

"The Crystallized Violet Caper"

By RUTH WEST

(Ruth West, now retired, owned and operated a children's clothing store in the Seven Mile-Livernois area with her husband Kurt. Her piece, written on an impulse after an impulsive experience, is one example of creative retirement.)

Now that I have retired after twenty-two years in the retail business, I get the same question every time I meet one of my former customers. The first question after, "And how is Mr. West?" is, "What on earth do you find to do with yourself?"

At first I tried to answer seriously. It required some real soul-searching. After all, what do I do? Well, I do all the things a working girl dreams about. . . I sleep late in the morning, I work in my garden, I have time to visit my mother, and, once in a while, I make the supreme effort and clean out a closet.

Last spring though, my life was changed and I found a new purpose—a new career with immense potential. I owe it all to my friendly supermarket which offered, on an immense poster, a Twelve-Volume Encyclopedia—of—Cooking. I knew that I'd found a beautiful future! I would challenge the culinary world and, singlehandedly, corner the market for Crystallized Violets!

IT WAS INSPIRED. It was perfect.

Everyone knows that the French have had it their own way with their little sugary gems snootily topping the peils-fours at all the best tea tables. Time that someone gave them a run for their argent! And don't I have a garden that is absolutely over-run with violets that started life in Grandma's back yard in Dayton, Ohio? What an ideal wedding of Supply and Demand!

I rushed to put on my Violet-Harvesting-Stacks, which also happen to be my Baggy-kneed-Weeding-Stacks, and raced out to the garden. Humming an old tune about "Sweet Violets," with sheer delight I gently plucked only the blossoms, no stems, from the shady corner where the violets hide.

WITH MY VAST GENERAL KNOWLEDGE, I reasoned that freshness is essential in the food business, so I hurried the crop to the kitchen. Carefully, ever so carefully, I washed each tender little beauty and dried it on paper toweling. What an esthetic experience it was to see the colorful patterns the blossoms formed. I was awed. Here was Nature's Great Plan at my fingertips!

It took the mathematical genius of my husband to figure out that I needed 3/4 cup of water and 3/4 cup of sugar to match my 1 1/2 cups of violets, and then I was on my way.

Into the pot it all went, to be stirred with great delicacy and a wooden spoon.



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As the mixture simmered I had my first faint foreboding. My fresh plump blossoms began to shrink! There was a strange aroma, too, that crept into my nose and into little corners in the back of my throat. I couldn't identify it. "Peas? Chives? Dog? Cat?" I thought.

"Certainly not tea-partyish. . . more like New England Boiled Dinner." But New England Boiled Dinner wasn't in this volume of the Encyclopedia. It would appear in a later volume that was several weeks away.

Undaunted, I forged ahead. I successfully met and passed the Soft Ball stage and continued a careful stirring until the syrup became "granular, like coarse meal." It thickened on schedule, alright, but as it did, all the little blossoms began clinging together in a mushy mass! I took this development in

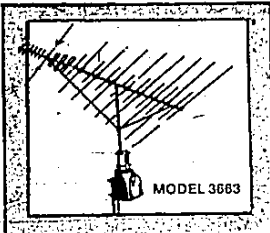
stride. . . dumped them into a colander, per instructions, and shook them vigorously to "remove the surplus sugar crystals."

This treatment simply made the terrified violets grasp at each other with frantic tenacity. They wouldn't let go! They wouldn't separate! They wouldn't cooperate! Reacting with great presence of mind and surgical coolness, I grasped a fork and a pair of sterilized tweezers, and gently coaxed each trembling flowerlet from its siblings and placed it on a sheet of waxed paper to dry.

EXHAUSTED BY THE EMERGENCY, I sat on a kitchen stool and stared at my handiwork with glassy eyes. The battle was over, but did the prize make it all worth while? The final pronouncement was made by my loving husband. "It looks," he said, "like bird droppings—albatross, maybe, or puffin." I could see a relationship to purple spiders, myself, but he was probably right again. After all, I really don't know one ocean bird from another.

Thus ended my first venture of the Golden Years. Where did I go wrong? Was it my Motivation? Or is it just a case of Misplaced Zeal? Time alone will tell, as they say, since I'll have to wait till spring for another violet crop. Or maybe I'll just sleep late, and visit my mother, enjoy my husband, clean another closet, and stay away from the supermarket!

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