

EDIBLE FLOWERS *petal perfect*



Petal Perfect

BY LAURA TAXEL

Sugar-coated blossoms are pretty and practical.

The Chinese say we eat first with our eyes. Italians agree, as do instructors at culinary schools who teach plating and presentation practices. Science confirms that all our senses come into play at the table. Food that looks good is not only food we want to eat, what we see also affects what we taste.

This combination of tried-and-true wisdom and hard fact comes as no surprise to kitchen professionals, and many know that for today's demanding diners, it takes more than a sprinkle of parsley or a toss of microgreens to make their dishes visually appealing.

Edible flowers are eye-popping garnishes that express a kitchen's commitment to go beyond the ordinary. Miche Bacher, chef turned artisan chocolatier, and author of *Cooking with Flowers* (Quirk Books, 2013), filled with flower-focused recipes, says people have used edible flowers since ancient times in the same way as they used herbs, both as food and medicine. But having highly perishable and naturally fragile fresh flowers on hand can be a challenge.

Planting your own garden or buying blooms from trusted local growers can ensure a supply of safe product in season, but what about the rest of the year? Shipping them in from warmer climes is costly, and those that arrive in good shape must be used quickly.

There is an alternative. Candied flowers, popular among the Victorians, are making a comeback, and not just for wedding cakes and petits fours.

"Candying is a traditional preservation technique," says Bacher. "It also makes those flowers that are naturally bitter, like violets, or too strong, like lilacs—which can taste like your grandmother's powdered neck—more palatable." She finds that the sugared blossoms have a place in both sweet and savory applications. "They make the plate pretty and add a nice touch to any dish that needs a sweet note—not just dessert—such as honey-glazed ham, meat or poultry that you prepare with fruit, or a wild rice salad."

time + patience

Chef Jason Bond and the back-of-the-house crew at Bondir, his restaurant in Cambridge, Mass., candy herbs, both the leaves and the blossoms, as well as flowers in summer. "There's such an abundance of product available from our own ¼-acre farm and the area farmers we work with," says Bond, "and this is one way to keep it from going to waste and having it available later in the year."

The process is simple. A mixture of egg whites and water is applied with a small paintbrush, and then the petals are dusted with fine sugar. But that doesn't mean it's easy. "It requires a lot of time and effort and is difficult to execute properly," says Bond. "Each piece must be done individually, then set on racks and flipped until they are completely dry. You have to use just the right amount of egg wash and sugar so there's no clumping." When finished, they're sealed in large lidded plastic tubs with desiccant packets.



Opposite, clockwise from top: 1) Fresh Origins' crystallized roses decorate this cake. 2) Violet cupcakes from *Cooking with Flowers*. 3) This vanilla chocolate martini from Dress The Drink is topped with a glazed viola on a dark chocolate swizzle stick.

Above, top to bottom: Tequila is topped off with a glazed viola, and the glass is rimmed with habanero/lemon zest/ginger salt from Dress The Drink. A pistachio/macadamia nut-crusted dark chocolate with a glazed flower from Coco Savvy.



Top: A crystallized rose tops shortcake. Middle: Sweet crystal snapdragons on spinach salad. Bottom, left to right: Tulip ice cream bowls. Mint crystals on chocolate ganache pops.

For a James Beard House dinner, Bond used candied bronze fennel flowers with a red wine/strawberry semifreddo with angel food cake to great effect. His restaurant customers take note when he accessorizes roasted squab or pheasant with candied flowers. “It’s not something they see everywhere,” he says. “People realize that it takes extra work and appreciate the effort.”

He’s especially enthused about how well the process works with anise hyssop, basil, angelica and even frilly fennel fronds. Inevitably, he adds, there’s a fair amount of breakage and blooms that aren’t quite perfect. But instead of discarding all this, Bond grinds it to a powder that he uses to make aromatic sugars for baking.

leave it to the pros

Not every chef or restaurant can do what Bond does. But they can purchase picture-perfect, shelf-stable blooms from one of the three American companies that make and ship candied edible flowers all over the country year-round.

Fresh Origins supplies four varieties of candied flowers to a long list of fine-dining restaurants. “Chefs use them to ornament both their savory dishes and desserts,” says David Sasuga, the man behind Fresh Origins, San Marcos, Calif. “Our method is a revival of an old practice, but we don’t use egg whites, so it’s allergen-free.” Herb and flower crystals, a combination of dried plants and sugar, are also available.

Karen Toocheck, founder of Crystallized Flower Company, Willoughby, Ohio, offers pansies, violas, snapdragons, lavender, miniature roses, mint leaves, strawberry blossoms, borage flowers, daylilies and Hawaiian orchids—the only item she sells that she doesn’t grow herself. Her process gives them sparkle while protecting their delicate shape. “Our daylilies are my pride and joy,” she says. “Nobody else in the world candies them—just us.”

The crisp melt-in-your-mouth beauties deliver a burst of sweetness followed by a hint of their particular flowery essence. Clevelander Liz Wienclaw, a partner in the recently launched Meringue Bake Shop and former pastry chef for Michael Symon at Lola, is a fan. “I’ve thought of doing this myself, but I believe if someone else is an expert, the better choice is to work with them.

“Karen’s products are gorgeous and elegant. She can put together a customized collection with just the color profile I want. People loved it when I decorated a white chocolate and passion fruit Bavarian with her purple violets for a winter dessert.”

Toocheck sells crumbled petals as confetti that can decorate the rim of a cocktail glass. Las Vegas-based Dress The Drink, a company specializing in culinary and mixology garnishes, in partnership with Sweetfields, a Jamul, Calif., grower of edible flowers with patented processes for candying them, offers something similar, creating distinctive flavored blends using the sugared and ground blooms. Dress The Drink also has a glazed,

water-resistant whole-flower version that actually floats. “Talk about the wow factor,” says Diane Svehlak, president. “The visual impact and value added are huge. These products provide a unique and memorable customer experience.”

John Clemons is Sweetfields’ founder/CEO. It took him more than nine years to, as he says, “go from reading about how to candy flowers to having a product that’s aesthetically astounding and can be produced on a large scale.” Even if fresh flowers are delivered one day after harvesting, Clemons explains, their structural integrity will be compromised. Some won’t survive and others will arrive with buds closed. “The flowers we crystallize are picked when they’re firm, between 6 and 8 a.m., before the sun has really touched them, and candied immediately. With our system, four people can do 1,200 blossoms an hour, capturing each one at the moment of perfection.” He also produces a variation with a luster finish that features a dramatic dusting of gold or silver.

Beauty, adds Clemons, is obviously the main attraction, but candied flowers also have a textural allure. “They’re crunchy. It’s like eating a sweet potato chip.”

Clemons’ newest venture is Coco Savvy, a line of dark and white single-origin chocolates topped with crystallized flowers and herbs. A request from one of his restaurant clients, Randy Smerik, owner of Solare in San Diego, inspired the project. “He asked me to come up with something special for a Valentine’s dinner. I created chocolate bars with crumbled rose petals and candied violas. Then he challenged me to make chocolates for pairing with port, and I used opal and lemon basil, spearmint leaves, sea salt and toasted zest from Valencia oranges we grow.” The confections are now available online.

“Solare is a green farm-to-table Italian restaurant,” says Smerik. “John’s products are a good fit. We use his fresh edible flowers on salads and pasta, but because they wilt easily, we order sparingly, and only on an as-needed basis. The crystallized ones, which make things like panna cotta and gelato extra special, give us more flexibility because they last almost forever, so we keep them on hand.” Coco Savvy chocolates are served as a dessert plate or purchased in packages of four pieces to take home.

“People are just blown away by these striking presentations,” notes Smerik. “It set us apart from the competition, and that’s a big win for my business.” ■



Cooking with Flowers: Sweet and Savory Recipes with Rose Petals, Lilacs, Lavender, and Other Edible Flowers (Quirk Books, 2013), by Miche Bacher, includes instructions for how to candy flowers.

Bacher has four key bits of advice for DIYers.

1. Make sure the flowers are completely dry.
2. Handle them carefully so the blossoms don’t bruise.
3. Use a fine paintbrush to apply the coating.
4. Egg whites must be really well broken up but not overly coagulated. Beat just to the point where the mixture starts to foam.



CANDIED FLOWER SUPPLIERS

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Crystallized Flower Company
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Dress The Drink
Las Vegas
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Top: The Flowerfetti cake from *Cooking with Flowers*. Left: Chocolate plate with cranberry crystals.