

Tulips for breakfast: the flower as food from the war to contemporary gastronomy

May 4 2023, by Jose Miguel Soriano del Castillo and M^a Inmaculada Zarzo Llobell



Children eat food donated by a church organisation during the great famine in the Netherlands between 1944 and 1945. Credit: Menno Huizinga/Wikimedia

The Netherlands, late 1944. After the liberation from the Nazis, there were still unexpected problems to solve. Trains and river transport were blocked by rivers that had frozen over so people found it more difficult to access food.

This critical situation led to a [great famine](#), especially in the country's western urban areas. [Calorie consumption went from 1,800 to 500 kilocalories per person per day from May 1944 to February 1945.](#)

It is estimated that from the fall of 1944 until May 1945, [between 20,000 and 25,000 Dutch citizens](#) died of malnutrition. This also affected [pregnant women](#) and babies less than one year old, with [long-term consequences on the health of these children.](#)

A 16-year-old apprentice ballerina, who was 1.70 meters tall and weighed 40.8 kilos, [would later recall](#) that she suffered from asthma, jaundice, anemia and other diseases that result from malnutrition, such as edema. "It starts with your feet and when it reaches your heart, you die. For me, it was above my ankles when the Allied Forces liberated us".

She and her family survived—by eating tulips.

Tulip soup to soothe the soul

The Dutch government was looking for food that was rich in energy and nutrients, as well as easily accessible. During this stage of war, tulips were no longer cultivated and a large reserve of unplanted bulbs remained. Therefore, authorities took advantage of this surplus to sell bulbs in [grocery stores](#) and publish recipes in local magazines in an effort to help the population. Tulip [bulb](#) soup was cooked during the only hour of gas that was available per day.

One of these recipes was prepared in the following way: "Add water to the pot, cut the bulbs in half and remove the germ. Next, grate the bulbs with a fine grater and preferably into the pot since the pulp discolors quickly. Although [tulip](#) bulbs are rich in starch, they will not thicken the soup as flour does. Their pulp floats in the soup like flakes. If you have

curry powder at home, add a pinch, then add a little oil or a small amount of fat. And don't forget the salt!".

Toxic bulbs

Tulips, nevertheless, have a problem. Their bulbs mainly contain an allergen: the compound called [tulipalin A](#), which is primarily found in the bulb's outer layer, but also in the stem, leaves and petals.

Experts have detected the [poisoning of cows](#) which have eaten hay and tulip bulbs, in addition to the compound's role as a causative agent of so-called "[tulip fingers](#)". This [dermatitis](#), which affects bulbiculturists, is characterized by a red rash on the skin located around the nails and between the tips of the dominant hand's first and second fingers. It [can only be prevented](#) by limiting contact with these bulbous plants and using nitrile gloves (vinyl gloves do not work).

The danger of consuming tulip bulbs lies in the variety or in the way in which they are prepared. In fact, not all types are edible, and those that are have a bitter taste. On the other hand, eating them uncooked can cause nausea, stomachaches and other digestive problems.

In modern cuisine

Today, tulip bulbs can be dried, pulverized and added to grains or modified to obtain flour to make bread.

In addition, the flowers are also edible. They can be used to decorate dishes, with the whole flower (without the pistil and stamens) or by chopping the petals and mixing them into a salad, although they do not have much flavor. The ornamental use of sugared petals on a cake or eating them with syrup is also noteworthy.

Efforts to recover this original ingredient are seen in current gastronomy. [Margaret Roberts](#), an expert in nutritional plants and medicine, has gathered recipes such as tulip syrup, tulips stuffed with chicken mayonnaise and three bean salad with tulips.

Other examples to highlight are Johanna Huiberts-van den Berg, who collected some [thirty recipes](#); and Alain Caron, a French chef based in the Netherlands for the past 40 years and who runs several restaurants in Amsterdam. Caron invented dishes such as [tomato confit, fennel and tulip bulb salad](#) and oysters with tulip bulbs.

What might that young woman who discussed the ravages of the Dutch famine have made of the culinary evolution of the tulip? Years after the hunger she became one of the twentieth century's best known actresses, and at the end of April 1990 she was declared a star of the botanical world in the Netherlands. The Dutch bulb industry paid tribute to her by naming a white variety of the flower with exceptional luminosity, the Audrey Hepburn tulip.

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