

FINANCIAL TIMES  
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Published: September 16 2006

Travelling, as I did recently, with a tiny packet of dried fennel flowers from Monti Sibillini in my pocket, ensured I had fellow passengers on the plane buzzing round me like bees. Despite vac-packing, the voluptuous aroma could not be contained. It perfumed the air enticingly – and wove magic in cooking when I got it home.

Fennel has been praised and prized down the centuries by kings, warriors and herbalists alike. In Ancient Greece, fennel symbolised success. The Romans rejoiced in its healing properties and its power over evil. Charlemagne declared it essential to every imperial garden. The Anglo-Saxons placed fennel seeds in keyholes to prevent ghosts passing through. Culpepper wrote that fennel "stayeth the hiccup, taketh away nausea and is used to make people more lean than are too fat".

Mrs Grieve's *A Modern Herbal* lauded fennel for speeding the digestion of rich and fatty foods and recommended fennel-based gripe water for babies. I am quite simply addicted to fennel in cooking: I rate it a kitchen essential, almost on a par with black peppercorns and lemons.

My love affair with fennel began in Sardinia in the 1960s. Inspired by Elizabeth David's *Mediterranean Food* and an abundance of brilliantly fresh local fish, I lunched and dined most of one summer on red mullet, mackerel and other fish brushed with olive oil and grilled over the incense- sweet smoke of dried fennel stalks.

Back in Britain I planted tall and stately herb fennel in my garden, cutting it down at the end of each season to dry and save as aromatic fuel for the barbecue. And I started to use fennel seeds - the fruit of the plant - that drift in the breeze and self-seed crazily if you don't cull them. I bruised the seeds and slipped them under the skin of goose and duck before roasting. I worked them into apple sauce and home-made sausage-meat. I added them to the liquor when poaching gammon, braising rabbit, making seafood stews, fish soups, potato gratins and risotto. Fennel seed is glorious added to bread dough (alone or with saffron or muscatel raisins). It is an exquisite alternative to caraway in seed cake and butter biscuits. And it is the salvation of fennel, the vegetable, when all you can buy is insipid produce grown in Holland.

Though fennel stalks and seeds are good allies to the cook, they pale beside fennel flowers, which can be used like the seeds but to infinitely greater effect. The flavour and aroma are much more complex: intense yet subtle, beautifully balanced, well rounded and lingering, a glorious three-dimensional experience. As the Marchigiani say: "The flowers are the true taste, the essence of fennel." "And so elegant" adds chef Jeremy Lee. "Once tasted, you may become hooked."

My fennel-flower epiphany came in the form of *ciauscolo* (the soft spreadable salami that is a speciality of Le Marche) made by Slow Food hero Giorgio Calabrò of Visso, whose perfectly judged seasoning and cures are second to none. It was love at first bite, and ever since that first taste, I have been trying to buy this gorgeous condiment and to take part in harvesting and drying the flowers. Finally, I did so this summer.

Although fennel grows all round the Mediterranean and as far afield as India and Scotland, there seems to be just one place where gathering the flowers to use in cooking is traditional – the Sibillini mountains, on the borders of Le Marche and Umbria. The epicentre of this culture is Visso, a medieval hill town where a reputation for upholding fine food traditions is evident in numerous small shops and no supermarkets.

Like many Vissani housewives of a certain age, Signora Rosina Venanzoni grows herb fennel in her vegetable patch to save walking into the hills daily. Until recently she used to dry kilos of wild fennel flowers every year, because her (now retired) husband, Pacifico Sabatini, was a famous porchetta cook. Porchetta is a large joint of rolled pork, or suckling pig, laced with fennel and complementary herbs, spit-roasted, sliced and sold, hot or cold, slapped between pieces of bread - the lovely street-food alternative to hamburgers and hot dogs in this region.

Venanzoni flicked her razor sharp pruning knife with lightning speed. I snipped gingerly with scissors. Each day you must cut only the blooms that are fully unfurled and heavy with powdery yellow pollen, she instructed. She lays the pickings on a special shallow wooden tray, places it in the sun or shade, depending on temperature (too much heat desiccates the blooms too fast, killing their colour). At sundown she covers them with muslin and brings them indoors. When suitably friable, she crumbles the flowers with her fingers, releasing the full force of their intense and intoxicating scent. The coarse powder is spooned into jars, sealed and stashed in the larder, ready to savour in months to come.

She tells me about the classic local uses of fennel flowers: to dress olives, flavour home-cured meats, make fegatini (strips of liver, dusted with fennel flowers, wrapped in caul and grilled), and to season stockfish, wrapped in paper and baked. This last is a traditional Christmas Eve dish, served with polenta. Does she ever use fennel seeds? "Never. The flavour and fragrance are so inferior. Besides, seeds stick in the teeth."

Because gathering, drying and cooking with fennel flowers is so traditional in and around Visso, no one there regards it as particularly special. They love it, are proud of it perhaps, but they take it for granted. The suggestion made by Patricia Michelson of La Fromagerie (my travel companion) and me that production should be nurtured and expanded into a proper cottage industry was greeted with surprise. But Enrico Cherchi, Mayor Giuliano Pazzaglini and pork butcher Giorgio Calabrò recognise the danger that this exquisite condiment may die with the ageing population who make it. Making a wider audience aware of wild fennel flowers could simultaneously help revitalise Visso and spread the good food gospel.

The message became even clearer after Michelson sent appetite-whetting pinches of this remarkable condiment to four of her favourite London chef clients. The enthusiastic responses of Jeremy Lee, Giorgio Locatelli, Rose Gray and Skye Gyngell was greedily unanimous; they begged for more.

Cherchi has formed a committee to promote and protect the traditional production and culinary uses of the wild fennel flowers of the Sibillini mountains. More growers,

young as well as old, are being encouraged to participate, always keeping within cottage industry traditions.

Small supplies of the magic powder should trickle into the marketplace next year. Meanwhile, we must be patient. Taking a DIY approach isn't worth it. I tried using fennel flowers from my Wiltshire garden and the chefs at Petersham Nurseries Café have pounded wild fennel flowers growing by the Thames. The resultant powders were not without charm but totally lacked the ambrosial qualities of the Sibillini original, qualities that may stem from the soil and microclimate there, or may be due in part to the evolution of an especially aromatic local variety of fennel.

Aided and abetted by Wendy Fogarty of Slow Food UK, the wild fennel flowers of the Monti Sibillini are poised to go into Slow Food's Ark. A presidium may follow, and perhaps PDO (protected designation of origin) status one day. Meanwhile, they are scheduled to make their first public debut next month at Salone Del Gusto and Terra Madre, Slow Food's biennial binge in Turin.

In recognition of England's pioneering interest and support, we will be the first, maybe the only, country to receive exports, with Michelson's Fromagerie acting as sole stockist here. Supplies will be modest and prices not cheap. Saffron is pricier but wild fennel flowers from the Sibillini seem a richer and rarer treat because they come from a single source. There is nothing else quite like them. They are a truly fabulous aromatic - unforgettable, even if you manage only to get a whiff of them from sitting next to me on a plane.