

FARMER'S DIARY

BY ANDREA ABEL

PURPLE HAZE



Twenty miles east of Austin lies a bit of the Mediterranean in Central Texas—the two acres Randy Graybill calls Texas Lavender.

A recent visit to the farm found Randy transplanting over a thousand lavender plants, many started from

cuttings. Long rows marked by string and wooden stakes snaked across one end of the field, and subsequent rows showed larger plants, soon to have spikes topped with reddish-purple blooms.

“I’m going for a Texas-Tuscan kind of look,” said Graybill, a tan, lean man in well-worn work boots. In summer, his fields will turn into rolling palettes of purple blossoms, perfuming the air with the astringent scent of lavender.

Lavender farmer is anything but a typical job description, and Graybill wouldn’t have applied it to himself until recently. His story begins in late 2001, when the software company where he worked fell victim to the dot-com bust. Even before that, he’d had a powerful need to dig his hands into the earth.

Then he saw an article about Hill Country Lavender, signed up for one of the farm’s workshops, spent a day working on the

farm, and knew what he wanted to do.

Lavender is an ancient plant—its Latin name, *lavare*, means “to wash,” reflecting the ancient Roman use of lavender for bathing. The plant’s versatile buds are used as fragrances, medicines, moth-repellents and mild disinfectants—as well as flavoring for both sweets and savory dishes. A perennial, lavender likes full, hot sun and a dry climate, and the type of alkaline, fast-draining soil typically found in the Hill Country. Texas lavender farms have burst into production over the past decade. Blanco now calls itself the Lavender Capital of Texas, and more than a dozen farms now dot the arid Hill Country.

But Texas Lavender occupies a very different landscape—a patch of land where the Colorado River once deposited a deep layer of sandy soil. Graybill acquired his farm in a lucky confluence of events: first, his wife Christi encouraged him to pursue his dream, then his mother-in-law offered a wooded five-acre parcel near Webberville.

But the transition from cube-farm employee to dirt-farm owner happened in fits and starts, and it took three years before Graybill’s farm produced enough product to market. He continues to work a day job as a TSA screener at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, “which is totally different than my personality,” he says.

By 2005, Graybill had harvested enough French and Spanish lavenders to begin marketing dried buds and sachets, as well as homemade lotion, calming mist, bath salts, soap and lip balm, all made from lavender oil.

Saturdays find Randy or his sister-in-law, Amy Ingram, at the Texas Lavender booth at the Sunset Valley Farmers’ Market.

Find out more about Texas Lavender products, workshops, and future events at texaslavender.com.

ETHIOPIA continued from page 35

that has been described as “raw meat served warm,” and that sometimes sounds alarmingly strange to American eaters.

“We can prepare it slightly seared,” Aster smiles, “but last week the only customers who wanted it that way were an older Ethiopian couple.”

Coffee is another important part of Ethiopian food traditions—not surprisingly, as the country holds a credible claim to being its birthplace. A ceremony that begins with roasting green coffee beans invites each participant to inhale the scent of the beans before the coffee is ground. Once brewed in a clay pot called a *jebena*, the coffee is served with plenty of sugar in three successive cups, each serving progressively thicker.

Under less formal circumstances, contemporary Ethiopians gather many times a day for coffee and conversation. Aster has even considered offering takeout morning coffee in the back lot of the restaurant, along with Ethiopian breakfasts: eggs, a boiled cracked wheat cereal, or *sambusas*—baked or fried turnovers filled with beans, cheese, peppers, onions or tomatoes.

And there are more plans. Aster is eager to find a space to teach

cooking classes, as she likes to teach by “showing, not talking,” and her current kitchen is too small. “Cooking is what you learn from your mother,” she says. “But Kassaye is a good cook.”

“I learned from hanging around you in the kitchen,” her son tells her. “Now I cook when everybody gets together to watch a big game on TV.”

As the restaurant settles into its new location, the Kassayes plan to offer a takeout menu, the *awaze* sauce and *kulet* (a base for stews) she’s begun marketing, and Aster’s special spiced teas.

“My friends call my mother ‘The Chemist,’” Kassaye says, “because of her spice mixes and her spiced teas. And they call her ‘The Ambassador’ because most of her customers are Americans, not Ethiopians.”

Clearly, food isn’t the only thing Aster Kassaye has to share. She thinks of her various culinary projects not just as a means of promoting her country’s foods, but the country itself.

“Everybody hears ‘Africa’ and thinks poverty, starvation, disease,” she says, “but Ethiopia is more than that. It’s an ancient culture with beautiful places and things in it.”

Aster’s Ethiopian Restaurant

2804 North IH-35 • 512-469-5966

Tuesday–Sunday 11 a.m.–2.30 p.m. and 5–9 p.m.