

Lavender:

THE TASTE OF PURPLE

BY
DEB SCHNEIDER



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RAMONA D'VIOLA

Fields of purple-tasseled spikes of lavender in bloom are wonderful to see. And it's a bit of heaven to breathe in the clean, sharply pungent scent that rises from a single, sun-warmed plant. There's always a place in my garden for lavender. I rub a little between my fingers as I pass by, or put a flower spike in my car and enjoy it for days.

Whether inhaled or ingested, lavender heals, transforms and relaxes, inducing a sense of tranquility and peace. In fact, lavender tea was used by England's Queen Elizabeth I to treat her armada-sized migraines.

Humans have long known the soothing qualities, penetrating scent and infection-fighting powers of this sweetest of herbs. Known as *spikenard* in biblical times, lavender probably moved around the eastern Mediterranean with Phoenician and Arab traders. It came in time to the ancient Greeks, and thence, like all things, to the Romans, who took it with them to the farthest reaches of their Empire. Lavender's botanical name, *lavandula*, is based on the Latin word *lavar*: to wash, clean, refresh and renew. In times past, laundry (derived from the same Latin root) was aired outdoors on great swathes of lavender plants. Lavender made the Dark Ages smell better and reached its peak of popularity during the late Victorian era. Today, lavender is largely used for its aromatic properties,

transformed into infusions and essential oils, potpourri and candles, dream pillows and bath scents.

As a culinary herb, lavender has an equally long history, particularly around its native Mediterranean where it is beloved by bees, butterflies and cooks alike. The venerable mixture known as *herbes de Provence* carries the very essence of the herb-covered sunny hills and cool pine forests of southern France. While Provence is still the lavender (and perfume) capital of the world, fine lavender is grown in this country—some right here in Valley Center (see *Resources*).

Lavender, like all herbs, offers both medicinal qualities and wonderful flavor. Over the centuries, it has found its way into sweets and breads, marinades and spice rubs, teas and jellies, ice creams and preserves. The flavor of lavender is not remotely like a sweet perfume; it tastes like something spiky and purple should taste—sharp, even slightly metallic, with a penetrating herbal pungency similar to rosemary, with which it is often combined.

Both English lavender (*L. angustifolia*) and French lavender (*L. provence*) work well with food. The French variety is not as aromatic but has a pronounced herbal taste. Almost all recipes begin by infusing lavender into a liquid—water, cream, honey or wine. Infusions can be made with dried or fresh laven-



der. The magic proportion seems to be 1 tablespoon of dried flower buds and 2 tablespoons of fresh buds to each cup of liquid. To infuse, heat the lavender buds in the liquid until just below the boiling point, then cover and set aside to infuse. Infusion can take anywhere from 15 minutes to overnight, depending on how strong you want the flavor to be. Anything to be served cold should be stronger, since cold dulls the flavors. Dairy products should infuse in the refrigerator.

Another way to introduce a lavender flavor to your cooking is to use Lavender Sugar in tea or in sweet recipes. If you are purchasing dried lavender, it should be powerfully scented and clearly marked as culinary or organic lavender; this ensures it is safe to eat. If you're growing your own, pick the unsprayed flower buds early in the day and strip off the flower buds, then gently shake the buds in a coarse sieve to remove bits of calyx and leaves. Rinse gently, drain thoroughly and spread out on paper towels to dry.

Lavender can be overpowering by itself. It plays better as part of a choir of tastes, combining nicely with citrus, mint, berries, ginger, figs and vanilla, or other strong Mediterranean herbs such as marjoram, oregano and fennel. Start with a small amount and increase to your taste. Depending, of course, on the size of the armada on your personal horizon.



FROZEN LAVENDER LEMONADE WITH FRESH MINT

On a hot sunny day, make good use of your herb garden with this refreshing iced drink. Serves 6.

- 1 cup sugar
- 2 1/2 cups water
- 2 heaping tablespoons dried lavender (1/2 cup fresh)
- 1/4 cup fresh mint leaves (or 2 teaspoons dried mint)
- 1 cup fresh-squeezed lemon juice, preferably very sour
- 3 cups crushed ice or ice cubes
- 3 teaspoons meringue powder or 1 egg white (optional)
- 6 mint leaves, plus more for garnish, if desired.

Boil water and sugar until dissolved. Add lavender and mint leaves. Cover and remove from heat. Let stand at least 3 hours or overnight. Strain and chill. Add lemon juice.

In a powerful blender, combine the lemon base, ice, mint and meringue powder or egg white. Blend on high until frothy and thick. Serve immediately.

