

Michigan asparagus — an all-edible delight

Season's now at its height



Asparagus buffs will love Oriental Beef and Asparagus and Golden Asparagus Supreme.

Most asparagus buffs probably don't know or even care that the ancient Greeks used the word "asparagus" to refer to all tender shoots picked and savored while very young.

All that matters to asparagus lovers is that the fresh season in Michigan is upon us, a six-week stretch where they can't get enough of the "aristocrat of vegetables."

To most consumers, a typical asparagus stalk picked out in a supermarket ranges from seven to 10 inches in length — that's where the Greeks are right. Left unpicked, certain strains of asparagus can grow from six to 10 feet high.

The asparagus season is a true sign of spring in Michigan, which ranks third in the nation in asparagus production with an average annual crop of over 20 million pounds.

A unique feature of Michigan-grown asparagus is that it is snap-harvested, meaning that you won't see the white, woody ends that end up in the store from asparagus that is cut in the field. It's an all-edible product with very little waste.

MICHIGAN'S ASPARAGUS season generally runs from the beginning of May through mid-June, when residents of Oceana County, dubbed the nation's Asparagus Capital, celebrate the National Asparagus Festival. The dates for this year's event are June 12-15 in Hart and Shelby. Let's look at just a few of the ways asparagus can be used:

ORIENTAL BEEF AND ASPARAGUS
1 1/2 lbs. round steak, 1/2-inch thick
1/4 cup soy sauce
1/4 tsp. sugar
3 Tbsp. sherry or water
2 lbs. fresh asparagus, cut into 1-inch pieces
1/4 cup vegetable oil
8 oz. fresh mushrooms, sliced,

or 1 8-ounce can mushroom slices, drained

Remove fat from meat. Cutting across grain, slice meat into thin 2-inch strips. Meat may be semi-frozen for easy slicing. Mix soy sauce, sugar and sherry with meat, stirring well to coat all pieces. Set aside. Cook fresh asparagus in boiling water 4 minutes or until crisp-tender; drain. Heat 2 tablespoons of the oil in large skillet over medium high heat. Add asparagus and mushrooms and stir-fry for 2 minutes; remove from skillet. Heat remaining oil in skillet. Add drained meat and stir-fry until meat is cooked but still juicy. Add asparagus, mushrooms and drained marinade; stir-fry entire mixture for another 2 minutes or until hot. Serve immediately. Makes 6 servings.

ASPARAGUS WITH TANGY SAUCE
1 1/2 lbs. fresh asparagus spears
1/2 cup dairy sour cream
1/2 cup mayonnaise
2 tsp. lemon juice
1 tsp. prepared mustard

Cook asparagus in boiling water until tender; drain. Place in serving dish. While cooking asparagus, combine remaining ingredients in small saucepan. Heat over low heat, stirring frequently, until thoroughly heated. Pour over hot asparagus or serve as a sauce in a dish. Makes 6 servings.

MARINATED ASPARAGUS SALAD
2 cups cooked asparagus pieces
1 small red onion, thinly sliced
1 or 2 tomatoes, chopped
Salt and pepper to taste
Italian salad dressing

Combine all ingredients with

enough salad dressing to moisten well. Stir gently. Cover and refrigerate overnight. Stir again before serving. Makes about 6 servings.

GOLDEN ASPARAGUS SUPREME
1/2 cup cracker crumbs
2 Tbsp. butter or margarine, melted
1 1/2 lbs. fresh asparagus, cut into 1-inch pieces
6 oz. process pimiento-cheese, cut in pieces
4 oz. cream cheese, cut in pieces
1/2 cup butter or margarine
3 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
1/4 tsp. salt
1 1/2 cups milk

Combine cracker crumbs and the 2 tablespoons butter; set aside. Cook fresh asparagus in boiling water 4 minutes or until crisp-tender; drain. Arrange asparagus in buttered 1-quart baking dish; set aside. Melt the 1/2 cup butter in saucepan. Stir in flour and salt. Add milk and cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until mixture thickens and starts to boil. Add cheese and continue cooking and stirring until cheese is melted; remove from heat. Pour sauce over asparagus and sprinkle evenly with prepared crumbs. Bake in 350 degrees oven about 30 minutes or until sauce is bubbly and hot and crumbs are browned. Makes 6 servings.

ASPARAGUS SOUR CREAM DIP
3/4 lb. fresh asparagus, cut into 1-inch pieces
1/2 cup dairy sour cream
1 1/2 tsp. grated onion
1/4 tsp. garlic salt
1/4 tsp. seasoning salt

Cook asparagus in small amount of boiling water until tender. Drain and cool. Puree asparagus in blender. Combine asparagus with remaining ingredients. Chill thoroughly. Serve as a dip with fresh vegetables or crackers. Makes 125 cups.

A dilly of an appetizer

Make-ahead appetizers are always a popular choice with busy cooks. Dilly Salmon Appetizer is a tasty hors d'oeuvre that can be made in advance of a party.

DILLY SALMON APPETIZER

1 can (7 1/2 or 7 3/4 oz.) Alaska salmon
1 envelope unflavored gelatin
3/4 cup chicken broth
1/4 cup mayonnaise or plain yogurt
1/4 cup each finely minced celery and finely shredded fresh spinach
2 Tbsp. each finely chopped green onions, chopped parsley and lemon juice
1 tsp. dry mustard
1/2 to 1 tsp. dill weed
1/4 tsp. bottled hot pepper sauce
parsley
assorted crackers or fresh vegetables

Drain salmon, reserving liquid; flake. Soften gelatin in reserved salmon liquid. Stir in chicken broth; heat to dissolve gelatin completely. Stir in remaining ingredients; pour into 3-cup mold. Chill until set. Garnish with parsley and serve with crackers. Makes about 12 appetizer servings.

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