

UNUSUAL INGREDIENT: PRIPRIOCA

WELCOME TO THE

jungle

GROWN IN THE LUSH SURROUNDINGS OF THE AMAZONIAN RAINFOREST, THE HERBACEOUS ROOT PRIPRIOCA CAN ADD A HEADY DEPTH TO SWEET AND SAVOURY DISHES, as *Rovie Birkett* discovers.

Priprioca is a strange looking ingredient. The herbaceous root, which is indigenous to the deepest depths of the Amazon is a brown, husky, hairy affair, with little bulbous nuggets punctuating its length. It really isn't all that pretty – which makes its special musky, heady, flavour and aroma (it's been likened to a cross between patchouli and marijuana) all the more mesmerizing.

Used for centuries by the Amazonian Indian tribes as a fragrance, its gastronomic potential was discovered by Brazilian chef Alex Atala, who, aside from championing Brazilian fine dining at his acclaimed restaurant D.O.M in Sao Paulo, has for years been working with anthropologists and scientists at the Social Environmental Institute to discover and classify new products and foods from the Amazon region. Taking his lead from the nine indigenous tribes who live and eat within the Amazon's 2000sq km of rainforest, Atala has fiercely pioneered the use of uniquely Amazonian produce in the national cuisine.

During his explorations, the chef has come upon many appealing ingredients, including the significant discovery of a new variety of wild palm heart perfectly adapted for farming.

While usually a palm is killed to harvest a single 700g heart, the new variety takes only two years to grow and has five to eight different shoots, meaning that it can be harvested at different times so that the tree itself doesn't die. Working with his agricultural contacts, Atala has championed the planting of this variety of palm, and now sells his own palm heart fettuccine in Brazil's supermarkets.

"One of my favourite discoveries is priprioca," explains Atala. "I found out that it was edible, so with the help of a perfumier, I developed an extract that I can use in both savoury and sweet dishes, such as the Brazilian crème caramel or the lemon banana ravioli." Atala describes the aroma of the root as "intensely herbal" and uses its essence to infuse and enhance certain recipes, like his signature dish of priprioca milk pudding with lime ravioli and ouro banana (see recipe). The result is a delicately tropical and memorable dish that stimulates the senses and delights the palate.

"I use priprioca as 'oil of essence' or simply by boiling it in some water or under cereal alcohol," he explains. "I use it through the

process of a dish or as final touch spraying some essence once the dish is ready to go." He's keen to point out its versatility, and the fact it can be used in the place of vanilla as it marries particularly well with citrus and dairy, and, Atala adds, chocolate and sausage.

But aside from providing dishes with a smoky, fragrant edge, the way the root is being cultivated is helping to preserve the culture of the Amazon and provide employment for local tribe members. "Due to the increased demand created we now have farms that harvest and cultivate priprioca in Brazil, specifically in areas where we used to have deforestation," explains Atala. "The native families, nearby the farm are employed to look after the fields where the root grows, close to water."

In terms of getting hold of priprioca, while it is readily available from the street vendors and markets of Sao Paulo, distribution as a cooking ingredient is still very much in its infancy. While Atala finds it easier to deal directly with the tribes, he suggests contacting cosmetic factories that produce priprioca essential oil as a means of getting some into your kitchen.



PRIPRIOCA MILK PUDDING WITH LIME RAVIOLI AND OURO BANANA

BY ALEX ATALA, D.O.M, SAN PAULO

Serves 10

For caramel priprioca

Ingredients

320g sugar
80ml water
20ml essence of priprioca

Method

1. Make a caramel with sugar to about 142°C and add the essence of priprioca and water.

Priprioca pudding

Ingredients

80g pasteurised yolks
60g sugar
250ml single cream
250ml milk
2 gelatin sheets

Method

1. Heat the milk and the single cream (do not let it boil).
2. Beat the yolks with the sugar until the mixture is pale yellow.
3. Hydrate the gelatin sheets and dissolve them, in the previously heated milk.
4. Slowly mix the milk with the yolks and strain.
5. Line the bottom of 30ml sphere silicone moulds with caramel. Pour the pudding liquid over the caramel.
6. Steam in a 90°C oven for 10 to 12 minutes.

For crème patissiere

Ingredients

200ml milk
8g wheat flour
40g sugar
40g pasteurised yolk

Method

1. Mix the egg yolks, sugar and flour in a bowl.
2. Boil the milk.
3. Slowly add the milk to yolks to temper.
4. Strain the mixture and cook over low heat, stirring constantly for about 5 minutes.
5. Remove from the heat, transfer to a bowl in a cold water bath and cover with a plastic film so that it does not form a crust.

For ravioli lemon and ouro banana

Ingredients

175g sugar
175ml water
100ml lemon juice
2g agar-agar
20g gelatin
Ouro banana finely sliced into slivers

Method

1. Boil all ingredients except the gelatin and bananas.
2. Add to gelatin.
3. Pour the gelatin over a pan, leaving it with a thickness of about 2mm.
4. Cut the gelatin with the aid of a ring around 5cm diameter.
5. Assemble the ravioli as follows:

A layer of gelatin

A drop of cream pâtissière
3 sliced banana
Another layer of gelatin

For sugar syrup for the confit of lemon zest

Ingredients

500ml water
500g sugar

Method

1. Boil the ingredients until sugar dissolves.

For julienne zest of lemon confit

Method

1. Blanch the zest of lemon in boiling water and cool quickly in ice water. Do this procedure three times.
2. Heat the sugar syrup and add the blanched zest.

White kikurage mushroom

Ingredients

One unit of kikurage mushroom

Method

1. Rehydrate the mushroom in the water overnight.
2. Cook them in 500ml water and add 500g sugar.

Assemblage

1. With the aid of a piping bag, finish the raviolis with a drop of crème pâtissière and two lemon zests.
2. Brush the tips of the kikurage with a dash of powdered gold.
3. Place the pudding at the left side of a 25cm x 10cm slate.
4. At the centre of the slate, place the ravioli and, at the right side, place one kikurage mushroom.
5. Finish the assembly with a dash of priprioca caramel across the plate.