

SALT

A still life composition featuring French food items: a baguette, Swiss cheese, and jars of milk and cream, with a building facade superimposed on the baguette.

A French Affair

PROVENANCE

The Heart and Soul of Provence

SEVEN DISHES

Jérémy Gillon

A FRENCH AFFAIR

Mid-autumn Festival à la Française

SALT

Lavender

The Heart and Soul of Provence

TEXT DAWN WONG PHOTO YOUNG LIVING, LAVANDE DE LHERM

To some, there's nothing that epitomises the appeal of Provence more than the purple rows of lavender that pepper the landscape every summer. The lavender fields of Provence represent a change of seasons, a ripening of the earth, and a time where life slows to the mercy of the sun's strong rays.

PROVENANCE





The smooth hills, green trees and the vivid purple spots of the arresting lavender fields are guaranteed to stir emotions in even the most jaded of hearts. The captivating landscape mesmerises and enchants all who set their sights upon it. This is the essence of Provence, as perfect as one would have imagined it to be. It is no wonder lavender is often known as the heart and soul of Provence.

This purple-gold marvel is shaped in small clusters, thirty to eighty centimetres high. It is of great aesthetic appeal the moment it starts to bloom. The lavender flowering season in Provence is an extraordinary sight: fields of light purple stretch limitless beyond the horizon, like endless, static waves.

The Provence lavender fields are among the best in the world. Come July, the Lavender fields are fully blooming in all their glory, the purple spikes dancing gently under the breeze, diffusing their intoxicating smell, keeping all prisoner under their spell. The spring poppies have all but disappeared, bright lavender flowers start to transform the already beatific landscape into a patchwork of colour. The entire region is peppered with vibrant purple fields.

Historical Origins and Uses

Lavender, prized for its medicinal qualities is known for its ability to repel insects, and beloved for its fresh and floral scent that is both aromatic and lightly medicinal. Historically, it has been prized as one of the herbs used to make "Herbes de Provence", a mixture of dried herbs considered typical of the Provence region of southeast France. Since time immemorial, they have been picked in the wild by Provence locals. Back in the 19th century, the poor Haute-Provence peasants saw its potential as a source of wealth worth cultivating and exporting. The first fields of lavender in Provence, as we know them today, date back to then.

Fragrant lavender fields can be found popping up everywhere in Provence in summer. It's the most famous crop of the region and one that has held significant importance for the people of Provence for centuries. But the lavender fields of Provence are not just a source of pride for the locals; they are also a key Provence attraction that draws in countless visitors from around the globe yearly.

The bushes in Provence are impeccably aligned to create a beautiful geometry, and when the fields are slightly rolling, it is reminiscent of beautiful, purple waves. It is a landscape to behold, to savour slowly.

The allure of the lavender fields is completed by the charming villages dotting the area, like Sault and its local street market, or the small but disarming hamlet of Aurel. Here, people are kind, warm and welcoming; the rural life and traditions are still strong. Everything is calm around the lavender fields. It is a little oasis of peace.



Several species can be cultivated in Provence lavender fields. Often, these plants are turned into essential oils or are dried. They also serve as aromas for food recipes. Culinary Lavender or pure lavender essential oil is an incredibly versatile ingredient for cooking. In today's upscale restaurants, fresh edible flowers are making a comeback as enhancements to both the flavour and appearance of food. English Lavender (*L. angustifolia* and *munstead*) has the sweetest fragrance of all the lavenders and is the one most commonly used in cooking. The uses of lavender are limited only by the imagination. Culinary Lavender has a sweet, floral flavour, with lemon and citrus notes. The potency of the lavender flowers increases with drying.

In recent years, Lavender is commonly used in baking because of its natural sweetness. It is often used as a substitute for rosemary in many bread recipes. The flowers can be put in sugar and sealed tightly for a couple of weeks, then the lavender sugar can replace ordinary sugar in cakes, buns or custards. These flowers are not only aesthetically pleasing but taste stunning in a glass of champagne, with chocolate cake, or enhancing salads, sorbets or ice creams with its beautiful colour. Lavender lends itself to savoury dishes also, from hearty stews to wine-reduced sauces.

Farming Lavender

The highest quality lavender comes from the seeds of healthy plants. Many other oils on the market come from lavender cuttings. At Young Living's **Simiane-la-Rotonde Lavender Farm and Distillery**, they use only the seeds, as this method produces a much better quality essential oil.

To do this, farmers will select a few rows in a field and leave the lavender flowers to mature longer and dry. Thereafter, they will crop these rows and crush the flowers to get the seeds out. The seeds are then sent to the nursery, where the farmers grow starters to plant in the field the next spring.

From that point, it takes about three years for the lavender plants to reach full maturation. During this time, the weeds in the fields must be kept under control so they don't choke the plants and absorb all the water. The farmers employ the use of machinery to remove the weeds that grow in between each row of lavender and between each plant. In addition to machinery, the sheep in the spring will eat the weeds and they also clear the areas around the plants by hand. After three years of tending to the lavender plants, the weeds are less problematic because the lavender plants have become bigger, more robust, and can handle the competition from other plants.

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The Great Harvest

The flowering season spans from mid-June to mid-August and may depend on climate factors: it comes sooner in warmer, sunnier regions, and can come later nearer to Alpine valleys. There is only one harvest a year for lavender and that is in June and July when the weather is hot and dry. The rest of the year, except for January and February, is dedicated to weeding, pruning and tending the plants.

Lavender plants can thrive in the field for a total of 10 years. Every summer in June or July, the top part of the plant is harvested for distillation. The remainder of the plant stays in the ground and grows back the next year. The harvesting of lavender must happen in the summer when the lavender flowers bloom. During this time, the farmers will constantly go in the fields to observe the perfect time to cut the flowers. A small amount of the lavender plants may be harvested first and then distilled to verify if the plants need more time.

Once they are ready for harvest, the plants can be cut. After cutting, they are set on the side of the field to dry. Drying the plants allows the water inside to evaporate, but the oil stays trapped in the plant inside structures called glandular trichomes. The plants are then collected from the side of the field and brought to the distillery.

The Distillation

There are three elements essential to distilling the lavender. The first being the temperature of the steam. Dry steam is used for a quality distillation. If temperatures are too low, the steam will re-condense into water. If temperatures are too high, oil molecules will be harmed, and it affects the quality of oil. The second key element is duration. An essential oil is composed of hundreds of different molecules. Each molecule has a different mass and must be extracted at different times. If distillation were to stop before everything has been extracted, the heavier molecules that come out later would likely be missed out during distillation, and those molecules are critical to the quality of the oil. The third most important factor is the vat pressure. A low pressure must be maintained as the wrong pressure can alter the molecules in the oil, compromising its quality.



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After collection, the lavender plants are then loaded into the distillery chambers; the lid is lowered and sealed, and the distillation process begins. The distillation process uses steam to vaporize the oil in the plant and extract it. The steam and oil are cooled back down to a liquid state where the lavender oil separates and floats on top of the water, making it easy to collect. After distillation, the oil is placed in stainless steel drums. For each distillation, samples are taken to perform a gas chromatography analysis to test the components of the oil. Thereafter, the oil will be left to aerate in a controlled temperature environment to allow for moisture evaporation.

After the lavender essential oil has aerated, the Young Living oils are shipped with the results of the analysis to the Quality Assurance (QA) facility in the U.S. (Lehi, Utah), where further testing and bottling is done. After the testing is complete, the samples and batches are reviewed for either approval or rejection. The approved oil then goes through the batching and bottling process. Once bottled, samples will be pulled again and tested against the finished specification. The final product is now ready for distribution. A bottle of pure, unadulterated lavender essential oil.

A Labour of Love

Benoit is one of the farmers at the Young Living's Simiane-la-Rotonde Lavender Farm and Distillery in France. For more than 20 years, he has been a farmer working with lavender. At eight years old, he was already driving the tractor on the farm. The story of his family is rich and intensely intertwined with lavender: His great grandfather would hand cut wild lavender on the hillside of Provence and was one of the first to ever plant lavender. Distillers would pull small distillery chambers on horse-drawn carts to locations near water sources such as rivers and wells. Everything was done manually: cutting, loading the distiller and unloading the distilled plants.

When his father first started working with his grandfather, the lavender was cut entirely by hand. Those were long, gruelling days in the merciless sun, hand cutting the fields; but his father would often tell him that those trying moments were the best in his life. It was only after 1969 that they started having tractors and machines on the farm. During this time, distilleries were rather scarce. Farmers had to carry the lavender to faraway places to distil.

In the late 70s, Benoit's father, together with some of the growers of the village decided to make their own distillery. This distillery stood where the Young Living distillery stands today. During the planting season, the weather is often still very cold, as it is right after the winter. The days are long and freezing on the back of the tractor planting. Harvest days during the summer are a huge contrast, as it is very hot. Days start early; and harvesting takes place throughout the day and distillation happens late into the night. Despite the arduous labour and long hours, nothing can take away the joy that they derive from seeing the first drops of these precious oils. A labour of love.

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“After this my grandfather took over right before the wars. It was a hard time, but when the wars ended the perfume industry boomed and lavender started being more and more a part of the south of France and in Simiane-la-Rotonde,”

— Benoit

Farm to Table

In summer, passers-by of the tiny village of Lherm - in a hidden corner of the Lot department in France - will discover a lovely sea of indigo-blue with butterflies and bees hovering within the sweet, soothing smell of lavender. This lovely provincial farm belongs to couple, Ian and Suzie Dick. Ian and Suzie were inspired to grow lavender after a chance visit to Akaroa in New Zealand.

It was a 15-year odyssey of hard work and patience to learn about the practicalities of growing lavender, but their passion had been rewarded with 11 silver medals and a gold in an international lavender-oil competition. Visitors are treated to over 350 varieties of lavender at their farm. Ian and Suzie have always dreamt of producing the best quality, pure, essential lavender oil possible. This was achieved not by using tractors, chemicals or sprays in their lavender fields. Everything was done with their own hands – certainly a labour of passion.

About 20 different species of lavender are grown for their essential oils at the Lavande de Lherm farm. Despite the diminutive size of the farm, they grow more than 2500 plants which are all tended by hand. Lavender varieties cultivated on the farm can be divided into two main types: the first is called *Lavandula Angustifolia*, and the second is a hybrid called *Lavandula Intermedia*. *Lavandula Angustifolia* has a sweeter smell containing very little camphor and is often referred to as “culinary lavender”, which they use in their food products.

Suzie is the horticulturist and Ian is the alchemist. Together, they developed their own system of harvesting and distilling the lavender. For the

first two years, they cut the lavender with a sickle. The harvester cuts and blows the lavender into a large sack mounted on to a chariot. There are approximately 80 plants in each line, and one line fills a sack. The sack is unclipped and emptied immediately on to the floor of the distillery. The sack is full of very angry bees who all fly back to the field as soon it is emptied onto the floor. It is filled with 4 kilos of flowers, which must be harvested when dry, between 10am and 2pm. Ian normally does about 10 distillations a day for 5 weeks. The lavender is put in a container with a perforated base, which goes into a pressure cooker type pot that has steam passed through it under natural pressure. The steam extracts the oil which then flows into a glass separator where the oil floats on top of the water and is tapped off, leaving the lavender water which is also used for a myriad of things. Ian normally takes almost 20 minutes for each distillation as 80 percent of the oil is extracted within the first 10 minutes.

Ian and Suzie have on offer a plethora of gastronomical delights waiting for their visitors, such as lavender ice cream, *creme brûlée*, lavender cookies and honey, lemon and lavender roast chicken. They enjoy using lavender in their food as the flavour characteristics make lavender an excellent complement to many other flavours like the citrus in lemon, or other sweet flavours like honey or ordinary sugar. The farm is known specially for their delicious lavender biscuits, which are made in-house from scratch with the very same lavender from their farm. Guests from all over the world flock to this hidden gem of France for a peaceful respite from the concrete jungle and to take a slice of Provence home with them.

A soft-focus background of a vast lavender field under warm, golden light. In the lower-left foreground, a single lavender stem with several clusters of small purple flowers is in sharp focus, contrasting with the blurred background.

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“One of the things I’m the proudest of would be continuing my ancestors’ work, making the best quality oil possible, a noble product that is 100 percent pure and natural. I also love when people come to the farm and share their use of the oil. Seeing and hearing how the oils we make are used and loved is such a great feeling.”



The Soul of Provence

Provence. A place where hilltop villages collide with dramatic scenery and history is ingrained in its soul. A place to go for a languid drive through whimsical roads, to be immersed in fragrant foliage, or to explore the quaint cobbled lanes and advantageous views of its villages. It is a master artist's earthy toned palate, where fiery red canyons slice gloriously through a dark green forest. Where serrated hills meet impeccably preened vineyards, and golden stones form both ancient conical houses and modern-day mansions. The place's spiritual atmosphere is enhanced by the display of flowers, adding to the site's Provencal, countryside tranquillity and beauty.

For tourists as well as locals, lavender is more than just a plant. It is their identity. The ubiquitous Provence lavender fields which form the dramatic backdrop of the country is an integral contributor to the region's famed reputation across the globe and transcends all cultural boundaries. This plant, whose distinct scent both titillates and enchants the gastronomical world is the truly the soul of the real Provence.

Lavande de Lherm

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