



Byrd's Kitchen

by Vivian Byrd

Fresh asparagus heralds coming of spring

Toward the end of winter I have just about had it with the cold, the heavy clothing and during our typical winter, finding a spot to park when the snow has been plowed into piles covering half the parking lot. Even though all of that is part of choosing to love, not leave, Michigan.

Into all that gloom comes fresh asparagus. Ground Hog Day tells me nothing; fresh asparagus in the market means winter is almost over.

Common asparagus has been widely cultivated since time immemorial. But in France during the reign of Louis XIV, a method was devised for growing asparagus in beds in order to cater to the tastes of the Sun King year round. In food and in love, so the rumor goes, you can always rely on the French.

Some cooks swear by cooking asparagus by standing it in two inches of water in a double boiler with the top pot

turned upside down over the tips, or in the same position in a deep kettle. The tougher ends boil while the tender tips steam.

I prefer to cut them a little shorter and boil them in a large pot. This method works for me because I like the larger end slightly crunchy, so the tips do not get overcooked. Drain and serve with melted butter and a few drops of lemon juice for a taste that reminds me of freshly cut grass in the middle of spring.

When buying, allow two pounds for four servings. Break or snip off the tough ends. With a small knife or a potato parer that swivels, peel the lower end of the stalk. Cook as directed about 15 to 20 minutes or until desired tenderness is reached.

Green asparagus can be served hot or cold but while ones should always be

served cold. Both are quite good served cold in a vinaigrette sauce.

ASPARAGUS VINAIGRETTE

Put vinaigrette sauce over hot or cold cooked asparagus and let stand one hour, turning the asparagus once.

VINAIGRETTE

Use about a fifth or a quarter as much vinegar as oil. Start with 8 tablespoons oil, 1 teaspoon salt, ½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper or 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard, and 1 tablespoon vinegar or lemon juice. Mix, then add vinegar to your taste. My own preference is to use the Dijon mustard and start with the lemon juice then add vinegar, after the other ingredients have been mixed briskly with a wire whisk. Vinegar can then be added, one-half tablespoon at a time until the desired taste is reached. A half-teaspoon of tarragon is quite

good here, but I suggest that to best enhance the flavor, use one herb at a time in vinaigrette. Or one of either of these, chives, tarragon, basil, dill or chervil, plus parsley.

ASPARAGUS WITH FRESH TOMATO SAUCE

½ cup mayonnaise
¼ cup diced, peeled fresh tomato
1¼ tsp. lemon juice
Pinch of white pepper
¼ teaspoon salt

Combine all ingredients except tomato in the top of a double boiler. Stir over hot, not boiling, water until heated through. Stir in the tomato and serve over hot, freshly cooked asparagus. Makes enough sauce for six servings.

ASPARAGUS SOUR CREAM CASSEROLE

Place cooked, drained asparagus in a

greased casserole, sprinkle with salt and pepper and mix lightly with one cup sour cream. Top with one cup fresh bread crumbs which have been mixed with three tablespoons melted butter. Bake at 375 degrees until crumbs are brown, about 30 minutes. Makes six servings, about 2½ pounds asparagus.

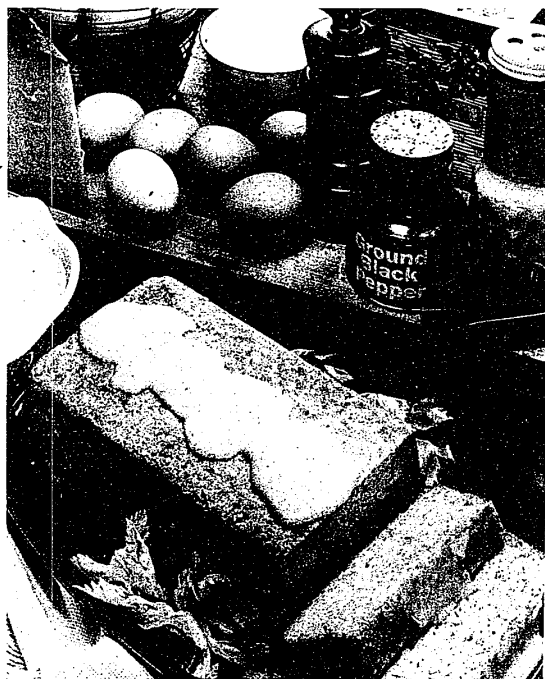
ASPARAGUS AU GRATIN

¼ cup butter
¼ cup flour
1½ cups chicken broth or milk
¼ cup light cream
¾ cup grated Cheddar cheese
¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
36 hot, freshly cooked asparagus spears

In a saucepan melt the butter, add the flour and stir with a wire whisk until blended. Meanwhile, bring the chicken broth and cream to a boil and add all at once to the butter-flour mixture, stirring vigorously with the whisk until the sauce is thickened and smooth. Add the cheeses, salt and pepper and stir until the cheeses melt.

Place alternate layers of sauce and asparagus in a buttered casserole, ending with a layer of sauce. Sprinkle with additional Parmesan cheese and brown quickly under a preheated broiler or bake in a preheated hot oven at 450 degrees for five minutes.

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The Black Pepper Rice Loaf is a meatless "meat" loaf of rice, eggs, cottage and Parmesan cheese, and bread crumbs. Black pepper is its major seasoning.

Black pepper can give new character to foods

Ham and eggs, Monk and Minky, salt and pepper are some of the things we think about in love. We are so used to seeing salt and pepper shakers on our dining room tables and to using them in tandem that we often overlook the distinctive flavor black pepper has to offer by itself.

Far from being simply zippy, it has an appetizing bouquet and savor. It's been known for centuries as "the master spice" because no other spice does so much for so many different types of food.

Used in small amounts, it adds a flavor spark to all other seasonings in a dish. This is how we usually know it. But when used in larger quantities, it can create an exciting new flavor character for certain foods.

You'll find black pepper available whole (pepper-corns) and in a variety of grinds: table, or regular grind, coarse ground and cracked. Try it in the following recipes:

BLACK PEPPER RICE LOAF

1½ cups regular cooking rice (raw)
3 eggs, lightly beaten
1 pkg. (8 ounces) cottage cheese
¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese
1 tsp. ground black pepper
½ tsp. Italian seasoning
½ tsp. salt
1 cup milk
¼ cup dry bread crumbs
Cheddar Sauce (recipe below)

Preheat oven to 375°. Cook rice according to package directions, undercooking slightly; rinse with cold water and drain well. In a medium bowl, combine eggs, cottage cheese, Parmesan cheese, black pepper, Italian seasoning and salt; add milk and reserved rice; mix well.

Grease a 9x5x3-inch loaf pan; coat with bread crumbs. Spoon rice mixture into loaf pan. Bake until loaf is firm, 55-60 minutes. Let stand in pan for 5 minutes. Loosen with spatula. Turn onto a serving platter. Garnish with celery leaves, if desired. Serve with Cheddar Sauce. Yield: 6 portions.

CHEDDAR SAUCE

2 tsp. butter or margarine
2 tsp. flour
1 cup milk
¾ cup grated mild Cheddar cheese
1 tsp. paprika
½ tsp. salt
Dash ground white pepper

In a small saucepan, melt butter. Mix in flour. Over medium heat, gradually stir in milk, mixing well. Cook and stir until thickened, about 5 minutes. Stir in cheese, paprika, salt and white pepper; cook and stir over low heat until cheese is melted, about 1 minute.

BLACK PEPPER RING

1 package active dry yeast
2 cups warm water (105-115° Fahrenheit)
6 cups all-purpose flour (unsifted) divided
1 tsp. salt
1 to 1½ tsp. cracked black pepper
1 tsp. sugar
1 egg, beaten
1 tsp. water

In a large bowl, soften yeast in warm water; let stand for 2 minutes. Add 3 cups of the flour, salt, black pepper and sugar; mix until smooth.

Gradually add remaining 3 cups flour to make a soft dough. Turn out dough onto a lightly floured surface; knead until elastic, about 8 minutes.

Place dough in a greased bowl; turn dough to grease all over. Cover lightly and let rise in a warm place until double in bulk, about 1 hour.

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