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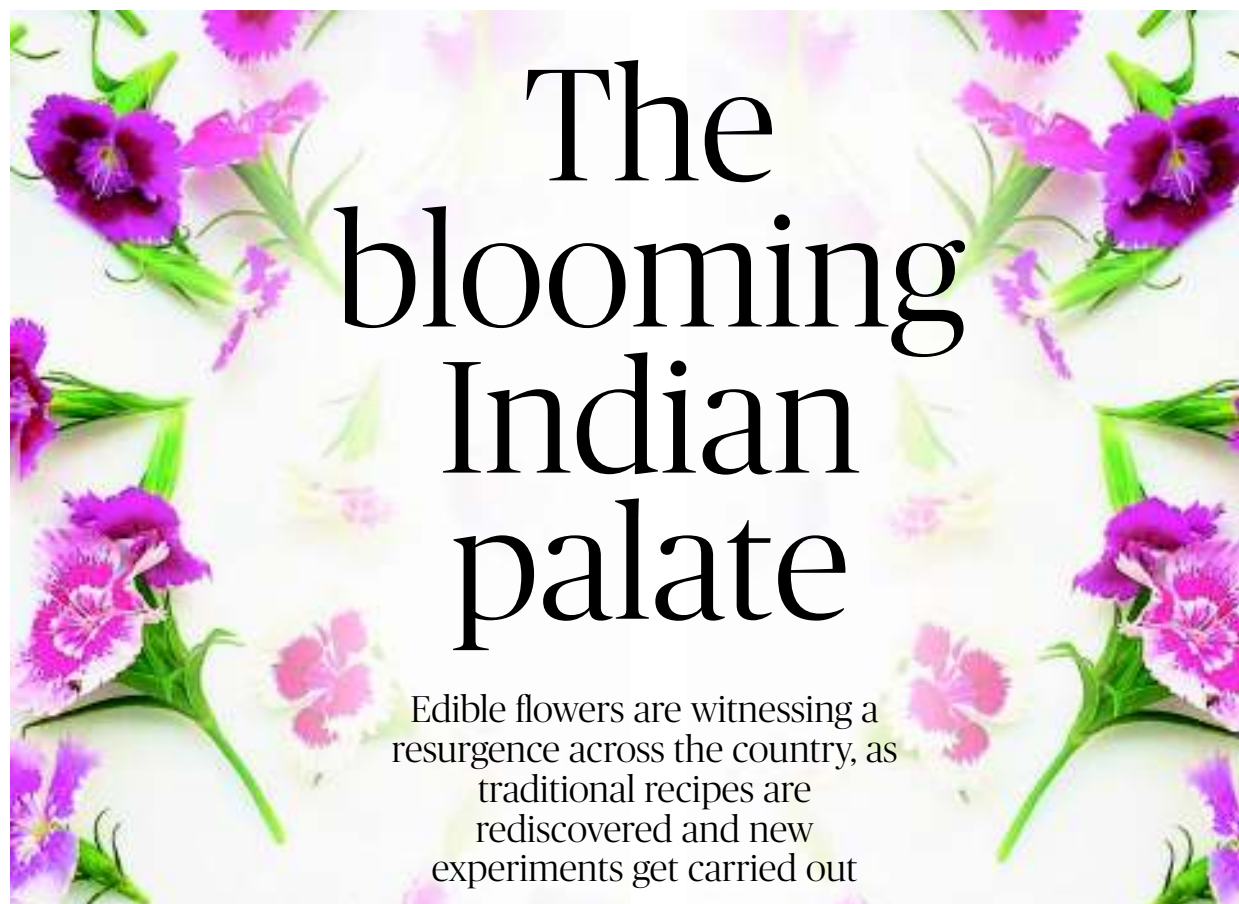
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## The blooming Indian palate

Edible flowers are witnessing a resurgence across the country, as traditional recipes are rediscovered and new experiments get carried out

MEGHNA MAJUMDAR

Edible flowers have been a part of traditional Indian cuisines for ages. Be it blossoms such as hibiscus, roses and jasmine (*mogra*) or foods like banana, cucumber and pumpkin in their flowering stage, Indian cuisine has had regional flowers being fried into fritters, steamed into teas and cooked into gravies.

### Floral resurgence

Recently, however, these floral ingredients have stepped beyond the humble walls of grandmas' kitchens, taking their place in the menus of upscale restaurants and the tables of young Indians.

Raka Chakrawarti, founder and CEO of online retail store Gourmet Delight, no

tes a sudden surge in interest in such ingredients. "Demand from bakers and chefs has been consistent for the past two years, but it's only now that these flowers are finding their way into households," she says. "People have started waking up to the health benefits."

Namita Jaitia's Panvel-based organic urban farm, The Farmhouse Company, has also seen a steady rise in demand for edible flowers. "We supply mainly to clubs, organic cafés and five-star hotels in Mumbai. Our clients order them up to three times a week."

While The Farmhouse Company supplies different varieties of flowers, Gourmet Delight's offerings comprise a mix of either seasonal flowers, or blossoms such as basil, chamomile and hyacinth.

"Customers call to learn how to prepare them and understand what each is good for," Chakrawarti says.

### Variety is key

Home chefs like Guwahati-based Kashmiri Borkakoty, however, can reel off a long list of flowers and the recipes best suited to each, without pausing for breath. "Hibiscus, rose, rosella, *moringa*, basil, cucumber flowers... there is one called heron flower, which is made into fritters. Pea flowers are had as a drink. The night jasmine can be had as a curry, as fritters, or as *khar*."

A quintessentially Assamese palate cleanser, *khar* can also be made with the regional *tita* flower. Made with water filtered through the ash of a banana plant,

this alkaline dish is a regional staple, and marks the start of traditional meals. In Bengal, the blossoms of banana and onion are used as any vegetable would be. Pumpkin flowers are popular as fritters.

Says Mumbai-based food writer Aniket Gulabani, "Pumpkin blossoms are available this season – January and February, and also for a short while post monsoons." He says onion and pumpkin blossoms are quite versatile, and recommends using them in dried shrimp preparations.

"I want to see more and more Indian flowers being used, like marigold for instance," he says. He proceeds to wax eloquent about the use of rose petals in Sindhi



### Prawn and Onion Flower curry

#### INGREDIENTS

- 2 bunches Spring onion flowers
- 2 tbsp Mustard oil
- 5 Garlic cloves, minced
- 250 gms Prawns
- 150 gms Shredded cabbage
- 2-3 tsp Madras curry powder
- 200 ml Coconut milk

#### FOR THE TEMPERING

- 1 Green chilli, finely chopped
- 1/2 tsp Mustard seeds
- 1/2 tsp Cumin seeds
- 5-6 Curry leaves
- 1 tbsp Mustard oil

#### TO GARNISH

- 1 tbsp Chopped coriander
- Chilli powder to taste

#### METHOD

Trim the ends of the spring onions and cut. Clean the prawns and set aside. Now, heat the mustard oil in a large *kadai* and fry garlic for a minute before adding the prawns. Season the prawns and cook over gentle heat till the prawns have all curled. Set the prawns aside. In the reserved liquid, add the chopped spring onion flowers and the cabbage. Cover and let it simmer for five minutes. Uncover and add the curry powder; mix well. Add coconut milk and simmer for 10 minutes. Add the prawns and cook for a minute.

To temper, heat the mustard oil till it's smoking and add chopped green chilli, mustard seeds, curry leaves and cumin. Season to taste. Serve with steamed rice.

Recipe: Aniket Gulabani



Blossoming flavours Flowers make for an interesting culinary addition • PHOTOS COURTESY ANKIET GULABANI AND THE FARMHOUSE COMPANY

food, his grandmother's recipes being favourites. You don't always have to approach gourmet farmers to source them, either. Dried rose petals are available in plenty at local grocery stores, he informs.

### Bottoms up

It's not all about food: certain flowers add a great touch to drinks as well. While chamomile or jasmine – or even hibiscus – in tea is nothing new, blue pea flowers have started turning heads because of the dramatic touch they lend to cocktails.

"Aparajita flowers have quite a bit of alkaline content, and when you bring it into contact with lemon juice, it changes colour," says Swayampurna Mishra, food blogger and food stylist. "It's a nice healthy way to add colour to your drinks and food," and describes how she played with the ingredient at a Christmas party. "I served the lemon juice in separate test tubes, telling my guests they could add it to their cocktails as and when they needed. Every time they did so, the colour would change from blue, to a lovely purple, to red, and then pink. They were surprised every time."

The best part about the flower is its easy access. "It grows quite well in tropical climate; I have a huge shrub right here in my house, so I can use it whenever I want," she says. Nothing quite like picking fresh flowers, and then tossing them into your food.

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## Eating it with flowers

SREEDEVI LAKSHMIKUTTY

I remember the morning I found my friend Sujata plucking flowers from the neem tree in front of our house. She showed me the tiny white flowers with their subtle fragrance and told me the flowers would go into making a delicious *rasam* for lunch. That's the first I had heard of *rasam* with neem flowers, and that set me thinking about other edible blooms.

Contrary to popular belief, which is that all of us are eating better and more diverse food than ever before, I believe that we have given up on some delicious and wholesome local foods. We are always looking elsewhere for the rare and exotic, and hence miss the wonders right under our noses. Flowers are one such category of plant foods that we often overlook.

Banana blossom is the first thing that comes to mind, being a commonly used ingredient in South Indian cooking. My favourite dish with banana flower is a stir-fry using chopped banana blossom and cooked green gram, which is a staple at home. While many people have started using banana blossoms again, and featuring it on cooking blogs, it is a difficult flower

From neem and moringa to agathi, there's a wide range of floral flavours to be discovered

### CLEANING A BANANA FLOWER

Peel the outer red leaves (called bracts). Then from each flower, remove the matchstick-like pistil and the outer petal that feels like plastic (the calyx). As you move into the inner layers, the leaves and flowers can be used. A traditional method used in Kerala to avoid discoloured hands is to apply coconut oil on the palms before handling the chopped flowers. Gently rub the chopped flowers with oil and then rinse in water or in lemon water to avoid discolouration.

to clean and prepare. I choose to think of it as a meditative process, but since most of us don't even have time to breathe in the mornings, let alone meditate, that is not a great selling point.

The edible flower that my mother favoured was the blossom of the moringa oilifer. As children, I can't say we loved it; our mother overrode our objections and moringa flower stir-fry appeared on the table whenever in season. As I grew older, I learnt to appreciate the distinct flavour of the tiny, creamy-white flowers. They can be eaten steamed or slightly cooked, and we usually have them in a steamed salad along with sprouts and peanuts, or in the traditional stir-fry with a lot of grated coconut.

Another discovery in the

last few years is the *agathi* flower (*sesbania grandiflora*, also known as the hummingbird flower). I love the shape and colour of these flowers, with their rich succulent petals in cream or a rich burgundy. To me, they taste as delicious as they look beautiful.

I have eaten only the cream-coloured ones, which are available locally. I just wash the large flowers and buds, chop them into pieces and lightly steam them, to be added to salads and the ever favourite stir-fry, garnished with grated coconut or roasted and crushed peanuts. I don't throw away any part of the flower.

A friend told me that a stir-fry of these flowers with eggs tastes great and these can also be fried in batter. Pumpkin flowers are on my list too. The season starts


with male flowers, and then the female flowers start putting in an appearance. It is popular in some cuisines, where fritters are made by frying the flowers in a batter of rice and gram flour.

The added advantage with *agathi* and moringa is that these are perennial shrubs/trees that are beneficial for the soil and easy to grow. Both are also nutritive powerhouses. Neem and cassia fistula are hardy trees and can withstand dry spells, more of which unfortunately seem to be coming our way. Banana trees are the constant companions in most South Indian homes. So, in effect, all of these are friendly neighbourhood flowers.

Being a pedestrian cook with a limited repertoire, I love anything that becomes flavourful with simple cooking, and I found to my delight that flowers fit the bill. What I enjoy about them is how lightly they need to be cooked and spiced.

Light steaming is usually enough; anything more and they can turn into mush. It goes without saying that we should choose flowers which have not been sprayed with any toxic chemicals.

Now, it's time to eat some flowers along with fruits, leaves and stems!



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