



COOKING ON THE HILL

Cupcakes, Cookware & Curious Combinations



BY VARU CHILAKAMARRI

Sometimes the most unusual pairings are the most successful: Sonny and Cher, geckos and car insurance...lavender and cupcakes. Until recently, I'd never given lavender much thought, aside from it being a pleasant scent for laundry detergent. But an encounter with a lavender-frosted bergamot cupcake during a trip to New York City awakened me to lavender's other wonderful attributes. I didn't expect this flower's striking scent to be so appetizing atop a golden cake, but the combination was truly sublime. I set out to recreate the experience as soon as I returned home to DC.

For my first attempt to create lavender frosting, I boiled dried lavender in sugar syrup, but the technique failed to capture lavender's essence to my satisfaction. Inspiration struck a few days later, and I exclaimed to my husband, Mike, "A mortar and pestle! That's what I need for the frosting!"

Confused, Mike murmured, "A mortar and pestle? You're going to put basil in frosting?"

After recovering from my laughter, I explained, "No, a mortar and PESTLE! It's for grinding ingredients!" Mike gave me the same blank stare he gives whenever I'm explaining the latest plot points of "Grey's Anatomy." I took this as a sign of great interest and proceeded to fill him in on the many uses of a mortar and pestle. (I later learned from Wikipedia that the word "pestle" actually is derived from "pestle," but I decided not to share this information with Mike).

I thought we might try Frager's, our local hardware store, for the mortar and pestle. This pleased Mike, who thought we could pick up batteries and potting soil while there. Armed with a list that would have made for an intriguing MacGyver episode, we were on our way.

As we walked past the Hill's colorful row houses, dog-walkers and brunch-goers, I began to worry that Frager's might not have cooking supplies. My concern must have been apparent, because as we neared Frager's, Mike innocently asked, "So if a mortar and pestle is for cooking, why didn't we just go to Bed Bath and Beyond?" I shot him a look, and we walked the remaining block in silence.

We arrived at Frager's, near the corner of 11th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, during what must have been peak-shopping hours. The store was pretty crowded, but when a minor traffic jam formed in aisle seven between me, a store employee, and a father with a stroller and twins in tow, the good-natured employee thought nothing of simply hopping into the store window – alongside a floor-lamp display – to make room for the customers. To my relief, I quickly found an aisle devoted entirely to kitchen equipment. The selection was unexpectedly impressive: garlic presses, microplane graters, colanders, dishware and even milk frothers.

And there among the measuring spoons and melon ballers, I spotted a white porcelain mortar and pestle pair. I asked assistant manager Amity Jeanes about Frager's interesting selection, and she explained that Frager's had always had a houseware department, but only in the last few years has the store branched out to include more cookware so that people wouldn't have to leave the Hill for their kitchen needs.

I found Mike in the garden section, and we headed home. I immediately went to work on the cupcakes. Because I didn't have bergamot oil to flavor the batter, I decided to add some strongly brewed Earl Grey tea (which contains bergamot essence) instead. Still marveling at my own ingenuity, I realized that no matter how much I ground the lavender and sugar together in the mortar, small bits of little flowers stubbornly remained. Stray lavender buds would prove annoying in an otherwise smooth frosting. As I lamented over how I should have purchased a sifter along with my mortar and pestle, Mike silently grabbed his jacket and headed back to Frager's. He unknowingly returned with a strainer instead of a sifter, but it worked perfectly nonetheless.

The cupcakes were divine, and just as I polished off my third, Mike said, "Hey, you know, maybe the blender would have worked just as well as the mortar and pestle." I was taken aback, but then again, having already discovered an unusual herb-dessert combo and a hardware store with a gourmet twist, my own husband's unwitting expertise in the culinary arts should have come as no surprise. ■

Lavender Bergamot Cupcakes

1¼ cup all-purpose flour
1 cup of sugar
¾ teaspoon of baking powder
¾ teaspoon of baking soda
½ teaspoon of salt
1 egg, beaten
½ cup of milk
¼ cup of oil
2 earl grey tea bags
Paper cupcake liners (optional)

For the frosting:
3 tablespoons of dried lavender
½ cup of sugar
½ cup of powdered sugar
1 stick of butter,
at room temperature
red & blue food coloring
(optional)

1. Combine the first eight ingredients into a thick batter. Steep the tea bags in ½ a cup of hot water for about 4 minutes; then stir the water into the batter. Pour the batter into a cupcake-lined pan and bake for 25-30 minutes, or until the cupcakes are firm and pass the old "clean toothpick" test.

2. Using a blender (or a mortar and pestle), grind the lavender with ½ cup of sugar for about 3 minutes. Sift the sugar (twice if necessary to remove any stray bits of lavender). Combine the lavender-flavored sugar with ½ a cup of powdered sugar. Cream the sugar together with the butter, and if desired, add about 4 drops each of red and blue food coloring. Beat together with a fork until the lavender frosting is smooth and creamy.

3. When the cupcakes are thoroughly cooled, top with frosting and enjoy!



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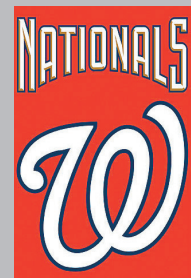
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