

San Antonio Express-News (TX)

May 11, 2005
Edition: STATE&METRO
Section: Food
Page: 05F

Lavender imparts a haunting fragrance to food, gardens

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Article Text:

BLANCO -- While strolling through the countryside of Provence, France, one June day in the early 1990s, Sharon Shipley came across fields of lavender carpeting the earth and emitting a haunting fragrance. From that moment, she knew that lavender would be her mission in life.

In the years that have passed, Shipley has devoted herself to finding out all she can about the culinary herb that the French call "blue gold." She has incorporated it in the cooking at her business, Mon Cheri Cooking School and Catering in Sunnyvale, Calif. She has followed cultivation and harvesting methods of lavender farmers in the United States and France. She even used lavender in a dish she prepared for President Clinton.

Shipley finally gathered all of her information into "The Lavender Cookbook" (Running Press, \$16.95), which was released last spring and recently received an award from the international culinary group Gourmand for best single-subject cookbook.

It's a collection of more than 120 recipes that range from Apricot-Lavender Chicken to Olive Lavender Country Bread, and a handful were chosen for a cooking class held recently at Jeannie Ralston's farm, Hill Country Lavender, here.

"My world of lavender is getting bigger and bigger," Shipley said, while sitting in a room that overlooked fields of her beloved plants. "Texas is the up-and-coming lavender capital" of the United States.

But the title isn't resting easy. Washington state and Ojai, Calif., are two areas trying to catch up, she said.

The best way to learn how to cook with lavender is to do just that, Shipley said, so she handed out the recipes and let everyone in the class do the cooking. Some tried their hand at Stuffed Peppers with Lavender Couscous, while others made Cold Cantaloupe Soup with Yogurt Lime Cream and Lavender or Veal Scaloppine and Artichoke Hearts with Pomegranate Lavender Sauce.

By the time the meal was ready, various tables in Ralston's dining area and porch were laden with appetizers, a salad, a main course with a side dish, and dessert -- all flavored in some way with lavender.

Shipley's recipes proved fairly easy to follow, which should be good news to anyone taking her next class at the farm, which is also hands-on and which is set for May 19. One reason for their success is that most were flexible. In fact, she encouraged experimentation. "The veal dish can be done with chicken," she said. "The soup can be done with frozen blueberries." And so on.

You could even omit the lavender in one or two, though that idea might seem heretical to the largely female class, many of whom drove across the state because of their devotion to it.

Wendy Nilsson, for example, came down from Richardson, near Dallas, because she has “a big thing for lavender.” She has also faced a number of recent upheavals in her life, including a divorce and the death of her mother, and the idea of a lavender class sounded like a great way to pamper herself for a short time.

Lavender has traditionally appealed to women more than men. Credit the perfume it emits, if you want. Whatever the reason, Shipley faces a wall of male prejudice most every day. “I’m not allowed to cook it at home,” she said. “My husband wouldn’t eat it. ‘What is that weird flavor?’ he’d say.”

“I have one just like that,” one woman chimed in.

Shipley offered some tips for cooking with lavender or incorporating it into more dishes:

--Start slowly. Grind a few of the flowers and start adding it into recipes, she said. It helps that lavender complements so many foods, including ginger, chocolate, citrus, some chiles, mango, banana, wrapped halibut ... “You name it,” she said.

--Lavender was once one of the ingredients in the magical herbes de Provence blend. It became so expensive, however, that you rarely find it included anymore. “That’s really sad,” she said, “because it’s traditionally always been there. You’ve got to add some back in.”

--When cooking with lavender, look for a variety that has a low camphor level. Spanish lavender, for example, is high in camphor, which adds a bitter taste to your food. So is lavender oil.

How do you tell which variety is low in camphor? She offered two ways. Low-camphor lavender has a grayer tone to it. The intensity of the aroma is also a clue: “The higher the perfume, the higher the camphor -- that’s the easiest way I can explain it,” she said.

She prefers a variety called Provence, but a good culinary lavender can be ordered from Dean & DeLuca if one can’t be found locally.

--The best way to deal with lavender is to buy it fresh whenever possible or keep it in a dark tin, she said. If you store it in the freezer, bring it to room temperature before using it.

--Perhaps the most important rule: “More is not better in lavender,” she said. Too much can give a dish a soapy quality.

Petite Bites of Salmon with Orange-Miso Sauce

ORANGE-MISO SAUCE:

1 cup mayonnaise

2 tablespoons frozen orange juice concentrate, thawed

1 tablespoon yellow miso (fermented soybean paste)

1 tablespoon Asian sesame oil

1 teaspoon dried culinary 'Provence' lavender buds, finely ground in spice grinder

1 tablespoon minced garlic 1 tablespoon garlic chile paste

1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger

1/2 teaspoon grated orange zest

Sea salt, to taste

Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

SALMON:

1 pound skinless salmon fillet (1/2-inch thick)

1/2 cup orange marmalade 1/2 cup frozen orange juice concentrate, thawed

2 tablespoons Asian sesame oil

1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger

1 teaspoon dried culinary 'Provence' lavender buds, finely ground in spice grinder

Sea salt, to taste

Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1 cup white or black sesame seeds

For Orange-Miso Sauce: In medium bowl, whisk together mayonnaise, juice concentrate, miso, oil, lavender, garlic, chile paste, ginger and orange zest. Season with salt and pepper. Cover and refrigerate until needed.

For Salmon: Cut salmon crosswise into strips about the width and length of your index finger. In large bowl, mix marmalade, juice concentrate, oil, ginger and lavender. Add salmon and toss to coat. Season with salt and pepper.

Place sesame seeds on a small plate. Coat salmon pieces lightly with seeds. Arrange salmon in single layer on baking sheet. Cover and chill at least 2 hours or up to 8 hours.

Soak package of 6-inch bamboo skewers in water for 30 minutes, then drain. Preheat a grill to medium-hot.

Thread each salmon strip onto 2 skewers placed 1/4-inch apart (the double skewers prevent fish from twirling during grilling, making it easier to turn). Grill skewers 3 minutes per side, or until salmon is cooked through. Transfer to serving platter. Serve warm with sauce.

Makes 24 servings.

Source: 'The Lavender Cookbook' by Sharon Shipley

Veal Scaloppine and Artichoke Hearts with Pomegranate Lavender Sauce

3 tablespoons fresh thyme leaves

2 tablespoons black peppercorns, coarsely ground

1 teaspoon dried culinary 'Provence' lavender buds, finely ground in spice grinder

6 garlic cloves, minced

9 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided use

1 1/2 pounds veal scaloppine, no more than 1/8-inch thick

Pomegranate Lavender Sauce (recipe follows) 1 cup flour

4 tablespoons unsalted butter

1 cup frozen artichoke hearts, thawed and cut into quarters

POMEGRANATE LAVENDER SAUCE:

3 slices pancetta, finely

chopped

1 tablespoon extra-virgin

olive oil

4 shallots, minced

1/2 cup dry red wine 3 tablespoons orange juice

1 cup chicken broth

2 tablespoons tomato paste

1 tablespoon pomegranate molasses (see Note)

1 teaspoon dried culinary 'Provence' lavender buds, finely ground in spice grinder

1/4 cup heavy cream (optional)

Sea salt, to taste

Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

In small bowl, mix thyme, peppercorns, lavender, garlic and 2 tablespoons of the oil. Rub veal all over with mixture. Cover and refrigerate for 3 hours.

Prepare pomegranate sauce.

Place flour on plate and dip veal in to coat both sides; shake off excess. Place butter and 5 tablespoons oil in large skillet over high heat. Working in batches, add a single layer of veal and sauté for 1 minute, or until slightly browned; turn and sauté for 1 minute or less on the other side, until cooked through. Transfer to middle of serving platter, slightly overlapping slices. Cover with foil to keep warm.

In same skillet, warm remaining 2 tablespoons oil over medium-low heat. Add artichoke hearts and cook 5 minutes, or until tender and starting to brown. Using tongs, arrange artichokes around veal.

Pour some of the sauce over veal and artichokes. Serve remaining sauce at table.

For Pomegranate Lavender Sauce: In saucepan over medium-high heat, sauté pancetta in oil 3 minutes, or until crisp. Add shallots and sauté 1 minute. Add wine and orange juice. Cook until only 2 tablespoons of liquid remain. Stir in broth, tomato paste, molasses, lavender and cream (if using). Bring to boil and cook 7 minutes, or until sauce is reduced to 1 cup. Season with salt and pepper.

Note: Pomegranate molasses is available at most international and Middle Eastern food markets. You can also order it at www.deandeluca.com.

Makes 4-6 servings.

Source: 'The Lavender Cookbook' by Sharon Shipley

Stuffed Peppers with Lavender Couscous and Artichokes

1 cup uncooked couscous

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

1 cup chicken broth

2 teaspoons dried culinary 'Provence' lavender buds, finely ground in spice grinder

3 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon extra-virgin olive oil, divided use 1 (10-ounce) package frozen artichoke hearts, thawed, trimmed of rough edges and quartered

2 shallots, chopped

4 ounces prosciutto, finely chopped

1/2 cup Niçoise olives, cut in half and pitted

1/2 cup pine nuts, toasted 3/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese, divided use

Sea salt, to taste

Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

2 red bell peppers

2 yellow bell peppers

1/2 pound fresh bocconcini mozzarella balls, cut in half, or pearl mozzarella balls

Place couscous in heatproof bowl and top with butter. Bring broth and lavender to boil in small saucepan and pour over couscous. Stir, cover bowl with foil, and set aside for 10 minutes. Fluff with fork and set aside.

Heat 3 tablespoons oil in large skillet over medium heat. Add artichokes and shallots. Sauté for 10 minutes or until artichokes are soft and slightly browned. Stir into couscous and let cool slightly. Add prosciutto, olives, pine nuts and half the cheese. Stir well and season with salt and pepper. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Slice peppers in half lengthwise and remove seeds and membranes. Brush outside of peppers with remaining 1 teaspoon oil. Evenly divide couscous mixture among peppers. Place in 13-by-9-inch baking dish, evenly distribute mozzarella over peppers, and sprinkle with remaining Parmesan.

Pour about 1/2 inch of water into bottom of baking dish and cover loosely with foil. Bake 40 minutes, or until peppers are very tender. Cool slightly before serving.

Makes 8 servings.

Source: 'The Lavender Cookbook' by Sharon Shipley

Dried Apricots with Lavender Goat Cheese and Pistachios

1/2 pound dried apricot halves (about 40)

1/4 cup orange juice

1/4 cup bourbon or apricot brandy

1 (12-ounce) log soft mild goat cheese

2 tablespoons cranberry chutney or fig or plum jam

1 teaspoon dried culinary 'Provence' lavender buds, finely ground in spice grinder

3/4 cup unsalted pistachio nuts, toasted and coarsely chopped

In medium saucepan, combine apricots, orange juice and bourbon or brandy. Simmer over medium heat 10 minutes, or until liquid boils away). Drain apricots on paper towels and pat dry. Line baking sheet with parchment paper and spread apricots, cut side up, on sheet.

In food processor, blend goat cheese, chutney or jam, and lavender. Transfer to pastry bag fitted with a large plain or star tip. Pipe a small dollop of mixture onto each apricot and sprinkle with pistachios.

Makes about 40 servings.

Source: 'The Lavender Cookbook' by Sharon Shipley

Cold Cantaloupe with Yogurt Lime Cream and Lavender

1 cantaloupe, seeded, peeled and cut into large cubes

4 peaches, peeled, pitted and diced

1 cup fresh tangerine or orange juice

1/2 cup fresh lime juice

1 tablespoon honey or lavender honey 1 (8-ounce) container plain yogurt, divided use

1 1/2 cups sweet wine, such as Riesling or Gewürztraminer

2 tablespoons grated lime zest

1 tablespoon dried culinary 'Provence' lavender buds, crushed or finely ground in spice grinder

Place cantaloupe in blender and blend until fairly smooth (if necessary, work in batches). Add peaches and blend until fairly smooth. Add tangerine or orange juice, lime juice, honey and 2 tablespoons of yogurt. Blend until smooth. Pour into a large bowl and stir in wine. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 3 hours or up to 24 hours.

In small bowl, mix lime zest with remaining yogurt. Cover and refrigerate until needed.

Ladle soup into chilled bowls and garnish with a dollop of yogurt mixture. Sprinkle with lavender.

Makes 6-8 servings.

Source: 'The Lavender Cookbook' by Sharon Shipley

Fruitful Salad with Lavender Candied Pecans and Pomegranate Dressing (THIS RECIPE DID NOT PUBLISH BECAUSE OF SPACE LIMITATIONS)

Lavender Candied Pecans (recipe follows)

Pomegranate Dressing (recipe follows)

4 cups loosely packed baby spinach, rinsed and dried

1 small head butter lettuce, washed, dried and torn into bite-size pieces

2 small heads radicchio, outer leaves discarded and the rest shredded

2 avocados, halved, pitted, peeled and cut into small wedges

2 mangoes, peeled, pitted and thinly sliced 2 cups seedless red grapes, cut in half

2 tart green apples, cored and thinly sliced

LAVENDER CANDIED PECANS:

3/4 cup pecan halves or large pieces

2 tablespoons Lavender Sugar (recipe follows)

1 teaspoon unsalted butter

POMEGRANATE DRESSING:

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1/4 cup mango nectar

2 tablespoons Ruby Red grapefruit juice 2 tablespoons pomegranate molasses (see Note)

1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar

1 teaspoon dried culinary 'Provence' lavender buds, finely ground in spice grinder

Sea salt, to taste

Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

LAVENDER SUGAR:

1 tablespoon dried culinary 'Provence' lavender buds

2 cups sugar

Prepare the pecans.

Prepare the dressing.

In large bowl, toss together spinach, lettuce, and radicchio. Add half of the dressing and toss to coat. Mound onto large serving platter.

In same bowl, combine avocados, mangoes, grapes and apples. Add remaining dressing and toss gently to coat. Spoon over greens. Sprinkle with pecans and serve immediately.

Makes 6-8 servings.

For Lavender Candied Pecans. Butter a baking sheet and set aside. Place pecans in large skillet and stir over high heat about 4 minutes, or until lightly browned and fragrant. Add sugar and reduce heat to medium. Cook, stirring constantly, until sugar is melted and just beginning to caramelize. Stir in butter and immediately transfer nuts to prepared baking sheet. Cool completely, then break up any nut clusters.

For Pomegranate Dressing. In small bowl, whisk together oil, mango nectar, grapefruit juice, molasses, vinegar and lavender. Season with salt and pepper.

Note. Pomegranate molasses is available at most international and Middle Eastern food markets. You can also order it at www.deandeluca.com.

For Lavender Sugar. In spice grinder, pulse lavender with 1 tablespoon of the sugar until finely ground. Transfer to bowl and stir in remaining sugar. Transfer to a jar, cover tightly, and let stand for at least 3 days before using.

Makes 2 cups of sugar.

Source: 'The Lavender Cookbook' by Sharon Shipley

Sharon Shipley will present a hands-on lavender cooking class at 6 p.m. May 19 at Hill Country Lavender, 1672 McKinney Loop, Blanco. The cost is \$65 a person. Call (830) 833-2294 or visit www.hillcountrylavender.com for reservations.

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Caption:

The recipes in Sharon Shipley's book include Petite Bits of Salmon with Orange-Miso Sauce (front left), Dried Apricots with Lavender Goat Cheese and Fruitful Salad with Lavender Candied Pecans. 3. ABOVE: Lavender works in all kinds of dishes, including Veal Scaloppine and Artichoke Hearts with Pomegranate Lavender Sauce. RIGHT: Sharon Shipley, author of 'The Lavender Cookbook,' offers her class some hints about incorporating lavender into cooking. PHOTOS: JOHN GRIFFIN/STAFF

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Record Number: 5510309