

## Bay (*Laurus nobilis*): Herb of the Year 2009 An Herb That Can Rest Upon its Laurels

by Susan Belsinger

The classical legend of bay's origin was Daphne's transformation into the laurel tree during her pursuit by Apollo. Versions vary; one infers that the nymph Daphne was a fiercely independent, rather wild creature and rather than give herself to Apollo, she pleaded with her father, the river god Ladonas, to transform her. Another account indicates that Apollo was wounded by an arrow of Eros (Cupid) and fell madly in love with Daphne, who fled from his advances and was changed into the slender bay laurel moments before her capture. All agree that Apollo was so astounded by the tree's beauty that he claimed the laurel as his own and dedicated it to reward the highest achievements of Greek civilization. Bay was first an herb of poets, but also of oracles, warriors, statesmen, and doctors. The leaves were made into wreaths for illustrious poets and the ancients used them to crown heroes.

Bay laurel was the symbol of wisdom, both acquired and intuitive. *Laurus nobilis* is believed to derive from the Celtic word *laur* meaning green and the Latin *nobilis* signifying noble. *Baccalaureate* is from the Latin for laurel berries, which were given to Greek students of the classical period. As bay is a narcotic and stimulant in large amounts, it was an important part of the Delphic rites. Apollo's priestesses chewed bay before prophesying. Later, even placing bay leaves beneath pillows was thought to bring prescient dreams.

Since bay was so strongly associated with the gods and people of high esteem, it gained the reputation of protecting against all manner of natural and manmade disasters. Sorcerers and poisoners could not harm the person who carried bay. It was believed that lightning would not strike where bay was planted. The Caesars appropriated bay as their special protector against accidents and conspiracies. Though not notably successful, its efficacy in this field was maintained even in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Witches and devils were supposedly rendered helpless by it.

The medicinal uses of the herb were always important; it was used as often as garlic to protect against epidemics. Considered an anti-rheumatic, it was drunk as a tea and used in baths. The Romans used bay leaves and berries for the treatment of liver disorders. Culpeper said that bay berries were "effectual against the poisons of all venomous creatures and the sting of wasps and bees." Oil from the berries was rubbed on sprains and used as eardrops.

The culinary history of bay has been constant and it is still an essential herb in the cuisines surrounding the Mediterranean. Strangely, though bay is likely of Mid-Eastern origin, there is no mention of it in records of Chinese cuisine. In those periods when people appreciated more and stronger herbal flavors, bay was commonly ground fine and sprinkled over fresh vegetables and cooked or marinated in fruit compotes. Now it is cooked with every variety of meat and most kinds of fish and shellfish. Bay leaves are in

the stuffings of or simply alongside many roasted fowl dishes. Its sweet balsamic aroma wafts from freshly baked breads, puddings and custards. It is essential to *bouquet garnis* for soups and stews, sauces and ragouts. I agree with Tom Stobart author of *Herbs, Spices and Flavorings* that “No kitchen should exist without bay leaves, and they should be used as a matter of habit.” and believe that bay adds depth and warmth to most kinds of sweets and savouries.

The major contribution of bay to foods is its fragrance, sweet but not cloying, pervasive but not overpowering. If you are fortunate enough to have walked through a forest with many bay trees, you will understand the almost incredible refreshing power of bay's scent. Its blend of balsam and honey, with hints of spice as in nutmeg and clove are predominant in the first inhale. These scents are followed by just a suggestion of citrus of orange and/or lemon sometimes followed by faint flowery tones described as vanilla or rose, and occasionally a hint of mint. I find the fragrance heady; these subtle combinations and other more ethereal echoes must be an ideal of master perfumers. The peak of bay's aroma is between three days and a week after it has been picked; this brief drying time concentrates the oils just enough. I keep freshly harvested bay leaves in a loosely-rolled unsealed zip-close bag, on the door of my refrigerator; they stay green for months this way and are far superior to dried leaves.

Although the taste is complex and aromatic, sometimes bay can be sharp, slightly peppery, or even a bit bitter. Most cooks use the whole leaves and remove them before serving, though traditionally the guest who had the leaf in his portion was due to receive some minor or major fortune. Crumbled or crushed bay leaves have very sharp edges; they should be enclosed in a bouquet garni bag, or something similar, so that unsuspecting eaters do not come across them. In general, the leaves should be added when the cooking begins. Aside from cooking with the leaves, for centuries bay leaves have been placed in foods from flour and meal, bean and grains to dried fruits, especially figs and raisins to deter insects and meal moths. Commercially dried bay should be bought carefully from a spice merchant as leaves can be old and fairly tasteless. Growing your own bay and using it fresh or drying it yourself is the way to go.

Picking bay in the wild is not recommended, as some commonly called bays or laurels are highly poisonous. California bay, *Umbellularia californica*, which I have picked when living in California, has an aroma much like *Laurus nobilis* but the taste is much more concentrated and bitter and should be used sparingly in cooking, if at all. Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*) and West Indian bay (*Pimento racemosa*) are highly toxic and should not be ingested.

Below are two recipes using the aromatics of bay in sweet recipes rather than savory.

## Herb Syrups

Herb syrups are wonderful flavor essences that can be added in place of the liquid in cakes, pie filling, and all type of baked goods. They are good on all kinds of fruits and fruit salads, used in beverages, and to make sorbets. Make these when you have fresh herbs in abundance, their flavor and aroma will bring a brightness to fruits and desserts. Although I have been making herbal infusions and syrups for over twenty years, I have expanded my repertoire since reading *The Herbfarm Cookbook* by Jerry Traunfeld, Scribner, 2000. This recipe is adapted from his Master Recipe for Herb-Infused Simple Syrup.

Makes about 2 cups

1 1/2 cups water

1 1/2 cups sugar

About 8 to 10 herb sprigs or a large handful of leaves

To make an herb syrup, combine the water and sugar in a small saucepan. Add the herb leaves and bruise them gently against the side of the pan with a spoon. Place over moderate heat and bring to a boil. Cover, remove from heat and let stand for at least 30 minutes. Remove the leaves and squeeze them into the syrup to extract their flavor. This syrup can be made ahead and refrigerated for about 10 days, or frozen for up to 6 months.

### Fresh Herbs, Flowers, and Spices to use for Syrups:

Amounts of fresh herb leaves, flowers, and seeds used will vary and depend upon the flavor of each individual herb, the list below is for sprigs about 4 or 5 inches long.

Anise hyssop—6 to 8 sprigs with flowers, or a handful of flowers

Basil—6 to 8 sprigs of anise, cinnamon, green, or lemon basil, flowers are good

Bay—10 to 12 leaves

Bergamot—6 to 8 sprigs, or handful of flowers

Gingerroot—5 or 6 thin slices of peeled root

Lavender—10 flower spikes or 1 tablespoon flowers

Lemon balm, lemon thyme, or lemon verbena—8 to 10 sprigs

Mint—10 to 12 sprigs of orange mint, peppermint, or spearmint

Rose—1 generous cup rose petals

Rosemary—5 or 6 sprigs

Sage—4 common sage sprigs; 6 fruit-scented or pineapple sage sprigs

Scented geraniums—12 to 15 leaves, or handful of flowers

Sweet Woodruff—1 generous cup small sprigs and/or flowers

Tarragon or Mexican tarragon—6 to 8 sprigs

Vanilla—1 bean, halved and split lengthwise

Violas—1 generous packed cup violets, Johnny-jump-ups, or pansy petals

## Rice Pudding with Bay

This is an ideal way to use leftover rice--either white or brown--if you cook your rice with salt, omit the salt in the recipe ingredients. This simple, low fat, rice pudding is made Mid-eastern style, simmered on the stove. It can be served warm right from the stove, at room temperature, or cold. If you refrigerate it, let it sit at room temperature for about 10 minutes before serving. It can be reheated gently on stovetop or in the microwave, covered, but you will probably need to add a little more milk.

Serves 4 to 6

2 1/2 to 3 cups whole, 2%, 1%-fat milk, or soymilk, just barely scalded with 3 bay leaves  
3 cups cooked rice

Pinch salt

1/2 cup cane sugar, turbinado or demerara sugar

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground nutmeg or mace

About 1 teaspoon freshly grated lemon zest

1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

Add the rice, salt, and sugar to the 2 1/2 cups milk in a heavy-bottomed saucepan. Bring to a simmer over medium heat. Reduce heat, add the nutmeg and cook, just barely simmering, stirring occasionally, for 20 minutes. Depending upon how much it cooks down, you may or may not need to add the remaining 1/2 cup milk. Cool a spoonful, taste for sugar, and adjust if necessary. Add the lemon zest and cook for 5 minutes more, until thick and bubbling.

Remove from heat and stir in vanilla. Spoon into individual ramekins or custard cups and serve, or cool and serve at room temperature or refrigerate.