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Food Detective: Flowers please eye and palate

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In the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, there's a haunting statue of Xochipilli, the Aztec "prince of flowers." Unearthed near the volcano of Popocatepetl, the statue is estimated to be over 500 years old.

Flowers assume a much larger role in the traditional cuisine of Mexico than they seem to in cultures north of the Rio Grande.

In Yucatan in June, the Flamboyant (or "flaming") trees were in full bloom. A local, Nacho Hernandez, told me that when he was a kid, he used to eat these flowers. Hoping to make a meal of them, I harvested Flamboyant buds along the streets of Playa del Carmen.

Chef Miguel Deul of Frida, a restaurant at the Grand Velas resort, prepared for me a salad of Flamboyant flowers, greens and raw tuna. The flowers themselves did not add a lot of flavor. Still, they were beautiful against the greens.

There are many opportunities to enjoy edible flowers in Chicago, mostly at places with a strong Mexican influence.

At the Maxwell Street Market (every Sunday on Des Plaines, between Roosevelt and the Eisenhower Expy.), you can sample flowers in several forms.

Tacos of flor de calabaza — squash blossoms — are available from many vendors. If you get your tacos "con todos" (with everything), you run the risk of overwhelming the very laidback flavor of the flowers. Still, if you can wrangle a bright green and yellow blossom from the mass of lettuce, tomato, sour cream and cheese, you'll find that it tastes faintly pickled.

At many Maxwell Street stands, you'll also find dried hibiscus flowers and a magenta beverage made from the flowers. Called Jamaica in Spanish, these red-purple flowers are about \$6 a pound, which is enough to make several gallons of tea.

I added 1 cup of dried flowers to 8 cups of boiling water. After letting it sit for 10 minutes, I strained it and added honey and ice cubes. It was a delicious drink — slightly tart, perfumed and attractive.

Jennifer Hamer, formerly of Mexico City, told me that after making the tea, she uses the flowers in quesadillas. I tried making these with rehydrated hibiscus flowers and was pleased with the result: The flowers added a surprisingly meaty texture to the cheese-filled tortillas and, of course, they looked great.

And that, I think, is the main use of flowers in food. Xochipilli was the god of flowers but also of beauty. Beauty, it seems, is mostly what flowers bring to the table.

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