

# Bring flower power to your plate

*As supermarkets branch out into edible blooms, Victoria Moore picks the best petals – from nasturtiums to violas*

It seems perfectly reasonable to eat nasturtiums – I grew them as a child and my mother used to put the flamenco-bright flowers and bitter, crunchy leaves in salads – but violas? Their velveteen petals and delicate markings are so pretty, it almost feels wrong to put one between your jaws and crunch, like eating a butterfly.

“Try one,” says Gordon McDermott, Waitrose’s very organised cookery school course manager, offering me a tub of tiny, mauve flowers. There is almost no taste at first, then, as you chew slowly through the soft fibres of petal, there is a sudden explosion – more of a scent, actually, that hits the top of your nose, with a gently floral, woodland-floor perfume. At least, that is how I would describe it, but I’m sure I hear someone else mutter, “Deep Heat”.

Anyway, violas have a far more subtle flavour than nasturtiums, which are quite peppery and reminiscent of ... “watercress,” says Rhonwen Cunningham, salad buyer for Waitrose, which has just become the first supermarket to stock edible flowers as part of its summer salad range. Grown under glass

in the Vale of Evesham and available in small 5g pots costing £1.29 each that sell alongside a new range of “microherbs” (tiny, pungent herbs that take just days to grow) and purple basil shoots, the nasturtiums and violas have been on the shelf for around 10 days now and are already a considerable hit.

“Last week was huge for salad,” confirms Rhonwen. “Probably because of the weather warming up so suddenly. We sold 20 per cent more salad than we ever have before and we sold out of all the flowers. They really seemed to capture people’s imaginations as a way of dressing salads and plates of food to eat outdoors in the sunshine.”

The use of flowers on a plate rather than in a vase is quite a trend at the moment.

“We started thinking about it a couple of years ago after seeing edible flower gardens at the Chelsea and Hampton Court flower shows,” says Rhonwen.

Flowers have also been blooming on restaurant menus. Michelin-starred Roussillon, in London, recently put on a five-course petal menu, while the menu at Hélène Darroze at the Connaught has featured dandelion and amaranth leaves.

It is not new to use flowers in food;



Source: Daily Telegraph, The {Main}  
Edition:  
Country: UK  
Date: Thursday 28, April 2011  
Page: 22  
Area: 903 sq. cm  
Circulation: ABC 626416 Daily  
BRAD info: page rate £46,000.00, scc rate £214.00  
Phone: 020 7931 2000  
Keyword: Marks & Spencer

crystallised rose and violet petals in confectionery, rose and orange flower water in Middle Eastern dishes, elderflower fritters; hibiscus syrup; lavender sugar; borage in a glass of Pimm's and courgette flowers, fried or stuffed with ricotta, have all established a place on our table. Mostly, though, in English food, flowers have remained on the periphery, used with a quirky or old-fashioned sensibility as decoration, or strewn on salads for colour.

"Further east, flowers become a more integral part of culinary practice," according to *The Oxford Companion to Food*. "And the lines between cookery, pharmacy and perfumery become as blurred as they had been in Europe until the 18th

The use of flowers in food can be quite divisive. "Some people don't like it and can't see the point," says Sian Wynowen, head chef at the River Café. "I love it, I find it very feminine, but it's not for everyone."

The late Rose Gray, one of the restaurant's co-founders, was a passionate gardener who ensured that the River Café had a garden bursting with herbs, vegetables and flowers which, come the high-summer months of July and August, still find their way on to its menu. "We use borage," says Sian, "You pick the flower away from the furry bits and you can use it in *fritto misto*, along with mallow and marigold shoots, leaves and flowers. We also use yellow rocket flowers, occasional dandelion leaves, zucchini flowers. We might make a risotto with pea and broad-bean flowers – they taste just like the shoots, really, of very tender peas and broad beans."

The easiest way for flowers to give a summery lift to food is to use them as decoration. Gordon McDermott, who before joining Waitrose worked at Quaglino's restaurant, in Mayfair, suggests floating one or two on top of a cocktail – he has made a beautiful, crimson-coloured orange and pomegranate martini that I would quite like to take out on to a sunny terrace right now.

"You can also use violas and nasturtiums on top of cupcakes," he says, producing a couple that are so piled up with cream, raspberries and flowers I wouldn't know how to start eating them, though I would quite like to try. "And they're very good on top of trifles, too."

Well, it certainly beats hundreds and thousands. Sarah Raven, in her excellent *Garden Cookbook*, suggests that lavender

makes "a lovely, unusual taste in puddings, biscuits, cake and ice cream. Put a sprig in custard when you're making *crème brûlée* and quiz everyone as to what they think the flavour is." She also uses nasturtium in fishcakes and runner-bean flowers in salad. "I love edible flowers. They may be perceived as a bit fussy, but so what? I like bright colour in my food."

But what about flowers as a more integral part of a dish, where their texture, taste and colour adds something more than just a pretty finish?

Gordon has two recipes to show me. The first is a gorgeous looking salad made from peach, mozzarella, microherbs, prosciutto, flowers and tomatoes. "I like to use Marmonde tomatoes as they have a slightly bitter taste that is wonderful against the sweetness of the peach," he says. "The flowers add layers of flavour and texture – each ingredient has its own little bounce of flavour."

The second dish uses nasturtiums and violas as part of the base for a mango and mint, Thai-dressed salad on which he serves a crisp-fried fillet of sea bass with a chilli sauce. By the time the photographer has finished shooting the sea bass and its salad, by which time it's really quite cold, but I still eat rather a lot of it.

If you have no garden or no time to grow your own flowers, there is plenty of time to try them out; Waitrose says it hopes to stock edible flowers until the season ends in September or October, and **Marks & Spencer**, not to be left behind, is launching its variant next month, a bag of "aromatic salad with mizuna, baby red pak choi and edible violas" (these flowers grown in Kent).

Flowers on a plate? It seems far more sensible than wearing them in your hair.

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## Botanical sea bass

### Crisp-fried sea bass, sweet chilli, mango, mint, coriander and shallot salad (serves 2)

#### For the chilli sauce

100ml/31/2fl oz white wine vinegar  
60g/2oz palm sugar  
1 red chilli, finely deseeded and chopped very fine  
1 tbsp tamarind paste  
2 tsp fish sauce

#### For the fish

2 whole sea bass, bream or gurnard (about 350g each)  
30g/1oz cornflour  
1/2 tsp flaked sea salt  
Pinch of dried chilli flakes  
1 litre sunflower oil

#### For the flower salad

1 ripe mango, peeled and cut into 25mm pieces  
1 tbsp fresh mint leaves  
2 tbsp amaranth and coriander microherb  
1 tbsp purple basil microherb  
5g/1 tsp mixed violas and nasturtiums  
1/2 carrot, peeled and pared into thin strips  
Juice of 1/2 lime  
(Flowers and microherbs from Waitrose)

● To make the sauce, put the vinegar, sugar and



chilli in a pan and bring to the boil. Simmer for six minutes, then remove. Add tamarind paste and fish sauce. It should now be a thick consistency. Set aside and keep warm.

● Fillet the sea bass.

● Mix the cornflour, salt and dried chilli, then gently toss the fish in the mixture. Put the sunflower oil in a large wok or fryer. Heat to 180C (it should sizzle if you drop in a piece of vegetable). Slide the fish into the oil and fry for six minutes, or until golden.

● Toss salad ingredients together, heap on to a plate, put the fish on top and serve with the sauce.

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MARTIN POPE

**Just peachy: Victoria Moore tries out a salad of peaches, microherbs and flowers at Waitrose's cookery school**