

Purple Passion

STORY BY LINDA THOMPSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY THOMPSON

In July, lavender fields against the backdrop of the periwinkle Sandía Mountains become the pastoral playground that is the Lavender in the Village Festival, in Los Ranchos de Albuquerque

It's like stepping into a Paul Cézanne painting,

or a romantic movie about the Provence region of southern France. Neat rows of purple-and-green mounds recede toward an indistinct horizon; sweet-scented branches yield to the gentle *clip-clip* of the shears; and bending low, a longhaired feminine figure in silk gathers her fragrant harvest to her breast. Distant mountains loom and clouds billow in the blue overhead, while in the foreground a group of children eagerly pluck their own small bouquets. It's lavender-picking time.

If you can't make it to Provence this month, plan to attend the fifth annual **Lavender in the Village Festival, July 12-13, in the Village of Los Ranchos de Albuquerque**, just seven miles from downtown Albuquerque. Sometime around 1700, this farming village was established along the Río Grande. In recent years, as the city began pressing up against the village's outskirts, locals began looking for a crop that would keep their fields of wheat, chile, and corn out of the bulldozers' path for good. They sought something that would thrive at 5,000 feet and tolerate a dry climate, alkaline soil, hot summers, and fairly cold winters. The ideal plant would be people-friendly—nothing thorny or too high off the ground—and would not only entice visitors, but would give the community a common interest.

What about a healing plant, these dreamers asked themselves—something with a perfume that lures, rather than a medicinal scent? They imagined a crop that would inspire artists and craftspeople, chefs and bartenders, passionate interpretations of every kind—something old and rich in folklore. Amazingly, there was a plant that met all of these requirements: lavender.

Penny Rembe, co-owner of Los Poblanos Inn and La Quinta Cultural Center, on Río Grande Boulevard, was one of three women who decided to test the idea. "It started as an agricultural project," she says, "and the festival was formed to promote the awareness of Los Ranchos as a lavender-growing area. Each year, it has gotten bigger and incorporated more events, such as live music, different types of food, classes and lectures, and gradually we've brought into it the whole concept of organic gardening."

Los Poblanos is one of several festival venues along Fourth Street, Río Grande Boulevard, and Chavez Road. The main venue is Los Ranchos Village Hall (on Río Grande Boulevard), where a large barn and grassy field provide plenty of space for vendors offering a plethora of things lavender—and not. Antiques, ceramics, organic fruits and vegetables, weavings, jewelry, soaps and lotions, fine-art prints, hats, seeds and seedlings, sandwiches, and lavender-infused beverages are just a few of their offerings. A free shuttle transports visitors from site to site, and this year, says Rembe, the number of shuttles will be doubled. Within easy walking distance are wineries, antique shops, and cafés.

Rembe, who has been involved with Lavender in the Village since its inception, is excited about some of this year's new features. "For the first time, we'll have a lavender baking competition with celebrity judges," she says. "And for children, we're going to have a bubble farm at Los Poblanos—a big vat creating bubbles that kids can chase all over. We're having our first-ever barn dance on Friday, July 11. But I'm most excited about a new activity for kids and grown-ups alike—a fairy garden mystery tour.

"This year, we especially want to help children discover the natural environment. Children need to connect with nature while they're young, or protecting the environment won't mean anything to them



A TASTE OF THE FESTIVAL

Los Poblanos Lavender Mexican Wedding Cookies

Los Poblanos Inn, a major festival venue, serves these rich cookies when they hold weddings on the grounds. Begin by making Lavender Sugar three days beforehand.

Lavender Sugar

1 tablespoon dried culinary lavender
2 cups granulated sugar

In spice grinder, pulse lavender with 1 tablespoon sugar until finely ground. Transfer to bowl and stir in remaining sugar. Store in tightly covered jar for at least three days before using.

2 teaspoons vanilla extract
powdered sugar for dusting

Pulse pecans and Lavender Sugar in food processor to make a fine nut meal. In separate bowl, combine nut mixture with sifted flour and salt. In larger bowl, cream together butter, $\frac{3}{4}$ cup powdered sugar, and vanilla. Blend in nut mixture until dough is uniform in texture. Wrap dough in plastic wrap and store until ready to use. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Form dough into 2- to 3-ounce balls ($\frac{1}{4}$ cup or less). Bake for 20 minutes, or until cookies are firm to the touch and golden-brown. While cookies are still warm, roll them in extra powdered sugar and serve.

Cookies

1 cup pecans
3 tablespoons Lavender Sugar (made in advance; see recipe above)
4 cups all-purpose flour (sift before measuring)
 $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt
 $3\frac{1}{2}$ sticks butter, softened
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup powdered sugar

Makes three dozen cookies.



Take Your Pick: Guests harvest their own lavender at the festival.



Shop for locally made lavender products and other goodies at the festival.

when they're grown. We thought we could start by hiding fairy gardens—little houses made out of twigs and berries—around the formal gardens at Los Poblanos. How could anyone resist?"

A master gardener, Ann Haile, has worked with experts on fairy folklore to add an authentic note to these creations. Aided by volunteers, she will lead tours aimed at sparking children's interest in nature, as well as providing delightful fun for everyone.

For adults, says Rembe, there are hour-long tours of the inn and cultural center. The property dates from 1790 and is on the New Mexico and National Register of Historic Places. The newer buildings were designed in the 1930s by architect John Gaw Meem, dubbed the father of Santa Fe Style. In those days, the property was owned by Albert and Ruth Simms, who both served in the U.S. Congress. The estate also showcases woodcuts and carvings by Gustave Baumann, decorative ironwork by Walter Gilbert, tinwork and decorative lighting by Robert Woodman, photographs by Laura Gilpin, landscaping by Rose Greely, and works by artists Larry Miller and Paul Valentine Lantz.

The festival features demonstrations of lavender distillation and aromatherapy, lectures, cooking and cultivation classes,



Amidst the purple haze, guests also enjoy live music, cold lavender sangria, and aromatherapy demonstrations.

WHERE TO STAY

Adobe Garden at Los Ranchos
641 Chavez Rd. NW, Albuquerque 87107
(505) 345-1954
www.adobegarden.com

Casita Chamisa Bed & Breakfast
850 Chamisal Rd. NW, Albuquerque 87107
(505) 897-4644
www.casitachamisa.com

Cinnamon Morning Bed & Breakfast
2700 Río Grande Blvd. NW, Albuquerque 87104
(800) 214-9481, (505) 345-3541
www.cinnamonmorning.com

Los Poblanos Inn and La Quinta Cultural Center
4803 Río Grande Blvd. NW, Albuquerque 87107
(866) 344-9297, (505) 344-9297
www.lospoblanos.com

Sarabande Bed & Breakfast
5637 Río Grande Blvd. NW, Albuquerque 87107
(888) 506-4923, (505) 345-4923
www.sarabandebb.com



Better than Easter Eggs: Kids can scavenge for Fairy Gardens like these on the grounds of Los Poblanos Inn and La Quinta Cultural Center.

live music, and, of course, shopping and eating. But by far the main attraction is standing knee-deep in a field of lavender, gathering armloads of scented stalks. "That's what everyone comes to do," says committee member Janelle Dry. "Whether they come from near or far, people want to get into the fields and pick."

Probably originating in Mesopotamia, lavender spread across Europe from Greece. Ancient Romans recognized its antiseptic qualities, and washed themselves and their clothing with it. Ladies have traditionally slept on lavender pillows to invite romance, and placed lavender under the bridal bed to guarantee passion. Since Victorian times, lavender wands placed in dresser drawers and wardrobes have scented clothing and repelled moths. Early Spanish settlers brought lavender to New Mexico in the early 1600s for use in teas, poultices, and medicines for insomnia, hay fever, and asthma. Today's herbalists still favor it for many of the same conditions.

Lavender comes in more than 15 species and hundreds of varieties, which range in color from deep purple to light

pink and even white. The most popular species is *Lavandula angustifolia*, or English lavender; only it and *Lavandins (Lavandula intermedia)* are recommended for use in cooking.

The Lavender in the Village Festival is a joint effort of Los Poblanos Inn, Casa Rondeña Winery, Los Ranchos Growers' Market, Los Ranchos Chamber of Commerce, and the Village of Los Ranchos. Expect to return home laden with one or more of the following lavender-infused item: jellies, cookies, candies, culinary herbs, teas, honey, soaps, shampoos, bath oils and salts, lotions, salves, perfumes, sachets, potpourri, candles, wreaths, wine, incense, smudge sticks, greeting cards, and furniture polish—perhaps even a lavender-scented dog collar. So unless you simply must visit Cézanne's family home in Aix-en-Provence this year, save your money and indulge your passion for lavender right here in New Mexico. 

Linda and Terry Thompson are featured in "Storytellers" on page 6.

GETTING AROUND

Los Ranchos de Albuquerque is a small village; once you've arrived, it's easy to find the Village Hall, Los Poblanos Inn, and the shuttle stop along its main drag, Río Grande Boulevard. Free shuttles leave every 15 minutes, 8 a.m.–5 p.m., both days, and stop at Los Poblanos Inn, the Village Hall, the Anderson Valley Vineyard, Casa Rondeña Winery, and several stops in between. For last-minute details: www.lavenderinthevillage.com, www.villr.com/lavender.htm.