

IN PRAISE OF THE GASLI TREE

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Vahe H. Apelian, Ohio USA, 22 November 2012



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Cilicia. Its Latin name is *Laurus nobilis*. The name conveys majesty and leaves a sort of a "nobless oblige" impression. It is indeed a majestic tree growing as tall as 18 meters (59 feet). That may be the reason that those who baptized the tree with its scientific Latin name called it *nobilis*.

In English the word laureate has come to signify eminence. It is associated with literary – poet laureate - or military glory. It is also used for winners of the Nobel Prize. I cannot tell if the word laureate was coined after the tree or whether the tree was named after the word that had evolved somehow to signify achievement that bestow upon the individual a high social status. The ancient Greeks considered wreathes made from laurel as symbol of highest status. The Romans depicted golden crowns made in the like of laurel tree (*Gasli*) leaves as a symbol of victory.

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Ovid, the Roman writer, tells the story that the nymph Daphne was transformed into a laurel tree to avoid being pursued by Apollo. I am not sure if the Greek myth has anything to do with the Romans

to have their victory symbol shaped after the laurel tree - *Gasli* - leaves. I have my own thoughts as to why the Greeks and the Romans may have picked laurel leaves - say - over rose pedals or any other leaf. The laurel trees - *Gasli* - are evergreen. Their leaves do not assume a rusty color during the fall, unlike the leaves of the many naturally grown trees such as in New England. There does not seem to be a later season for the laurel tree. Its leaves remain sparkling green during the four seasons of the year and throughout the life of the tree. The tree simply looks ageless. This unique feature of the laurel tree leaves makes a good reason for it to symbolize enduring achievement. The crisp, attractive, the uniform shape and color and their orderly spacing on a branch give the *Gasli* leaves more of a reason to be decorative symbols.

The *Gasli* appears not to lend itself to domestication. It grows in most unlikely places. It takes root within the rocky crevices and it does it on its own terms. Try to plant it in your backyard, more likely than not, you will not succeed. If gold is the golden metal among the metals, then laurel tree (*Gasli Dzar*) is the golden tree among trees grown in the wild. It is imposing, majestic, pleasant smelling and aloof.

Gasli trees have been and continue to be a source of income for the Kessabtsis. From the berries 

the Kessabtsis extract the oils that make the famous Kessab soap, known as *Ghar* soap. *Ghar* means laurel in Arabic. LaurApel is one of the main manufacturers of laurel soap in Kessab. It is situated in Keurkune and its products have reached Japan. According to their Website it was Hagop Atikian who introduced the manufacture of laurel soap in Kessab in early 1940's. He is one of the early graduates of the famed Kessab Oussoumnerats Varjara, the Kessab non-denominational high school, the Kessab Educational Association founded in 1922. It is the first Diaspora Armenian High School to be recognized by a foreign country, France, allowing its graduates to pursue their education in France, and many did. Hagop Atikian, as a young graduate from the University of Sorbonne, upon his return to Kessab, advocated making use of the abundant Kessab *Gasli* trees and to make soap from its famed laurel oil and taught the Kessabtsis the basics for soap manufacture. The manufacture was first initiated by the Churukian Family of Kessab and continues with their daughter Ani and son-in-law, Steve. Hagop Atikian is also a revered educator and author of Armenian history.

Besides being a source of income, *Gasli* is also very much ingrained in Kessab culture and somewhat to its cuisine as well. The Kessabtsis call its ripe black berries as fruit-*Gasli Bdugh* (laurel fruits). Harvesting the ripe black berries used to be a much looked for social event. The attached picture depicts young Kessabtsis mounted on donkeys, protected against the colder autumn weather, on their way harvesting *Gasli Bdugh* - laurel fruits- as late as in 1978. The Kessabtsis look forward in anticipation for the autumn passage of migratory birds they call *summun* and *kartavok*. They taste delicious full of laurel oil aroma because they feed on laurel tree berries.

The branches of the tree serve as skewers par excellence. Those who have tasted freshly hunted birds prepared over fire on skewers made from laurel tree (*Gasli*) branches, can attest to the exquisite taste, especially when the birds are eaten with bread oiled by squeezing the birds during the grilling in freshly prepared oven (*toneer*) breads. Laurel leaves, commonly known as bay leaves, impart taste to a cooking but should not be consumed. They are not digestible.

Spoons made from laurel leaves are used to taste foamed grape molasses. During the autumn the Kessabtsis get engaged in the preparation of grape molasses. The process is called *massara*. At one time it was by far the most anticipated social event in Kessab extending well into the night. Ms. Effie Chambers, the beloved missionary in Kessab from 1904 to 1912, in a letter to her Board in America complained that the school year is short and getting the kids attend school gets harder during the autumn because of the preparation of grape molasses that the Kessabtsis consider a time to be merry. Kessabtsis continue to do *massara* in Kessab and as far away as in Los Angeles and in Fresno. The freshly made warm grape molasses is scooped by ladles made from gourd and poured back into the container from a distance creating a most exquisite tasting foam, the Kessabtsis call *prpoor*, which is then scooped with *Gasli* leaves that leave on the taste buds an unforgettable exquisite taste. Wooden or metal spoons do not come near to the *Gasli* leaf spoon in imparting the taste of the *prpoor*.

The late Stepan Panossian depicted a picture of *Gasli* branch with leaves and ripe berries on the cover of one of his books depicting life in Kessab, which is also famed for its apple and grape trees. The 1978 Vol. 3 National Geographic attested to the Kessab's "crisp apples that burst upon the tongue" and "grapes that cluster sweet and heavy on the vines". However no other entity can possibly symbolize Kessab and its resilient native Cilician Armenian population as the tall, erect, eternally green Kessab native laurel tree – the famed *Gasli* of Kessab.

