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How to Sip a Flower Garden

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NEW SONG A Hummingbird, with gin and blossoms.

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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.

"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

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SIPPABLE BOUQUET A mojito with lavender.

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The Marea is made with preserved wild hibiscus flowers.

crushed rose petals. “It’s a discovery for many: interesting flavors and tastes they never knew existed.”

Flowers have long been a staple of international cuisines. Consider dried lavender blossoms in herbes de Provence or Iranian rice pudding scented with rose water. But recently, floral concoctions and aromatic blossoms have moved out of the kitchen and behind the bar, where they are deployed as much for their delicate flavors as their visual appeal.

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.

Still others serve edible flowers fresh, slicing them to release aromatic oils or floating them among ice cubes as a garnish. For many, the trend is another iteration of local food traveling from farm to table; if it tastes great on a plate, it is sure to please in a glass with ice and gin.

“People have more access to better products,” said Scott Beattie, the former bar manager of Cyrus, a restaurant in Healdsburg, Calif., where he crafted an eclectic menu of drinks made from local seasonal ingredients. “Once you start tasting real flavor in cocktails, you don’t want to go back to cut melon balls.”

Twice a week, Erika Frey, who now runs the bar at Cyrus, stops at Love Farms, a grower in Healdsburg that has been selling organic produce since 1999. With scissors in hand, she snips her way through a patch of flowers, some of them planted at Mr. Beattie’s request. Other days she stops at a one-acre garden not far from work where she gathers rosemary, chamomile and nasturtium blossoms.

Two weeks ago she placed several crimson-colored sunflowers in a vase on the bar. When a guest ordered a Summer Thyme cocktail, she plucked a few petals from the arrangement and threw them into the shaker along with gin, thyme-infused limoncello, lemon juice and cucumbers.

“When I start picking the petals, they got a real kick out of it,” she said. “Their eyes grew big. They think the bouquets are there to look at, not eat.”

As well as using them fresh, bartenders are also flavoring syrups with flowers, like the lavender-and-rose-water simple syrup that sweetens the lime juice, mint leaves and rum in the lavender mojito at The Girl & the Fig in Sonoma, Calif.

The proprietor, Sondra Bernstein, creates meals inspired by the French countryside, which means lavender is a culinary staple that makes an appearance in everything from

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crème brûlée to seasoning salt. “I like the way it tastes,” she said. “It can be soft yet very distinctive.”

But syrups and flavored waters can be tricky to use. I learned this firsthand when I ordered a Coming Up Roses at the bar at the Modern. (The restaurant has taken it off the menu, but it is so popular it is still available upon request. It is also offered at Rayuela on the Lower East Side, where Mr. Merino consults.)

The first drink I ordered was too sweet, the taste of rose syrup clinging to the roof of my mouth like plastic wrap. I ordered another, asking the bartender to use less syrup.

This time, an overpowering scent of freshly cut roses filled my nose. The aroma would have been fine for a posy or a bride’s bouquet, but not for a cocktail. I decided to try a third time on another visit, and the bartender got the flavors just right. The chemistry of cocktails sometimes has more in common with the precision of baking than with the throw-it-in-the-pot creativity of a soup or a stew.

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.”

For bartenders who don’t want to bother with jarred flowers, let alone fresh ones, there is always floral liqueur. St.-Germain, which began showing up in bars in 2007, quickly achieving something close to total market penetration, is made in France from the blossoms of elder trees that grow in the Swiss Alps.

The flowers are distilled within a week. And in a clever marketing maneuver, bottles are marked with the year the blossoms were harvested. The liqueur tastes of pear, litchi and grapefruit and is often served with sparkling wine or other spirits.

Recently, I visited Martini House in St. Helena, Calif., where I enjoyed a Hummingbird, a

blend of Aviation gin, St.-Germain, lemon juice and soda. When I asked about the carrot-colored nasturtium lodged between two ice cubes, I was told it had been plucked from the bartender's garden that morning. The drink was refreshing, not too tart or too sweet. And it was pretty: a long-stemmed lime-green nasturtium leaf was a natural umbrella suspended above the ice.

When I made it myself at home, it looked just as beautiful, and tasted just as fresh. So much so that I went to the garden store and picked up a few nasturtium plants that are now growing in a large ceramic pot in the backyard, waiting for my next dinner party. When I see them blooming, I'll know it's cocktail hour.

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