

Dining In

The Flower Was Never Just for the Bee

By MELISSA CLARK

NASTURTIUMS in butter. Orchids in cheesecake. Rose petals with lobster. The idea of eating flowers may seem effete modern, but it's a concept that goes back centuries. Lilacs and pansies and marigolds, even those orchids, have always had a place on the plate, sometimes as just a gorgeous garnish but surprisingly often as real food.

This time of year, upscale markets and some Greenmarkets have a whole range of edible flowers to explore in cooking.

Some, with their vivid colors and fanciful shapes but faint flavor, are best just as eye candy, like pansies, Johnny-jump-ups, tulips, carnations, primroses, daisies and orchids. But others have a unique flavor and scent, from delicately floral violets, jasmine and chamomile, to intensely perfumed elderflowers, scented geraniums, lilacs and roses, to spicy and peppery nasturtiums and marigolds.

John Gottfried, an owner of Gourmet Garage, says he has noticed an explosion of interest in edible flowers over the last few years.

Last year, the chain stocked about four kinds of organic edible flowers, but now it carries eight to 10, including marigolds, nasturtiums, roses, pan-

sies, Johnny-jump-ups and orchids.

They all have time-honored appeal in the kitchen. In medieval Europe, roses, violets, primroses, dandelions, marigolds and fruit tree blossoms were candied in honey, boiled into jams and syrups, distilled for their scents, or even used fresh.

In Asia, specially bred chrysanthemums and jasmine have been used to flavor tea and wine, and lotus petals as a garnish for soup and salad. In India, roses flavor puddings and jams, much as they do in Turkey and northern Africa.

Roses are used in Moroccan cooking, said Mina Newman, the chef at Layla, a Middle Eastern restaurant in TriBeCa. "Flowers are a sign of hospitality," she explained. For

Mother's Day this year, she served an all-rose dinner, including a lobster and rose petal salad, and rose-chocolate truffles.

Roses have decidedly pronounced flavors. Their appeal in Mexican cooking was immortalized in the movie "Like Water for Chocolate," in which a sauce made with them sent everyone into a frenzy.

In Ukraine and Georgia, marigolds are common in the kitchen, said Ari Nieminen, the chef at Firebird, which serves Russian foods. He uses them fresh in salads for their pleasantly bitter herbal flavor, and in a stuffed tomato dish, where they contribute a saffronlike nuance.

Like marigolds, nasturtiums have a lively, peppery flavor. They are ubiquitous in salads and are often sold as part of a mesclun mix. But they can also brighten a vinaigrette or marinade. Samara Farber, a former private chef in New York, purées the blossoms with softened seasoned butter that she molds into a tubelike shape and chills. When sliced and served on hot grilled fish, the flowers leave a confetti trail of red, orange and yellow flecks as the butter melts. And the flavor has a subtle spicy kick that is heightened by the heat.

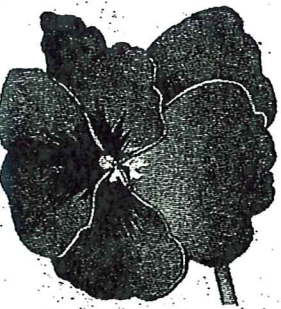
Mr. Gottfried of Gourmet Garage says that orchids are particularly good as a garnish because they are "nature's way of showing off."

"Caterers love orchids because they make a great presentation," he added. That's why Parker Stafford, the chef at Merchant's on East 62d Street, uses orchid petals in a ricotta cheesecake.

One problem with all fresh flowers is that their flavor is evanescent. Just-picked roses are more potent than roses a few days old. If they are heated too much, their color and flavor fade. So Matthew Lake, the chef of 27 Standard on 27th Street, adds julienned petals only once the sauce for his roasted pheasant is reduced.

Ann-Michele Andrews, the pastry chef at Judson Grill in midtown, garnishes her rice pudding flavored with rosewater with rose petals she candies herself. She brushes the rinsed and dried petals with beaten egg white, then sprinkles them with extra-fine granulated sugar.

Gourmet Garage sells a mix of 18 to 24 edible blossoms for \$3.95. Balducci's and some Greenmarkets also sell edible flowers.



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