

A FLAVOURFUL FLORAL FEAST

Chefs are using edible flowers for more than just garnishes

BY TRACEY MACKENZIE



FLOWERS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN LOVED for their beauty and valued for their medicinal properties. But some species—in particular those that are both beautiful and tasty—have acquired a lofty new status among five-star chefs and home cooks alike. In fact, some flowers have transcended the garnish ghetto and are being served as key ingredients in dishes ranging from salads and appetizers to main courses and desserts.

And many can be cultivated in your backyard.

Consider nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*), that old-fashioned window box stand-by. Its peppery leaves are an ideal substitute for watercress, and its spicy blossoms can animate a dish with flavour and colour. Add the leaves and petals (use petals instead of the whole flower to control the intensity of the spiciness) to your salad to make it a delicious conversation piece at your next dinner party.

Flowers can also be added to rice-paper-wrapped spring rolls. Position the bloom so that it is centered when the spring roll is complete.

Zucchini blossoms (*Cucurbita pepo*) can be stuffed with ricotta or goat cheese, or a combination of both, lightly breaded, and fried and served as an appetizer.

Flowers are not only tasty in meals but are also delicious in jams and sugars. Food writer and blogger Emiko Davies has chronicled her visit to an Armenian monastery on the island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, in the Venetian Lagoon, where monks grow organic roses and turn the petals into jam. Davies savoured the deep red jam for breakfast at the monastery, where the highly coveted treat is available only in May when the roses are in bloom.

Lavender, a spiky flower often planted with roses and cultivated for centuries for its fragrance, can be used to prepare lavender sugar, which enhances the flavour of Earl Grey tea. It's easy to make by combining the blossoms with white sugar in a Mason jar and storing it in a cool, dry place overnight. In the morning, open the jar and breathe in the glorious aroma. Adding a vanilla bean heightens the flavour for baking. 🍷

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Candied flowers are also on trend. Sarah Hughes, the Wales-based founder of Eat My Flowers, has made a career of crystalizing violets, roses and primroses, which she uses to decorate cakes and cupcakes.

When Hughes was aiming to launch a new business, she considered selling fresh, edible flowers to restaurants, but was dissuaded by their short shelf life. So she looked into crystalizing them instead. “I have always crystalized violets and primroses for my own baking and decorating, which friends and family

loved,” she says. “I was looking for an income I could make from home that would give me flexibility and allow me to be my own boss.”

Hughes grows the flowers organically in hoop greenhouses on her property. Within an hour of picking them, she paints the blooms with pasteurized egg white, sprinkles them with sugar and leaves them to dry. “It is all very simple and traditional. No artificial flavours, colours or glues are used,” she says.

She doesn’t use flowers that taste garlicky or peppery, favouring instead delicately scented

varieties, such as violets, roses and primroses, which have a light jasmine-like flavour.

Hughes, who sells her products online, says the flowers are so pretty that customers use them mainly for their looks rather than the taste.

Are edible flowers likely to be anything more than a passing culinary fad? “The restaurant market is always looking for new and novel things to include, and fresh, foraged and floral are all very on trend,” she says.

They’re also beautiful to behold and a pleasure for the palate. ☞

LAVENDER SUGAR

INGREDIENTS:

- Lavender buds
- White sugar
- Vanilla bean (if desired)

Add 1 tbsp. of lavender buds to 1 cup of sugar. If you are using the vanilla, add ¼ of the bean. Place all ingredients in a Mason jar. If you don’t want the lavender buds floating in your tea, grind them with a coffee grinder. This superfine mixture is also good in cakes and cookies.



CRYSTALLIZED FLOWERS

To crystallize flowers, buy or pick organic ones, such as violets or nasturtiums. Use a paintbrush to coat them in egg white. (Tip: using powdered egg whites will prevent the growth of salmonella). Sprinkle them with fine sugar and place on a wire rack to dry. The more humid the environment, the longer it will take to dry the flowers.

Once dry, use them to garnish your cakes or cupcakes.

ROSE PETAL JAM

INGREDIENTS:

- 2.5 cups fine white sugar
- 1 cup organic rose petals, ideally red or dark pink with a strong perfume
- 2.5 cups water
- Juice of one lemon

Gently rinse and drain the rose petals and place them in a large bowl with the lemon juice and 1 cup of the sugar. With your hands, massage the rose petals into the mixture until you reduce them to a paste. The petals should remain whole, not torn, but with the sugar and lemon they will release colour and perfume, and will wilt.

In the meantime, add the rest of the sugar to the water and heat in a large saucepan until the sugar dissolves. Add the rose petals and bring to a boil. Boil until the syrup thickens and the petals no longer float (about 30 minutes).

Because this jam is made from flowers rather than fruit pulp, it won't be thick but rather a silky syrup. Keep an eye on it, and stir periodically.

While still hot, place the jam in clean, sterilized jars and allow to cool. This delicately perfumed jam is delicious on fresh white bread or brioche, with or without a little unsalted butter. It can also be stirred into plain organic yogurt.