



Flowers transform swordfish brochettes into a feast for the eyes.

Fish and flowers — a flirtation

By Amanda Chater

Master chefs meld the best of summer: seafood and flowers

We eat with our eyes, so garnishing is one of the most important — yet, sadly, most neglected — things to remember when serving wild caught seafood.

These dishes can be adorned with a number of different garnishes, but flowers do an excellent job and are perfect to use as we roll through summer.

Chefs around the country are using them, and they all agree: Only use edible flowers.

“My feeling is that everything on the plate has to have a reason for being there,” says Ed Brown, executive chef of The Sea Grill in New York. “If it looks beautiful, that’s fine, but people have to [be able to] eat it.”

Roland Henin is the corporate chef for Delaware North Parks & Resorts, a food service contractor based in Buffalo, N.Y. Henin often decorates fish with orchids because of their vibrant and unusual colors.

They’re also elegant and edible and hold up well, he says.

Fish, flowers must be fresh

Flowers are underused in the industry, Henin admits. “It’s because of the practicalities of getting them in good shape. Flowers are a very delicate medium, and unless they’re on site, they should be

used the day you get them. Herbs are more resilient.”

He also cautions against using flowers with hot foods. “Once you put them on a hot plate, they wilt or get damaged,” he says.

“And, flowers usually have a strong aroma, and the heat accentuates that, which can interfere with the fish.”

So, he uses flowers more with fish appetizers and hors d’oeuvres.

For hot foods, he prefers to use herb flowers — blooms of thyme, rosemary, or basil, which give the scent of the herb but are a little spicier.

Brown tends to put the flowers on the cold component of the dish — with hot scallops served over salad, for example, they’d be on the greens.

A cold fish dish is served at Zocalo, a Mexican restaurant on New York’s Upper East Side.

In the summer, executive chef Julian Medina serves a tuna ceviche with a hibiscus-citrus and blood orange marinade.

Hibiscus flowers are also a garnish. They’re delivered dry, and he rehydrates them, dries them off, and then “throws them in the fire” to make them crispy. Flowers work well with fish tacos too, he says, and can take away from any oiliness of the fish.

One of the restaurant’s signature dishes is garnished with zucchini flowers. Medina serves grilled wild salmon with sautéed Mexican greens, morel mushrooms, zucchini flowers, and black truffle sauce, garnished with zucchini flowers.

He sautés the flowers first to release their flavor.

“The flower is yellowish, so it’s good for contrast, and the flavor has a lot of earth in it,” he says.

Flowers are used extensively on the Napa Valley Wine Train, which runs through the famous vineyards, serving upscale meals. Executive

chef Kelly Macdonald uses flowers and herb flowers.

However, he cautions, “You have to be very careful with tannins in flowers. If you’re using chive flowers, you should stay away from petrale sole or filet of sole because the tannins are

going to overpower the fish,” he says.

Terroir

Macdonald is a fan of chive flowers and likes to use them with meatier fish. He also likes nasturtiums.

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Edible flowers and their flavors

Flower	Latin name	Description
Nasturtium	<i>Tropaeolum majus</i>	Flowers add a splash of color and have a spicy flavor, similar to watercress.
Pansy	<i>Viola</i>	Slightly sweet flavor.
Lavender	<i>Lavandula</i>	Sweet flavor, with lemony, citrus tones.
Chive flowers	<i>Allium schoenoprasum</i>	A light onion flavor.
Borage	<i>Borago officinalis</i>	Cornflower-shaped flowers, with a cool cucumber taste.
Hoja santa	<i>Piper auritum</i>	Aroma similar to nutmeg or black pepper with a licorice flavor.

How to pick posies

Here are a few tips from restaurant and food service chefs who incorporate flowers into their menus.



- ✿ Pick flowers in the early morning or late afternoon when water content is at its peak.
- ✿ Choose only blossoms that are free of insects, disease, and damage.
- ✿ Shake the flowers to dislodge any insects that might be hidden in the petals.
- ✿ Never use flowers that have been treated with a pesticide, unless the product was labeled for use on edible flowers. Ask your distributor.
- ✿ Wash the flowers under a fine jet of water or in a strainer placed in a large bowl of water. Drain and allow to dry on absorbent paper. The flowers will retain their scent and color if they dry quickly and are not exposed to direct sunlight.
- ✿ Read up on the flowers you plan to use: Some flowers can lead to an upset stomach, diarrhea, or stomach cramps.
- ✿ Plan to serve the flowers within a few hours of harvesting, because they do not keep for long, even when refrigerated.

Flowers enhance subtle flavors

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“They have an herby, saffrony flavor that gives a quick terroir-esque flavor in your mouth that’s a little cheesy, a little bitter. It’s a very intense flavor, but it dissipates quickly.”

With this much going on, it’s a surprise there’s enough room left for the fish, but Macdonald is sure there is, and recommends sole, petrale sole, mahi mahi, and flounder.

Sunflower sprouts are an unusual flower product. Their flavor is salty and beany, and it works well with lightly sautéed or grilled wild fish such as salmon or thresher shark.

Culinary flowers are a feast for the eyes
— and the palate.

For the latter, Macdonald makes a salad with the flowers and a honey-tarragon vinaigrette, then piles it on top of the fish.

He also likes to use the flowers from herbs. “They’re really pretty and easy to work with, but you’ve got to get them at the right time, because they soon get hard, and no one wants to put a rock in their mouth.”

Basil flowers are a delicious addition to mussels or shrimp. Once he’s washed the basil leaves, Macdonald dries them and then puts them between two pieces of wax paper and rolls them, to release their flavor.

The shrimp and mussels are served in a light orange broth — the shrimp piled on top of the mussels and sprinkled with the basil flowers.

The Sea Grill’s Ed Brown prefers to use the blossoms and flowers from herbs because of their color and taste.

Retrain yourself

Brown does have a word of advice: “Use restraint. Do not put the flowers everywhere. When you overdo it, you really take away from the value. The dish needs to be about the fish, not about the flowers.”

He likes to serve wild salmon with orange segments, baby arugula, and chive blossoms. Another popular dish is grilled scallops with mizuna lettuce and Johnny-jump-ups, which give a great peppery flavor, he explains.

A raw preparation of hamachi (yellowtail) can be very simple, served with just good olive oil, sea salt, and Japanese yuzu lime, then garnished with cucumber blossoms.

“They have tiny cucumbers starting to form. You get an intense flavor at the beginning, followed by a tiny crunch,” he says. ■

Harvard: Fried fish is good for your heart

Here is an excerpt from the May issue of the *Harvard Heart Letter*, a monthly publication by the Harvard Medical School.

Question: You have written that fried fish isn’t nearly as good for the heart as baked or broiled fish, probably because of the oils many restaurants use for frying. What if I fry my fish at home using olive oil or canola oil? Would that make a difference?

Answer: Great question. I wish we had equally great evidence upon which to base a definitive answer.

Eating fish once or twice a week is good for the heart. That much we know. But as is true for so many general statements, research reveals that the situation is more complex. How fish is prepared seems to influence its benefits.

In several ongoing studies, researchers asked participants to complete questionnaires about the foods they ate and how often they ate them. These questionnaires distinguished between broiled/baked fish and fried fish/fish sandwiches.

People who said they routinely ate broiled or baked fish had lower rates of heart disease and stroke, while those who said they ate fried fish or fish sandwiches more than once a week had somewhat higher rates of these conditions. These studies, though, didn’t (and probably couldn’t) specify the kind of oil used in preparing fried fish.

Fish sandwiches are almost always deep-fried. Let’s look at one from a big chain: A BK Big Fish from Burger King gets 43 percent of its calories from the preparations, since the basis for the sandwich (usually Pollock or similar whitefish) contains barely one gram of fat, most of it unsaturated.

If you pan-fry fish at home in a tablespoon of olive oil, most of the fat is healthy unsaturated fat, and you don’t get the transfat. You can make the meal even more healthful by choosing salmon or another fish rich in heart-healthy omega-3 fats and serving it with a whole grain and two vegetables.

If pay-frying is what it takes for you to eat fish twice a week, as the American Heart Association recommends, then preparing it in olive oil, canola, or another healthful oil probably isn’t that far behind broiling or baking when it comes to your heart.

– Caitlin Hosmer,
Brigham and Women’s Hospital

What about it, Gorton’s?



We wanted a response from a producer of fish product that is often deep-fried, so we turned to Gorton’s. Here’s what Steve Warhover of the company had to say:

Gorton’s fried fish is hard to resist, for children and adults. It offers a great flavor and texture while providing a wonderful source of protein and omega-3 fatty acids. At Gorton’s, we have developed a blend of oils that delivers 0 grams of trans-fat to our products, and we have the expertise to cook it just right to lock in that great fresh flavor. ■