



*Icy texture and intense flavor characterize granitas. Most are based on puréed fruits. The flavors in the colorful palette at right are: 1—Green Kelsey plum; 2—Sunset plum; 3—Rhubarb-cinnamon-rosemary; 4—Peach-champagne; 5—Italian plum; 6—Mango; 7—Red raspberry; 8—Pineapple-vin santo; 9—Blueberry-pomegranate; 10—Golden raspberry.*

# Granitas

Scraped Italian ices are coolly refreshing, intensely flavorful, and easy to make

BY DIANE POSNER MASTRO

I am a lover of flavor: the lush flavor of ripe raspberry, or the warm, sunny flavor of blood-orange zest. If cakes and tarts are the novels of flavor, then surely granitas—those intensely flavored Italian scraped ices—are the poems of flavor.

You could think of granitas as the first snow cones. Sicilian peasants would gather pure mountain snow into cloth bundles, take them back to the village, and add crushed fruit and juices. For me, though, a good granita is more than just a flavored ice. It's an example of the characteristic Italian love and respect for flavor.

Granitas are easy to prepare. You don't need any special equipment—some tool for puréeing the fruit, a covered container, a large spoon or ice-cream scoop, and a freezer. Almost any fruit can form a



granita base. What's more, granitas are fat-free and use relatively small amounts of sugar because they derive most of their sweetness from the fruit.

### WHAT IS A GRANITA?

Most granitas are made by combining fruit purées with simple syrup, which is a mixture of sugar and water. I always add a pinch of salt and a little lemon juice to fruit granitas to bring out the flavor and to balance the sweetness. And I frequently include a couple of tablespoons of a wine or liqueur to enhance the base flavor. The mixture is frozen until solid; it's then scraped and served like ice cream.

There are obvious similarities between granitas and sorbets, which are also frozen desserts made with fruit purées and simple syrup. The main difference between the two is their texture. Sorbets often contain beaten egg white and are processed in ice-cream machines, which gives them a silky, creamy texture. Granitas contain less sugar, which allows ice to form in larger crystals. And the fact that granitas are simply frozen and then scraped further contributes to their icy texture. The root of the word granita, *grana*, means grain and describes accurately this dessert's texture; it is quintessential fresh fruit flavor captured in tiny chunks of ice.

While usually eaten as a dessert, a granita can also act as an intermezzo between two very flavorful courses—a little something to mitigate the richness of the previous course, cleansing the palate for the next dish. An icy granita, with its clean, fresh taste, is perfect in this role. In my restaurant, I often serve intermezzo granitas, perhaps a blood-orange–rosemary granita between a rich, gorgonzola-sauced pasta and a grilled lamb chop, or a tomato–sage granita between a pasta *alla carbonara* (with egg, pancetta, and cheese) and a seared swordfish steak. My intermezzo granitas are less sweet than dessert granitas.

### THE COMPONENTS OF GRANITA-MAKING

All granitas are made pretty much the same way. The differences lie in how the fruit is prepared.

**The simple syrup** sweetens the fruit purée and brings it to the correct consistency to produce the desired texture when frozen. Because sugar and water content varies from fruit to fruit and from crop to crop, I sometimes have to adjust the weight of simple syrup I add. Watery produce like tomatoes or melons need a heavier syrup, one made with a greater proportion of sugar to water.

Making the simple syrup is easy. You just cook



sugar and water together until it boils, stirring occasionally. Then cool the syrup and store it in the refrigerator, where it will keep for several weeks. It's best to have the syrup made ahead and chilled, because warm syrup won't give you the most accurate indication of the flavor of the frozen granita. Flavors are slightly dulled by cold.

I frequently infuse the syrup with herbs or even nuts to add another layer of flavor to a granita. To make an infused syrup, tie fresh herb leaves or sprigs or a handful of nuts in cheesecloth or a muslin infusion bag, and cook with the sugar and water. (If you have a fine mesh strainer to pour the finished syrup through, you can throw the herbs or nuts loose right into the pot.) When the mixture boils, take it off the heat, let it steep for twenty minutes, and then remove the flavorings. Left to steep longer, they might leave a tannic, bitter aftertaste. I always taste an infused syrup before using it, to be sure I like its flavor. If you already have simple syrup on hand, you can infuse as much as your recipe calls for by bringing it to a boil again with the herbs or nuts and letting it steep.

**Choose and prepare the fruit with care.** Look for fruit that's at its peak of ripeness but not overripe. Full flavor, sweetness, and juiciness are important, too. Some fruits, like mango, pineapple, and all the soft summer berries, need only to be puréed with a

**Scraping a mango granita.** Using an ice-cream scoop or a heavy spoon, Mastro scrapes toward her body in several short strokes until she's shaved enough of the granita to form a solid ball. She removes the ball to a chilled bowl and repeats the procedure until she's scraped as many servings as she needs.

### Double-duty labels.

Because Mastro constantly varies the flavorings, she labels the containers carefully. She includes not only the ingredients but also the quantities so she can replicate the most successful batches.



bit of lemon juice and a pinch of salt. Firm fruits like rhubarb, pears, and apples need to be cooked to soften them and to release their colors, flavors, and natural sugars. I prefer to cook peaches and plums, too; I find that doing so produces a granita that is more richly flavored, more complex, and more refined than if I use raw peaches or plums.

I pay close attention to the texture of the fruit I'm using, because the texture of the finished granita is every bit as important as its flavor. Watery or fibrous fruits present special problems. Pineapples must be perfectly, fully ripe, and they must be puréed in a food processor until they're as smooth as can be. Otherwise, the small fibers will float and the syrup and juice will sink. Melon purées are liable to separate because the fruit is quite watery. Generally, mangoes make a wonderfully creamy, dense granita, but some mangoes are very fibrous. Avoid those, or

## Concentrated pomegranate juice

If you make granitas a lot, you might want to keep one particular item on hand. Concentrated pomegranate juice is a staple in my granita ingredient list. Reduced to a syrupy consistency, the dark red-brown juice adds color, flavor, and tartness to granita mixtures that are too pale or too insipid of flavor. I also use this juice to add body when the mixture is too watery. Concentrated pomegranate juice will darken light-colored granitas, like those made of pineapple or green or yellow plums.—D.P.M.

### SOURCES

*Concentrated pomegranate juice, sometimes called pomegranate molasses, syrup, or paste, is available in many Middle Eastern grocery stores. The following stores will ship:*

**Alvand Market**, 3033 Suite G,  
South Briston, Costa Mesa, CA  
92626; 714/545-7177.

**International Food Bazaar**,  
915 SW 9th Ave., Portland, OR  
97205; 503/228-1960.

**K. Kalustyan**, 123 Lexington Ave.,  
New York, NY 10016; 212/685-3451.

**Middle East Trading**, 2505 W.  
Devon, Chicago, IL 60659; 312/262-  
2848. Checks and CODs only.

**Shiraz Food Market**, 7397 SW 40th  
St., Miami, FL 33155; 305/264-8282.

strain the purée to remove the fibers.

**Combining the ingredients is a simple step**, but it's the point where some crucial decisions must be made that affect both flavor and texture. I purée salt, lemon juice, and spirits if I'm using them, with the fruit to distribute their flavors better. I know that to get the best frozen texture, I need a mixture that thinly coats a wooden spoon, so if a recipe gives a range of simple syrup, I start with the smaller amount. I taste as I go, correcting with extra salt and lemon juice if the mixture's too sweet; if the mixture is too tart, I add a touch more syrup, some concentrated pomegranate juice (see box, lower left), or some confectioners' sugar mixed with water.

**Freezing takes a day.** I freeze the granita in a plastic container with a tight-fitting lid. You need a container with an opening large enough to allow you to scrape the ice. Flat, rectangular food-storage containers are ideal (see the photo at left). I usually just pop the containers into the freezer and forget about them for a day, but some granitas need occasional stirring until they begin to solidify, to keep them from separating. The tomato-sage granita is a good example. Until you become familiar with how various granitas freeze up, it's a good idea to check them every now and then. If you see signs of separation, stir. After freezing the mixture for approximately 24 hours, you should have a solid (or almost solid) block of ice.

**Scraping takes a little time and effort.** Using an ice-cream scoop or a large spoon, I make a few test scrapes to see how hard the ice is. Some granitas—mango, for instance—scrape easily right out of the freezer. Usually, though, I need to let the granita sit on the counter for about twenty minutes. Then I roll up my sleeves and scrape toward my body with several strokes, transferring the scraped ice to a chilled bowl as necessary. If you want, you can scrape all the granita at once, and put it back in the freezer until it's time to serve it.

Granitas will keep for six weeks in the freezer without deteriorating, but they probably won't be around that long. Serve them in a chilled dish with little cookies or a garnish of fresh fruit or mint leaves.

### TROUBLESHOOTING

Granitas are easy to make, but whenever you cook with fruit, things can go wrong. Water content, sugar content, depth of flavor, and depth of color all vary with every batch. Here are some potential problems and solutions. (All quantities are for the size of the recipes that follow.)



**Granita mixture is too sweet**—Add one to two tablespoons lemon juice and a dash of salt to help balance the sweetness.

**Granita mixture is too sour**—Add a little more simple syrup (no more than one tablespoon per cup of mixture). Or whisk a tablespoon of confectioners' sugar in a bowl with just enough water to make a slurry, add to the mixture, and blend well.

**Flavor isn't intense enough**—For any fruit granita where some additional red color isn't a problem, add two tablespoons to half a cup of pomegranate syrup to bring up the flavor (see the sidebar on p. 55). For light-color fruit granitas, add a little vanilla extract or lemon juice. Or make the granita with syrup infused with mint leaves or a vanilla bean.

**Color isn't intense enough**—This is a problem with strawberry granitas. Add a tablespoon of pomegranate syrup to four cups of liquid.

**Granita separates during freezing**—Stir every half hour until the mixture is solid enough so that it doesn't separate.

**Frozen granita is too icy**—If the granita is stubbornly hard to scrape, there's too much water in the fruit or in the simple syrup. Let the granita melt until you can break it into chunks. Spin the ice chunks in a food processor until crushed and refreeze. Then it's easy to scrape. If you make the same granita again with fruit of similar quality, concoct a heavier syrup, perhaps three cups of sugar to four cups of water.

**Mixture is too slushy, won't freeze solid**—There's too much sugar either in the fruit or the syrup. Add up to half a cup of water to the granita, purée again to mix thoroughly, and refreeze.

### **SIMPLE SYRUP**

Simple syrup keeps for up to three weeks. To make an herb-infused syrup, tie eight to ten large herb leaves or two or three sprigs of herbs in cheesecloth or a muslin infusion bag. Cook with the sugar and water, and then let steep no more than twenty minutes. *Makes about 3 cups.*

*2½ cups water  
1¾ cups sugar*

Put the water and sugar in a nonreactive pot and cook over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, until the mixture boils. Cool and then store in a covered container in the refrigerator.

### **PEACH-CHAMPAGNE GRANITA**

*Makes about 6 cups.*

*3 lb. ripe peaches (about 10) with skins  
Pinch of salt  
1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice  
3 Tbs. champagne  
1 cup simple syrup*



Photos: Ruth Lively



**Some fruits need cooking to release their flavors and to soften their textures.** As shown at left, Mastro cooks blueberries until their skins burst, and then combines them with herb-infused simple syrup and pomegranate juice or wine. Roasting rhubarb with cinnamon sticks and rosemary, above, softens and flavors the fruit.

Wash and pit the peaches. Put them in a nonreactive pot with the salt, lemon juice, and champagne. Cook until soft, stirring often so the peaches don't scorch. Cool, and then purée in a food processor until smooth. Combine with simple syrup and freeze.

### **TWO PLUM GRANITAS**

Follow the directions for the Peach-Champagne Granita, but use the following ingredients. *Each makes about 5 cups.*

*2½ lb. green Kelsey plums  
Pinch of salt  
1 Tbs. lemon juice  
2 Tbs. Tuaca liqueur (or other orange liqueur)  
¾ cup simple syrup  
OR  
2½ lb. Italian prune plums  
Pinch of salt  
1 Tbs. lemon juice  
2 Tbs. sweet muscat wine  
¾ cup simple syrup*

### **FRESH SUMMER BERRY GRANITA**

*Makes about 5 cups.*

*3 pints fresh ripe berries (blackberries, raspberries, or boysenberries)  
Pinch of salt  
1 Tbs. lemon juice  
¾ to 1 cup simple syrup*



Purée the berries with the salt and lemon juice. Strain to remove the seeds (leave a quarter of the purée unstrained if you want some of the seeds for texture). Combine with the simple syrup and freeze.

### **MANGO GRANITA**

*Makes about 5 cups.*

**6 ripe mangoes, peeled and seeded**  
**Pinch of salt**  
**1 Tbs. fresh lemon or lime juice**  
**1 cup simple syrup**

Purée the mangoes with the salt and citrus juice until smooth. Combine with the simple syrup and freeze.

### **ROASTED RHUBARB GRANITA**

*Makes about 5 cups.*

**2 lb. rhubarb stalks, washed, trimmed, and cut into 1-in. pieces**  
**1 cinnamon stick**  
**1 3-in. branch rosemary**  
**1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice**  
**Pinch of salt**  
**1 cup rosemary-infused simple syrup**

Put the rhubarb in a nonreactive baking dish with the cinnamon and rosemary. Sprinkle with the lemon juice and add a pinch of salt. Cover with aluminum foil and roast in a 375°F oven for 40 min., or until the rhubarb is soft. Remove the cinnamon stick and rosemary. Purée the rhubarb, combine with the simple syrup, and freeze.

### **BLUEBERRY-POMEGRANATE GRANITA**

*Makes about 4 cups.*

**4 to 5 cups fresh blueberries, washed and stemmed**  
**2 Tbs. fresh pomegranate juice**  
**1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice**  
**Pinch of salt**  
**¾ to 1 cup simple syrup**

In a nonreactive pot, cook the blueberries, pomegranate and lemon juices, and salt until the berries soften and begin to burst, releasing their color and flavor. Purée when cool. Combine with the simple syrup and freeze.

### **TOMATO-SAGE INTERMEZZO GRANITA**

I like this best during a seafood dinner. Use the most flavorful tomatoes you can find. Stirring slows down the freezing process, so make this granita two days before you plan to serve it. You really have to watch the sweetness when making an intermezzo granita. If the mixture tastes too sweet, correct with more lemon juice and salt. *Makes about 4 cups.*

#### **FOR THE GRANITA:**

**3 lb. plum or medium-size standard tomatoes**  
**¾ tsp. coarse salt**  
**¼ tsp. black pepper**  
**2 tsp. extra-virgin olive oil**  
**1 to 1½ cups sage-infused simple syrup (see below)**  
**Juice of 1½ lemons or 2 limes**

#### **FOR THE SYRUP:**

**Juice from tomatoes**  
**2 cups water**  
**1 cup sugar**  
**8 to 10 clean, fresh sage leaves**

**Prepare the tomatoes.** Score the stem end of the tomatoes and drop them, a few at a time, into a large pot of boiling water for 90 seconds. Transfer them to a large bowl of ice water to cool. Peel, cut in half, remove all the seeds, and cut away any core. Purée the tomatoes in a blender with the salt, pepper, and olive oil. Strain the purée, reserving both the pulp and the juice. You should have about 3 cups of pulp.

**Make the sage syrup.** In a heavy, nonreactive pot, combine the tomato juice, water, and sugar. Tie the sage leaves in cheesecloth or a muslin infusion bag and toss into the pot. Set over medium-high heat and bring to a boil, stirring frequently. Remove from the heat, and let steep 20 min. Remove the sage and let the syrup cool.

**Combine the ingredients.** Start by whisking 1 cup of sage syrup into the tomato pulp. Add the lemon or lime juice to taste, and more salt if necessary. Whisk together. If the mixture coats a wooden spoon thinly, it should be just right. If the coating is heavy, add more simple syrup. Transfer the mixture to a plastic container and freeze. Stir every 30 min. until the mixture starts to become solid, and then leave it to freeze completely.

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*Diane Posner Mastro's specialty is northern Italian cuisine, specifically the cooking of the Piedmont. She concocts her granitas at Restaurant Enoteca Mastro, the restaurant she co-owns in Albany, California. ♦*

#### **Not just for dessert.**

*Served after a rich course, a not-too-sweet granita cleanses and refreshes the palate, preparing the diner for the next dish. The Tomato-Sage Granita shown below is a perfect intermezzo between a creamy pasta and a seared fish steak.*

