

# TASTE

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MONDAY, JUNE 27, 1994

## TASTE BUDDS



CHEF LARRY JONES

## Edible flowers make summer dishes blossom

In May, on a trip through Napa Valley, friends and I enjoyed an incredible lunch at the Simi Winery in Healdsburg, Calif. Chef Mary Evers adorned our salads with fresh sage flowers. Our Thai beef stir-fry was sprinkled with lilac blossoms, and the dessert chilled grape sorbet, was literally flocked with violets.

Now we all know that they do crazy things in California, but eating flowers isn't as wacky as one might think.

I tasted my first edible flower in cooking school back in the early 1970s. It was a gigantic fresh zucchini blossom, dipped in tempura batter. It was as light as an angel's wing.

The flower was fried in just enough oil to coat the bottom of a frypan to a golden tinge. Ask me to recall the taste, and I would describe it as a burst of the freshest wilted lettuce with a subtle hint of zucchini. I had ever tasted.

Edible flowers have been around for much longer than I have. Think about it for a second: we've been eating basil leaves and drinking rose scented tea for centuries. Dandelion wine has been brewing in Uncle Charlie's basement since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. Little did he know but Euell Gibbons with all his bark and berry eating strategies brought the edible flower business out of fancy European kitchens and into back yards.

In her book "Edible Flowers," Claire Grafton, (copyright 1983, McGraw-Hill), Grafton offers recipes for flower butters, flower vinegars, flower pickles, stuffed flowers, fried flowers, flower salads, flower drinks and flower marinades. Chef Elder at Simi Winery says "use flowers not just for decoration on plates but also to heighten the taste of salads, entrees and desserts."

If you're thinking about wandering out to the backyard to cut a few blooms to spice up tonight's salad, there are a few things you need to know.

### Flavorful blooms

First off, when planning to use flowers to eat or simply touch food, it is imperative that they be organic and completely free of any residue from fertilizers, insecticides or fungicides. Plant foods, Miracle Gro or any other additive that is sprinkled directly on the flower or blossoms should never be used. Also, be aware that there are naturally poisonous flowers around every house.

Lilies of the Valley, and Stars of Bethlehem have natural poisonous properties, but there are many more safe flowers like wild daisies, nasturtiums, primroses, carnations, lavender, clover, rose petals, violets, lilac and any and all squash blossoms.

If you have an herb garden and allow your herbs to flower, fresh rosemary, thyme, chives, sage, basil and oregano not only taste great in a fresh summer salad, but they also are aromatic and increase the sensation of smell for the diner.

### Vinegars

Vinegar delicately tinted and flavored with flowers is delicious and very simple to make. "Steep the flowers or their petals in a good white vinegar in the sun for two weeks before straining, and bottling the finished product," says Clifton in her book. Use these flowery vinegars with lighter oils to dress up salads and use in marinades.

Those who enjoy "high tea" will appreciate a tea sandwich made with flower butter. You can accomplish the flowery butter two ways, blend them together in a food processor or allow a pound of butter to soften for two days between layers of flowers, covered. Thinly spread the flower butter on good bread and trim the crusts, then decorate the plate with the flowers as well.

If you make pickles, you use the seeds from a dill flower to spice it up. If your summer garden has decided to bolt during the last blast of hot, humid weather, after the flowers fade you can use the seeds from onions, shallots, nasturtiums, broom and alexander buds for pickling and/or canning. And if you think that flower blossoms should only be fried, steeped, mashed or pickled, larger blossoms, especially those from any type of squash plants can be stuffed with a subtle blend of ricotta, parmesan, eggs and herbs and then baked in a tomato sauce for a luxurious treat.

Lastly, fresh flower blossoms can grace anything from a basic carrot cake to an elegant wedding cake. Just a reminder, make sure that all flowers weather edible or just for garnishing have not been sprayed with anything.

See Larry Jones' family-tested recipes inside. To leave a message for Chef Larry, dial 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, then mailbox number 1885.

## LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

■ Pick up some Michigan cherries for pie and desserts.

■ Build your own wine cellar with help from wine columnist Ray and Eleanor Heald.



STAFF PHOTOS BY DAN DEAN

Cool supper: Wilma and Bruce Allmayer and their granddaughters Lauren (left) and Sydney escape the heat by enjoying a picnic under a shady tree in Shain Park in downtown Birmingham.



Satisfying sandwiches: Roll up sandwiches filled with savory spreads thinly sliced turkey, fresh sliced tomatoes, lettuce and sprouts in flat bread for elegant sandwiches.

PICK UP AND GO

## COOL SUMMER SUPPERS



Don't let the "summer stickies" get to you. Pack up the kids and head off to a park for a picnic featuring goodies for the kids and special treats for Mom and Dad, too.

BY KEELY WYOGNIK  
STAFF WRITER

When it's hot and sticky and everyone feels, well - icky, pack a picnic supper and head to your favorite park. Going to the park to cool off was common before air conditioning was invented. My family often reminisces about picnics at Rouge Park and Belle Isle.

Sometimes a change of scenery,

even if it's just a park in the community, can offer relief from the heat. Plan your picnic on a night when there's a free "concert in the park."

Debbie Cox of Livonia has three children, ranging in age from 18 months to 7. "When we go to the zoo I always pack a picnic,"

See PICNIC, 2B

## Cut fat in family favorites with healthy substitutes



LAURA LETOWAR

Summertime is a great season for casual, carefree meals. It is also a time for getting together with friends and family and enjoying a good meal. We all can picture the setting. Everyone gathered around a smoking barbecue grill, filling our plates with family favorites. The potluck meal is one of the most common means of feeding a large group.

Unfortunately, we do not always know just how many sticks of butter are in Aunt Mary's mashed potatoes, or exactly how many jars of mayonnaise are in Uncle Bob's world famous potato salad. But, before all hope is lost of ever enjoying a cookout again, read on for some great suggestions to lower the fat in some of our favorite picnic recipes.

Marnie Britcher of Garden City sent in a recipe for Swedish meatballs. In my family, these have been at almost every gathering I have ever attended. Unfortunately, they always had a layer of grease about half an inch thick floating on top! This is due to a combination of high fat items in the recipe.

For example, regular ground beef has 120 grams of fat per pound. Healthy Choice extra lean ground beef has 16 grams of fat per pound! That substitution alone removed 114 grams of fat and 1,026 calories from the recipe.

Fat free mayonnaise or fat free sour cream can be used to replace the regular mayonnaise. This eliminated 96 grams of fat and 864 calories. One of my favorite brands is Land O'Lakes No Fat

See MEATBALLS, 2B



### Swedish Meatballs Original Recipe

3 slices white bread, crumbled  
1/3 cup milk  
1 pound ground beef  
1 small onion, grated  
4 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1/4 teaspoon pepper  
Dash of ground nutmeg  
1 packet (7/8 ounce) powdered brown gravy mix  
1/2 cup mayonnaise

Add bread to milk. Mix in next 6 ingredients. Shape into 1-inch balls. Brown in an electric frying pan. Prepare gravy according to package directions, using 1 1/4 cups water. Blend gravy into mayonnaise. Add to meatballs and heat. Makes 45 meatballs. Serves 5 (9 meatballs per serving).

## RECIPE MAKE OVER



### Swedish Meatballs Reduced-Fat Recipe

3 slices fat-free bread, crumbled  
1/3 cup skim milk  
1 pound Healthy Choice extra lean ground beef  
1 small onion, grated  
4 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1/4 teaspoon pepper  
Dash of ground nutmeg  
1 packet (7/8 ounce) powdered brown gravy mix  
1/2 cup Kraft Free mayonnaise substitute

Add bread to milk. Mix in next 6 ingredients. Shape into 1-inch balls. Brown in electric frying pan. Prepare gravy according to package directions, using 1 1/4 cups water. Blend gravy into mayonnaise. Add to meatballs and heat. Makes about 45 meatballs. Serves 5. (9 meatballs per serving).