

# Citrus Maximus

By AMANDA HESSER

When food people gather, one game that is often played is: If you were banished to a desert island and could take just three foods, what would they be?

The answers are always surprisingly mundane. The truffles are left behind, as is the Château d'Yquem. Packed up are bread (Balthazar), butter (French), bacon (Nueskies), coffee (La Colombe Torrefaction) and the like — the staples. But the one food that is almost never mentioned — and yet is the flavor upon which so many of the world's dishes depend — is the lemon.

We tend to forget the lemon. It is so common that, like salt in a list of ingredients, it escapes notice. And criticism. The sustainable-food police look the other way when it comes to the lemon. It is seasonless, sourceless, immune to fads, a commodity untouched by the shifting culinary winds. And unlike a staple like salt, which has many gradations and prices, the lemon is populist. Every cook, rich or poor, uses the fruit. It is also apolitical, employed by Republicans and Democrats, Sunnis and Shiites, Tamils and Sinhalese alike. It is the pillar of lemon-meringue pie, the sting in tabbouleh, the perfume in genoise, the zip in chicken tandoori, the structure in hollandaise, the clarity in a hot toddy and the fragrance in German hazelnut cookies.

Where sugar, coffee and flour addict us in various ways, the lemon has earned its place on merit alone. Lemon sharpens the flavor of soups and sauces. It prevents avocados and apples from discoloring. It neutralizes the oiliness of mayonnaise, helps fruit preserves to gel, cures fish and brightens pastry.

The lemon is also an efficient fruit, with two sources of flavor: the zest and the juice. The zest, which contains essential oils, has a floral aroma and less bite than the juice. It is the main ingredient in limoncello, a sweet, highly alcoholic digestif that has elbowed its way onto the drinks menu at New York restaurants like Gusto, Alto and Esca, where there is always a tub of zest macerating in vodka behind the bar. There's no reason not to make your own, either — it could not be easier or cheaper. All you do is infuse lemon zest in vodka for a couple of weeks, then sweeten it with sugar syrup, bottle it and put it in the freezer to await guests. After a big meal, its tingly, fragrant chill has a way of putting a little starch back in your sluggish senses.

At Babbo, the cooks have brought limoncello into the kitchen, where they whisk it into a vinaigrette spiced with dried red chili. It functions as an acid, with the vodka lending an amusing kick. The vinaigrette is used to dress grilled octopus, but it is also delicious on salad greens, as I tried at home. Grilled fish, artichokes and beets will be next.

Sometimes the zest is unwanted, as is the case with the preserved lemons Gabriel Kreuther makes at the Modern, at the Museum of Modern Art. He shaves the zest, then blanches the bald citrus before curing it with salt as well as sugar. With the lemon,

nothing needs to be wasted. The leftover zest can be mixed with sugar to make a lemon sugar, much as you would make with spent vanilla-bean pods. It's an amicable arrangement: the zest perfumes the sugar, and the sugar cures the zest. You can chop the sugared zest and sprinkle it on desserts — a chocolate cake, for instance — or use the sugar to sweeten pancakes, cakes or ice cream.

Lemons are at their best when they find a balance between salty and sweet. A lemon tart is good only when there is not too much sugar in the curd and there is enough salt in the pastry. The best lemonade I have ever tasted was made with lemons that were first salted, to draw out any bitterness, before being squeezed and sweetened.

Like many cooks, I keep a file of recipes I want to try. When I looked through it recently, there were a preponderance of lemon recipes, including one for roasted chicken with lemons and Coca-Cola from Frédéric Grasser-Hermé. Again, the savory and sweet. A food writer who has worked with chefs like Alain Ducasse, Grasser-Hermé is also the wife of the Parisian pastry chef Pierre Hermé. It humored me that a French cook would deign to baste her chicken with Coke. But it makes perfect sense: like many drinks — wheat beer, iced tea, sangria, Vietnamese sugar-cane juice — Coca-Cola is always improved by a wedge of lemon.

So if you're ever banished to a desert island, you may want to reconsider your list. Lemons would make ceviche of the fish you catch, clean your hands and help prevent scurvy. And you can plant the seeds and grow your own.

### **Limoncello**

12 lemons  
1 750-milliliter bottle good vodka  
½ cup sugar.

1. Finely grate the zest of the lemons. In a large jar, combine the zest and the vodka. Seal tightly and place in a cool, dark place for 2 weeks.
2. In a small saucepan over medium heat, dissolve the sugar in 1/2 cup water. Let cool.
3. Using a sieve lined with cheesecloth, set over a bowl, strain the vodka mixture. Stir the sugar syrup into it. Use a funnel to pour into a 1-liter bottle and seal. Place in a cool, dark place for 1 week, then chill in the freezer until ready to serve. *Serves 1, or many.*

### **Limoncello Vinaigrette**

¼ cup limoncello (see recipe)  
2 teaspoons lemon juice  
1 teaspoon grated lemon zest  
1 ½ teaspoons Dijon-style mustard  
¼ teaspoon ground red-pepper flakes

½ cup extra-virgin olive oil  
Salt to taste.

1. Whisk together the limoncello, lemon juice, lemon zest, mustard and red-pepper.
2. Whisk in the oil and season to taste with salt. *Makes ¾ cup. Adapted from Babbo.*

### **Chicken With Coca-Cola and Lemons**

Juice of 3 lemons  
1 4 ½ pound chicken, butterflied  
3 teaspoons kosher salt  
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper  
Zest of 2 lemons, removed with a vegetable peeler  
Olive oil, for sautéing  
1 medium onion, thickly sliced  
¼ cup finely julienned ginger  
3 cloves garlic, crushed and chopped  
1 cup Coca-Cola  
½ teaspoon white vinegar  
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar.

1. In a large, rimmed dish, sprinkle the lemon juice over both sides of the chicken. Rub with the salt and pepper, then the lemon zest. Cover and chill for 4 hours.
2. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Spread the chicken, skin side up, in a roasting pan. Reserve the lemon juice, diluting it with 1 tablespoon water. Cover the chicken with foil and roast for 30 minutes, basting it with the lemon juice every 5 to 10 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, cover the bottom of a medium sauté pan with a thin film of olive oil. Place over medium heat and add the onion and ginger. Cook until the onions are soft and golden, about 8 minutes, then stir in the garlic. Season with salt and pepper.
4. After the chicken has cooked for 30 minutes, lower the heat to 300 degrees and remove the foil. Begin basting every 10 minutes with the Coca-Cola, until the chicken juices run clear, about 1 hour more. Reheat the onions, adding the vinegars and 2 tablespoons of the chicken juices. Cook for 1 minute. Serve the chicken topped with the onions and pan drippings. *Serves 4 to 6. Adapted from Frédéric Grasser-Hermé.*

## **Hazelnut-Lemon-Ricotta Pancakes**

This recipe fuses the lemon-ricotta pancakes at the Four Seasons with the hazelnut waffles at Balthazar. I adapted a recipe for cottage-cheese pancakes from "Joy of Cooking," adding ricotta, lemon zest, hazelnuts and more salt.

Grated zest of 2 lemons  
1/3 cup sugar  
1 cup flour  
½ cup finely ground toasted hazelnuts  
2 teaspoons baking powder  
½ teaspoon baking soda  
1 teaspoon kosher salt  
1 cup milk  
3 tablespoons melted butter  
2 eggs, separated  
1 teaspoon vanilla  
1 cup ricotta, strained of any liquid.

1. The day before, rub together the lemon zest and sugar in a bowl. Cover.
2. Mix the flour, lemon sugar, hazelnuts, baking powder, baking soda and salt. In another bowl, whisk the milk, butter, egg yolks, vanilla and ricotta. Fold this into the dry ingredients. Whip the egg whites just until stiff, then fold them into the batter.
3. Heat a pancake griddle. Lightly coat the surface with butter, then use a ¼ cup measure to scoop the batter. Cook until the pancakes appear dry around the edges, about 3 minutes, then flip them and cook for another minute or two. *Serve with honey. Serves 4.*