



WE'RE NOT PARIS – OR EVEN NIAGARA FALLS.  
WE HAVE NO LOVERS' LANE OR INSPIRATION POINT.  
BUT THE COUNTY ISN'T A ROMANTIC DESERT.  
YOU JUST HAVE TO LOOK TO FIND ...

# ROMANCE

## *in Montgomery County*

By Carolee Noury

When you think of romance in Montgomery County, what comes to mind? That's a tough one for sure. We had to think on it for a while – quite a while. But we were convinced we're not living in a black hole of romance so we came up with a list of spots that might be good for a Valentine's Day sojourn. They may not be akin to a hotel night within eyeshot of the glowing lights of the Eiffel Tower, but you wouldn't be embarrassed to take your better half there. We narrowed it to a nice Valentine's Day number of 14 – that part was easy. We present them, in no particular order, for your romantic enjoyment on Valentine's Day or any other day of the year the romantic urge strikes.



Montgomery Magazine // February/March 2016 61



## 14 ROMANTIC PLACES



### SPAGnVOLA

**Where:** Gaithersburg

**For:** Chocolate divinity

As chocolate lovers can affirm, the confection stimulates feel-good chemicals in the brain. It's no wonder the candy is a popular gift. It's also no wonder there are many, many options for buying chocolates. Despite all the competition, SPAGnVOLA manages to stand above. Their chocolate is single-estate, meaning the cacao beans come from SPAGnVOLA's own farm (in the eastern region of the Dominican Republic).



Their award-winning chocolates are made using traditional techniques in their Gaithersburg factory. SPAGnVOLA hosts events including factory tours (by reservation only), wine and chocolate, and birthday parties. Or stop in to the boutique during business hours to buy ultra-premium chocolates fresh from the source. Why not cash in on that mood boost with the freshest, most lovingly crafted chocolate?

**[www.spagnvola.com](http://www.spagnvola.com)**

### Montgomery College Astronomical Observatory

**Where:** Rockville

**For:** Stargazing (and perhaps a date with destiny)

The busiest parts of our county make stargazing a challenge thanks to light pollution, but despair not. As Shakespeare once said, "Get thee to an observatory!" (Or maybe that was my Earth Science teacher.) If you seek a clearer view of the stars and planets, the Montgomery College Astronomical Observatory has you covered with high powered telescopes, other stargazing instruments and just the right amount of education (read: no prerequisites required).

Visitors are welcome to stargaze and learn about the solar system during assigned nights. (None is offered during the winter, though.) Check the website to register for an Observatory Guest Night beginning in March. Bring a date or go alone to collect some facts to wow your partner the next time you're gazing into the heavens together. A word of caution from Professor Carrie Fitzgerald, though, "We've had two marriages come out of first dates at the observatory. I tell my students to be careful who they bring if it's a first date, because it might be a lifelong commitment!" **[www.mcobservatory.blogspot.com](http://www.mcobservatory.blogspot.com)**





### Olney Winery

**Where:** Olney

**For:** Tastings of local wines

The Olney Winery makes their 30+ wines here in Maryland. You can purchase their products, including award-winning red "For Your Eyes Olney," at locations all over the state. However, if you want to learn more about the wines and taste before buying (without risking arrest, anyway), the Olney location offers you the opportunity to sample and chat with staff. Sweet wine fans will be delighted by the quality selection of wines that are sweet, not syrupy and fruity without sacrificing alcohol content. Their fruit wine varieties include tempting Peach Chardonnay, Watermelon White Merlot and Black Cherry Pinot Noir to name just a few. Fans of drier wines have plenty of options as well, but why take it from me? Head on over, the drive is considerably shorter than one to Sonoma Valley.

[www.olneywinery.com](http://www.olneywinery.com)

### Gala Artisan Jewelry and Gifts

**Where:** Kensington

**For:** Unique gifts

If supporting local art is important to you, Gala Artisan Jewelry and Gifts offers an excellent selection of handmade gifts. Inventory includes a plentiful selection: from jewelry to cards to handbags and beyond, many artists' works fill their shelves. Their website offers links to many of the artists' own sites as well. It's especially great for those who seem to have everything. And why not select something for yourself while you're there? It's practically a good deed, just ask any starving artist. Love the thrill of last minute gift buying? Stop in during the evening on February 13 for "Cupid Rescue and Beer Tasting." Gala will be open until 8 p.m. serving local microbrews and offering gift buying guidance.

[www.galaartists.com](http://www.galaartists.com)

### B&B at Lansdowne Way

**Where:** Silver Spring

**For:** A romantic getaway

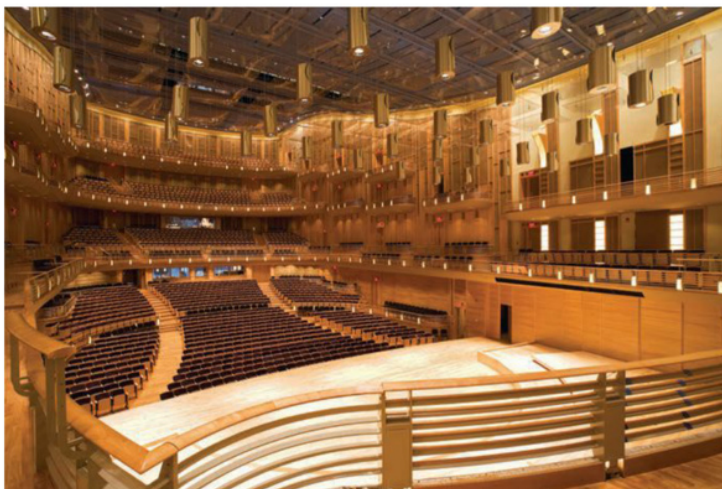
It may not be your stereotypical bread and breakfast located in the country or set in the historic area of some destination town, but the B&B at Lansdowne Way is an off-beat, if not romantic, place to spend a night or weekend. Set in a residential Silver Spring neighborhood within minutes walking distance to great restaurants, shops and entertainment, Lansdowne has a trio of uniquely and tastefully decorated rooms. The Africa Tapestry Suite has a king-sized bed, private bath and a touch of North Africa and France. The Antique Suite is a junior suite decorated in American antiques, Asian Indian silks and features art by Shara Banisadr while the popular India Ink Room is decorated with American antiques and silks from India. After a filling breakfast of fresh ingredients served on fine china, it will be time to hold hands and go exploring in downtown Silver Spring.

[www.bblansdowneway.com](http://www.bblansdowneway.com)





## 14 ROMANTIC PLACES



### The Strathmore

**Where:** North Bethesda

**For:** Performances

The Strathmore – a nonprofit multi-disciplinary arts center – is an institution in our county, so if you’ve never caught a show there, or if it has been a while, now is the perfect time. With an excellent range of choices, a beautiful setting, and a unique gift shop, you’ll be glad you did. From a world-class violinist playing Tchaikovsky to an intimate evening with a rock ‘n’ roll great, the Strathmore has your next date night covered.

Whether it’s your first date or your thousandth, it is sure to be memorable for all the right reasons. [www.strathmore.org](http://www.strathmore.org)



### Beall's Florist

**Where:** Damascus

**For:** Rave-worthy flowers

Colorful, bright flowers are a winning gift, especially during the cold months when they’re more difficult to find. Beall's Florist, family owned and operated since 1961, offers delivery to a large portion of the county. With many varieties and arrangements (from the catalog or custom made), finding exactly what you need is a breeze.

Bring your loved one a hint of the warmer weather. It's much better to give flowers for a passionate reason than because you're in trouble, but Beall's has you covered either way – no judgment.

[www.damascusflorist.com](http://www.damascusflorist.com)



### AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center

**Where:** Silver Spring

**For:** Eclectic Films

Carrying on today thanks to a partnership between Montgomery County and the American Film Institute (AFI), the AFI Silver offers a wonderful combination of history and innovation. Screening films from all eras, regions, and genres, the AFI is an excellent remedy for those wanting a break from the “same old, same old.” And if you’ve ever wished for healthy or locally-made concession items, you’re in luck. AFI’s café has items like hummus, a cheese plate, and freshly baked cookies and brownies from a local bakery. Prefer the standard menu of popcorn, soda, candies, etc.? No worries; they have those, too.

[www.afi.com/silver](http://www.afi.com/silver)

**You can get all mushy with flowers and a card and maybe a box of chocolates,**

but your Valentine's Day probably hits the make-or-break point with dinner. Finding a romantic restaurant on Valentine's Day is much like finding beauty itself. It's in the eye of the beholder. Setting the table for romance on the most romantic evening of the year by taking your sweetheart to a steakhouse when she's a seafood girl probably won't get you very far. And if she's vegan, well, relationship over.

So food is a variable that only you can factor into the equation. Don't blow it.

The rest is all about the ambiance. Maybe all you need to impress your gal is linen tablecloths or tablecloths at all.



Maybe for you kicking it up a notch for Valentine's Day requires a table near the stone fireplace. Or maybe a view of the city lights from a top-floor bistro.

Maybe you need a violinist to brush by while you hold your sweetheart's hands and stare awkwardly into her eyes while fumbling for your martini. Or maybe you've dug such a deep hole in the past year you need Old Blue Eyes himself to come by and serenade her with his gushingly romantic "All the Things You Are."

In a county not known for romantic spots, here are three restaurants where you can't go wrong.

### Bistro Provence

**Where:** Bethesda

**Chef:** Yannick Cam

**Atmosphere:** Southern France

**Come for:** The Lobster Aumoniere – a thin, almost transparent crepe wrapped around lobster, roasted lightly and served in an emulsion of carrot juice and ginger. Couples can order together and share.

**Don't miss:** Tartare Salmon spiced with a little sea salt, oil and lemon juice and served with shallots. "It's sushi without the rice, almost sashimi," Cam says.

**For something different:** At Bistro Provence everything is something different. "You don't find any of the things at my restaurant at any other French restaurant," Cam says. "I create everything myself based on personal experiences."

**The romantic touch:** Candles, low lighting and an intimate space create an elegant and romantic atmosphere that looks like the south of France. The kitchen is open to the dining room so it's almost like dining at home with your own personal world-class chef.

**Sweets for the sweet:** Diners can't go wrong with any of the four chocolate desserts. The cake made with Tanzania chocolate melting in the middle is a chocolate lover's heaven. The four chocolates served with black cherry syrup are rich and gooey and delectable. For the non-chocolate lover (is there such a thing?), try the passion fruit cup.

**[www.bistroprovence.com](http://www.bistroprovence.com)**





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### The Roundhouse Theatre

**Where:** Bethesda

**For:** Plays and more

The Roundhouse Theatre is dedicated to emotionally-engaging and discussion-inspiring shows. It also offers “enhanced” options, including select performances with an after-show question-and-answer session with actors, playwrights and/or directors. This February’s play, “Father Comes Home from the Wars (Parts 1, 2 and 3),” takes place during the Civil War, but carries themes relevant to today. Sure to offer plenty of conversation for dinner afterward and the years to come.

**[www.roundhousetheatre.org](http://www.roundhousetheatre.org)**

### iPic Pike & Rose

**Where:** Rockville

**For:** Luxurious dinner and movies

Dinner and a movie typically mean going to two different places, and at least one of them is less than luxurious. iPic changes all of that. Since it also houses the City Perch Kitchen + Bar, dinner and a movie are a decadent one-stop operation.

Prefer dinner during the movie? Then you can opt for the premium plus seating which offers seat-side service, courtesy of “ninja” waitstaff dressed in black. Order your meal via a touchscreen system and have your theater appropriate (read: not too crunchy or fragrant) meals served directly to you.

Thanks to online seat reservations, there’s no need to arrive early, you get to preselect your perfect seat. Once you arrive, a concierge will direct you to your theater.

**[www.ipictheaters.com](http://www.ipictheaters.com)**



### Tea Spa

**Where:** Gaithersburg, Silver Spring

**For:** Couples massage and spa

Has life been too busy to make time for romance? Then why not loosen those tense muscles together with your beloved? For quality time and serious pampering, Tea Spa has you covered with a selection of couple’s massage packages or you can opt for his and her services from the spa menu. Think nail treatments are just for women? Where did you think the “man” in manicure came from? Take my word for it. (Besides, my source is busy with preschool at the moment.) Regardless, nice looking hands are always in fashion.

**[www.teaspawellness.com](http://www.teaspawellness.com)**

(Gaithersburg)

**[www.teaspadc.com](http://www.teaspadc.com)** (Silver Spring)

## Olazzo

**Where:** Bethesda, Silver Spring

**Chef:** Riccardo and Roberto Pietrobono

**Atmosphere:** Italian

**Come for:** The Frutti de Mare is a favorite among regulars – fresh sea scallops, salmon, calamari, shrimp, mussels and clams topped with your choice of zesty marinara sauce or a lemon white wine sauce.

**Don't miss:** The oven-roasted lamb chops are marinated overnight in balsamic and fresh herbs and served with a silky rich mascarpone risotto.

**For something different:** Diners in the cozy restaurant are treated like one of the family by the staff.

**The romantic touch:** The dimly lit, romantic dining room will warm your hearts and impress your date.

**Sweets for the sweet:** A Valentine's Day dinner isn't complete without a special dessert. Try the warm fudge brownie with salted caramel gelato for the perfect ending to your dinner and a great start to your night.

[www.olazzo.com](http://www.olazzo.com)



## Squire's Rock Creek Chophouse

**Where:** Wheaton

**Chef:** Scott Squire

**Atmosphere:** American steakhouse

**Come for:** The steaks. This is a place for meat lovers. The array of filet and strip steaks is impressive and the true carnivore can tackle the 22-ounce bone-in Porterhouse or the eight-bone rack of lamb. Squire's also offers some really nice seafood, like their butter poached cod, and pastas, like their gnocchi in vodka sausage. It's an eclectic menu for a steakhouse.

**Don't miss:** The black iron skillet mussels from Prince Edward Island (Canada) served as an appetizer on a sizzling cast iron skillet.

**For something different:** The butter-poached cod has been a big hit since the chophouse opened on Dec. 30. Squire's also does pasta and the gnocchi in vodka sauce shows off its Italian side.

**The romantic touch:** Wheaton hasn't seen anything like this in a long time – dark wood and leather ambiance in an extremely intimate space; a small but very nice wine list.

**Sweets for the sweet:** The house-made chocolate mousse is a light and fluffy finish to a romantic meal.

[www.squiresrc.com](http://www.squiresrc.com)





## 14 ROMANTIC PLACES



### Villain & Saint

**Where:** Bethesda

**For:** Dinner, drinks, live music

Need something fresh? The Haight-Ashbury-inspired venue for rock 'n roll offers an excellent opportunity to catch some of the area's best musicians. Bring your appetite: food and drinks aren't an afterthought here. Enjoy a full meal or some bar fare, and be sure to check out the bar's signature drink menu with song inspired names like "Bye-Bye Miss American Pie" and "Bittersweet Symphony." You'll be sure to find something to fit your mood. The dance floor offers a chance to get really close to the music. If you're musically inclined, check the schedule for open mic nights. Any of the above will shake off the dating doldrums. Bonus: the music may take off some of the pressure to make conversation.

[www.villainandsaint.com](http://www.villainandsaint.com)

### Princess Jewelers

**Where:** Rockville

**For:** Shiny things

For over 25 years, family-owned Princess Jewelers has offered the best of both worlds: a large selection and dedicated, personal service. Visit the store to peruse the selection, or meet with an in-house goldsmith to hammer out your own design. Much of the collection can be viewed on their website, if you'd like to start window shopping before you leave the house. Then again, the sparkle and shimmer are so much better in person.

[www.princessjeweler.com](http://www.princessjeweler.com)



### Avant Garde Ballroom Dance Center

**Where:** North Bethesda

**For:** Salsa (or other) dance lessons

Ever wondered how salsa dancers work their magic? Here's your chance to learn firsthand. Avant Garde's private lessons, classes, and social dance party evenings offer plenty of opportunities to learn or improve your game in a classy, low-pressure learning environment. Dancers of all skill levels are welcome. Wow your date with your excellent moves or take a class together and wow everyone else at your next event.

[www.avantgardeballroommd.com](http://www.avantgardeballroommd.com)