

Dress-up: Celsius chef Ayhan Erkoc shows how to use flowers for flavour and colour.
Pictures: Mark Brake



A plate of petals

Flowers are more than window dressing, writes **Simon Wilkinson**

PICKING flowers doesn't sound a dangerous occupation. But Kasim Erkoc is understandably nervous when he's asked to collect nasturtiums by his brother Ayhan, chef at city restaurant Celsius.

"There's a brown snake living in the nasturtiums," Ayhan laughs. "He throws a couple of rocks in there before he goes in. He's tried to scare it off and it doesn't want to budge. He says, 'Use another flower'."

Kasim picks the many different flowers used at Celsius from the family market garden at Murray Bridge where most of the restaurant's produce is grown.

With the recent burst of spring sunshine flowers such as viola and borage are at their best. Ayhan also likes to use



Different taste: Flowers both enhance the look and flavour of a fish dish at Celsius.

vegetable flowers including cauliflower, peas, turnip and radish to dress up his plates.

"It's nature's own decoration," he says. "I like putting stuff on the plate that hasn't been tampered with, things that have come straight from the ground."

Australia's top restaurant, Quay in Sydney, and world No.1, Denmark's Noma, are both renowned for their use of flowers. So it's no surprise other chefs are following suit. Margy Abbot, from leading Adelaide supplier AMJ

Produce, says flowers including violas, fennel, coriander and borage, are in demand at most of our top restaurants including The Manse, Auge, Fino and Magill Estate.

"They just finish a dish off," she says. "It's already a wow dish but the flowers add pizzazz."

The visual effect is only part of the appeal to Ayhan. He also appreciates the delicate flavour they bring, particularly with plants such as radish or rocket where the flowers are more subtle in heat or pepper than

the leaves or fruit. "If there is no flavour combination to suit the dish, there is no point to it," he says. "It looks pretty but if it doesn't enhance the food it shouldn't be there."

So Ayhan uses pea flowers in a fish dish alive with other green, spring flavours, while the sweet nectar of violas is better in a dessert.

Ayhan warns that not all flowers are edible and some can taste horrible. Generally, a plant with edible fruit will have an edible flower.

He stores the flowers in a plastic container in the fridge, covered by damp paper towel. He recommends checking flowers for bugs but says washing them will damage the petals. And add the flowers just before serving, so they aren't tainted by any dressing or sauce.

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FLOWERS AND FLAVOR



SNOW PEA FLOWER: Both the leaf and white flower carry the green pea flavour and go well in a dish that feels like spring. Ayhan uses them in a fish dish with cauliflower, potato and peas, of course.



BORAGE: A delicate blue star with a sweet nectar that goes well in desserts.



NASTURTIUM: This fast-spreading plant has orange/yellow flowers that look beautiful on the plate. The leaves have a mild, peppery flavour that is good in salads.



VIOLAS: Varieties come in shades of purple, lilac and yellow and look impressive on the plate. Sweet taste suits desserts.



ROCKET: A fragile propeller shape with fine vein. The flowers are much less peppery than the leaves.

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