

Culinary Lavender, the Other Blue Food
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From home-cooked to fine dining, Michigan food is discovering a fresh, Mediterranean dimension with the alluring scent and flavor of lavender. Gardeners, herbalists and chefs of all levels of interest and training are experiencing the influence of lavender across the culinary spectrum.

Paul Forte, owner of Harvest Time Farm Market in Oxford since 1983, has noticed a “growth spurt” in lavender requests and sales in the past several years. “It seems more people are using herbs in their kitchens. I’ve never carried as many varieties of lavender as I have this year,” he observes.

According to perennial and annual grower Ron Hendrix, lavender is by far the most popular herb at Earthly Arts Greenhouses in Imlay City. “We sell out of lavender every year,” Ron says.

Lavender is no longer just a lovely flower with a heavenly scent. This sub-shrub from the mint family is a hardy plant and versatile herb. Dried buds can stand alone in a scone, or blend with a host of herbs, roots, creams and wines for an elaborate entrée. Lavender knows no boundaries when inventing healthy and original beverages, breads, salads, vegetables, main dishes, desserts and chocolates. Embellish your favorite scone recipe, brownie batter, Earl Grey tea, maple syrup, honey and pie crust with a tablespoon of lavender.

For instance, Jan Burns, co-director of Friends of Herbs at Seven Ponds Nature Center, was introduced to lavender’s alluring mint flavor in 1993 when she joined the herb group located in Dryden. What began with lavender Fairie Cookies, a light sugar cookie someone brought to a meeting, developed into countless gastronomic inventions including roasted lavender potatoes.

Lavender romanced her taste buds in a fresh ginger-root tisane. She learned that ginger root aids in digestion, and lavender, among many medicinal qualities, is also an analgesic: good things for a gardener’s overworked muscles and bones.

“I grew my own herbs and cooked with them before it became popular,” Jan recalls. “I shopped the Oakland County Farmers Market regularly for my fresh plants, produce, breads and homemade mustards. The market has really grown since then.”

Local and widespread fresh herb awareness and education has significantly increased in the past twenty five years, encouraging the culinary lavender enlightenment. Regional, state and national herb societies study and teach the particular properties of herbs, why and how we have cooked with them for centuries.

Established in 1987, Michigan Herb Associates sprouted from enrichment classes taught by the late Mary Geratcy, instructor of the Greenfield Village enrichment classes in the 1980s. That is where Julie Krist, President of Michigan Herb Associates, first heard about lavender.

Owner of A Place in Thyme Bed & Breakfast in the Leelanau Peninsula, Julie serves her guests buttermilk lavender scones for breakfast, and a savory meat loaf seasoned with *herbes de Provence* for dinner. When she grills, Julie often sprinkles *herbes de Provence* with lavender over the charcoal for a smoked herb flavor.

The relationship between lavender and *herbes de Provence* is a rather new American idea. Typically, Provencal cooks do not include lavender in their *herbes de Provence*.

Furthermore, there is no one original recipe for this blend of herbs that may include marjoram, savory, thyme, basil, sage, rosemary and fennel.

“*Herbes de Provence* translates ‘herbs of the region’,” Julie says. “*Herbes de Provence* is to the French as Italian seasoning is to Italy. The herbs didn’t become a blend until the 1970s when some entrepreneurs decided to market them.”

Julie also makes a “cheesy white sauce” with lavender she pours over her vegetables. The sauce is a house favorite and works like magic to make homegrown vegetables disappear.

Colin Brown, Executive Chef of the Royal Park Hotel in Rochester infuses lavender in his crème brûlée, honey and maple syrup. “Our breakfast guests love the lavender maple syrup,” he says. “I use lavender infused honey and maple syrup for crepes, breakfast recipes and other desserts. It’s something people don’t pick up every day.”

Lavender infused honey also flavors the savory side of the menu. Chef Aaron created a lavender honey *jus* for his roasted chicken at the Clarkston Café. For variety, he mixes the lavender honey *jus* with heavy cream in a sauce pan for his Chicken Paillard, a tenderized chicken breast. He is convinced lavender, honey and chicken were made for each other.

A simple lavender, orange, honey glaze on roasted chicken with rosemary sprigs makes a delicious main course. Chef Aaron’s great idea for the grill is marinated chicken in saltwater brine with lavender, rosemary and thyme.

Most people are not aware that every part of the lavender plant is scented and full of flavor. The stems and leaves can be used for seasoning and substituted for rosemary with rave reviews. For a nice touch, the square lavender spike can be used for a skewer. Fresh and dried lavender buds are deliciously edible (and a breath freshener), but decrease the amount of buds when using dried lavender because it is more potent than fresh. Remember, go easy on the lavender.

Chef Greg Reyner of Café Muse in Royal Oak uses the blue herb for the vegetarian side of lavender’s personality. Influenced by Provençal cuisine, he grows his own kitchen garden behind his café including lavender and heirloom tomatoes. His tomato and eggplant stew cooked in a vegetable stock and seasoned with lavender is his version of the Mediterranean ratatouille.

“Since my soups and stews are maintained as vegan, I sauté the vegetables and lavender in olive oil, but for those who aren’t vegan, to finish the dish with good quality non-salted European butter would be good,” Chef Greg suggests.

To grow your own lavender, I recommend the English lavenders (*lavandula angustifolia*), Hidcote and Munstead because they are the hardiest in Michigan’s climate. My experience, on my lavender farm in Leonard, has shown that although Grosso (*lavandula x intermedia*), a lavandin, makes beautiful fields and bouquets, it is not as hardy as the English lavenders.

For convenient harvesting, find a sunny, well drained plot of soil with plentiful circulation close to the house and with plenty room to grow. Water well until the root is established, then leave it to Mother Nature.

The plant should bloom the first season, but if you want to establish a healthy root system, clip the flower spike before it blooms. Lavender is a Mediterranean plant and grows in calcareous soil and doesn’t generally need fertilizing. If you fertilize, use

organic fertilizers for toxic free seasoning. The next year you'll have enough lavender for all your culinary experiments, a few bouquets for the table and sprigs for garnishing.

The ideal time to harvest lavender is when a few of the calyxes (buds) are open. Snip with sharp, clean scissors below the first leaf node. Use fresh in recipes and for garnishes, or hang upside down out of direct sun to dry. Once dried, remove buds from the stem and store in an airtight glass or tin container. Unlike many herbs, lavender will hold its scent and potency for years.