

How to Sip a Flower Garden



At bars across the country, there are so many flowers in bloom that this season might go down as the summer of love. Bartenders, though, are not spending gauzy afternoons threading tiny daisy necklaces while the Mamas and the Papas play softly on the stereo. Instead, they are indulging in floral cocktails that seem designed to make even the most serious-minded customers blush. Red sunflower petals and cucumbers are bathed in gin. Syrup made from dried lavender blossoms is muddled with mint leaves to lend mojitos a Provençal air. And the fizz of Champagne is quieted by wild elderflower liqueur (or *Wild Hibiscus Flowers*.)

“People are realizing there are a lot of edible flowers or flavored liqueurs that taste beautiful in a cocktail glass,” said Junior Merino, a bartender and consultant who came up with a drink for the Modern in Manhattan called Coming Up Roses, a bouquet of rum, rose syrup and crushed rose petals. “It’s a discovery for many: interesting flavors and tastes they never knew existed.”

Foreign suppliers of exotic flowers, like *hibiscus blossoms from Australia*, and makers of liqueurs flavored with violets or elderflower have broadly begun promoting their products in the United States. Bartenders, too, have taken up pots and pans to infuse sugar syrup with the delicate blooms of lavender, rosemary or thyme.

Those who do not have a flowering field steps from their front doors can experiment instead with preserved blossoms. Consider Fernando Leon, the bar manager at Marea, the new seafood restaurant on Central Park South, who wanted the restaurant’s signature drink to evoke an underwater garden in a glass. He first considered a cocktail infused with the briny taste of oyster, but dropped the idea. “I’m not sure how to make that work,” he said. He thought about using brightly colored pansies (the color of exotic fish), but they did nothing to call to mind the sea. So instead he devised a concoction using grappa, lemon-flavored Acqua di Cedro liqueur, passion fruit and preserved *Wild Hibiscus Flowers from Australia*, which are jarred in syrup and sold by wholesalers and at specialty food stores like Whole Foods.

The allure? The deep magenta blossoms are edible, a chewy mouthful of sweet rhubarb and berry. (A sweet-tart tea made from dried hibiscus flowers is drunk in many parts of the world, including Latin America, under the name agua de jamaica, and in the Caribbean, where it is known as sorrel.)

On a recent night at Marea, Mr. Leon placed one of the flowers in the bottom of a V-shape glass and strained the cocktail over it. The *hibiscus* petals unfurled with the rush of alcohol, swaying like the tentacles of a sea anemone bobbing in the ocean’s current. “Nice, huh?” he said, a smile on his face.

Other bartenders, too, have discovered the sumptuous allure of *Wild Hibiscus*. Ms. Frey first saw them in a cooking video on YouTube and now, upon request, will mix bitters and sparkling wine with a flower to make a *Hibiscus Royale*.

Hibiscus “has a natural acidity which helps open the appetite,” Mr. Merino said. “It is beautiful. It adds complexity. It is not something that gets lost in the glass.”



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