



MAKING PANNA COTTA

with Verbena Tea Syrup and Candied Violas

BY ANN M. EVANS AND JAMIE BUFFINGTON

In the spring, if you look closely enough on your walk about the neighborhood, you will see tiny patches of purple and lavender. These are violets, which like other edible flowers and herbs you can grow in your garden can provide a seasonal flair to any dish on your table. Here we show how to make simple syrup from a spring herb and candy flowers to transform the Italian dessert panna cotta into a signature spring flourish to the end of your meal.

Flowers are easy to grow in the edible Sacramento region. Many flowers have edible petals and can be planted in your garden in the spring, along with herbs for tea and syrups. Examples of edible flowers include violets, Johnny Jump Ups (violas), pansies, calendulas, nasturtiums, roses and borage. We love a project and making the time to candy flowers is an old-fashioned confectioners art. The process has three basic steps: pick, wash and dry, and paint and dust.



Culinary herbs, perennial or annual edible plants, are also easy to grow in the edible Sacramento region. Spring is a good time to add herb plant starts into your garden or windowsill planter. Classic culinary herbs to grow include parsley, sage, rosemary, oregano and thyme, but we both grow many more. Bay, lemon verbena, basil and mint provide options for savory and sweet dishes. Here we use lemon verbena leaves made into tea, then the tea into simple syrup to concentrate the flavor.

Often overlooked, panna cotta, or Italian cooked cream, is a delicate dessert. Made with cream, sugar and gelatin, it differs from custard cousins such as French crème brulee and Spanish flan in that panna cotta is made without eggs. The trick to a silky texture is the right amount of gelatin. Garnished with fresh candied flowers and simple herbal syrup, panna cotta is the essence of spring.



PANNA COTTA

*with Verbena Tea Syrup
and Candied Flowers*

TO MAKE THE *Panna Cotta:*

- 1 envelope gelatin, about 1 tablespoon
- 3 cups heavy cream
- 1½ cups sugar
- 1 cup buttermilk
- Juice of 1 large lemon
- 4-6 ounce paper cups, or glass or ceramic ramekins
- grapeseed oil

Soak the gelatin in 4 tablespoons cold water for 15 minutes, until softened.

Pour the cream into a saucepan and whisk in the sugar. Heat until almost boiling, and add the softened gelatin. Stir until the gelatin completely dissolves. Stir in the buttermilk and lemon juice and remove from heat. Cool to room temperature.

While the cream mixture is cooling, prepare the cups or ramekins. With your fingers, wipe the inside of the paper cups with a light coating of grapeseed oil, making sure to coat the bottom of the cup and 2 inches up the sides. This will help unmold the panna cotta more easily.

Once cool, pour the cream mixture into the prepared cups or ramekins to a level of about 2 inches. Refrigerate overnight, until the gelatin sets. Makes 8-10 serving molds.

TO UNMOLD THE PANNA COTTA:

To unmold the panna cotta, use a small paring knife to slide around the edge of the cream to loosen.

Place the serving plate so that the right side is upside down, over the cup.

Hold the cup in one hand, and the cup in the other and flip them both over. Now the cup is upside down on the right side up plate. Puncture



the tip of the knife in the bottom of the cup to help loosen the cream.

The molded cream should slide down onto the plate, if not, give the cup and plate a gentle wrap to loosen.

TO SERVE:

Pour desired amount of Verbena Tea Syrup around the panna cotta to create a shallow pool. Pour a little more over the top of the molded cream so that it drizzles down the sides. Garnish with Candied Flower and serve.

If using ramekins, just set on a dessert plate, drizzle with Verbena Tea Syrup and garnish with Candied Flowers.



TO MAKE THE *Verbena Tea Syrup:*

Lemon verbena is generally thought of for tea, but it makes flavorful simple syrup as well.

1 ½ cups loosely packed lemon verbena leaves, washed

1 ½ cups water

½ cup sugar

Boil the water in a teakettle on top of the stove. Place 1 cup of the lemon verbena leaves in a teapot, and pour the hot water over them. Let the tea steep for 20 minutes.

Measure out one cup of the tea and place it in a stainless steel or other non-reactive saucepan. Bring to a boil over high heat. Add the sugar and stir rapidly until it has dissolved. Add the remaining ½ cup of lemon verbena leaves, holding out 8-10 leaves to candy or to use as garnish. Reduce the heat to medium and simmer. Stir periodically until thin syrup forms, about 30 minutes.

Let stand overnight in a cool place. The next day, strain the syrup through a sieve lined with several layers of cheesecloth. Pour into a sterilized jar or bottle with a tight fitting lid in the refrigerator. The syrup will keep for 2 months or more. Makes about 1 cup.





TO MAKE THE *Candied Violas:*

Any edible flower can be candied and uses the same process.



- 24 viola flowers, with stem on**
- 1 cup superfine sugar**
- 1 egg white**
- 1 – 2 small paint brushes, such as used for water color (1/4 to 1/2 inch)**

Clean the flowers by soaking them in room temperature water in a large bowl.

Remove flowers by hand and lay flat on a cotton kitchen towel to absorb the water as it drains from the flowers. Let air dry for 24 hours, or, pat dry with a cotton flour sack, or other light, kitchen towel. Each flower petal must be completely free of water.


Separate the egg white and place in a small bowl. Beat by hand with a fork until just frothy. This will make it easier to paint on the flower petals.

Place the sugar in a wide mouthed bowl. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

Dip the paintbrush in the egg white mixture and pick up a flower by the stem. Carefully paint each petal, front and back.

Holding the flower over the sugar bowl and, using your fingers, use a spoon to gently sprinkle sugar over the petals, ensuring that every part of the petal, front and back, is covered.

Holding the flower by the stem, carefully shake off any excess sugar and place the flower on top of the parchment paper. Let sit over night to thoroughly dry. Flowers will be hard to the touch. Keep the stems on through storage and remove prior to use.

Store the flowers in a glass container, or tin, using a layer of parchment paper to separate layers of flowers if you are stacking the flowers. Store in a cool, dry place. Candied flowers will keep up to 6 months. 



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