

Bloomin' Delicious

Flowers might have been part of food for, literally, ages. But today, there is a growing trend to use them for flavour, colour and aroma in appetisers, mains, salads, soups, and desserts.

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I am looking at my lovely plate bursting with colours but what catches my fancy is a bright purple flower—a pansy. So what do I do with that, I ask Chef Nimish Bhatia who is sitting opposite me, explaining his love for cooking with flowers. Well, eat it, he says and I put it in my mouth a bit reluctantly. I instantly realise that it actually tastes very nice. Flowers are increasingly finding a place in the kitchen and the trend is growing.

Looking Back

My earliest memory of edible flowers goes back to a simple recipe made with banana flowers and grated coconut tossed in simple spices that had the most amazing taste. These little flowers are quite a task to cook as they contain a pistil and calyx that need to be removed prior to chopping. And that is certainly a mammoth task. It took me some time to realise that cooking with flowers is not as simple as it seems.

Using flowers in food is a fast catching trend in culinary circuits. In fact, there is a movement towards specifically cultivating flowers to be part of food, including the likes of dianthus, calendula, nasturtium, pansy, marigold, lavender, borage, calendula, lilac, hollyhock, day lily and tulip. Hibiscus, rose, jasmine, coriander, pumpkin, banana, lavender, basil, sunflower, daisy, chrysanthemum, drumstick, radish and dandelion flowers are also finding favour among chefs. Salads, steaks, cookies, cakes, ice-creams and

beverages can be made using edible flowers. Adding flowers to food is a nice way of gaining both colour and flavour. “The culinary use of flowers goes back to the ancient Chinese, Greek and Romans. Many cultures used flowers in their traditional cooking. Well, think of squash blossoms in Italian food and rose petals in Indian food,” says executive chef Manpreet Singh Malik of the InterContinental Chennai Mahabalipuram Resort. Likewise, Southeast Asia uses jasmine at tea time, whilst people in undivided India from pre-Mughal times were eating/drinking flowers such as the keora, rose, saffron, khus and so on. Similarly, the French used lavender, whilst flowery pekoe was well known in Ceylon. Basically, edible flowers have been used in cooking for centuries all over the world, particularly in Asian, Middle Eastern and European cuisine. Again, the taste of each flower is unique and while some are spicy, and some herbaceous, others are floral and fragrant. The gamut of taste profiles is astonishing.

Cuisine Matters

Earlier, lots of flowers were used for décor value but now have become a part of the mains and short-eats. “It is not uncommon to see flower petals used in salads, teas, and as garnishing for desserts, but they inspire other uses as well. Lavender flowers which are sweet, spicy and perfumed are a great addition to both savoury and sweet dishes like a *kheer* or a *biryani*. Roll spicy ones like chive blossoms into

KEEP IN MIND

- Shake flowers to remove insects or excess dirt before using them.
- Gently wash in a large bowl of cold water and drain, let flowers air-dry on a paper towel-lined tray.
- The secret to cooking edible flowers is to keep the cooking process simple so that the freshness of the flowers is not lost.
- Flowers used fresh in salads like frangipani, nasturtium or daisies can be

- kept in chilled water while dried flowers can be heated or lightly broiled for flavour enrichment.
- Flowers are very delicate, so if you are using them in their original form they have to be kept chilled and washed a few times before being used.
- If they are preserved as a syrup or frozen/sun-dried, then use as per the recipe.



(Clockwise) Squash noodle, soft poached chicken, cherry tomatoes and edible flowers; amaranthus granola with lemon yogurt, berries and marigold; chicken and banana flower salad; trio of drumstick *palya* with Mysore *dosa*



handmade pasta dough, incorporate floral ones into homemade ice-cream, pickle nasturtium flower buds and use them to make a floral syrup for use in lemonade or cocktails,” exhorts Chef Bhatia.

Edible flowers can also be used in pastries, sorbets and other desserts. “Chefs have also started using them in Indian cuisine now. Initially, they were eaten for therapeutic reasons but modern cuisine has rediscovered them and they are now used not only for their taste but also to create bold and intriguing blends of fragrance and colour,” says Chef Alok Verma, executive sous chef, The Imperial, New Delhi. Karan Dogra, executive chef, Goldfinch Hotel, Delhi, adds, “Pansies could be used for their mild flavours and their wintergreen taste. Don’t forget decorative purposes too. Keep scissors and tweezers handy. Clip the flower stem as close to the base as possible, snip off the sepals, hold what is left of the stem with tweezers.”

Floral Touch

Flowers are a fantastic element of culinary conversion as they can alter mood as well as the face value, fragrance and oomph factor of the dish. “Flowers are very delicate and can be had in their original form only if uncooked or unprocessed as they wilt otherwise. But they can be used for flavour or colour as well. For instance, rose and hibiscus have vibrant colour and strong, alluring aroma. Being easily available, they are used for syrups, compotes like *gulkand* and *paan*. Banana and drumstick flowers are also available easily and are used in curries but do not have a strong flavour or colour profile. Chamomile, jasmine and lavender have strong fragrances but low colour impact and are not easily available and are used in dried or preserved form with teas or so,” says Chef Bhatia.

Abhijit Saha, founding director and chef, Avant Garde Hospitality, says, “I started cooking with flowers about 15 years ago, with vegetable-based flowers like zucchini, pumpkin, drumstick and a flower called *bok phool* which is commonly used in Bengal and can be crumb-fried or batter-fried. Flowers from herbs like basil, thyme and rosemary as well as arugula have the flavour of the herb and are great additions to food.”

Take Care

As lovely as eating flowers can be, it can also be deadly if you are not careful. “Eat flowers you know are consumable. If you are uncertain, consult a reference book on edible flowers and plants. It is better to consume flowers that you have grown yourself or are sure are safe for consumption. Flowers from the florist or nursery or those that grow in public parks have probably been treated with pesticides or other chemicals. Roadside flowers may be polluted by car exhaust. Eat only the petals, making sure to remove parts like the stamens and pistils. If you suffer from allergies, introduce edible flowers gradually, as they may exacerbate allergies,” advise Hamsa V. and Nithin, founders of Growing Greens, a farm that grows edible flowers in Bengaluru. Jagdish Chandra, head chef, Suvaasa Resorts, says, “First and foremost is the edibility, even when a flower can be consumed there are certain portions which need to be discarded. Second is allergic reactions, which have become quite rampant as some people are sensitive to certain smells, or food types. Gather some knowledge about the plant, consult someone, and try and taste it yourself first before serving.” Adding flowers to your dish can certainly elevate it to another level. As Hanna Rion VerBeck said, “The greatest gift of the garden is the restoration of the five senses” and food is certainly the right way to do just that! ♦



ASSORTED FLOWER TEMPURA

(Serves 4)
INGREDIENT
 Tempura flour – 100 gm
 Egg – 1
 Ice cubes
 Pumpkin flowers – 20 gm
 Banana flowers – 50 gm
 Marigold flowers – 30 gm
 Hibiscus flowers – 20 gm
 Frangipani flowers – 20 gm
 Refined oil for frying

METHOD
 Beat the egg and ice cubes together and gradually add tempura flour to make tempura batter. Heat oil in a deep frying pan. Individually coat the flowers with batter and deep-fry. Serve hot.
 (Courtesy of Chef Nimish Bhatia)



WARM PRAWN & SHRIMP SALAD

(Serves 1)
INGREDIENT:
 Shredded red cabbage – 1 small bowl
 Shredded lettuce – 1 small bowl
 Squared chopped zucchini – 1/2 bowl
 Sweet lime – 6-7 pieces
 Cleaned shrimp – Half bowl
 Cleaned prawns – Half bowl
 Himalayan pink salt – To taste
 Olive oil – 1 tablespoon
 Freshly ground green pepper – 2 pinches
 Pansy flowers – 5-6
 White wine vinegar – 1/2 tablespoon
 Ripe tomato – 1

METHOD
 Toss the prawns and shrimp for two minutes in a flat pan. Place vegetables and fruits in a big bowl, add the shrimp and prawn, add freshly ground green pepper, diced tomato and white wine vinegar. Toss all in the olive oil for two minutes again on the flat pan and remove from the flame. Add Himalayan pink salt and pansy flowers while the dish is hot. Additionally, mustard sauce, sweet onion and mayonnaise could be added to accentuate the taste.
 (Courtesy of Chef Karan Dogra)