

The Winning Table

By Erika Kotite

Celebrate the quirky and unforgettable journey of married life with a game-themed dinner for two.



Ask almost anyone in a committed relationship if it's all fun and games and of course they'll answer with a resounding "no." Still, most of us wouldn't trade our sweet-heart for the world...me included. With ten years of marriage and three children to show for it, I wanted to remind my husband that we still prefer each other's company over anyone else's, and that we still have some funny bones left in our bodies.

With that in mind, I began to plan a Valentine's Day dinner for the two of us. Usually we make reservations at a nice restaurant, but this year I wanted something different. My dining room, generally filled with the day's newspapers, a plastic high chair and children's homework, was going to be transformed into a light-filled, gracious bower where we could intimately review our life together, laugh at its ups and downs and excitedly make plans for the future.

One day I was pondering the enormous risk we all take when we fall in love and marry. I decided that playing games would remind Tim and me of the incredible luck we had in finding each other, as well as the notion that whenever one of us wins, we both win. And what better game markers could we use than our own wedding rings? From there the fun and fanciful ideas started pouring out.

THE BIG PICTURE

Of course with any fabulous tabletop design, you start with the big picture. Our big picture is just a comfortable room with battered chairs and an old oak table, warm gold paint on the walls and naked windows. Some strategic layering was definitely in order. Lots of filmy fabrics softened the room's large windows and brushed the plain woodwork with elegant strokes. I've always marveled at the way plain old



(Right) The well-used family dining room was transformed into a romantic Valentine's setting for two, using a large canopy, rose-printed rug and a lavishly adorned table.




*Amor non vincit
sed vincit
et vincit
et vincit
et vincit*

*Amor non vincit
sed vincit
et vincit
et vincit
et vincit*

*Amor non vincit
sed vincit
et vincit
et vincit
et vincit*

Reserved

A romantic dinner table setting. A chandelier hangs from the ceiling. A vase of yellow roses sits on the table. A bottle of champagne is on the left. A lit candle is in a glass holder. A glass of champagne is on the right. A plate of salad is in the foreground. A napkin with a rose design is on a plate. A small sign on a stand is on the table. A chair with a white cloth is in the background.

Champagne served from a standing ice bucket begins an evening of games and loving conversation.

“Playing games would remind us of the incredible luck we had in finding each other.”

mosquito netting could turn a bed into a Shakespearean dream. Couldn't it do the same for our table? With a king-sized canopy complete with cord tiebacks, four hooks and some fishing wire, we created a room within a room that shut the harsh world out.

Although the view through our windows is spectacular (we live on a river), I wanted the evening to be

about us. Holding hands and looking into each other's eyes, we would feel as if we were the only two around. Seeing the early evening headlights streaming over the bridge was too distracting. The answer? Filmy shower curtains with lovely openwork lace on the top and bottom. I clipped on decorative curtain rings that are not entirely closed so you can hang the curtains in minutes and easily adjust

the ring placement. The graceful folds also made a perfect backdrop for dangling heart frames filled with copies of our favorite family photographs.

CHAIR MAKEOVER

For me, splurging is as much about time as it is money. When I looked around at my dining room, the chairs caught my eye. Their beautiful carved wood backs were showing the effects

Nothing says love like a heart-shaped cake for two. A decorative photo album provides a wonderful walk down memory lane.





*This card good
for
unlimited
kisses
by moonlight*

Glass hearts purchased at a crafts store lead the way to winning cards with prizes listed in fancy script.

Lots of filmy fabrics softened the room's large windows and brushed the plain woodwork with elegant strokes.

of a busy household and careless pushing and pulling. Each one was sporting battle scars of nicks, scratches and even a few bits of missing veneer. That was it—I decided to transform them with billowy slipcovers. I knew it would take several precious hours out of my weekends and evenings to make them, but I figured it was worth it for the large element of romance they would add to the setting.

I rushed in to the fabric store, my two-year-old safely strapped in his stroller, and quickly decided on a pattern with a gathered skirt, along with yards of lovely sheer voile with a floral motif. The chairs would be softened, but their elegant lines would show through. To suggest the intimacy of a restaurant, “Reserved” signs were folded over a length of craft chain and attached to a tasseled cord that hung down the back of the chair.

To complement the chairs, two tablecloths were selected for their airiness and subtle detail. The bottom



cloth in pink taffeta has a soft stripe, and the champagne cloth on top adds a delicate edge of sequins. Fanciful touches that glittered and sparkled would contribute to the festive mood and capture the light from the glimmering chandelier crystals overhead.

SETTING THE STAGE

Using many of my own family possessions, I began to set the table.

(Above) Take off your wedding rings and let the games begin!

(Left) The chair's sheer slipcover shows the ornate chair back underneath. "Reserved" signs make the night special.

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Gold-rimmed vintage china paired with chargers and early-20th-century silverware would be the stage for a three-course meal that recalled our early married years. After starting with an appetizer of hothouse tomatoes layered with fresh, local chèvre and sprinkled with basil on a bed of red-tipped bibb lettuce, we would then enjoy a nostalgic entrée of chicken with sundried tomatoes over linguine. This was one of the first “fancy” dinners I made in our married life and it’s still a favorite.

Dessert, of course, needed to be in the shape of a heart. From a local pastry chef I selected a fondant heart cake for two, beautifully embellished with fondant flowers, leaves and a



delicate scroll with the word “Love” in script. Accompanied by a fine champagne given to us by some close friends, we toasted our future

with fun, heart-based flutes.

GAME PLAYING

Both during and after dinner, the name of the game was love. Playful trails of glass hearts turned our table into a game board. Luckily, I chanced upon a 1950s bingo game in a local antiques shop. Its metal spinner had every number with a small hole next to it. When the number is called, a wooden peg goes into the hole. With our red game cards in hand, we played a couple of rousing games of bingo. Using our rings, we each moved closer to our goal: a card promising a fabulous prize!

Of course, being a woman, I had to put my husband on the spot at least once. For the grand prize consisting

Fancy Tricks and Shortcuts



A wedding earring dangles from this framed photo of the happy couple. No one would ever guess that the sheer window panels are actually shower curtains.

Want to play romantic games with your loved one? Since most of us have abundant creativity but limited budgets, here are some ideas that are easy and inexpensive to do:

- Create instant curtains. I didn’t have the time or the money to have custom drapes made for my large dining room windows. I was amazed at the abundance of beautiful shower curtains on the market, most of which come in 72-inch lengths. I paid \$40 for each of the four curtains, but I bet any self-respecting bargain-hunter could probably find them for about half that price. Use the pre-punched holes at the top, or use clip-on rings with a pretty design.
- Hang framed photographs that

showcase your life together. We used pretty ribbon and freeze-dried roses for embellishment. Another idea is to string pearl garland all the way around your windows, threading it underneath the display flap of each frame in the back.

- There are many with which to let loose your imagination. Bingo, poker, Monopoly, chess and Life lend themselves perfectly to a night of romantic game playing. Use familiar symbols and motifs from these classic games as decorative elements on your table and surroundings.
- Your chairs are your thrones. If you aren’t a seamstress, dress them up with ready-made slipcovers, which can be bought for under \$20. Or simply wrap lengths of

of “one kids-free bath...bubbles, candles,” Tim had to find something in the room that I had worn at our wedding. Poor guy—up for the challenge, he searched and searched and after awhile triumphantly came up with the answer. At the end of each heart frame on the windows hung an earring from my jewelry box. One of them was my wedding earring.

The evening was full of laughter, good food and meaningful conversation. With such beautiful and playful surroundings, we didn’t expect anything less. Today we are back to our ordinary lives—china tucked away, slipcovers gently folded, spelling words and mini pizzas a common sight. But just as our children do each day, we cherish the joy of playing. And, just like in the old days of pinball, sometimes we win a free game.

Produced by Erika Kotite

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pretty fabric or large ribbon bows around the backs. Your cards could say “Reserved,” “His” and “Hers” or even “King” and “Queen.” Use craft chain or fancy costume necklaces to display them.

- Real flowers soften the edges and highlight the details. A generous vase filled with roses and some red tulips were my glorious focal points. From there it was all details: a fresh rose at each place setting, some red spray roses tucked into the appetizer dish, freeze-dried roses surrounding the centerpiece candle and tucked into each corner of the canopy. The final touch: pink petals scattered artistically about.

—E.K.