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## So wildly elegant

They're not just for looks. Arugula flowers and other herbal blossoms add intriguing layers of flavor.

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**J**osiah Citrin likes to eat flowers. Or to be more specific, the chef at *Mélisse* in Santa Monica likes to cook with them—but he doesn't candy them and put them on cakes, à la Martha Stewart, or use them as cute decorations.

Citrin and other chefs, including Victor Scargle at *Julia's Kitchen* in Napa and David Lefevre at *Water Grill*, love the intense flavors of sage blossoms, arugula flowers and borage blossoms. Perhaps you've seen the lovely, raggedy bunches in farmers markets, or marveled at them in your herb garden? These chefs are using them—and thyme flowers, rapini blossoms and other herb, vegetable and even fruit tree blossoms—in ways that go way beyond the decorative. They're a pleasure to cook with, and they can add a new dimension to a dish.

"The flower is a little sweeter than the actual leaf," explains Citrin, who credits his interest in edible flowers to a memorable visit to the kitchen of French superstar chef Marc Veyrat. Veyrat, a former shepherd with two restaurants—one in *Megève*, the other in *Annecy*—and six *Michelin* stars between them, grew up nibbling on flowers from the Alpine meadows along with his sheep, and is known for his use of wild plants, herbs and flowers in his cooking.

The flowering part of an edible plant can often encapsulate its flavors as well as vary them slightly, and the pollen of the flower gives it a sweet note that can beautifully balance or heighten the flavor.

Using the textures and varying flavors is also an important part of cooking with the delicate blossoms, which can also be infused into sauces, vinaigrettes or stocks.

At the Wednesday Santa Monica and Friday Venice markets, Dennis Peitso of *Maggie's Farm* has arugula and rapini blossoms as well as bright nasturtiums and calendula petals in little containers. Bill Coleman of *Coleman Farms* (where Citrin gets his flowers) brings sage flowers, flowering thyme and nasturtiums, depending on the weather, to the Wednesday and Saturday Santa Monica markets. Paul Thurston of *McGrath Family Farms* sometimes brings arugula blossoms to the Wednesday Santa Monica market. And you can find flowering pea shoots at many Asian vegetable stands at various markets.

Or head up Pacific Coast Highway to *Vital Zuman Farm* in Malibu,

where you can get pineapple guava flowers, borage, sage and arugula blossoms picked for you right from their sustainable and chemical-free fields.

Flowers are fragile under any circumstances, and the tiny, delicate blossoms of herbs and greens can break down pretty fast, especially in hot weather. Resist the urge to turn them into a tabletop bouquet before using them; instead park them in water in the refrigerator as soon as you get them home. And be flexible: Remember that you and the farmers are dealing with the maddening vicissitudes of weather, which can wilt a bunch of flowering arugula in half an hour or turn a bed of it to seed overnight. But it can also bloom when you least expect it (like basil plants) and offer sudden inspiration.

Being flexible, however, can quickly turn a dish from ordinary into extraordinary. A goat cheese tart is a terrific vehicle for whatever you might find flowering at the moment. Rapini flowers, which are a vibrant yellow and taste like a more tart variation of the broccoli rabe that they grow from, add a terrific dimension to the tart. But if you can't find them, try flowering thyme—the tiny purple flowers are stunning and add a slight sweet note to the aromatic thyme, which matches up gloriously with the faintly tangy cheese. Fold a cup of them into a smooth blend of goat cheese and Greek yogurt (or try

an aged goat cheese for added depth), throw a few extra over the warm tart and you have a deeply aromatic pie, redolent of herbs and flowers.

Citrin infuses sage flowers into a tomato consommé, which he serves with steamed Copper River salmon and cherry tomatoes macerated with olive oil and chive blossoms; he strews more sage flowers and chive blossoms over the finished dish.

And for anyone who loves arugula, here's a soup that combines the peppery leaves with the flowers of the plant. You can use wild arugula or domesticated, or a combination of the two. Wild arugula has tiny yellow flowers, and the domestic sports somewhat larger, gorgeous white blossoms. Wilting the greens coaxes out the bitterness, yielding a distinctive yet surprisingly gentle flavor. A swirl of cream adds richness, and a sprinkle of flowers gives texture and a sweeter note.

