

St Valentine's Day has come and gone for another year, but how did it begin?

St Valentine's Day is supposed to be a time to celebrate romance and love but the origins of this festival of chocolate and cupids are actually dark, bloody — and a bit muddled. Though no one has pinpointed the exact origin of the holiday, one good place to start is ancient Rome.

As the story goes, the Romans celebrated the feast of Lupercalia. The men sacrificed a goat and a dog, then whipped women with the hides of the animals they had just slain. Young women would actually line up for the men to hit them. They believed this would make them fertile.

The Roman romantics "were drunk and they were naked," says Noel Lenski, a historian at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Lenski adds, "It was a little more of a drunken revel, but the Christians put clothes back on. That didn't stop it from being a day of fertility and love."

Later, Pope Gelasius I muddled things in the 5th century by combining St Valentine's Day with Lupercalia to expel the pagan rituals.

As the years went on, the holiday grew sweeter and sexier. Chocolates, oysters, bananas, avocados, pistachios, chai tea and red wine were at the top of the list - aphrodisiacs? Well some might think they are but the science says these foods increase blood flow, and that is the heart of the matter. All of these foods have something (a chemical) in them that will change blood flow and blood flow starts to move where love happens.

- Chocolates contain a stimulant related to amphetamine, which is released when people fall in love
- Oysters contain a large amount of amino acids that build a lot of hormones
- Bananas contain bromelain that is shown to be associated with testosterone
- Pistachios are on the list because they contain protein and flavonoids to stimulate blood flow

and who is to say that long-stem red roses, and a dinner at a fine French restaurant and red wine, aren't going to help?

Geoff

