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## Cupid Commerce

Valentine's Day sweetens profits for retailers, restaurants

by Emilie Bahr



Taiya Bach packs a box of chocolate hearts at Blue Frog Chocolates. Other hot sellers at Blue Frog include a chocolate gorilla. (Photo by Frank Aymami)

Fresh off the beads and bacchanalia of an early Carnival season, a time when many retailers opt to close, merchants now turn their focus to another big February holiday.

At Blue Frog Chocolates on Magazine Street, owner Ann Streiffer extended hours and even opened on Sunday ahead of her busiest shopping season right before Valentine's Day.

"It's pretty big," Streiffer said.

Last-minute shoppers, mostly males, make up the bulk of her business. "We have probably the three single busiest days of our year," she said.

Customers search for cheaper items such as heart-shaped candies on a stick along with more elaborate displays of affection such as a chocolate gorilla retailing for \$55 or satin-covered heart-shaped boxes of chocolate truffles that run about \$38.

Cupid's holiday consistently delivers for other retailers, too.

"Valentine's Day is our Christmas," said Erinlea McGowan-Moniz, owner of Hot Chocolate, a purveyor of erotic-themed cakes, candies and novelty gifts on Dumaine Street in the French Quarter. The weekend before, she said, is typically "twice as busy as a regular weekend."

McGowan-Moniz said the standard Valentine's-related sale runs between \$30 and \$70, money often spent on items including chocolates, a popular line of Kama Sutra-themed products and adult toys and lingerie.

At nearby Chartres Street ConXXXion, manager Samuel Shelton said Valentine's Day sales run double to three times those of a standard period on average, with a typical customer spending anywhere from \$150 to \$200 on adult-oriented merchandise.

The Washington, D.C.-based National Retail Federation expects the average consumer to spend \$123 on the holiday this year, with about \$80 going toward spending on a significant other.

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Nationwide, dining out is one of the most popular ways of commemorating Valentine's Day, according to the NRF, which pegs Valentine's Day as the second-most popular holiday for restaurant outings behind No. 1 Mother's Day.

In New Orleans, restaurateurs romance customers with special menus and ad campaigns.

"Valentine's Day is our big gig," said Tia Sommerville, sales director at Andrea's Restaurant on 19th Street in Metairie, where the sweethearts menu this year features filet of beef tenderloin with peppercorn sauce, lobster ravioli and a red rose for women.

Sommerville said her restaurant averages 300 customers for Valentine's Day, roughly triple the patronage of a non-holiday. The occasion also

brings higher-than-average checks, she said, thanks to the requisite bottle of wine or champagne.

Some Valentine's Day spending doesn't even require a date.