

Rum-Soaked Chocolate Prune Cake: London's Violet bakery shares cake-baking secrets



CHRISTOPHER KIMBALL'S

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*Updating
an Italian classic*

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A fresh, flavorful way to stew, no browning needed

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Japanese method produces easy-roll, no-shrink crust

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Pickled mustard seeds and marjoram *transform the bland, creamy avocado*

The Avocado Makeover

Story by CHRISTOPHER KIMBALL

IT WAS THE SIMPLICITY of it that took me by surprise. Half an avocado, sliced and fanned across the plate. Over it, marjoram vinaigrette studded with tender spheres of pickled mustard seeds. Thin slivers of ricotta salata. A squeeze of lemon juice. A sprinkle of sea salt.

An unassuming starter at Stephen Oxaal's Branch Line restaurant in Watertown, Massachusetts. It made one thing quite clear—a handful of simple ingredients can take a stunning turn when the right flavors tie them together. In this case, right was the pickled mustard seeds, adding a tang and crunch that cut through and balanced the lushness of the dish.

Americans think of mustard seeds—when they think of them at all—as living only in pickle brines. But let's set aside the jar of bread-and-butter chips for a moment. Because given a chance, whole mustard seeds can lend tons of flavor and texture.

Cuisines across Asia have used whole mustard seeds since before recorded history, and Europe caught on quickly. In India, the seeds often are fried in a bit of oil, then added to curries or spooned over soup. In Italy, they are cooked in sugar, then added to the fruit compote mostarda di frutta. The common denominator? Heat.

The same is true at Branch Line, where this simple salad outsells everything but the rotisserie chicken, the restaurant's signature dish. To soften the seeds, Oxaal boils them in water for several minutes. And it turns out that heating is key to flavor, too. Molecules in the seeds called glucosinolates break down into volatile compounds when exposed to water, producing intense bitter flavors. The effect is most pronounced when ground mustard seeds are reconstituted with water (explaining the intensity of dry English mustard powders).

But heat inhibits this reaction, leaving the seeds with a pleasant bite. When we compared boiled seeds with seeds soaked in cool water, the difference was striking. The soaked seeds were unpleasantly sharp and hard, while the boiled seeds were mildly mustardy and tender, popping in our mouths. They became the perfect foil for an otherwise fatty dish.

"You get that mustardy bite and that popping crunch. You get the acid and the sweetness of the pickling," Oxaal said. "It's interesting to say you are humbled by an avocado, but it's incredible."

Admittedly, to get all that, you do have to pickle the mustard seeds, but we found it takes just a few minutes and the leftovers (be smart and double or triple the batch) keep for up to a month refrigerated. They are perfect for dressing up roasted cauliflower, broccoli or potatoes; tossed with cooked beets; served with charcuterie or cheeses; slathered into grilled cheese sandwiches; spooned over grilled meats; or mixed into mayonnaise for a sandwich spread. And as you use up the seeds, don't ditch the pickling liquid. Oxaal uses it in an arugula vinaigrette for roasted cauliflower.

The vinaigrette itself uses honey, mustard and fresh marjoram (when was the last time you used marjoram?), which adds a wild, floral note to the dressing. It makes you think about the dressing rather than dismissing it as purely functional.

Avocado Salad with Pickled Mustard Seeds and Marjoram Vinaigrette

Start to finish: 1 hour | Servings: 6

CONVENTIONAL vinaigrettes—blends of fat and acid—tended to slide off the avocados. Eliminating the acid from the dressing altogether provided the best texture, allowing it



Milk Street Basics: *Pickled mustard seeds offer a punchy, crunchy contrast to lush, fatty ingredients like avocados and cheese.*

to cling to the avocados. We instead drizzled lemon juice directly onto the avocado slices, where it mingled with the dressing to produce balanced flavor. Marjoram was a standout in this recipe, but oregano would work in a pinch. We liked ricotta salata best, but Parmesan was a fine substitute.

—JEANNE MAGUIRE

For the pickled mustard seeds:

- ¼ cup yellow mustard seeds
- ½ cup cider vinegar
- ¼ cup white sugar
- ¼ cup water
- 1½ teaspoons black peppercorns
- ½ teaspoon coriander seeds
- 3 allspice berries
- 1 bay leaf
- ⅛ teaspoon red pepper flakes

For the dressing:

- 2 tablespoons pickled mustard seeds and brine
- 1 tablespoon minced shallot
- 2 teaspoons whole-grain mustard
- 1 teaspoon honey
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
- ¼ cup chopped fresh marjoram
- 3 tablespoons canola oil
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

To finish:

- 3 firm but ripe avocados
- Kosher salt
- 6 teaspoons lemon juice
- Thinly sliced ricotta salata cheese
- Fresh marjoram leaves

▪ **To make the pickled mustard seeds,** in a small saucepan over high heat, combine the mustard seeds and enough water to cover them by 2

inches. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer until the seeds are tender, about 8 minutes. Strain the seeds through a mesh strainer and transfer to a bowl. Wipe out and reserve the pan.

▪ **To the pan, add the vinegar,** sugar, water, peppercorns, coriander, allspice, bay leaf and pepper flakes, then place over high heat. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer until the spices are fragrant and the sugar has dissolved, 3 to 5 minutes. Strain the hot brine over the mustard seeds, discarding the solids, and let the mixture cool to room temperature. Use immediately or cover and refrigerate for up to 4 weeks.

▪ **To make the dressing,** in a small bowl mix together 2 tablespoons of the pickled mustard seeds and brine, the shallot, mustard, honey, salt and pepper. Let sit for 10 minutes. Add the marjoram and both oils and whisk until emulsified.

▪ **To assemble and serve,** slice the avocados in half lengthwise, remove the pits, then peel the halves out of their skins. Place the avocado halves cut side down. Starting at the larger end of each half, cut each into 6 lengthwise slices, leaving the top 1 inch of the avocado intact. Arrange the avocado halves on a serving platter or individual plates, cut side down, and gently press to fan the slices. Sprinkle a pinch of salt and 1 teaspoon of lemon juice over each half. Spoon the dressing over the avocados and garnish with ricotta salata and marjoram leaves. ♦

Step-by-step: *Slicing and fanning an avocado*



1. Slice each avocado in half lengthwise and remove the pit. Carefully peel the skin from each half.



2. Place avocado halves cut side down. Starting at the larger end of each half, cut each into 6 lengthwise slices, leaving the top 1 inch intact.



3. Arrange the avocado halves on a platter or individual plates, cut side down. Gently press the larger end to fan the slices.