

brain freeze

The
Pleasure & Pain
Explained

STORY BY EAGRANIE YUH
PHOTOS BY MICHELLE PETERS

BANJO WAS NAMED AFTER AN AUSTRALIAN POET, Banjo Paterson, best known for his lyrics to the song “Waltzing Matilda.” I sang it in grade 3 as part of a social studies unit on Australian culture. I assumed, as you might, that Matilda was a woman. In fact, Matilda refers to a bag slung over a man’s shoulder—a wandering man who kills a sheep, commits suicide to avoid arrest, and haunts his death site. I’ve never been one for lyrics.

I met baby Banjo and his Aussie parents while on vacation in the BC Kootenays. They remarked that in Australia, everyone assumes Banjo is named after Paterson, but that in Canada, they had to explain. The poet, not the instrument.

Strapped into his high chair, seated at the head of a cedar dining table in a log cabin at the foot of Red Mountain in Rossland, Banjo had it good. In his right fist he squished a grape-red. In his left he wielded a tube of yogurt—frozen solid.

I’m not sure what made me and the five other adults pause our dinner conversation, but we all turned to Banjo at the same time. His right hand planted on the high chair’s plastic table, his left still clutching the tube of yogurt, he leaned forward with eyes wide, mouth open. It was an expression of pure wonder and mild distress. It was Banjo’s first brain freeze.





Brain freeze, or *sphenopalatine ganglioneuralgia*, is equal parts pleasure and pain. While we understand other pleasure-pain sensations, such as the endorphin rush we get from spicy food, scientists didn't know much about brain freeze until April 2012, when an international team of researchers suggested that brain freeze is a protective mechanism. In short: drinking cold things quickly makes your body think it's in danger of freezing. To protect the brain, the anterior cerebral artery expands abruptly. But since we only have so much room in our skulls, the expansion creates pressure. That pressure results in brain freeze. Thankfully, once the artery goes back to normal size, brain freeze subsides.

If that's the pain, then the pleasure lies in brain freeze's unpredictability. I know plenty of adults who haven't outgrown their love of slushy drinks, me being one of them. But if your idea of refreshing extends beyond swirly ice and high-fructose corn syrup, you might consider the slushy drink's grown-up bestie: granita.

Granita is fancy flavoured ice, and at one restaurant where I worked, we served it as a palate cleanser before the main course. Each day before dinner service, I'd run down two flights of stairs to the walk-in freezer and don the flour-crusting parka that hung outside the door. Inside the freezer, I'd scrape pans of frozen juice with a fork, transfer the delicate crystals to chilled serving dishes, and run them back up the stairs and into the kitchen freezer before they melted.

It's funny what you notice in a -18°C room, wearing a black parka four sizes too big. Amid my zealous scraping, I'd marvel at the transformation from frozen juice to icy fluff. In their pans, raspberry was deep claret, and pineapple, pale yellow; as ice they became translucent and airy, like memories of themselves. But best of all was raking through champagne granita's jagged shards. Slightly sticky, they seemed to sigh in their serving dishes, the fragments piled upon each other in neat little mounds.

Though granita is a classic palate cleanser, it's also a perfect dessert for sultry summer nights. Some granita recipes insist you stir every 30 minutes, which strikes me as too much work for flavoured ice. Here's the lazy person's route to granita: in the morning, prepare the base and pour it into a baking dish. Place the baking dish and serving dishes in the freezer. When you're ready, scrape the granita with a fork, pile the glorified ice crystals into a serving dish, and enjoy. No parka necessary.

Eagranie Yuh tried saying sphenopalatine ganglioneuralgia ten times fast, and failed miserably. She writes about the science of chocolate at thewelltemperedchocolatier.com

Photographer Michelle Peters (michellepeters.ca) and stylist Ali Ramage (curiositeit.wordpress.com) love to play with their food.



PEACH-BASIL GRANITA

FROM EAGRANIE YUH

Makes approximately one litre (eight half-cup portions)

Few things scream summer like ripe peaches and fresh basil, and their union is pretty outstanding. In this granita, basil provides an earthy undertone to peach's joyful sweetness, and a zing of lemon ties the whole thing together.

½ cup (75g) granulated sugar

about 16 large (12 plus 4) basil leaves, rinsed and dried

4 medium-sized ripe peaches (about 150g each), quartered

½ cup (125mL) cold water

1 tsp (5mL) lemon juice

¼ tsp (1g) salt

Place the sugar and 12 of the basil leaves in the bowl of a food processor. Whiz until the basil is finely chopped. Add the peaches and whiz until smooth. Add the rest of the ingredients (apart from 4 basil leaves) and whiz just to combine. Pour into a 13 x 9-inch Pyrex baking pan, and wrap with plastic wrap. Place in the freezer along with your serving vessels. Freeze for 4 to 6 hours, or until solid.

Just before serving, stack the remaining basil leaves in a neat pile, then roll lengthwise into a tight cigar. Using a sharp knife, slice into thin ribbons (the French call this *chiffonade*). Remove the granita from the freezer, scrape with a fork into fluffy ice, and divide among the serving vessels. Garnish with a few ribbons of basil.

Note: I don't peel my peaches—the fuzz provides a nice bit of texture—but if you're so inclined, you can peel yours. Score an X in the bottom of each peach before dunking it into a boiling-water bath for one minute. Using a slotted spoon, transfer each to an ice bath to stop the cooking process. The peels should slip off easily.



CUCUMBER-GIN GRANITA

FROM EAGRANIE YUH

Makes approximately 500mL (eight quarter-cup portions)

I love this cucumber-gin granita for its refreshing, herbaceous qualities, and while I prefer to use long English cucumbers, you can also use field cucumbers. A little bit goes a long way, hence the smaller portion sizes.

1½ cups (375mL) water

¾ cup (80g) sugar

2 large cucumbers

⅓ cup (85mL) gin*

3 Tbsp (45mL) lemon juice

¼ tsp (1g) salt

lemon zest, for garnish (optional)

In a small saucepan over medium-low heat, warm the water and sugar until the sugar dissolves, then set aside.

Peel cucumbers and slice lengthwise into quarters. If the seeds are large and tough, remove them. Otherwise, chop the cucumbers roughly and place in the bowl of a food processor. Whiz the cucumber until it's a fine purée. Place a fine-mesh sieve over a bowl, and pass the purée through the sieve, pressing with the back of a spoon to get all the juices out. (You can use leftover cucumber pulp in smoothies, or toss it into gazpacho.)

Into a medium bowl, measure out 1 cup (250mL) of cucumber juice. Add the sugar syrup, gin, lemon juice, and salt, and stir to combine. Pour into a 13 x 9-inch Pyrex baking pan, and wrap with plastic wrap. Place in the freezer, along with your serving vessels. Freeze for 4 to 6 hours, or until solid.

Remove the granita from the freezer, scrape with a fork into fluffy ice, and divide among the chilled serving vessels. Garnish with a bit of lemon zest, if desired.

* *Editor's note: Your options for making this with a BC artisan gin are numerous: try one from **Urban Distilleries** (Kelowna), **Victoria Spirits** (guess), **Phrog** (on Hornby Island), **Long Table Distillery** (right in Vancouver), or **Schramm** (this one is organic, delightful, gorgeously packaged, and crafted at Pemberton Distillery in Pemberton).*