

## STOP AND SMELL THE LAVENDER

Groves of olive trees. Acres of vineyards. Herds of goats yielding tangy cheese. Is this Texas or the South of France? Nowadays, the foods and flavors of Provence can be found a lot closer to home. Here's where—plus recipes très délicieuses.

by Patricia Sharpe

IT HAPPENED THE FIRST TIME I visited the South of France. My boyfriend and I were nuzzling our way through the countryside in a rented Renault when suddenly the same idea struck us like a bolt of summer lightning. Seldom had we felt so close, so in tune. Gazing deeply into each other's eyes, we asked the wordless question: "What are all these rolling hills, limestone bluffs, oak trees, and prickly-pear cacti doing in France?" No, we hadn't been mysteriously teleported back to Texas: Provence is a dead ringer for the Hill Country.

Until recently, though, the resemblance stopped with the terrain. The singular terroir of Provence—the character of the land that manifests itself in the region's wine, olives and olive oil, herbs, lavender, goat cheese, lamb, and honey—had no homegrown counterpart. But all that has changed in the past decade, as a gaggle of entrepreneurs—some starry-eyed, some sharp-eyed—has started transforming the local landscape. So one balmy week this spring, I hit the road to find out what's happening in the mythical region of Provence, Texas. Just outside the town of Dripping Springs (affectionately called "Drippin'" by the natives), I turned off the main highway and followed narrow country roads to the sixty-acre farm where Sara and Denny Bolton have been making their prize-winning Pure Luck goat cheese for ten years. After being nibbled and drooled on by a herd of pushy female goats, I went with Sara's daughter and fellow cheesemaker Amelia Sweethardt into the spotless small building where the cheese is produced. As I asked questions and generally got in her way, she scooped and packaged creamy white mounds of chèvre. Pure Luck's main product is fresh goat cheese, both plain and flavored (I love the chipotle), but it also turns out five other types, including a piquant, log-shaped Sainte Maure and Del Cielo, a lusciously soft aged version that's similar to Camembert. On most weekends and holidays, you can wander around the farm, pet the goats, and buy cheese on the honor system from a tiny hut across the road. You might even come home with an armful of fresh flowers too, since Pure Luck also grows snapdragons, zinnias, larkspur, and a dozen other species.

Out at Hill Country Lavender, owners Jeannie Ralston and Robb Kendrick had been praying to the rain gods to stop, to no avail: Their fields of lavender were green, not purple. "It's the cool, wet weather," Ralston said, looking a little frazzled. "The plants are way behind schedule." Ever since she and Kendrick—who are married—visited a lavender farm on a trip to France, they've been obsessed with raising it themselves. "We put in two thousand plants in 1999," she said. Now they have six thousand on their 225-acre place near Blanco. As the three of us surveyed the rows of clumpy gray-green shrubs fanning out in every direction, Ralston predicted that by late June the plants would be heavy with flowers and the air thick with lavender's pungent aroma. On weekends from mid-May to early July (if the weather cooperates), hordes of lavender lovers show up and pay \$4 a bunch to cut their own. The rest of the year, visitors can wander around the fields and investigate the farm's rustic gift shop, which is stuffed with oils, candles, sachets, and other fragrant items. "People are crazy for lavender," said Ralston.

It used to be that the words "Texas wine" elicited snorts of disbelief. Now "Texas olive oil" is having the same effect. But contrary to expectations, olive trees are thriving in Texas. Some half dozen incurable optimists are convinced that Texas olive oil is the next big thing, and the one who has gone the farthest the fastest is Dallas businessman Jim Henry, the owner of the Texas Olive Company. In ten years the gentleman farmer and his wife, Kathy, have planted 40,000 olive trees in the sandy soil of South Texas. When I first saw the skinny little saplings standing bravely on the flat-as-a-tortilla plains outside Carrizo Springs, I was taken aback: Instead of the gnarled, Van Gogh trees I had envisioned, here were tidy, drip-irrigated rows of upright trunks. But if they

last long enough, these trees will be geezers too someday. This year will mark the Henrys' first big production—they hope to turn out around five thousand bottles of olive oil.

If olive oil is one of the newest Provence-style products in Texas, honey is one of the oldest. Fain's Honey, of Llano, for instance, has been around for 78 years. Second-generation-owner Dewey Fain and his wife, Erwinna, met me at their honey-production plant on Texas Highway 16, where he proceeded to give me a crash course in honey-making. It was more fun than a grade-school field trip. We started at the magnolia tree in front of the building, where we watched a few random bees packing pollen into the little saddlebags on their legs. Then we hopped into Fain's truck and drove five miles down the road to check on some of his hives (he has others in South Texas). The sky was overcast, so the bees were cranky—they like sunny weather—and Fain insisted I wear a white bee suit that made me look a lot like the Michelin tire man. "Africanized bees have taken a lot of the fun out of beekeeping," he said. "These days I won't go near a hive without a bee suit on." The tour ended back in his seven-hundred-square-foot honey-processing room, where as many as two hundred 55-gallon barrels of natural raw honey are bottled every year. Fain's honey distills a summer's worth of wildflowers, mesquite, catclaw, cactus, wild persimmon, guajillo, and beebrush into a subtly spicy blend he calls Texas brush honey.

The Francification of Texas doesn't stop with lavender, goat cheese, olive oil, and honey. Lamb is the red meat of the South of France, and Ranchers' Lamb, in San Angelo, has been selling chops, racks, loins, shanks, and more—all grain-fed—for six years. Near Fredericksburg, Becker Vineyards is making a dry rosé called Provençal, which is like the wine that is the summer drink of choice in southern France. (Becker also sells dried lavender, for a Provençal twofer.) And finally, herb growers all around Texas, such as the Fredericksburg Herb Farm, are raising the fresh rosemary, thyme, tarragon, basil, sage, lavender, and more that are the region's indispensable seasoning mix: herbes de Provence.

Of course, it's one thing to know about all the foods that make up this bounty. It's quite another to know what to do with them, which is why we turned to San Antonio chef Scott Cohen for help. A transplanted New Yorker, Cohen not only trained in French techniques but also completed a demanding apprenticeship program known as a stage in—you guessed it—Provence. Eighteen years ago, though, he married a Texan and is now a complete nut about seeking out Texas-raised foods to use in his highly regarded restaurant, Las Canarias, at La Mansión del Rio Hotel. Who better, we thought, to put together a Provençal feast, Texas style?

#### Directory

##### GOAT CHEESE:

Fresh and dry, aged goat cheese available at the Mozzarella Company, 2944 Elm, Dallas; 800-798-2954, mozzco.com. Closed Sunday. Also available at many supermarkets. Fresh goat cheese available at Pure Luck, 101 Twin Oaks Trail, Dripping Springs; 512-858-7034, purelucktexas.com. From the intersection of U.S. 290 and Ranch Road 12, go 3.6 miles west on 290; turn right on McGregor Lane, proceed for 1.7 miles, turn left on Martin Road, and continue .6 mile to the farm stand, just before Twin Oaks Trail. The farm is a few hundred feet farther on Martin Road (turn right at the first gravel driveway past the farm stand). Open weekends and some holidays if the sign is out on 290 at McGregor Lane. Pure Luck cheese also available at some Central Market and Whole Foods stores.

##### HERBS:

Fredericksburg Herb Farm, 405 Whitney, Fredericksburg; 800-259-4372, fredericksburgherbfarm.com. From Main Street, turn south on Milam and go 6 blocks to Whitney. Open daily.

##### HONEY:

Fain's Honey, 3744 Texas Highway 16, Llano; 325-247-4867. From the intersection of Texas highways 71 and 16, go 1.5 miles south on 16; the store is on the left. Closed weekends, except by appointment. Honey also available at some H-E-B, Central Market, Whole Foods, Sun Harvest, Super S, and other stores.

##### LAMB:

Ranchers' Lamb of Texas, San Angelo, 325-659-4004. Not open to the public. Available at Albertson's, Brookshire Brothers, Central Market, Fiesta, H-E-B, Wal-Mart, and other supermarkets.

##### LAVENDER:

Hill Country Lavender, 1672 McKinney Loop, Blanco; 830-833-2294, hillcountrylavender.com. From the traff-

ic light on U.S. 281 in downtown Blanco, go west on FM 1623 for 2.5 miles; turn right on County Road 106 (McKinney Loop), and continue for 1.5 miles. Open weekends through Christmas. Closed January through March. Dried lavender is also available at Becker Vineyards (see below).

**OLIVE OIL:**

Texas Olive Company, Carrizo Springs. Not open to the public. Available by mail order in October: 214-325-5787 or olive henry@aol.com.

**ROSE´ WINE:**

Becker Vineyards, 830-644-2681, bekevineyards.com. From Fredericksburg, go about 10 miles east on U.S. 290, then turn right on Jenschke Lane. Open daily. Becker Provençal rosé available only at the vineyard; other Becker wines available in many supermarkets and liquor and wine stores.