

Mushroom Fondue

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"You're never had fondue??" Philippe is horrified. "But I must take you! Tomorrow night!"

I accept, slightly embarrassed that I have been living for eight months in Switzerland without having tried the national dish. I've had a raclette- but in Anncey, France and while it was delicious, I was on such a high from the rendez- vous with my gorgeous French ex that I could have been eating snail shit and loving it. I've tried Tartarflette, another cheesy experience, on the set of a hip hop video clip but, as advised, only had a mouthful due to the leaps in the choreography we'd yet to film, then nearly started a brawl between the French and Swiss cameramen over the origins of the recipe, both claiming it to be theirs. But fondue, I'd only experienced with a sweaty brow as a melting motion in ballet class, in the heat of a Sydney dance studio.

The evening before Christmas Eve, Philippe arrives to pick me up with rosie cheeks and a grin of expectation. We cross the bridge over the icy Lake of Geneva to Rive, park and climb out to minus temperatures. "This is great!" Philippe cries "You have to be very cold to appreciate fondue. It heats the insides." I grit a 'd'accord', while pushing forward on a 45 degree angle and bracing myself against 'La Bise' - the kiss of death wind that comes directly from Siberia. It reminds me why I'm leaving Switzerland (and will *never* go to Siberia in winter): I'm an antipedeon wimp when it comes to weather. Eveyone else seems to deal with being cold and gets on with things while I become a verbal and mental broken record with "It's S0000 cold. I'm S00000 cold" This repetitive phrase bores even myself, but I honestly can't concentrate on anything else. Once when rehearsing a new choreography with Saphar in the middle of summer, she was acting odd- wanting to take breaks all the time, sit down- lacking her usual fiersome motivation. I couldn't work it out. Then I realised it was the heat. She couldn't concentrated in it. I was hot but I could still function. But the cold- it terrifies me. I cannot face another European winter. Not right now.

We squeeze into a cozy corner table and Phillipe rubs his hands together and explains with sparkling teeth about white wine essentials when fonduing. It sound very scientific.

"Red wine is not good. It forms a little ball in the stomach with the fondue," he insists gesticulating to show the movement of the red wine combining with the fondue.

I nod studiously and toast to Switzerland.

"And to us" he ads.

At the next table, there is an argument between the client and a somewhat drunk looking waiter about whether or not their bread is stale. We glance over but return to each other, smiling, refusing to allow it to spoil my initiation.

Feeling fresh and blissfully out of La Bise, I'm ready to redeem myself for eight months sans fondue. We order a mushroom variety and a bottle of white.

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Warming my hands over the steaming pot, I watch Phillippe puncture a piece of bread with a fork. His portion is expertly captured in the dead centre with Swiss precision. I follow his lead and stab, feeling potentially dangerous. My bread wobbles. Philippe dips cleanly into the pot and surfaces thickly with steamy, creamy cheese. Before my bread topples, I dunk it with a little splash and reach for my glass .

The local wine is good and I smile across at Philippe. His pink lips perk and glisten, and from behind fogged glasses he peers anxiously as I take my first mouthful of fondue.

I make a polite and rather genuine little groan. His attention to my reception is quite endearing and I must admit I can understand:

I once lured a swiss man back to my apartment and fed him vegemite on toast.

We cooked the toast together and I had him in the palm of my hand right up until the moment I'd finished slathering on the butter. Because when I opened the jar of vegemite he reeled back in horror. . 'What it is- stock for cooking?' he asked and I said 'noooo' spreading it thick on the toast and taking a mouthful, 'noooo try again it's sooooo gooooooood don't you see?mmmmmm'

He never got the wonders of my national spread, couldn't understand the salty flavours of the soul. I slept alone that night.

As I swallow the cheesy bread, Phillippe shoots a line across the table:

'Darling. I want you to stay'.

The piping cheese sliding down my throat brings tears to the corners of my eyes and taking it as a sign of emotion, he reaches for my hand.

'Don't go. Stay with me. Marry me.'

The cheese sticks somewhere in my windpipe. The lights fades, my life speeds up, I try to cough, my eyes dart wildy, the world is getting blotchy, Philippe's lips are moving but there's no sound, my face burns, my chest locks, life turns bluer and darker

I grab my white and gulp.

When my vision clears I see that Phillipe is blinking but looking quite serious.

'We will have a beautiful life together.' he continues, delicately dipping more bread and swirling it in cheese as if from a glossy food magazine page.

Perhaps sharing his national dish with a foreigner is making him sensitive. Or maybe he's been waiting for this moment since we met at the opening of a fashion store, ducking between the young Bougeoisie after much champagne (he later tells me he thought 'this is my future wife', I thought 'he's nice and definitely gay'!) . Perhaps it is the mere fact that I haven't kissed him and as a successful, confident and attractive Swiss man, he's not used to his advances being taken with salt. Maybe it's just because I'm leaving town.

But I'm sure it's also the cheesy fumes that are affecting my date.

'Sorry but I can't take you seriously darling' I say softly, now able to speak and breath and feeling slightly spinny from the near death experience and possibly the scull of wine "I have to race off and finish this shoot, then pack, then fly to Stockholm then Amsterdam, then Singapore then Sydney.' Sun drenched beautiful, salty Sydney. "I've already got my ticket."

Sulkily he rubs the fog from his glasses.

I feel bad. Not wanting to ruin his evening or bruise his Swiss pride, I say, "Come over on Christmas morning. We can discuss it then,' I feel my warmed stomach threatening to knot...

But I'll give him a chance to put his case to me again. When I'm clearer, at my house. Over coffee... and vegemite toast.

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