In the early 1960s Folgers was trying to convince American women they had a choice: buy Folgers instant coffee or risk losing their husband. Georgia O’Keeffe opted for “none of the above.” In the early 1960s Miss O’Keeffe, instead, chose to walk the New Mexican hills with her two dogs, grow an unruly paradise of a garden, and create some of the best American art of the twentieth century.

O’Keeffe kept on ignoring Madison Avenue’s plans for her throughout the rest of her long life. She just kept on painting. She also kept on grinding her own flour, baking her own bread, making her own yogurt from local sheep’s milk, and living in
her unique, independent, fiercely feisty way until just shy of her ninety-ninth birthday.

One of the most nurturing and enduring inspirations I have ever come across has been the day-to-day life of Georgia O’Keeffe. Reading various O’Keeffe biographies, perusing her letters to friends, watching video interviews of her, or viewing photos of her throughout her life never ceases to inspire me. I see O’Keeffe as having been a grounded sage of sorts, who had turned her share of personal suffering into wisdom, and whose steadying anchor in the stormy sea of life was the land.

For O’Keeffe was a natural gardener. Much of her contentment, outside of art-making, stemmed from observing nature and growing and preparing food from her own bit of earth in New Mexico. Come with me on a short walk through the garden and kitchen of one of America’s favorite painters.

The Surprise to Be Found at O’Keeffe’s Home and Studio

A few years back I took a pilgrimage to O’Keeffe’s home and studio in Abiquiu, New Mexico. It was not surprising that her sparsely furnished, clay-walled home had the same stark look that her paintings have. What was surprising was the whimsy and lush beauty of O’Keeffe’s garden. Black, branchy tree shadows draped over coral-beige enclosing adobe walls. Buzzing bees navigated through the plum, apple, and apricot trees. Sagebrush, Russian olive, and greasewood trees graced the eastern rooms of the house where O’Keeffe’s sister, Claudia, often stayed (Lynes/Lopez, 216).

I felt enchanted by the property’s many whispering tamarisks. I imagined how the place would feel after a rainstorm
with all the irrigation channels open to create paths of gurgling waterways. The most memorable sound for me was the billowy rustle and percussive pop of clean, white sheets still set out to dry on O’Keeffe’s windy clothesline just west of the north garden. This lucky clothesline was nestled between sweeping willow trees and fragrant lilacs. In the north garden itself, O’Keeffe’s inky green junipers curved round in bonsai waves against the turquoise sky.

At this point in my walk through the property it dawned on me that O’Keeffe did not just make a garden here; she created what the ancient Greeks referred to as a temenos. A temenos is a sanctuary, a bit of land spared from urban use. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung later defined a temenos as a purposefully created, bounded place where one’s most important work is encouraged to come to fruition. O’Keeffe made a clay-walled temenos at Abiquiú, a place where she grew and refined her thought process in the midst of her wondrous garden. Maybe we can all do this. We all have our own unique brand of genius. Perhaps all our gardens are the seeds with which we each can begin our own temenos. And we can start with an herb garden.

**O’Keeffe Loved Herbs**

O’Keeffe adored herbs. She enjoyed the unique flavor herbs imparted to her meals. The artist also honored herbs for their sensual appeal. She appreciated the beauty of their physical forms, their tactile allure, and their varying enticing aromas.

Margaret Wood, one of O’Keeffe’s live-in cooks/assistants in her later years, describes the introduction she got from O’Keeffe to the herbal kingdom, “Miss O’Keeffe acquainted me with wiry tarragon, feathery dill, stalky lovage, bushy...
green and purple basil, and other herbs” (Wood, 1). O’Keeffe’s unruly herb garden also gave forth sorrel, summer savory, chives, tarragon, parsley, marjoram, and many mints (Wood, xiv). But O’Keeffe’s herbs were not grown just for pleasure. Like everyone and everything connected to her home, they had their work to do.

O’Keeffe was well aware of the restorative properties of herbs and their abilities to make a significant contribution to overall wellness. She was a health nut, and she was amazingly strong, radiant, and active. She was still rafting the Colorado River and camping in the wilderness in her late seventies. The artist was an early adopter of the teachings of exercise and bodywork pioneer Ida Rolf. O’Keeffe was also personal friends with the rebellious biochemist, nutritionist, and author Adele Davis. Nutrition had a lot to do with O’Keeffe’s vim and vigor. Salad was on the menu daily for lunch, and though O’Keeffe’s cooks often prepared meals, Georgia herself usually made the daily lunch salads with freshly picked lettuce, herbs, and vegetables (Wood, 1).

O’Keeffe Was a Foodie, a Slow Foodie
Like most successful artists, O’Keeffe had a fierce and fast work ethic. But when she was not working, she understood the pleasure and meditative importance of life in the slow lane. One of her favorite books was the 1906 classic The Book of Tea by Okakura Kakuzo, which lyrically describes the Japanese tea ceremony, the merits of simplicity, and the philosophy underpinning tea (Udall, 220). O’Keeffe enjoyed taking tea daily, often favoring a spearmint tisane plucked fresh from the garden and slowly served from her modest, yet comely, Japanese teapot.
Inside O’Keeffe’s Kitchen

O’Keeffe’s recipes, like her teapot, were not meant to impress; they were no-nonsense and good for you. However, that did not mean food from her kitchen was bland or put together in a slapdash fashion. Celebrity chef and author Deborah Madison has been quoted as saying the following about O’Keeffe’s ostensibly overly simple recipes, “It looks as if there’s nothing special going on with the recipes, but read between the lines and everything that promises deep goodness is there, mainly the fruits of the garden translated with a sure hand into, say, a salad of torn herbs or a soup scented with lovage” (Wood, ix).

Why not peruse one of O’Keeffe’s personal recipes written by Margaret Wood and decide for yourself?

O’Keeffe’s Herb Salad Dressing

From A Painter’s Kitchen: Recipes from the Kitchen of Georgia O’Keeffe, courtesy of The Museum of New Mexico Press, 2009© by Margaret Wood.

2 teaspoons herbs: lovage, tarragon, dill, basil, parsley
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 tablespoons safflower oil or other high quality vegetable oil
1 teaspoon lemon juice, or more to taste
¼ teaspoon whole seed mustard
2 garlic cloves
Herb salt, to taste
Freshly ground pepper, to taste
Pinch of sugar (optional)
Chives, as garnish
Wash the herbs and pat them dry. Then chop all herbs medium fine, except the chives. Blend the olive oil and safflower oils with a fork, add the lemon juice and mustard. Squeeze one medium garlic clove through a garlic press and add it to the liquid. Then add the chopped herbs to the dressing. Add herb salt and freshly ground pepper to taste. Add a pinch of sugar if the mixture is too sour. Allow this dressing to stand for an hour, if possible, so that the herb and garlic flavors can permeate the dressing. This quantity will dress a salad for 4 to 6 people.

Before serving the salad, rub a wooden bowl with a garlic clove split in half. Add the lettuce to the bowl. Pour the dressing over the lettuce and toss the salad. Chop the chives into ¼-inch pieces and sprinkle them on top.

Note: There are quite a number of herbs included in this dressing. For practicality, use the herbs available or preferred. Sliced or quartered sweet cherry tomatoes, thinly sliced small radishes, or chopped and seeded cucumbers are possible additions to this salad. In the salad dressing, a variation for the lemon juice is balsamic vinegar; the vinegar lends a rich, slightly sweet taste to the dressing.

People get weirdly enthusiastic about salad when it has a homemade herbal dressing like this on it. Maybe it’s the unique taste imparted by unusual ingredients like lovage. Why does lovage keep cropping up in an American kitchen in the southwest?

Lovage: O’Keeffe’s Favorite Herb
The answer is because O’Keeffe loved lovage; it was her favorite herb. She had this in common with the medieval emperor
Charlemagne. He was so enamored with the look and taste of lovage that he commanded all his estate gardens overflow with it. However, lovage was not just a favorite with the royals. Lovage was a staple in the healing gardens of monks and very popular amongst the common folk, as it was a vital ingredient in love potions. In fact, lovage used to be commonly known as “love root.”

Etymologically, lovage was derived from two words: love and ache (ache being a medieval word for parsley). So technically, lovage is the parsley of love. For the last few centuries, though, lovage’s popularity has wilted, and with occasional exceptions, it has languished on the sidelines of herbal history. O’Keeffe paid popular sentiment no mind and enjoyed lovage anyway. And so should you. Here are six ways to delight in that certain je-ne-sais-quoi nuance lovage can offer.

Six Sumptuous Ways to Love Lovage in Your Kitchen

Roast It in a Chicken
Gail Monaghan of the Wall Street Journal recommends that cooks “Tuck a sprig or two inside a whole chicken or fish before roasting, and you’ll be rewarded with intriguing, je-ne-sais-quoi nuances; guests will be racking their brains to decipher the delicious enigma.” (Monaghan)

Candy It
You can candy thick lovage stems to decorate a cake top or enhance homemade biscotti. Use them in a dish as you would use candied fruit pieces or the candied stems of angelica (lovage’s botanical cousin).
Pretend It’s Bok Choy
Lovage stems can be simply steamed and eaten with a splash of balsamic vinegar. Personally, I prefer to douse my steamed greens with soy sauce or a bit of Braggs Liquid Aminos™… delicious and healthy.

Make Soup
As we saw earlier, O’Keeffe added lovage to salad dressing and used it for salad greens, but the craftiest way she deployed lovage was in her soups. Lovage was actually the star ingredient that could make ordinary tomato soup, in O’Keeffe’s words, into something, “quite special.” (Wood, 20).

Pretend It’s Fennel
Lovage’s root can be chopped, grated, or shaved like fennel. Include it as one of a few ingredients in an easy but daring salad combination. For example, you could put it in a version of a blood orange salad served in Sicily, a country whose dishes benefit from an exotic North African influence. Grate or chop lovage root over navel and blood orange sections, add a bit of mint, some very thin slivers of red onion, and serve with a tangy, hot paprika vinaigrette.

Lovage: The Cocktail
Or better yet, use mature lovage stems as savory Bloody Mary straws. O’Keeffe didn’t imbibe much, but that shouldn’t prevent you from occasionally partaking in a refreshing herbal cocktail.

Lovage in Your Garden
Lovage is a member of the tasty Umbelliferae family, along with the likes of dill, celery, carrot, fennel, coriander, and pars-
Georgia O’Keeffe’s Garden

If given the right conditions, this perennial will reach six feet tall and resemble parsley on steroids. If you want to experience lovage, you may have to order the seed online and grow it from seed. I have yet to find it at Southern California farmer’s markets or local grocery stores. And poor Charlemagne might be horrified to hear that many United States nurseries do not carry lovage seedlings, though some sell lovage seeds. You may meet with more success in your own area. (For improving your lovage’s odds of thriving, see the Underhill and Nakjavani link in endnotes). If you give ho-hum, ordinary lovage a chance, the reward may be extraordinary.

The Extraordinary Ordinary

Celebrating the extraordinary within the ordinary was a big, silky theme that threaded itself through O’Keeffe’s life and art. She wanted people to see the magnificence she saw in the simplest of natural things. O’Keeffe is famous for her huge, arresting paintings of flowers, but it is her renderings of bones on canvas that personally send me to the moon. The artist also did a heck of a job on rocks and shells. An entire O’Keeffe canvas like Inside Clam Shell (1930) could be devoted to showing the miniature, watery universe contained within a humble shell—a universe that a viewer of her work may have been too busy to notice. To physically feel the wallop that even a wee 7” x 9” O’Keeffe shell painting can pack, nothing beats viewing one in person. Or better yet, see a few in a row.

Make Your Own Pilgrimage to O’Keeffe Country

Why not visit her museum? The Georgia O’Keeffe Museum in downtown Santa Fe holds the largest collection of her

Georgia O’Keeffe’s Garden

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work in the world with over a thousand of her pieces. While you are in the area, fast becoming known as “O’Keeffe Coun-
try,” don’t miss touring her home/studio and garden. Travel writer and pilgrimage scholar Phil Cousineau has declared
the visiting of O’Keeffe’s home and museum a modern pil-
grimage, one especially important for American women. Any
important journey can bring you face to face with some of
your own fears. O’Keeffe, like all of us, constantly encoun-
tered her own fears. As she used to say, “I’ve been absolutely
terrified every moment of my life—and I’ve never let it keep
me from doing a single thing I wanted to do.”

If you are at all inspired by Georgia O’Keeffe’s life or her
paintings, I urge you to leave the comforts of your own home
and journey to her home. This journey could help you to con-
tinue to uncover your own unique brand of genius. And be-
sides, it beats staying home and worrying if you are making
someone else the right brand of instant coffee.

Further Info
A little advance planning and a rental car will make it possi-
bile for you to easily tour the O’Keeffe Museum, and Georgia
O’Keeffe’s home and studio in Abiquiú on the same day. Be
on the safe side: book a tour reservation a few months ahead
of time. Tour groups are small and conducted sparingly from
March to November. Private tours can be scheduled off-season.

Travel Tip
You may find some of O’Keeffe’s quotes as inspiring as her
paintings, her life, and her garden. Pack the best selling Por-
trait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O’Keeffe by Laurie Lisle as a companion on your voyage.

Endnotes


Thea Fiore-Bloom, PhD is a California-based writer, artist, and gardener. She teaches writing, creativity, and art history to children and graduate school students.
Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM. 60,445 likes · 3,117 talking about this · 42,480 were here. A Great American Artist. A Great American Story... The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, opened to the public in July 1997, eleven years after the Westward Ho! 35th Anniversary. See More. CommunitySee All. 60,445 people like this. 61,708 people follow this. 42,480 check-ins. AboutSee All. Georgia Totto O'Keeffe (November 15, 1887 – March 6, 1986) was an American artist. She was known for her paintings of enlarged flowers, New York skyscrapers, and New Mexico landscapes. O'Keeffe has been recognized as the "Mother of American modernism". In 1905, O'Keeffe began her serious formal art training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and then the Art Students League of New York, but she felt constrained by her lessons that emphasized the recreation or copying of nature. In 1908 Georgia O'Keeffe purchased her house in Abiquiú in 1945, attracted in part by its large garden served by the local irrigation system known as an acequia. She hired Maria Chabot to manage the restoration and rebuilding of the property, undertaken from 1946 to 1949, while O'Keeffe was in New York settling her husband Alfred Stieglitz's estate. Chabot had overseen daily affairs at O'Keeffe's house at Ghost Ranch and understood the artist's ambitions for the home and garden in Abiquiú. To this end, she created the plan for the adobe house and surrounding landscape. The garden at her Abiquiú home r...