



# A Pretty Mouthful Eating Lotus

by Carol Penn-Romine

As I descend into the sunken garden on a terra-cotta pathway leading to the lotus pool, I'm transported to a world where I'd be completely unsurprised if a knee-high chap with pointy ears, a cherry nose and a helium-balloon voice popped out from under an enormous leaf and offered me a lotus petal filled with sweetest ambrosia. Santa Barbara's Lotusland is just that otherworldly.

But I'm not here to eat, although feasting my eyes on the lotusscape, I see munching prospects all around: Giant lotus leaves in which I could wrap sticky rice and chicken or fish before steaming it, to impart a subtle, earthy sweetness. Tiny new leaves I could cook up like greens. Seedpods that look so much like showerheads that in the Thai language they use the same expression, *fak bua*, for both—pods filled with seeds I could eat fresh or cook or purée to make an exquisite paste. Buried deep within the muck below are starchy tubers, which I could cut up and bake or stir-fry or make into a thick soup or hearty beverage.

Then there are the lotus blossoms themselves, whose petals I could pluck, fill with sweet bean or lotus paste, batter and fry. And their stems, which I could slice and toss into a salad. And their stamens, from which I could brew tea. Oh, the possibilities!

It's easy to associate the lotus with the dubious reputation it received in Homer's *Odyssey* and Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters," but the stories of those munchers as mere hordes of drugged-out slackers are just that—stories. The lotus is an amazing, multipurpose plant that demands appreciation as much for its culinary potential as for its stunning beauty.

Opposite: The enormous blossoms of the lotus rise up out of the water on long stems at Lotusland in Montecito.



After flowering the lotus seedpod resembles a showerhead.

STEVEN BROWN

The symbol for many, Buddhists and Hindus in particular, of purity, eternal life and the ability to rise to great heights from lowly circumstances, the lotus is a member of the rhizome clan and the classier cousin of such robust specimens as Bermuda grass and kudzu. Lotus seeds estimated to be as old as 1,300 years have been discovered in China, germinated and grown into new plants. How's *that* for resilience?

For centuries lotus grew primarily in Egypt and throughout Asia and was used for both food and non-food purposes. Then Santa Barbara horticultural superstar Ralph Stevens introduced it to the area in the late 1800s, planting it at showplaces including Lotusland, Franceschi Park, the Santa Barbara Biltmore and Casa del Herrero, and setting the stage for generations of Southern

Californians to be enchanted by its beauty.

But it's high time we considered other ways to enjoy this magnificent perennial, for it's packed with protein, vitamin C and minerals. Whether or not you buy into the stories of its curative and restorative powers, it is nonetheless a versatile plant, and just about every part is edible.

Most food from the lotus comes from the rhizome (you may also see it called the root), a long, cylindrical tuber with a crisp, crunchy texture reminiscent of jicama and water chestnut. Unlike these two, though, lotus must be cooked first. While it retains that texture for a while, if you give it an extra long cooking it will eventually break down and become starchy and glutinous, which makes it a good choice for soup to soothe an angry tum. It can be used in stir-fries, soups, stews and salads, and even for snacking. The root has hollow chambers running through it, so when you cut it into slices you get pretty, lacy rounds that make every dish look extra special.



STEVEN BROWN

Although the lotus blooms during the summer, the tasty rhizomes are harvested in the fall.

The thin exterior is bitter, so carve it away with a vegetable peeler. Once the flesh has been exposed to air it will begin to oxidize and turn dark, just like potatoes, apples and artichokes do. (It won't hurt you to eat oxidized food—it's just not very pretty.) Have a bowl of cold water mixed with a splash of white vinegar sitting next to the cutting board—that's called acidulated water in chef talk—and toss the slices into the bowl as you work.

Lotus has a delicate flavor that plays well with most any seasonings you want to use. You're not limited to Asian ingredients, so do some experimenting and see what you like.

As for the seeds, when they're fresh from the pod they're tender and taste like green peas. Once you've simmered the dried ones for about 30 minutes, they'll have myriad uses, both savory and sweet.

Drain and blot the rehydrated seeds, and toss them into a pan over medium-high heat with a bit of oil (the type depends on the influence you want). Roll them around until they begin taking on some color. They'll start to sing or make a whistling sound, a veritable lotus chorus. It's one of those rare instances when you don't sing for your supper, but your supper sings to you! Blot the roasted seeds on a paper towel and sprinkle with seasoning—Cajun, Italian, Asian, Mexican or a blend of your own concoction. These are good for snacking or for garnishing a salad or stir-fry.

The seeds also work well in sweets and can be candied whole or puréed for filling pastries such as Chinese mooncakes.

The flower is perched atop a fibrous hollow stem that looks like a chambered drinking straw. When the stem is cut into slices, the fibers aren't noticeable, but take a bite (you'll find jars of brined lotus stems or "rootlets" in Asian markets), and as you

pull it away from your mouth you'll see tiny filaments extending between the stem and your teeth. These fine fibers are used to create a variety of products, from weaving the beautiful saffron wraps that clothe Buddha statues all over Southeast Asia to making wicks for oil-burning lamps.

Summer is lotus blossom time. But once the flowers have finished putting on their show, they die back, and the plant concentrates its starch in the rhizomes. So autumn is the time to find them either fresh in the store or buried in your own water garden.

And you're thinking about trying your hand at growing them, right? Aside from the lotus being one of the most glorious flowers you've ever seen, another good reason to grow them yourself is that it's difficult to find the leaves and flowers in Asian markets, even when they're in season. If you have your own supply growing at home, you have the freedom to be creative.

Lotus fits in perfectly with our California fusion sensibility and our penchant for subbing out one ingredient for another we like better—or that we have growing in our yard or peeking out of the latest CSA box.

And maybe there's something to those stories about its healthful properties. The woman who sells prepared Korean foods at my local farmers market tells me about the benefits of the various foods I pile into my basket each week.

"Lotus is a *cooling* food," she stresses every time. I'm not sure whether she repeats this because she sells to so many people that we're all a blur, or because she takes one look at me and is convinced that I need cooling, and that I need frequent reminding of it.

No matter. Those crunchy marinated lotus slices are flavorful and refreshing, and that's cool enough for me. 🍃





ERIN FEINBLATT

## Recipes

### Lotus Chips

Slices of lotus rhizome—sometimes called the root—are easy to bake, season and serve as an appetizer or dipper.

Lotus rhizome, either fresh or dried

Oil, your choice

Sea salt, seasoned salt or various spices, your choice

Bowl of water

White vinegar, as needed

Preheat oven to 350°.

If you're using fresh lotus rhizome, peel it and, using either a very sharp knife or a mandoline, slice into 1/16- to 1/8-inch slices. As you work, place the slices in a bowl of cool water with a bit of vinegar stirred in.

If you're using dried lotus rhizome, soak it for about 3 hours in a bowl of water to which you've added a bit of vinegar. Some pieces may need more time, so let your fingertips be your guide. When the pieces are soft and feel hydrated, they're good to go. Drain and blot pieces well before slicing and placing in vinegar water.

When all the slices are cut, drain and blot excess water. Arrange on a rack set over a baking sheet, brush with oil and sprinkle with sea salt.

Bake for about 20 minutes, until pieces are dry and crispy.

When they've cooled, they're ready for snacking. Alternately, you can angle the knife (or the rhizome as you cut it on the mandoline) to make longer slices that are good for dipping.

Travel to  
France, Italy & Spain  
Right here in  
Santa Barbara County

**THE SANGER**  
FAMILY OF WINES

*Excellence in  
Local Winemaking  
Since 1997*

2923 GRAND AVENUE, LOS OLIVOS | 805.691.1020 | SANGERWINES.COM

**BUTTONWOOD**  
FARM • WINERY • VINEYARD

**WWW.BUTTONWOODWINERY.COM**  
1500 ALAMO PINTADO ROAD SOLVANG CALIFORNIA

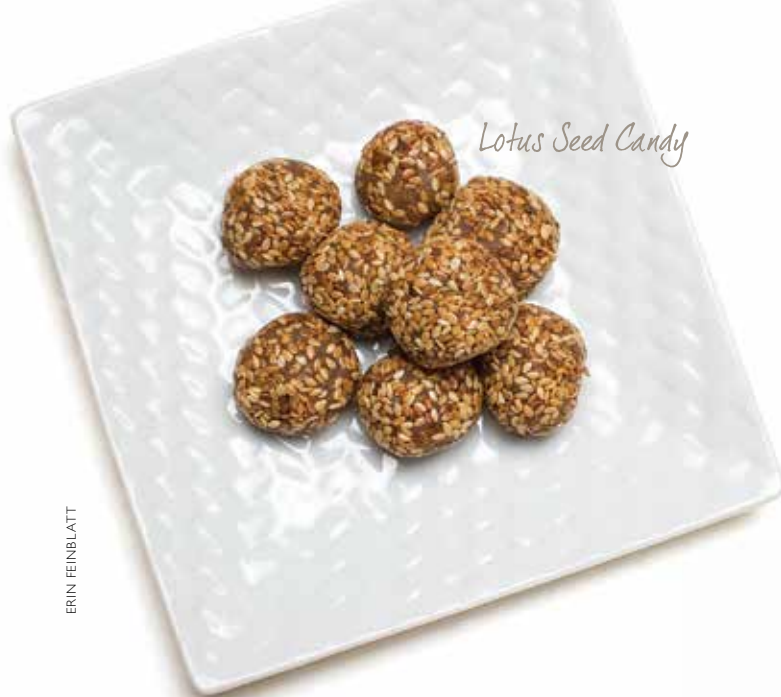
**SUPPORT YOUR  
LOCAL WINE  
MAKERS**

**MUNICIPAL  
WINEMAKERS  
.COM**

**22 ANACAPA ST. SANTA BARBARA, CA 93101 PH. (805) 931-6864**

**Global  
Gardens**

Award-Winning Organic Olive Oil  
Tasting Bar & Farm Stand  
**Now In Los Olivos!**  
Local Fruit Balsamics • Spice  
Blends • Organic Snacks  
Specialty Foods  
Fri-Sun, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.  
2450 Alamo Pintado Road  
800.307.0447  
globalgardensonline.com

*Lotus Seed Candy**Dried Lotus Seeds*

## Lotus Seed Candy

Mooncakes filled with lotus seed paste are wonderful but can be overpowering—too much of a good thing. Here's a way to enjoy the richness of lotus paste without overdosing. This recipe is easy to tweak, and you can add your favorite spices to create a candy that is uniquely your own.

*Makes about 40 grape-sized pieces*

1 (5-ounce) package dried lotus seeds

1 cup light brown sugar

½ cup water

¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

2 tablespoons pure sesame oil (not sesame-flavored oil)

Zest of 1 lime

10 candied ginger slices, cut into quarters

½ cup sesame seeds, toasted

Rinse dried lotus seeds and pour into a medium-sized pan with enough water to cover the seeds generously. Simmer for about an hour, or until seeds are fork-tender. Drain.

When seeds are cool enough to handle, pop each one open and remove the green sprout inside (not all will have them, but they're bitter and not what we want in our candy). Process seeds in a food processor or blender until they're a crumbly purée.

Combine sugar and water in the pan you used to cook the seeds. Turn heat to medium and stir until sugar dissolves. Stir in the cayenne pepper, and then add the seed purée. Stir until purée has absorbed the syrup, and then turn the heat up to medium-high and cook, stirring, until most of the water has evaporated, about 5 minutes or more. The sweetened purée should be dry but not scorched, lowering the heat if necessary.

Let cool a bit and then pour back into the food processor or blender, and add the two oils and lime zest. Process until you have a smooth paste.

*Lotus Stems**Sliced Lotus Rhizome*

Take a pinch of the purée and cover each piece of candied ginger, rolling it between your palms to make grape-sized candies. Roll each one in the toasted sesame seeds, and then roll between your palms again, so the seeds adhere.

These candies don't require refrigeration, but they'll hold their shape better if they're kept cool in an airtight container.

---

**Carol Penn-Romine** is a 2014 recipient of Les Dames d'Escoffier's M.F.K. Fisher Award for Excellence in Culinary Writing. Her work has appeared in *Best Food Writing 2013*, *Leite's Culinary*, *Gastronomica*, *Cornbread Nation IV: The Best of Southern Food Writing*, *Christian Science Monitor* and several magazines in the Edible Communities family. You can read about her culinary adventures at [HungryPassport.com](http://HungryPassport.com).