

Dumplings on the vine

By Leah Eskin
Chicago Tribune

The flower — all beauty, promise and wit — makes for an unlikely meal. To pluck, stuff and fry it seems savage. Though, in truth, no more brutal than the rest of dinner prep.

The nasturtium spikes the salad with brilliant color and radish-hot bite. The rose petal, starched with sugar, gives pastry a sweet snap. Lavender warms shortbread sunny.

The squash blossom, soft and capacious, grows like a dumpling-on-the-vine — ready to fill and fold. Plumped with ricotta, batter-dipped and crisped, it makes for a crunchy, creamy bite. One best downed with neither sauce nor sentimentality. The abundant, prickly vine is busy unfurling more flowers.

STUFFED SQUASH BLOSSOMS

Prep: 15 minutes
Cook: 3 minutes per batch
Makes: 4 servings

- 12 squash blossoms or 4 small (1 pound total) yellow squash or zucchini
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup flour
- 4 tablespoons freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- ½ cup beer or sparkling water
- ½ cup whole-milk ricotta cheese
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh mint
- Finely grated zest of 1 lemon
- Canola oil, for frying
- Flaky salt, such as Maldon

1. Provision: If you have squash growing in the garden, snip off 12 male blossoms

(growing on a straight stem), as opposed to female (which sport a swollen mini-squash at the base). Peek inside — if there's some six-legged fellow busy pollinating, shake him out. Or find blossoms at the grocery store or at the farmers market. Lacking blossoms, use 4 small summer squash sliced into ¼-inch-thick circles and sprinkled with a little kosher salt.

2. Mix: Whisk together flour, 2 tablespoons Parmesan cheese, ¼ teaspoon salt and a few grinds of pepper. Whisk in enough beer (or sparkling water) to form a thin batter. Set aside.

3. Stuff: Stir together ricotta, remaining 2 tablespoons Parmesan cheese, the mint, zest, ¼ teaspoon salt and a few grinds of pepper. Open each blossom. Spoon in about 2 teaspoons ricotta mixture and twist the



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Fresh squash blossoms fill with ricotta cheese.

blossom closed.

4. Fry: Choose a deep, heavy pot for frying blossoms. Pour in oil to a depth of 2 inches. Heat oil to 365 degrees. Dip one filled blossom in the batter and lower it into the oil. Repeat with

a few more blossoms, without crowding. Fry until golden brown, about 1-2 minutes per side. Lift out with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towels. Sprinkle with flaky salt. Repeat, frying all blossoms. For

squash circles, pat dry and fry as above, about 2 minutes per side.

5. Serve: Munch fried blossoms hot or warm. For circles, top each with a dollop of the ricotta mixture before serving.

Soup in summer's heat? Gazpacho's the cool solution

By Bethany Jean Clement
The Seattle Times

"Nice recipe for vichyssoise," wrote a reader named Edward after I extolled the virtues of the classic cold potato soup earlier this summer. (It's so much better than it sounds!) "But," he continued — there's usually a but — "way off base in the gazpacho department. It is as unlike eating a bowl of salsa as a well-wrought Polish sausage is unlike your average ballpark dog."

It's true, I did disparage the classic cold tomato soup in those salsa-terms, but I was also happy when Edward took the bait. He was the sole defender of gazpacho to get in touch, which I let him know in order to goad him a little more, along with asking him if he had a favorite recipe.

Edward professed amazement — he honestly thought he'd be "near the bottom of a very long list" of gazpacho adherents. But he was kind enough to send what he called a very traditional recipe, his own translation from the Spanish from Angela Landa's cookbook "A Fuego Lento."

Gazpacho may have come to Spain from Rome way back when, but then again, there are cold soups all over the place, made with whatever's plentiful — beets, cucumbers, the aforementioned potatoes. Gazpacho must've arisen as an obvious answer to an equally obvious summertime question: It's hot, and we're tired of salad, so what's the next

easiest, coolest way to deal with all these vegetables from the garden? Hey, also, these tomatoes are so ripe, they're almost mush — hurry!

Gazpacho is an eminently forgiving soup, with the ingredients and quantities more like suggestions than dictates. Tomatoes, yes, lots. But bread or no bread? It's such a good way to use up part of a getting-old loaf, and thickens the soup so nicely, why not? Vinegar or no vinegar? Angela Landa's version goes without, but the cookbook from Toro Bravo in Portland calls for both Champagne and sherry vinegar — I split the difference, keeping the quantity small for a slight acidic zip, and keeping the vinegar from Spain. Green pepper or red pepper? I don't like green peppers — they taste like peppers that really should be let to ripen to red, which is what most of them are — but if you're a fan, do what you feel. Do you have to peel your cucumber? Absolutely not, especially if they're thin-skinned smaller ones, and you'll be doing one teeny-tiny part to end food waste. Egg or no egg? Recipes vary; if you've got one, and you're not ovo-opposed, it just might add some richness.

Also: chunky or smooth? Both Toro Bravo and Landa take a best-of-both-worlds approach, blending the soup a bunch but reserving some of the ingredients, finely diced, to add back for texture and prettiness when

serving. Toro Bravo's chef John Gorham notes, "If you can't get it to silky smoothness, do your best, then pass it through a sieve," and Spanish food expert Penelope Casas agreed. With all due respect, I'm not going to spend time shoving soup through mesh — I am that lazy, especially when it's hot. Gorham also gussies up his garnish with fried capers, which sounds lovely, but again, laziness happens.

A miniature bumper crop of the world's tiniest Sungold tomatoes also happens on my deck this time of year, and they make an addition to the garnish that's almost too cute (but not!). Would it be heretical to also add a big spoonful of organic sour cream? Maybe, but I tried it, and it is good. Some crabmeat, or shrimp, or avocado on top of a bowlful of gazpacho also seems pretty foolproof for an excellent summer lunch, along with a glass of cava, to stay on theme. Or Thomas Keller of the famed French Laundry says you can go ahead and augment your gazpacho with vodka, thus creating "the world's best Bloody Mary." Could you put croutons on top? Yes!

How cold should you serve it? Think of an old stone house on a hillside in Spain, and how back in the day, the gazpacho would've been cooled, but not quite chilled, in the cellar, maybe itself cooled by a stream ... then serve it as cold as you please.

The mishmash recipe here makes a gazpacho that's

more on the blushing side of tomato-red, both sweet and tart, smooth (enough!) and easy to eat in the heat. The fine-diced garnish gives little pops of red-pepper and cucumber crunch, plus little hel-LOs of onion (I used Walla Walla sweet — so nice — and a very fine dice). I still think it's a bit like eating a bowlful of salsa, but, then, that's kind of a great idea.

GAZPACHO

Suggested additions: Fried capers and/or Sungold tomatoes for the garnish, and/or a spoonful of organic sour cream on top; crabmeat, shrimp or avocado; croutons; vodka, per Thomas Keller.

- ¼ cup sherry vinegar
- 4 slices white bread (with crust)
- About 6 large ripe tomatoes (about 4 cups)
- 2 small cucumbers, peeled (or one large one, peeled and seeds removed)
- 1 medium yellow or sweet onion
- 1 medium red pepper
- 2 or 3 small garlic cloves
- 1 egg (optional)
- ¼ cup olive oil
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt (or more, to taste)

1. Combine sherry vinegar and 1 cup of water in a large bowl, then add the bread, tearing it into chunks. Stir and smush the bread down into the liquid with a big spoon; repeat once or twice during next step.
2. Let the bread soak while

you finely chop ingredients for the garnish: one of the tomatoes, one cucumber, about 1/3 of the onion and about 1/3 of the red pepper. Combine it all in a medium bowl and set aside.

3. Roughly chop the rest of the tomatoes, adding them and their juice to the bowl of bread (you can use kitchen shears and your hands if you don't mind getting messy). Chop the rest of the cucumber, onion and red pepper, and add as well. Mince garlic and add. Beat egg and add. Add olive oil. Mix to combine, then blend with a hand blender, a food processor or in batches in a regular blender until as smooth as you like. Add salt to taste.

4. Refrigerate gazpacho and garnishes separately until as cool as you like. Stir to recombine, if need be, and serve, topping each bowl

with garnishes, a drizzle of olive oil and a sprinkle of kosher or sea salt.

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SCRATCH

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The old motto, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" applies as readily to cat scratching as it does to many other things in life. It is far easier to prevent problem scratching than to try to change a cat's scratching preferences. Following are some suggestions for helping kittens and newly acquired adult cats develop appropriate scratching habits:

- Place multiple scratching posts in areas of the house most frequented by the cat, such as near feeding centers, sleeping and resting places, and places cats like to play.

- Ensure that the scratching surface is textured fabric that shreds easily.

- Don't try to "teach" your cat to scratch your desired post by placing its feet on the post and forcing it — you may develop an aversion.

- Encourage scratching by playing with toys on or near the post, scenting the post with catnip, and using praise or rewards when the cat scratches the post.

For older cats who have an existing scratching problem:

- Cover the damaged scratching area with a thick plastic that is not appealing to the cat for scratching.
- Place the scratching post next to or in front of the damaged area. Ensure

that the new scratching post is covered with a material that is acceptable to the cat (use the damaged material as an example of what is acceptable to the offending cat).

- Remember that cats like to scratch in prominent areas of their homes. Don't expect your cat to transfer his scratching needs from a chair in the front room to a scratching post in the cellar.

As you navigate the frustrating challenge of a cat that likes to scratch (or try to prevent inappropriate scratching), remember that attempting to discipline or punish a cat rarely results in a positive outcome. For additional help with cats that scratch, visit with your veterinarian about your specific situation.

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