



Coming up roses

Fragrant and evocative, rose petals have long been a luxurious addition to food, life and love, says PETA MATHIAS.

We're great rose growers in New Zealand and lots of rural folk at this time of year can be found hunched over big pots of fragrant sugar, making that most refined of all preserves – rose petal jam. You can't just use any old rose – it has to be a very perfumed one like floribunda, Old English or damask for example. The double, old-fashioned ones are the best – you must pick them late morning after the dew and they can't have been sprayed. All roses are edible, though some are more appetising than others. Most of the great perfumes are made of roses.

The Arabs invented the distilling process centuries ago and their alembic or quettara stills are basically the same as a modern still – it takes three and a half kilos of roses or orange blossoms to make one gallon of fragrant water. Rose water is used to flavour cakes, pastries, desserts, meat stews, salads, ice-creams and sorbets. You can add rose water to poached apples when cooking, sprinkle it over grated apples for breakfast and add a dash to a cherry clafoutis.

Dried roses are part of the aromatic spice mixture ras el hanout, used in tagines, meatballs and couscous. Rather than being overwhelmed by the other powerful spices like turmeric, nutmeg, paprika and cumin in this mixture, the roses add a musky, haunting flavour.

In Morocco where they eat with their fingers, rose or orange blossom-scented water is poured over the hands before and after food. Often the first thing served at a meal is a glass of cool rose-perfumed almond milk. A spray of it makes a bus load of hot tourists smell wonderful and it is widely used in beauty preparations.

Scatter crimson rose petals over the dinner table, in fountains and down the driveway so that when the person of your dreams comes home, they will have soft petals underfoot.

According to Berber North African women, who have pellucid, pale skin,

you should splash your face with rose water morning and night. You can also add it to your final hair rinse to prevent hair loss. Not only does it refresh and moisturise the skin but, like lavender, it is a tranquilliser and antidepressant. If you've had a fight with that fabulous man you married, instead of looking longingly at the kitchen knife, run outside and eat a rose.

Speaking of love, roses symbolise sex. Yes, I'm sorry, you're not even safe in the garden – why do you think so many middle-aged men grow roses? The rose is an ancient symbol of sensuality, fertility and womanhood. It stands for the universal woman who, as the great goddess, is mother of the world.

The Romans worshipped Flora, the goddess of fruit trees, vineyards and flowers, and on her special day they gave women roses. The Romans also decorated rose puddings with candied rose petals and ate rose jellies, rose honey and rose pâtés. The original rose has five petals only, symbolising the five appendages of the body – legs, arms and head which capture the essentials of life – sex, birth, life and death.

If you sleep with a bag of dried rosebuds under your pillow, you will have sweet dreams forever, and if you add a drop to mint tea you will never be sad. Eating rose-flavoured sweets is like eating summer and romance and longing. ■

THE GOOD OIL

● **Avocado oil, with its soft, nutty taste and mild avocado aroma is going from strength to strength and I can hardly remember a time when we didn't have it. Olivado avocado oil gives you lots of options too – you can spray it, drizzle it, sauce it and fry it to a very high smoke point. You can have it flavoured with lemon zest, basil, rosemary, chilli or a mix of all four. You can have it blended with olive, macadamia, omega and you can have it organic and fair trade. It is the healthiest of food oils so you can safely rub it all over your significant other and lick it off again.**



STUFFED ROASTED FIGS

Fresh figs
Blanched almonds
Cardamom seeds
Rose blossom water
Fresh bay leaves
Avocado oil in a spray can

- Cut the figs in half, but not all the way through, and open them up.
- On one half lay a couple of almonds and sprinkle about half a dozen cardamom seeds, then sprinkle with a little rose water.
- Fold the figs together again.
- Preheat the oven to 180°C. Spray a shallow oven dish just big enough to hold the figs with olive oil then pack the figs in upright, folding bay leaves around them here and there. Spray with oil, sprinkle with a little more rosewater and roast for half an hour or until golden on top.
- Allow to cool before eating with crème fraiche, rose blossom meringues and strong coffee with cardamom seeds in it.