

# Growers call asparagus 'grass'

AP — The Greeks called it asparagus, meaning "sprout or shoot." The English referred to it as asparagus.

To most growers and distributors in the United States, it's simply "grass," and to the American consumer, it's known as asparagus.

If it is possible for a vegetable to gain celebrity status, then asparagus has done so. This "star" can be at dinner in your home throughout the spring, so look for it at markets in your area.

To appreciate the prominence asparagus has had in history, consider the devotion paid to it by King Louis XIV. During the king's rule in France from 1643 to 1715, he became so enamored of these tender stalks that he was not content to enjoy them only during spring and early summer. He summoned his royal gardeners and instructed them to develop a method that would force the sprouting of asparagus during the winter months. This was accomplished in "stove houses," which are good examples of some of the earliest greenhouses on the European continent.

"ASPARAGUS HAS been successfully cultivated for over 1,000 years, and it remains the most noble of vegetables," said chef Charlie Rascoli of the Culinary Institute of America.

Although asparagus is easily attainable in most markets, Rascoli says there are those who prefer to stalk the wild variety. "Though the roadside or fence-row variety are not genetically different, those who forage for them swear they're better," he says.

Asparagus is unusual, somehow elevated above the crowd, but what exactly is the lure of this early spring spear?

"Asparagus are uncommon in their flavor, texture, color and shape, making them infinitely more appealing than the average head of broccoli or everyday turnip," Rascoli said.

"Asparagus may be regarded as the embodiment of spring. They symbolize life's perennial plan — to be born, to grow, to mature, to be dormant and to be born again. The cucumber just doesn't rise to that level of spirituality."

For those who wish to join the unofficial asparagus fan club, Rascoli provides the following advice for purchasing and preparing them:

**PURCHASING:** When selecting asparagus, look for firm, straight stalks and deep-green coloring at least 1/4 of the way toward the base. Tips should be tight and unbruised.

**PREPARING:** Wash the vegetables well. Remove the portion of the stem that is pale green and fibrous. To do this, hold the asparagus spear in your hands at the point where the color change begins. Carefully bend the discolored portion until it snaps off. This portion may also be removed with a knife.

Asparagus that are slender and fresh are generally more tender. With less tender asparagus, peel the lower third of the green stem to form a uniform thickness from bud to base. This will also assure even cooking.

The most common methods for cooking asparagus are by boiling, pan-steaming and total steaming. In all cases, select a pot that can accommodate the asparagus without breaking the spears.

Asparagus that are boiled are generally tied in clusters for easy removal after cooking. Pan-steamed asparagus are cooked in about 1/2-inch of boiling water in a suitably sized pot with a tight-fitting lid. Total steaming may be done using any commercial or household steamer. This method is preferred by many cooks, because asparagus prepared in this way retain more of their nutrients.

Defining the proper doneness for asparagus is largely a matter of personal preference. However, most chefs agree that with spears that are 1/2 inch in diameter, a cooking time of 4 to 6 minutes produces asparagus that retain their emerald green color and have the appropriate texture.

Rascoli says asparagus can be served with melted butter and a splash of lemon, or with Romesco Sauce, a tomato-based sauce made with ancho chilies and fresh cilantro.

## ROMESCO SAUCE

- 3 dried ancho chilies
- 1 head garlic, whole and unpeeled
- Vegetable oil, as needed
- 1 fresh, large ripe tomato, or 3 canned plum tomatoes with the seeds removed
- 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 slice bread, cubed
- 1 cup toasted almonds
- 1/4 cup red-wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne

1/4 cup chopped, fresh cilantro  
Salt and pepper to taste

Place the dried chilies in a pot of simmering water and cook for about 20 minutes or until they are very tender. Remove the stem and seeds. Reserve the pulp.

Rub garlic lightly with oil, place it in a pan and roast in a 375-degree oven for 40 minutes, or until cloves are extremely soft. Peel all the cloves and reserve the pulp. Once peeled, the pulp should have the consistency of butter.

Plunge the tomatoes in boiling water for about 30 seconds, or until the skins begin to crack. Remove from the boiling water and place them into cold water. Gently peel away skins. Cut the tomato in half crosswise and squeeze out the juice and seeds. Chop the flesh and reserve.

Heat 1 tablespoon of the olive oil in a small saute pan over medium heat; add the cubed bread. Cook, stirring constantly, until the cubes are dry and golden. Reserve.

In a blender or food processor place the chilies, garlic, tomatoes and cubed bread with the almonds, vinegar, cumin and cayenne. Blend until smooth.

With the machine running, add the remaining oil in a slow, thin stream. This will form a creamy, rich mixture. Add the cilantro and adjust the seasoning to taste with salt and pepper. Makes 3 cups.

Note: This sauce can be served with hot or cold asparagus. It should be kept at room temperature. If it gets too cold or too hot it will separate.

## Italian supper pairs with tea

Most teenagers, in addition to school work, are involved with extracurricular activities, and in many cases, this means a steady stream of young people stopping by to go over things with them.

Being a good hostess, you will want to provide snacks, but it would also be a fun idea to occasionally invite a small group for an early supper so that you can really get to know them. It doesn't have to be formal. A hearty casserole would fit the bill very nicely.

Good home cooking is always appreciated, and this Italian-style dish served with a light and fragrant tea, will provide the perfect opportunity to spend some quality time with your children and their friends.

Ending the meal with a simple dessert and some more fresh brewed tea, slows down the pace, allowing for more chat time, and will earn you top marks for serving a super supper.

### FLAVORFUL HOT TEA

- Bring freshly drawn cold water to a full rolling boil.
- Rinse out your teapot with hot water to warm it.
- Immediately add 1 tea bag or 1 teaspoon of loose tea per serving to the pot.

• Pour boiling water over the tea using 5 to 6 ounces per cup.

• Cover and let stand 3 to 5 minutes, then remove teabags or strain loose tea before serving.

### HEARTY SUPPER CASSEROLE

- 10 ounces (about 3 cups) ziti (elbow shells or other macaroni may be used)
- 1/2 pound ground beef
- 8 ounces (1 cup) small-curd cottage cheese
- 4 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature
- 1/2 cup sour cream
- 4 tablespoons chopped green onions
- 1 teaspoon dried parsley
- 1/4 teaspoon crushed red pepper
- 1 1/2 cups spaghetti sauce

Cook ziti as package directs; drain. Meanwhile, brown beef in skillet; remove with slotted spoon to drain off fat. Set aside.

Combine cottage cheese, cream cheese, sour cream, onions, parsley and pepper. Spread half the ziti in buttered 2-quart casserole. Cover with half the cheese mixture and all of the meat. Add remaining ziti and pour spaghetti sauce over all. Spoon on dollops of cheese mixture. Bake in 350 degrees oven until heated through, about 30 minutes.

## What's the reason for roasting peppers?

Question: why do some recipes suggest roasting sweet peppers? Is it really worth the extra effort?

Answer: Roasting or charring peppers makes the tenacious pepper skin easy to peel away. You remove the tough skin from peppers for the same reason you peel a tomato, to make sure each bite is wonderfully tender.

What's more, roasted peppers take on a delicate smoke flavor that enhances many dishes. Use them in summer salads, sauces, appetizers,

and as a simple side dish for grilled meats. When you choose fresh peppers from your local farmer's market, you will add a rainbow of color to your menu, too. The process of roasting is really pretty simple:

- Using a sharp knife, cut any sweet pepper in half lengthwise.
- Remove the stem and seeds from each pepper half. Rinse peppers to remove remaining seeds.
- To make the pepper halves lie flat, cut two or three small slits in

both ends of each half. With the skin side up, press down on the pepper halves to flatten.

- Broil or grill the pepper halves.
- To broil, place the flattened pepper halves on a lightly greased broiler pan. Broil about 4 inches from heat until the pepper skin is just charred. Watch the peppers closely; this takes just minutes.
- To grill, brush the pepper halves with olive oil or cooking oil. Cook on an uncovered grill directly over medium-hot coals for 8 to 10

minutes or until slightly charred, turning occasionally.

- Immediately place the hot charred peppers in a paper bag. Close the bag tightly and let the peppers stand for 10 minutes. The hot steam will loosen the charred pepper skin.
- Remove the peppers from the bag. Use a paring knife to peel away the charred skin.
- Your peppers are now ready to use in salads or in any recipe calling for sweet or roasted peppers.

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