

Dining Out

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Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

BRIGHT AND TART Hibiscus is a bold quencher.

Red, Hot And Cool: It's Hibiscus

By SUZANNE HAMLIN

WOW! What is this?" David Coleman, the chef at Atlas on Central Park South, had just tasted a \$3 glass of hibiscus punch at Gary's Jamaican Hot Pot, a restaurant in Harlem, where he lives. The question just popped out.

"Sorrel" was the answer, as edible hibiscus is called in parts of the West Indies. Mr. Coleman was impressed, and a hibiscus sauce is now used at Atlas as a glaze for a foie gras ballotine dusted with pulverized dried hibiscus petals, part of the restaurant's \$68 three-course tasting menu.

As a gorgeous, tart — and tarted-up — red infusion, hibiscus has made a confident entrance at a host of high-end New York restaurants, among them the brand-new Cinnabar, at 235 West 56th Street, and Citarella, at Avenue of the Americas and 49th Street, where every diner ends dinner with hibiscus, intentionally or not. The restaurant's free plate of petits fours includes a shot glass of "Exotic Hibiscus Cocktail," a confetti of mango, blueberries and raspberries floating in a hibiscus syrup and topped with a tiny scoop of litchi sorbet.

"The citrus and rose hip flavors in hibiscus are naturals with those fruits," said Bill Yosses, the pastry chef at Citarella the Restaurant, whose introduction to hibiscus was in a Serendipitea herb tea.

And as the weather warms, the seasonal flow of chilled hibiscus infusions has begun to soak street corners and garden parties alike in East Harlem, Brooklyn and Queens — hibiscus is as ubiquitous a summer drink for many transplanted cultures as

iced tea is for American Southerners.

Unquestionably, brewed hibiscus is a stunning refresher, bold, tart and beautiful. Unlike tea, however, it is not made from leaves, nor from flowers. (Red Zinger tea, beloved of counterculturists everywhere, is a mixture of hibiscus, lemon grass, rose hips and licorice root. But its mild, pleasant taste should not be confused with the full-on flavor of unadulterated hibiscus.)

The tall, slender hibiscus plant, related to both okra and the cotton plant (but not to the inedible ornamental hibiscus), produces tiny pink flowers, which wither quickly and fall off, leaving seedpods behind. Big, fleshy red calyces, not petals or leaves, grow around the pods, and it is these juicy calyces that are harvested and dried in the sun to become the blackish-red bits used in infusions.

There are about 10 cups of dried hibiscus in a pound. One cup steeped in two quarts of hot water makes eight cups of hibiscus tea. Dried hibiscus is available at Citarella stores; Kalustyan's market, on Lexington Avenue near 28th Street; and at the Sahadi Importing Company, on Atlantic Avenue near Court Street in Brooklyn. It can also be bought online at www.kalustyans.com or from Nile Valley Herbs in Austin, Tex., at www.nilevalleyherbs.com. (1-512-442-6907)

Whether called sorrel (in a nod to its lemony tang), or by its Egyptian name, karkady — or for that matter, by the Mexican flor de Jamaica or the Swiss karkade —

RASPBERRY HIBISCUS SAUCE

Time: 5 minutes, plus chilling time

- 2 cups karkady cooler (see recipe)
- 1 12-ounce bag frozen raspberries.

Place cooler and berries in a blender or food processor, and blend. Strain if desired, and chill. Use as a sauce for vanilla ice cream or for a mixture of fruits like mangoes, papayas, litchis and kiwis. The sauce can be frozen and eaten as a sorbet.

Yield: 3 cups.



hibiscus gives itself away in a drink by its color: a deep, clear, dark red, like vintage Burgundy. The tart taste will be familiar to the neophyte, but not quite, something like cranberry juice (but richer) or pomegranate juice (but thinner), with notable citrus notes and a slight riff of rose hips.

Intrigued hibiscus drinkers may well go on to experience more culinary discoveries, taking hibiscus infusions well beyond the refrigerator and the thirst-quenching glass. Sweetened hibiscus is an appealing mixer for vodka or rum cocktails; Jerri Banks, the bar manager at Cinnabar, mixes it with gin, lime juice, cassis and prosecco and calls it all a Global Blossom. In its unsweetened form, hibiscus can be the acidic element in a vinaigrette or can be used as a marinade or basting liquid for lamb and pork. Reduced to a glaze, it becomes a sauce.

And combining brewed hibiscus with dissolved gelatin makes a luscious jelly, one recently spotted in Paris on the menus of such culinary icons as Guy Savoy and Alain Passard.

Hibiscus sorbet? Definitely — and other possibilities that are seemingly infinite.

BREWED HIBISCUS

Time: 35 minutes

- 1 cup dried hibiscus
- Sugar to taste.

Bring 2 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Put hibiscus in a large nonreactive bowl, and pour hot water over it. Steep 30 minutes or longer. Strain through a sieve, and discard hibiscus. Add sugar to taste and more water, if desired, for a less concentrated flavor. Serve hot or cold.

Yield: 2 to 3 quarts.

KARKADY COOLER

Time: 5 minutes

- 3 cups brewed hibiscus (see recipe)
- 1 cup orange juice
- ¼ cup lime juice
- Finely grated rind of one lime
- 1 to 3 teaspoons finely grated ginger or ginger juice
- 2 to 4 tablespoons sugar, to taste
- Fresh mint leaves (optional).

Combine all ingredients in a pitcher. Serve chilled or over ice, garnished with mint.

Yield: 4 servings.

Librado Romero/The New York Times

DESSERT DRINK Citarella's hibiscus cocktail.