mix-and-match gift for your Valentine. Choose from rugelach filled with raspberries, apricots, chocolate chips, raisins, or nuts, or go for healthy with a sugar-free nut rugelach.

Love is a many-layered thing at **Middle East Bakery & Grocery**, 1512 W. Foster, (773) 561-2224.

Nothing's better than baklava, the traditional Middle Eastern pastry made of layers of phyllo dough. Your partner will go nuts working through each piece of syrupy, chewy, nutty goodness. Pair this delightful snack with a

wrapped-up surprise or with an array of other sweets, like dried date cookies.

Go all-natural at **Letizia's Natural Bakery**, 2144 W. Division, (773) 342-1011.

Wicker Park's favorite all-natural bakery steals your heart with heart-shaped shortbread cookies. Actually, they could be termed heart-breakers, since raspberry and vanilla butter cream literally flow out of the middle of these goodies. If you're looking for an extra boost, try the espresso shortbread version of this tasty treat.

Tiny treats can't miss at **Swirlz Cupcakes**, 705 W. Belden, (773) 404-2253.

Good things do come in small packages; the dark and white chocolate raspberry truffle cupcakes at Swirlz are proof of that. The moist chocolate or rich vanilla cakes come bursting with fruity filling, topped with melted chocolate and decorated with a double raspberry butter cream swirl. Craving that personal touch? Come to the store on Valentine's Day and the Swirlz pastry chef will create a custom message for your special cupcake. There's a gluten-free option, too.

Satisfy canine cravings at **4 Legs Pet Store**, 3809 N. Clark, (773) 472-5347.

Share the puppy love this Valentine's Day by treating your pooch to a special treat. Choose from round carob and yogurt treats speckled with bright red sprinkles and topped off with little red hearts. Or reward pooch with a doughnut, a doggie-style doughnut made of pink yogurt and covered in carob and sprinkles. You can rest assured that your dog won't ingest any chocolate; all of 4 Legs's treats come from certified doggie spots Polkadog Bakery and Buttercup Patisserie.

NOTE: More Valentine's Day ideas, including a special guide to things to do if you're single and fabulous, are online at centerstagechicago.com.