



*Herb long popular
in beauty items
soothes its way
into consumables
from martinis
to scones, stews*

DayBreak Lavender Farm's cooking contest brought out fragrant dishes, such as lavender nut bread (on plate) by Malka Finsel of Somerset; lemon blueberry and lavender scones (right) by Monica Wagner of Moreland Hills; and lavender-rosemary-thyme-cumin rub (lower left, off plate), by Bev Pockar of Chagrin Falls.

Lavender wafts into kitchen

By Jane Snow, Beacon Journal food writer

Fields of lavender unfold downhill from Jody Byrne's white farm house, dwindling in the distance into two ribbons that lead to a picturesque pond.

On Sunday, the hot summer sun coaxed a few lavender buds to open and waft their heady perfume over the crowds. To Byrne's astonishment, more than 1,000 people visited the farm last weekend to revel in this bit of French Provence in, improbably, Northeast Ohio.

"I never dreamed..." she said, shaking her head as another load of passengers debarked from a shuttle bus that deliv-

ered them from the Wal-Mart a mile away.

Byrne had hoped to lure 200 to 300 people to the first Ohio lavender Festival in Streetsboro. But she hadn't factored in the strangely hypnotic power of the herb.

"Lavender is more of a culture than a plant," Byrne said. "There's not a culture built up around oregano."

Byrne and her husband, Michael Slyker, sold out of homemade lavender jelly on Saturday, the second day of the three-day festival. By 2 p.m. Sunday, six chocolate lavender tortes had been reduced to crumbs, the dozens of fresh

goat cheese and lavender jelly sandwiches on rosemary focaccia were gone, and the lavender-infused lemonade was running low.

The most popular product Byrne and Slyker make from their harvest is lavender soap, but their food products aren't far behind. Lavender, long a popular fragrance in beauty products, has been steadily gaining fans in the kitchen. It is the herb of the moment among the culinary cognoscenti, showing up in everything from martinis to cheese dips.

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"The lavender really pops in this scone," said one taster Sunday at the first annual Ohio Lavender Cook Off. "It's a really good use of it."

The luscious Lemon-Lavender Blueberry Scones earned first place and a \$200 DayBreak gift certificate for Monica Wagner of Moreland Hills. She and her mother, Bev Pockar of Chagrin Falls, both placed in the contest. Pockar's surprisingly good spice rub of cumin, lavender, thyme and pepper was a runner-up, as was the headily perfumed nut bread entered by Malka Finsel of Somerset in Perry County, southwest of Columbus.

Trick with the herb is using right amount

Wagner began cooking with lavender after a trip to southern France, where fields of the bluish-purple herb alternate with fields of yellow mustard.

"My husband and I honeymooned in Provence 13 years ago and I was so impressed that we created our own little Provence at home," Wagner said. "My front walkway is lined with Munstead lavender, which the bees love and we use in sachets, salads, cooking and baking."

Byrne and Slyker grow 13 varieties of lavender, including Munstead and — her favorite for use in cooking — Provence. Any lavender is edible, though, Byrne said. The couple picks the buds when they are one-third open and loaded with essential oils. They turn the harvest into lavender-infused honey, lavender sugar, lavender teas, lavender jelly and lavender tea cake and dark chocolate torte mixes.

A small selection of items is sold in Heinen's stores and a few boutiques scattered throughout Northeast Ohio. The full line is available through the Internet at www.daybreaklavenderfarm.com.

Both fresh and dried lavender buds may be used in cooking. Fresh has the most pronounced flavor and should be picked as close to the time of use as possible, Byrne said. In addition to lavender products, Byrne also sells dried buds for use in cooking.

Those who know lavender as a fragrance worn by a grandmother or aunt will be surprised at how versatile it is as a flavor. It pairs well with mint and chocolate and can be used in every-

thing from desserts to stews. It can't be used with abandon, though.

"Lavender is difficult to cook with because if you underdo it, you won't taste it and if you overdo it, it tastes like medicine," Byrne said.

Byrne likes to dip the dried stems in an egg white beaten with a bit of water, roll them in sugar and dry them for use as stir sticks for tea. One of her employees, Jinx Jenkins, likes to cook with lavender sugar and infusions. She has figured out how to intensify the flavor of lavender sugar by combining a half-cup of dried buds with 6 cups of sugar in a food processor and pulsing for three to four minutes.

"It's very intense in flavor because you've broken up the lavender and it has released its oil," she said.

Jenkins uses the sugar in lemonade she makes in a coffee maker. For the ultimate lavender lemonade, she said, grind a quarter-cup dried lavender bunch in a clean coffee mill reserved for the purpose. Place in the filter basket of a clean coffee maker and run 12 cups of water through the appliance. When the lavender-infused water cools, stir in the juice of 6 to 10 lemons and 1 cup lavender sugar. Add enough additional water to make a gallon of lemonade.

A glass of icy lavender lemonade and a plate of Wagner's scones would be the perfect combination on a hot summer day, Byrne mused Sunday as she reached for a scone and sank into the lavender-colored cushions of a white settee on her screened-in sleeping porch, in sniffing distance of the lavender fields.

"Everything you make with lavender somehow makes you slow down and enjoy life," she sighed.



LEMON-LAVENDER BLUEBERRY SCONES

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup whole-wheat flour
- 1 tbsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. baking soda
- ½ tsp. salt
- 8 tbsp. cold, unsalted butter
- 1 tbsp. dried lavender blossoms
- Grated zest (outer yellow skin) of one lemon
- 1 tbsp. fresh lemon juice
- ¾ cup buttermilk
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 egg
- 1 cup fresh blueberries

Blend dry ingredients in a large mixing bowl. Cut in butter with a pastry blender or two forks until the mixture resembles bread crumbs. Sprinkle lavender over the mixture.

In another bowl, mix lemon zest, lemon juice, buttermilk, sugar and egg. Pour over dry ingredients. Stir with a fork until a soft dough forms. Add blueberries and mix briefly with hands just until dough clings together. Turn onto a floured surface.

Form dough into 2 balls, then flatten with hands into circles, each about 1/2 inch thick. Cut each circle into 8 wedges. Bake at 375 degrees for 20 to 25 minutes, until light golden brown. Makes 16 scones.

GRANDMA MALKA'S LAVENDER NUT BREAD

- 2½ cups flour
- 1 cup packed down sugar
- 3½ tsp. baking powder
- 3 tbsp. oil
- 1½ cups milk
- 1 egg
- 1 cup fresh lavender buds or ½ cup dried
- 1 cup ground walnuts or pecans
- 1 cup mini chocolate chips

In a large bowl, stir together flour, brown sugar and baking powder. In another bowl, whisk together oil, milk and egg. Blend wet ingredients into dry, stirring until thoroughly incorporated.

Process lavender in a food processor until finely ground. Stir into batter with nuts and chocolate. Pour into two small (7 inches long) greased and floured loaf pans. Bake at 350 degrees for 55 to 60 minutes. Makes 2 loaves.

MIDDLE EASTERN LAVENDER SPICE RUB

- 2 tsp. dried lavender buds
- 1 tsp. chopped fresh rosemary
- 1 tsp. fresh lemon thyme leaves
- 1 tsp. fresh thyme leaves
- 2 tsp. kosher salt
- 1 tsp. finely ground pepper
- 1 tsp. ground cumin

Combine all ingredients and mix well. Use as a dry rub for poultry or pork prior to baking or grilling.

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