

# Herbs Make Scents

THE HERB SOCIETY OF AMERICA  
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SOUTH TEXAS UNIT  
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## February 2019 Calendar

Feb 12, Tues. at 10 a.m.

**Day Meeting** is at the home of **Tamara Gruber**. The program, “*Salvia greggii – Hot Lips*,” is presented by **Cathy Livingston**. **Members should bring a dish to share**. Guests should RSVP to Tamara at 713-665-0675

Feb 20, Wed. at 6:30 p.m.

**Evening Meeting** is at the Cherie Flores Garden Pavilion in Hermann Park (1500 Hermann Drive, Houston, TX 77004). **Hosts** are **Jenna Wallace, Mike Jensvold, and Virginia Camerlo**. The program, “*Molcajetes and Metates*,” is presented by **Jesus Medel, M.Ed.**, founder of Museo Guadalupe Aztlan. **Bring your plate and napkin and a dish to share.**

## March 2019 Calendar

Mar 12, Tues. at 10 a.m.

**Day Meeting** is at the home of **Janice Stuff**. The program, “*Blue Blooming Salvias*,” is presented by **Janice Dana**. **Members should bring a dish to share**. Guests should RSVP to Janice Stuff at [jestuff@pdq.net](mailto:jestuff@pdq.net)

Mar 19, Tues. at 7 p.m.

**Board Meeting** is at the home of **Donna Yanowski**

Mar 20, Wed. at 6:30 p.m.  
**(Note: Change of Location)**

**Evening Meeting** is at the Clubhouse in Hermann Park (6201 Hermann Park Drive, Houston, TX 77030). Parking Lot H. **Hosts** are **Mary Sacilowski, Palma Sales**. The program, “*Healing Teas from the Wild Side*,” is presented by **Mark “Merriwether” Vorderbruggen, PhD**, author of *Foraging* and creator of “Foraging Texas”. **Bring your plate and napkin and a dish to share.**

**Newsletter deadline: the 25<sup>th</sup> of every month**



2/13

Maria Treviño

Happy  
Valentines  
Day

A decorative graphic for Valentine's Day. The words “Happy Valentines Day” are written in a colorful, cursive font. The text is surrounded by several red hearts of different sizes and a decorative ribbon that forms a heart shape at the bottom right.

Members – If you would like to have your birthday remembered, and haven't seen it announced, send me an email.  
[janicehfreeman@comcast.net](mailto:janicehfreeman@comcast.net)



## Chairman's Corner

### Greetings from the Gardens!

Those would be my back yard garden, the teaching beds at Blossom Heights Child Development Center (where I play/work some), the new Plant It Forward large garden at Blossom Heights CDC, the Centennial Gardens at Hermann Park (where our bench resides) and the Japanese Garden (where I volunteer most Thursday mornings) just to mention a few. To my eyes, this is the most beautiful and green winter in a while.

Our 36<sup>th</sup> annual Herb Day committees are filling up and I would like to thank **Dena Yanowski** for stepping up to chair the Food, and all the trimmings. **Karen Cottingham** is developing the program, "*Herbs from South of the Border*," finding speakers and presenters as she does so well for our evening meetings. The duo of **Maria Treviño and Catherine O'Brien** will pull together the Public Relations/Advertising portion of the event. **Janet Ruffin** offered to coordinate the materials to be printed for the program booklet, which we collate during set up the Friday before. **Lois Jean Howard** and **Julie Fordes** will work with HSA member crafters and artists to create merchandise to sell in the Herbal Market Place. I would still welcome a few more Chair positions ie: Set up/Take down (to include trips to the storage facility- St. Paul's staff moves tables/chairs), Decorations and Door Prizes. There will be ways for everyone to contribute.

We also have the dates locked in for 2019 Herb Fair at the Judson Robinson Community Center, again. Friday, November 1 is set up and the Fair will be Saturday, November 2.

*"If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need."* -unknown

**Donna Yanowski**  
Unit Chair





What's Happening in our Unit!

Back to our Roots - February

Julie Fordes

Several of us met to begin developing a method to get more of people growing and harvesting herbs which can be used in our products. Our goal is to have articles in our newsletters, and I will develop other channels of communication as time goes on. Educating ourselves about the "use and delight" of herbs is part and parcel of being an Herb Society member.

There are many educational resources that are available to us. My current favorite is the national HSA website, which has detailed information on many herbs and is available to the general public. Members can log in with their email and the password HSA1933 to access additional material. There are Quick Fact sheets and also more in-depth profiles of herbs here.

Here are a few things that you can get going in February:



Calendula:

Bedding plants are available in nurseries now. Plant them in full sun. Harvest and dry the petals in their prime for use in teas,

salves and other skin preparations. These won't be ready for a while, so stay tuned for how to dry these lovelies.



Red-Stemmed Apple Mint:

Our unit has used this mint in its Texas Herb Tea for years. Here is why it's so special: This variety, originally from Asia, is among those

deemed "Promising Plants" by the Herb Society of America. With the chemistry of both peppermint

and spearmint, it is sometimes known as "Double Mint." It is extremely flavorful and versatile in the kitchen. It's the mint of choice in Vietnamese cuisine. It is now renamed, Doublemint Madalene Hill, *Mentha x gracilis 'Madalene Hill'*, after Madalene, because of her work to broaden the cultivation and use of this wonderful culinary mint. This can be planted now, away from all other mints because it will cross-pollinate. (Ask Lois Jean what happens then!) It may look like it's not doing anything for a while, but once the weather is more consistently warm it will perk up according to long-time grower Beth Murphy.

Here is my request: If you currently have red-stemmed apple mint, PLEASE divide and repot part of your plant and bring it to the February meeting to share with new growers.

Second Request: If you still have lemons, please process the zest by grating the clean rind with a cheese grater and dehydrate it. We want to use it for teas and spice blends. If you would like me to do it, call me (832-969-8349)

Finally, thanks to Catherine O'Brien and crew for harvesting ONE POUND of dried orange zest. We look forward to using this wonderful, sunny-smelling treat in teas and blends.



For Herb Day! Help needed -Set up/take down -Decorations -Door Prizes Contact Donna Yanowski at 713-524-3542 or donnayanowski@gmail.com



## What's Coming Up Next?

### THE SAME OLD GRIND? WHY STONE AGE KITCHEN TOOLS ARE SOMETIMES BETTER

Karen Cottingham



#### ***Molcajete and Tejolote, the Mesoamerican mortar and pestle***

The next time you're in the mood to make a flavorful spice rub or a fresh guacamole, pesto, or salsa, consider your options:

You can always pull out that shiny food processor with all the bells and whistles - just plug it in, listen to it whirr, and watch as the blades slice everything into little pieces.

Or you can reach for a rustic three-legged bowl carved from volcanic stone. Fill it with your ingredients; and with another stone held firmly in your hand pound, bash, smash, and grind away.

If your priority is to "get it on the table quickly", by all means use the food processor. In about two minutes, you will have a serviceable result.

But if you are craving a feast for all of the senses, nothing quite compares to the tactile, visual, olfactory and even auditory experience of grinding food by hand. And when food is prepared with stone tools designed thousands of years ago, the taste is truly exceptional.

Even if you've never thought about grinding your own corn or cacao, I think you will be fascinated by our February 20, 2019 program, ***Molcajetes and Metates***. Our speaker, **Jesus Cantú Medel**, M.Ed., is Professor of Mexican American Studies at Houston Community

College, the Executive Director of the Museo Guadalupe Aztlan, and an expert in Mesoamerican culture and artifacts. In addition to presenting the educational program, Professor Medel will bring a display of ancient food preparation implements from the Museo for all those interested in culinary and material history.

Preparing food with stone implements is a direct way for serious cooks - those who are truly engaged in the "craft" of meal preparation - to connect with traditional culinary techniques.

If you want to try your own hand at grinding herbs and spices the "Stone Age" way, we will have *molcajetes* (mohl-kah-HEH-tehs) and *tejolotes* (teh-hoh-LOH-tehs) available at each table.

Grinding ingredients with a *molcajete* and *tejolote* requires some skill and endurance, but the exquisite flavors and aromas that are released make it well worth the effort.

These Mesoamerican versions of mortars and pestles have been used for millennia to grind foods like pumpkin seeds, tomatoes, tomatillos, and avocados, as well as herbs and spices such as chiles, garlic, and cinnamon. Foods traditionally prepared in a *molcajete* are the familiar *salsas*, *moles* (mohl-LAYS), and *guacamole*.



***Molcajetes with salsa ingredients***



If the idea of grinding food with stones makes you think the apocalypse has come, consider this: industrial-sized grinding stones produce the finest gourmet mustards, grits, and specialty flours available. In an ordinary grocery store, we have a huge selection of breads, crackers, and tortillas made with stone-ground grains. We can even splurge on pricy stone-ground coconut butter, coffee, nut butters, and artisanal chocolate.

So why not have our own stone food grinders at home?

Just visit a modern Latino market or a trendy store offering high-end cookware and you will find a variety of stone grinding tools for the modern kitchen. If you are really lucky, you might even have a priceless heirloom that has been passed down from *abuelita* to *hija*.

Amazingly, there have been almost no changes from the centuries-old original design.

Modern *molcajetes* are carved by skilled craftsmen out of a single block of vesicular basalt, just as they were when indigenous peoples were first settling down in agricultural communities. Six-thousand-year-old *molcajetes* from Tehuacán valley tombs are nearly identical to what a waiter might use to serve guacamole in a contemporary Mexican restaurant.



**Guacamole served in a Molcajete**

*Metates* (me-TAH-tes), like the one pictured below, are much older than molcajetes. Thousands of years before the development of agriculture, hunter-gatherers used rounded pebbles to grind roots, nuts, leaves and seeds against flat stones to make them edible. The

upper stone, called a *mano*, could be small enough to be held in one hand for twisting and grinding or larger and meant to be rolled by both hands.

The lower, flat stone, the *metate*, was sometimes light enough to be portable, but was frequently too large to move. In some areas, it was even part of the actual bedrock.



**A boulder-sized primitive Metate with Mano**

As indigenous peoples transitioned from hunting and gathering to planting seeds, their main source of nourishment became the newly domesticated precursors to modern corn. The survival of Mesoamericans as agriculturalists depended so much on *metates* to grind the hard kernels of corn into nutritious, useable flour, that archaeologist and *metate* expert **Michael Searcy** calls them “the life giving stones”.

The basic design, in use even today, evolved into a rectangular slab, usually of volcanic stone, which was raised from the earth or floor on three short legs.

The slab was set at a slight incline to facilitate the efficient grinding of corn. Women knelt on the ground, pushing their *manos* back and forth like rolling pins for so many hours each day that concave depressions developed on the work surface of the stone slab.

This backbreaking work by women at their *metates* was necessary to keep their families alive.



**Early *Metate* and *Mano* (hand-piece) used to grind corn**

*Metates* and *manos* were also used to grind other grains such as amaranth, as well as cacao beans, sunflower seeds, *chile* peppers and other herbs and spices. Even the fruits of cactus were pounded for consumption on these crude implements.

So important were the *metates* that they are at the heart of Mexico's cultural as well as culinary traditions.

In some Zapotec villages, for example, where there is still a complex system of gift-giving, a *metate* is an obligatory gift for the confirmation godparents to give to their goddaughter for her wedding day. The *metate* is given with the admonition not to sit on it lest one be "cursed" with only being able to have daughters.

*Metates* are still used today by those who prefer the old ways of doing things, like this woman preparing corn tortillas:



**Preparing corn tortillas the old-fashioned way**

Those interested in the artisanal or ritual production of traditional indigenous foods also use traditional *metates* for more authenticity:



**Grinding cacao for artisanal chocolate at Xcaret, Yucatán Peninsula**

The traditional Mesoamerican processing of cacao - roasting the whole beans on earthenware *comal* and then grinding them to a paste on a stone *metate* - results in a product said to be more earthy, smoky, and spicy than the chocolate we are accustomed to. And even though the texture of this stone ground chocolate is coarse and grainy, this ancient preparation technique reveals vibrant and intense flavor dimensions otherwise hidden within the bean.

This brings us to The Big Question: Why would ancient implements out-perform modern kitchen technology in extracting the most robust flavors from foods?

First, let's see what the experts say about mortars and pestles in general:

**Susan Belsinger** is a well-known culinary herbalist whose articles and photographs have been published in many national magazines and newspapers. Belsinger owns nearly 50 mortar and pestle pairings and even travels with her favorites packed in her suitcase.

In an interview for *The Chicago Tribune* Belsinger commented, "There is a resurgence of people who are using the mortar and pestle because they want to be in touch with their food."



According to Belsinger, spices and foods broken down by a mortar and pestle are completely different than ingredients pulsed in a food processor.

"When you use a mortar and pestle, you are releasing essential oils," she said. "For example, you can really taste the basil, the pine nuts, and the garlic in a pesto made in a mortar and pestle."

**Dorie Greenspan**, author of 13 cookbooks and the recipient of five James Beard awards, made the following comments for the radio show, *The Splendid Table*:

With ingredients like garlic and basil, you don't get the bitterness that you might get. The color stays better I think as well. I think things do taste fresher. It's the texture as well -- it's not as uniform and that's really, really nice.

And **Daniel Gritzer**, Culinary Director of the food blog *Serious Eats*, says the mortar and pestle deserves to be an essential tool in every kitchen:

Not just because it served our ancestors so well, but because it continues to do what no other item in the kitchen does: smashing fibers and cells apart to fundamentally transform their texture and release their full aroma and flavor. That's something a blade can't ever do as well.

So, what's so special about a *molcajete/tejolote* or *metate/mano* compared to other mortars and pestles? The answer lies in the traditional material used - vesicular basalt.



**Coarse holes in vesicular basalt**

Basalt is an igneous rock created through volcanism. As magma rises to the earth's surface and cools, gas bubbles become trapped and form holes in the lava rock. These holes, it turns out, are extremely useful when grinding typical Mesoamerican foods.

Basalt's coarse surface is perfect for crushing and shearing, which, in contrast to merely cutting, releases more of the essential flavors and oils trapped within the plant cells. The action of repeatedly pushing foods and spices over the rough bottom of a *molcajete* or *metate* breaks down their tough fibers and cell structures. The more thoroughly the plant cells are broken down, the more vibrant and full-bodied is the taste.

Modern kitchen appliances mince and chop in a jiffy, but when it comes to flavor and aroma, chopping is not the same as grinding. Chopping, either with a knife or in a food processor, only opens the cells that are actually cut; whereas grinding, especially with stones, disrupts all of the cells and thus releases all of the flavorful contents.

And while the blender or food processor produce fast results, the heat generated from the whirling blades causes damage that can degrade flavor and destroy vibrant colors.

So, to create the best possible flavor, aroma, texture, and appearance, a food processor simply cannot compete with an old fashioned hand-operated mortar and pestle, preferably one made of stone.

Gritzer is convinced of the superiority of the mortar and pestle:

Even if you already have a food processor, you still want to invest in a mortar and pestle. Why? First of all, you have more control — pesto and other sauces can remain looser and slightly rustic instead of being blitzed into a homogenous paste, so each bite is more dynamic. Secondly, the mortar and pestle can actually coax out more essential oils and flavors from your ingredients by evenly crushing the cell walls, without developing the bitterness that comes from food processors and blenders, which rely on blades to speedily chop and slice into your ingredients. Third? It's just fun to use! Using a mortar and pestle really lets you get a feel for your food, and helps you immerse yourself in every recipe.



And **Kate Angus** makes the following perceptive observations about these iconic culinary tools in her essay for The Atlantic, *Ten Thousand Years of the Mortar and Pestle*:

In part, the mortar and pestle remain timeless because their design still works, but their appeal in the kitchen extends beyond usefulness and into ritual. Modern kitchens are stocked with gleaming machines, ready at the press of a button to shred fresh herbs or to systematically churn seeds into dust. But by applying muscle to transform ingredients into paste or powder, the mortar and pestle help the cook form a bond with his or her food. These two tools on the shelf, inseparable partners, promise work, intimacy, and an elegant testament to the staying power of simple things.

Heirloom *molcajetes* and *metates* are prized kitchen tools enriched with each generation of use, but it is not too late to start your own tradition. Come to the **February 20, 2019** program, *Metates and Molcajetes*, and find out why stone implements of ancient design deserve a place in your kitchen.

The **South Texas Unit of The Herb Society of America** is dedicated to sharing "The Use and Delight of Herbs" and welcomes all interested guests to our meetings. There is no charge to attend.

We meet in the **Cherie Flores Garden Pavilion**, 1500 Hermann Drive, where it T-intersects with Crawford Street. There is free parking adjacent to the Pavilion. Members gather at 6:15 pm, and the public is welcome to join us at 7:15 to enjoy the program.



### An umbrella with a "peacock tail" design

was left at the Cherie Flores Garden Pavilion after the January meeting.

Please come to the February meeting or contact **Karen Cottingham** at

[karen.redbrick@gmail.com](mailto:karen.redbrick@gmail.com)





# Save the Date for Herb Day

A full day of education, information, shopping  
and lunch!

*Herbs From South of the Border*

Saturday, April 27

St. Paul's United Methodist Church

