

You say courgette, I say zucchini - stuff it!

by **Tonya Jennings** (On the Ridge Cooking School)

Zucchini flowers are part of our wonderful Hinterland produce

Next to food, wine and cooking, my passion is books – cookbooks and culinary travel books - a consequence of my former life as a librarian. A book I really enjoyed is *From Here You Can't See Paris: seasons of a French village and its restaurant*, by Michael Sanders, a self-proclaimed Francophile, who decided to spend a year living in a French village, Les Arques, and write about the village restaurant, La Récréation, in the beautiful Lot region of south-west France. I visited Les Arques and La Récréation last year and was struck by one of the dishes on their menu - zucchini flowers stuffed and steamed; it was delicious, and unusual as it was steamed rather than fried.

Returning home, I began looking for a quality supplier of these beautiful and delicate flowers for the cooking school's signature program, *A Slice of the Hinterland*, in which we focus on locally grown, fresh, seasonal food.

It was with delight that I discovered Owen Jago at Palmwoods growing his superb zucchini flowers, which he meticulously packages and sends to restaurants around Australia. He kindly agreed to supply the cooking school with small quantities of them.

Zucchini, also known as courgette, is available throughout the year, but is at its best in spring, summer and autumn.

The zucchini produces both male and female flowers, both are suitable for stuffing. The male flower is much larger, the female flower is smaller and has the immature vegetable attached. As the vegetable grows, the flower shrinks, so if you wish to eat them attached, pick them when the vegetable is still tiny and tastes sweet and delicious with the flower still at it's best.

Zucchini flowers are delicious added fresh to salads, as well as stuffed and cooked. There are many choices of marvelous fillings, such as soft cheese combined with fresh herbs; a touch of chilli or chopped anchovies; or pastes such as pesto, harissa or baba ghanoush. My favourite is stuffed with a mousseline of chicken, crab, scallop or prawns.

Another fabulous stuffing mixture is finely chopped chorizo, roasted capsicum, caramelised onion and goat's cheese served with a tomato coulis.

The filled flower may be dipped into a variety of light batters; tempura style is the most commonly used. Other good alternatives are to use chickpea flour, which gives a delicate, nutty taste to the flower, or a beer batter. Another way is to simply dip the flower into beaten eggs, then into breadcrumbs or

polenta and shallow fry in equal quantities of olive oil and butter. A favourite here, On the Ridge, is zucchini flowers stuffed with prawn mousseline, steamed and served with a fresh tomato coulis.

The flowers are best prepared and cooked as soon as possible after they have been picked or bought. The fresher the flower, the easier is it to stuff, as the petals are still open. Carefully open the petals and check for any insects. Remove the stamen with your fingers (it has a bitter taste if left in), then place a small amount of stuffing in each flower. Fold the petals back, making sure the stuffing is completely encased. Once they are filled they need to be cooked immediately.

They make a great starter or vegetable accompaniment to your main dish and look very appealing.



Zucchini flowers stuffed with eggplant, haloumi and pistachio nuts

Serves 3 - 4 as an entrée

3 tbsp olive oil
 1 medium brown onion, finely diced
 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
 1 medium eggplant, cut into small dice
 80g haloumi cheese, finely grated
 2 tbsp flat-leaf parsley, chopped
 2 tbsp coriander, chopped
 2 tbsp raw pistachio nuts, chopped
 Zest of ½ lemon
 Juice of ½ lemon, or to taste
 1 tsp pomegranate molasses, or to taste
 Sea salt and black pepper to season
 12 to 16 zucchini flowers (3 to 4 per person)
 Flour for dusting
 1 egg, beaten
 Breadcrumbs
 Extra olive oil for shallow frying

In a frying pan over a low to medium heat, heat 1 tbsp of the olive oil and fry the onion until soft. Add the garlic and gently cook until it is soft. Remove from the pan and set aside. Turn up the heat, add the rest of the olive oil and fry the diced eggplant in batches until golden brown and soft. Remove from the pan and drain on paper towel. Mix the onion, garlic and eggplant together and leave to cool, add the haloumi, herbs, pistachios, lemon zest and juice and pomegranate molasses. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Carefully open the petals of the zucchini flowers and check for any insects. Remove the stamen with your fingers and then place a small amount of stuffing in each flower. Fold the petals back, making sure the stuffing is completely encased. Dust with flour, dip in the beaten egg, and gently roll in breadcrumbs, shallow fry in the extra olive oil until golden brown, drain on paper towel. Serve immediately with aioli or another dipping sauce.