

THE TASTE OF purple



COLORFUL CUISINE: Lavender isn't just a perfume, it's a pungent, summery flavor

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Staff writer

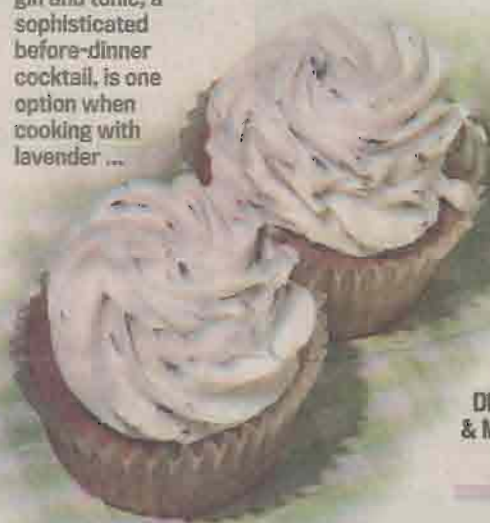
They steep it in drinks. They swirl it into cakes, crust it onto fish, stuff it into chicken and crumble it onto veggies. Lavender, that essential summer herb, isn't just a fragrance — it's a flavor that cooks all over the Puget Sound area are using to create dishes that entice with texture, aroma and that beautiful purple tinge.

"Most people think lavender is just for aromatherapy," says Stephanie Pollak, who has been gradually adding the herb to items at Tacoma's Corina Bakery for a while now. "Customers are a little afraid of it. They don't realize that people have been using it in cooking for thousands of years."

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JANET JENSEN/Staff photographer

ABOVE: Lavender gin and tonic, a sophisticated before-dinner cocktail, is one option when cooking with lavender ...



... lavender cupcakes are another.

FOR THE DRINK RECIPE & MANY MORE, SEE PAGE C2

local lavender events

Blue Willow Lavender Farm Lavender Fest

WHEN: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Free.

WHAT: Lavender crafting and demonstrations, workshops, vendors, food, live music, plus lavender products and plants for sale.

WHERE: Blue Willow Lavender Farm, 10615 Wright Bliss Road/KPN, Gig Harbor.

INFORMATION: 253-225-9030, bluewillowlavenderfarm.com

Mountain Meadow Lavender Festival

WHEN: 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Sunday. Free.

WHAT: featuring live music, crafting for kids and adults, food, workshops, demonstrations, items for sale and "Discover Cooking with Lavender" by Kathy Gehrt.

WHERE: Mountain Meadow Lavender Farm, 919 304th St. S., Roy.

INFORMATION: 253-843-4109, mountainmeadowlavender.com.

Sequim Lavender Weekend (3 EVENTS)

WHAT: Inaugural Lavender Festival in the Park. Features live music, vendors, wine and beer garden, food, raptor program.

WHEN: 10 a.m.-7 p.m. July 15-16, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. July 17. Free.

WHERE: Carrie Blake Park, 202 N. Blake Ave.

INFORMATION: 360-452-6300, sequimlavenderfarmersassociation.org.

WHAT: Inaugural Lavender Farm Faire. A bus tour of local farms and features chef demonstrations, plants for sale, crafts, lavender food, drinks, music, workshops and more.

WHEN: 10 a.m.-7 p.m. July 15-16, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. July 17. Free.

WHERE: Farm bus tour leaves from Festival in the Park (see previous).

WHAT: 15th annual Sequim Lavender Festival. Self-drive tour of small local farms (unaffiliated with Farm Faire and Lavender in the Park) and street fair.

WHEN: 9 a.m.-6 p.m. July 15-16, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. July 17. Free.

WHERE: Various farms (map available online); fair on Fir Street, Sequim.

LAVENDER

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They also don't realize how delicious it can be, says Pollak, who just convinced a lavender-phobic groom to buy her lavender-honey cake for his entire wedding, just by tasting it.

Pollak's not the only chef to discover how sweet lavender can be in desserts. Lisa Owen of Olympia's The Mark makes a lavender cake surrounded by a frosting colored purple with blueberries, and at Bonjour Cupcakes, Elyssa Conn makes a best-seller cupcake using lavender-infused milk and fresh buds in the frosting. You can steep lavender flowers in hot water and add to regular lemonade, or grind it up with sugar for lavender-flavored shortbread or chocolate-chip cookies. You can even steep it in agave syrup and pour it over waffles, or add it to a latte like the signature ones at Tacoma bistro Babblin' Babs.

But the pretty purple flower isn't just for sweets. In fact, say chefs, it combines well with many savory foods, as long as it stays in the background.

"Lavender has a subtle, clean flavor, with a heady crispness," says Pollak, who's developing a lavender-lemon cheesecake at Corina Bakery this month. "You need to add it to smooth, fatty foods, something rich and light."

"It enhances bland food

like potato, halibut or chicken," says Kathy Gehrt, Seattle author of "Discover Cooking with Lavender." Gehrt is one of the demonstration chefs at next weekend's Sequim Lavender Farm Festival, covering breakfast, entrees and desserts. Among her favorite recipes is roasted salmon encrusted with lavender and hazelnuts, using a technique she developed of roasting the flower buds in a dry skillet.

"You get the same pungent flavor but the floral essence vaporizes and tones down, transforming into a grassy, rosemary-like flavor," explains Gehrt.

Lavender also goes well with smooth cheeses – Gehrt loves to crumble it with blue cheese over sweet potato fries, an appealing color combination.

Matt Stickle, chef at the Hotel Murano's Bite restaurant, stuffs a goat cheese-lavender combination into chicken, where he says it gives "a pungent, sour counterbalance."

Lavender is one of the herbs commonly added to the American version of herbes de Provence. (The French version usually doesn't have it.) William Mueller of Babblin' Babs creates his own version, the Backyard Northwest blend, using sage, lavender, thyme, rosemary, oregano, basil and savory, and slips it into a lot of entrees – such as chicken patties.

"Lavender's nice on lamb, seafood and chicken," Mueller says, "and it's good on



LUI KIT WONG/The News Tribune, 2009

A Royal Velvet lavender plant at the Mountain Meadow Lavender farm in Roy.

baked tomato with a crumbled topping. We cut whole bunches of it and hang it up in the restaurant."

When it's time for dessert, if you've had enough cake, you can pair lavender with just about any fruit, says Gehrt – think poached pears, lavender-strawberry parfait or a pink grapefruit broiled with lavender sugar.

"It brings back summer on a dark winter's morning," she says. She also blends it with mango in salsa.

Lavender does have some surprising pairings: Stuart "Bliss" Schantz, who's presenting his Blissful Wunders Chocolates at the Sequim Festival, infuses a cream ganache base with both lavender and peppermint to make a prize-winning chocolate.

Another surprise is lavender cocktails. Both Owen and Stickle are offering lavender drinks, such as gin-and-tonic and a lavender-

lemon vodka, on their summer menus. Both use an infusion of fresh lavender in hot water.

"It's not sweet; it's very sophisticated," says Owen, who also likes the idea of edible landscaping and using fresh, locally-grown ingredients in her menus.

Culinary, or English, lavender can be found at local farmers markets. Find it dried at spice shops off-season. Essence is quick to use. It tastes a little different, but it can be a powerful flavor, say chefs, especially dried – and it can take a bit of experimenting to find the right balance.

"I just combine it with different things and see what it combines with best," says Owen. "Anyone can do that."

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4 tips for growing lavender

Lavender makes the ideal edible landscaping plant – but you have to treat it right, and it helps to know which varieties taste best. Here are some tips from Laura Ambers Pittman-Hewitt, owner of Ambergardens in Port Orchard, who grows and sells lavender plants and products at the Tacoma Farmers Market.

1 What are the best lavender varieties for eating?

All lavender is edible, but not all lavender is tasty. Some have more of an astringent, camphor flavor. The best culinary varieties are in the Angustifolia or English lavender family – Royal Velvet, Mailette, Hidcote. Provence, an intermedia lavender, is also widely used.

2 How can you tell if the lavender in your home garden is edible?

The edible varieties usually bloom late June-July. They're low-growing, with 1-to-1½-inch flower stems. The flower buds are close together and have a rounded, not pointed, tip. Avoid the Spanish lavender, with the rabbit-ears bud. No lavender will poison you – it'll just taste bad.

3 How do you care for lavender?

Two words – drainage and sun. Plant it farther apart in the South Sound than on the farms near Sequim, to get more sun and avoid fungus. It needs well-drained soil, not much fertilizer, maybe a bit of lime once a year. Don't plant it in clay.

4 What about pruning?

You need to prune at least once a year after flowering. Leave just 1-2 inches of foliage. If the plant has gotten woody and scraggly, look to see if there's any foliage at the base – if there is, cut right back to that. If not, prune about 25 percent, then add lots of chicken manure. You can also clone the plant by heeling a stem into the ground, then cutting it off once it has roots. Pittman-Hewitt also has lavender information on the Ambergardens website, www.ambergardens.com.

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