



A Question of Taste

By Hilary Keating Callaghan

Serve asparagus in buttery shells with Bechemel

I was recently stumped by a problem on a math test. The problem was based on a bar graph depicting sales volume according to the months of the year. The solution involved a comparison of sales performance by seasons of the year.

I had no difficulty with the mathematical concept. What I couldn't remember was what months comprise spring. We always have a big snowstorm around St. Patrick's Day. March can't be spring. April also seems to bring an annual "surprise" snowstorm. That brings us to May, which is too late for spring to be starting. Maybe May is the last month of spring?

This is probably a peculiarly Michigan dilemma. Other states must enjoy a clearly defined season called spring. Where else would all the poetry and photographs celebrating spring come from?

IT WOULD have been easier to identify spring if the graph has been marked "asparagus, spring strawberries" instead of "March, April."

Spring begins when these items first appear on produce aisles and ends when they disappear, yielding their space to summer's fruits and vegetables.

Using asparagus as a yardstick, spring is gasping its last for this year. Asparagus, when still available, is fast becoming both expensive and club-like. With some diligence, however, you can

still find some slender stalks at a price which should only dent your food budget slightly.

If you are fortunate enough to discover some of this asparagus, you will want to feature it in a very special dish. My personal favorite is an asparagus tarte. The buttery shell holds a mound of crisp tender asparagus blanketed with a rich Bechemel Sauce and topped with a golden crust of Swiss cheese.

The short crust may be prepared ahead of time but the asparagus should be steamed at the last possible moment to retain its fresh color and texture, which are essential to the success of this dish.

In fact, the only problem with finishing the asparagus season with this delectable pastry is that it is likely to create a craving which cannot be satisfied for another year. Frozen or canned asparagus will just not work here.

ALTHOUGH I have, on occasion, made a meal of asparagus pastry, it is actually intended as a first course. It could perfectly set the stage for a spring feast.

Try following it with some fresh lake perch, which is just appearing in the markets at reasonable prices. Since the first course contains a cream sauce, you might wish to present the fish course as simply as possible. The fillets could be broiled on a sheet of aluminum foil on a cookie sheet or broiling pan two inches from the heat source.

Dot with a few dabs of butter before broiling. Broil only for 3 or 4 minutes. Do not turn. Remove immediately from the baking sheet or the heat from the pan will continue to cook the fish.

Serve with a little clarified butter and wedges of fresh lemon. Accompanying the fish could be the little new potatoes, which also appear in spring, and a salad, dressed with a simple vinaigrette sauce, featuring the tender, red-tipped lettuce which is coming back into the stores right now.

TO COMPLETE the Spring Feast, you might want to feature luscious fresh strawberries as a dessert.

They could be served as part of a fruit plate or with a sour cream dip. They are so naturally sweet that they can even star in a sugarless strawberry shortcake. The "shortcake" for this dessert is actually an oatmeal biscuit. Oats are a naturally sweet grain that no sugar is needed for this dessert biscuit.

If cholesterol and calories are not a serious concern, you might even whip some heavy cream and mound it onto the biscuit with the berries for a truly rich strawberry shortcake.

ASPARAGUS PASTRY

Pastry Brisee (recipe follows)
About 2 lb. asparagus
1 1/2 cups Sauce Bechemel (recipe follows)
2 oz. grated Swiss or Gruyere cheese

Make pastry for one shell, line a shallow pan with it (Note: I use an 11-inch flan pan with a removable bottom), and bake it for 20 minutes or until just brown. Clean the asparagus, discard the hard end pieces, and cut into 1-inch pieces. Steam it until it is tender (10 minutes for very young asparagus; longer for older — only testing will tell). Now put the asparagus into the pie shell, pour the bechemel over it, sprinkle on the cheese, and put it into a medium oven to bake until it is browning on top. Serve very hot. Serves 6.

PASTRY BRISEE

2 cups flour
3/4 cup butter (if at all possible, use butter rather than margarine)
Salt

Sift together the flour and a good pinch of salt, and cut in the butter until the mixture resembles coarse sand. You may also rub the butter in with your fingertips. Add no water. Work it into a ball, wrap, and put away to chill for an hour or more.

This pastry is too crumbly for rolling out, so you must press it into the buttered pie dish with your fingers until you have a smooth crust of even thickness. Finish the edges as you normally do, prick the bottom with a fork, and bake for 10 minutes at 450 degrees. Fill as desired and finish baking.

SAUCE BECHEMEL

3 tbsp. butter
3 tbsp. flour
1/4 onion, minced
2 1/2 cups hot milk
Peppercorns
Thyme
1 tiny bay leaf
Salt
Grated nutmeg

In the top of a double boiler, heat the butter until bubbly. Add the finely chopped onion, and let it cook over very low heat for 3 or 5 minutes — stir in the flour and continue cooking a few minutes more, then begin adding the milk. Pour in the milk bit by bit and stir with a whisk while you do. The sauce will begin to thicken after a few minutes. Add a few peppercorns, some thyme, and a very small bay leaf or a piece of one. Sprinkle in a little salt and nutmeg, let it cook slowly for 10 to 15 minutes, then strain through a sieve.

(Note: I have had better luck using a heavy-bottomed saucepan than using a double-boiler.)

BUTTERED NEW POTATOES

24 very small whole new potatoes
3 tbsp. clarified butter
Salt
Chopped chives or parsley

Heat the clarified butter in a heavy saucepan. Scrub the potatoes and, peel a thin strip from the circumference of each. Add potatoes to the butter in the saucepan, turning to coat with the butter. Cover the pan and cook the potatoes slowly until tender, shaking the pan occasionally. Season to taste with salt. Sprinkle with the chopped parsley or chives. Serves 4.

OATMEAL DROP BISCUITS

1 cup all-purpose flour
1 tbsp. baking powder
1/2 tsp. salt
3 tbsp. butter or margarine
1 cup rolled oats
1 beaten egg
1/2 cup milk
2 tbsp. honey

Combine flour, baking powder, and salt. Cut in butter or margarine until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Stir in oats. Combine egg, milk, and honey; add all at once to dry mixture. Stir just until moistened. Drop by spoonfuls onto a greased baking sheet, making six large shortcakes. Bake in a preheated 425 degree oven for 12 to 15 minutes.

Serve shortcakes split and filled with crushed fresh strawberries and whipped cream. Serves 6.

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Dieter's best friend is tuna

Tuna Slaw Lunch is a "brown bag" main dish salad, perfect for dieters.

TUNA SLAW LUNCH

1 can (6 1/2 or 7 oz.) tuna, packed in vegetable oil or water
1/2 cup plain low-fat yogurt
2 1/4 tsp. diet mayonnaise
1 1/2 tsp. vinegar
1 1/2 tsp. honey
1/2 pimiento, chopped
1 tsp. chopped green pepper
1 tsp. grated onion
1/4 tsp. salt

1/4 tsp. dry mustard
Dash pepper
2 cups shredded cabbage

In medium bowl combine all ingredients except cabbage, and mix well. Toss with cabbage. Chill. Yield: 2 servings.

Tuna Yogurt Garden Cups are high in nutrition and low in calories and cholesterol.

TUNA-YOGURT GARDEN CUPS

1 can (6 1/2 or 7 oz.) tuna packed in oil or water
1 cup plain low-fat yogurt
1/2 cup mixed fresh vegetables (chopped, diced, grated)
1 tsp. chopped fresh parsley
Salt and pepper to taste and pepper to taste

Drain tuna. Place in bowl and break into flaker. Combine with yogurt, vegetables and seasonings. Spoon into two 1-cup containers, cover and keep chilled until lunch time. Yield: two servings.



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