

a subtle sweet spot

WITH CULINARY LAVENDER,
TEMPERANCE IS KEY TO
GOOD TASTE

THE SWEET perfume of lavender smells good enough to eat.

Unfortunately, it isn't always good, no more than perfume itself would hold any culinary appeal when rubbed on ducks or infused in cocktails or baked into shortbread.

"It's like eating soap," says food writer Tara Austen Weaver. Weaver is comfortable cooking with plum vinegar or ribbons of sorrel or even foraged dandelions. But lavender?

"It's just wrong."

Plenty of consumers agree. New customers are often leery of sampling the lavender flavor of Dry Soda, says company CEO Sharelle Klaus. Usually, it's because they've had a bad experience with lavender in food — "which is easy to do," she says. She knows firsthand. It took her 1,300 tries — "I'm not joking . . . I have all my notes from back then" — to get the soft, soothing flavor she had envisioned. Her earliest attempts were astringent; medicinal.

"It was so hard to get right. The only one I cried over!"

Luckily, Klaus did get it right. The final version of lavender soda is one of Dry's best sellers. And there's hope for others who love the sweet, floral qualities of the herb enough to liberate them from the garden or cosmetics counter.

Generally, says Seattleite Kathy Gehrt, author of "Discover Cooking With Lavender," the problem in lavender cooking is excess. "What I tell people is, if you have a really well-seasoned meal, you don't say, 'Oh, I can taste the salt.' If you can call it out and go, 'My gosh, there's lavender in this,' it's typically too much."

Gehrt has a few techniques for success:

First, see above. "Use less than you think might be appropriate until you

get it where you like it."

Then: For savory dishes, Gehrt dry-roasts lavender buds as her first step, a trick she learned from local culinary instructor Kris Dews. "Put them in a dry skillet over high heat for about a minute, almost like you do when you toast nuts. It brings out the oils . . . It takes off some of the real floral taste," leaving a rustic and earthier flavor. Bonus: The evaporated oils also scent the kitchen.

Also: Mellow and balance the flavors. Gehrt infuses sugar with lavender and vanilla beans and uses the sugar for baking. "Vanilla is mellow and comforting. Lavender tends to be lively and vibrant and wants to take over the show. They balance each other really well." The sugar works particularly well with blueberry muffins, she says. Just swap it out for regular sugar in any recipe. On dark and rainy winter days, she loves to broil pink grapefruit and top it with the sugar. "It just reminds me, summer will return."

Finally, improve the texture. Gehrt grinds buds in a coffee grinder for dishes where the texture of the buds would be off-putting, such as in a pound cake. Steep lavender in sweetened cream, simmering it on the stovetop, then remove the buds, cool the cream, and whip it into a scented topping. She also adds lavender to simple syrup, providing an infusion for cocktails and other recipes. "I tell my classes, you can infuse almost anything with lavender."

Still, it isn't all about doing it right, says Marcia Breece, who tended 200 lavender plants as innkeeper of the Morgan Hill Retreat bed-and-breakfast in Poulsbo. Some people's taste buds, she thinks, are just more sensitive to the herb. She remembers teaching a Valentine's Day class on lavender creme brulee. One woman took a bite and ran to the sink to spit it out. "She said, 'Oh, my God, it's ghastly. It tastes like soap.'" Her partner devoured the rest.

Sharelle Klaus probably wouldn't




What to look for, and where

CULINARY LAVENDER is available in the bulk bins at specialty-food stores such as Whole Foods and Central Market. Most stores that sell bulk culinary lavender use generic forms of dried English lavender. (Don't try eating Grosso varieties, which are popular in gardens.)

Lavender is a big regional crop, with an annual lavender festival in Sequim (www.lavenderfestival.com), held July 15-17 this year. Connoisseurs can buy particular varieties through local growers. Kathy Gehrt is a fan of the Royal Velvet variety, which is lower in camphor.

disagree. People either love or hate the lavender soda, she says, with remarkably few in-betweens. For her product development, there were a few keys to success. One was tweaking the type of flavor extract she used; the others were acidity and sugar. While lavender smells inherently sweet, it required more sugar than she expected to smooth out the edges. And fortunately, her end product has far more lovers than haters.

"People ask me all the time, 'What's your favorite flavor?' And I always say the flavor I'm most proud of is lavender, because that turned out exactly the way I wanted it to, and it was really hard to get it to that point." 

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Lavender Sugar

Makes 2 cups

1 tablespoon dried culinary lavender buds

2 cups granulated sugar, divided

1. Put the lavender buds and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the sugar in a spice grinder or clean coffee grinder. Blend for about 1 minute, until the mixture is a soft powder.
2. Add the lavender-sugar mixture to the remaining $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups sugar. Place the mixture in a container with a tight-fitting lid. Allow to sit for three days before using.

— From "Discover Cooking With Lavender"