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products & produce guide

Flowers & "fruit" - ZUCCHINI

Vegetables

REVIEW:

The z-factor

As a child, I was less than impressed by zucchinis. Water logged and tasteless, they belonged in my mind to those other unmentionables of the vegetable kingdom: silver beet, cabbage and brussel sprouts. No doubt my experience of zucchinis was tainted by the perils of overcooking and their monstrous size. My father all too often discovered them overgrown and hidden beneath leaves in his vegetable patch. It was only later that I rediscovered the zucchini and tasted anew its sweet, nutty flavour. I have been a convert ever since.

The zucchini is a vegetable of many names. The French and English call it courgette, Italians refer to it as zucchini as do we, and the Americans give it the name summer squash, a curious name that would inspire very few to eat it. Such identities can lead to some frustrating page turning in the indexes of cook books, but don't be discouraged. While the zucchini will never achieve the status of a signature dish, it is a little too modest for that; its flowers and dewy flesh made it a vegetable deserving of its own renaissance.

Edible flowers

Primal yellow with a sunny disposition, zucchini flowers are a summer time treat. In Italy, they are a great delicacy and are sold in bunches during their season. From market to table, they are added to pastas and risottos where they bring a riot of colour and the subtle yet distinct taste of the zucchini itself.

Don't be put off by the dexterity of touch needed to prepare these lovelies. Look for flowers that are slightly open. Separate the petals. Remove the stamen from the inside and brush away the pollen. Stuff with leftover risotto, ricotta or couscous. Bake or fry in light batter for an experience that the Italians would call bellissima.

Fruit of the vine

The zucchini is a voracious vegetable, as rampant as my childhood memory of vines that threatened to overrun the garden. In the summer months, a promising young zucchini will literally turn into a marrow over night. So beware. The closer the zucchini comes to looking like a marrow, the more bitter its flesh.

While the zucchini might not garner the praises of an artichoke or asparagus, it makes up for such applause by being one of our most versatile vegetables. It can be cooked whole, stuffed and baked. Ribbioned, it adds a distinctive flavor and texture to pasta. An essential ingredient in ratatouille, a must in fritters and even when overcooked can be made into a warming winter soup.



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Varieties -

There are two types of zucchini flowers. The male is the larger of the two. Its impressive open flowers and thin stem makes it the preferred flower for stuffing. The female is easily recognisable by the immature zucchini plant that forms a part of the flower.

Varieties of the zucchini plant are available with colours ranging from dark green, such as the ever popular Blackjack, to yellow or golden, like Gold Finger, Gold Rush or Golden Dawn.

Season -

Like most vegetables, zucchinis are available all year round; however, it is in the summer months that it is at its sweetest. This is the time when prized zucchini flowers are available (November through to April). If you can't find them in your local market, consider growing some zucchini plants just for the fun of getting the flowers.

Buying and storage -

The flowers should be unblemished, firm and slightly open and are best stored on a damp cloth in the refrigerator. They should be eaten at most within two to three days of purchase.

When choosing a zucchini, the skin should be firm and the zucchini itself should be heavy for its size. Unlike the flowers, little preparation is required. Simply remove the stalk of the plant and the rounded end.

Goes with -

Capers, anchovies, ricotta, pasta, walnuts, tomatoes, eggplant, capsicum, ocean trout, gruyere, yogurt, coriander, chilli, or on the sweeter side, chocolate