

SUNDAY, MARCH 30, 1997

TASTE

B

GOLDEN MUSHROOM



CHEF STEVEN ALLEN

Thaw makes me anxious to garden

Although I really enjoy Michigan winters, by the time April rolls around I'm ready for change. With the anticipation of spring comes the "seems like forever" wait for snow to melt and dirt to be warm to the touch.

As a child I recall that my neighbor, Mrs. Daniels, had a fabulous garden. Her backyard was small, yet packed with bountiful vegetables and flowering plants. I would spend my whole day helping her tend the garden. For my effort, she once gave me some small tomato plants that were over-crowding her garden.

Digging in

I brought them home, and armed with a small, broken hoe, and bucket of water, hacked away at the sod along our back fence line, carving out space for the plants. The ground was hard. Later, I discovered it was once an alley.

Days later, with careful watering, my tomato plants grew. What a feeling of accomplishment that was! I can still taste that first, warmed by the sun tomato, which I grew myself. After that, I was hooked on gardening.

The following spring, when I was 10 years old, I went with my mother to the Royal Oak Farmers Market to speak with local farmers, and learn more about their profession. I purchased starter plants, and placed them in the ground. Two had a garden ever since.

This year I'm planting about two acres of land. It's the equivalent of 60 flats of plants. I've already ordered what I could from Don Van Houtte at the Royal Oak Farmers Market, the farmer who gave me advice as a child. He always offers plant care instructions, and keeps me up to date on all the hybrids. My plants are scheduled to arrive around the last week of May. By that time I will have worked the ground.

Sunny spot

I am picking a spot that receives sun throughout the day. If you have limited space, choose ground that receives a southern sun exposure with little to no shade.

If you haven't attempted to garden before, start slowly with a small space that you can work comfortably. This will also help build your confidence, and not make you feel overwhelmed. The results will be just as gratifying. I promise with a little attention, water and passion, you will have a successful harvest.

Purchase starter plants, it will be easier than worrying about seeds germinating. Loss of product is reduced, and results are quicker. Some good plants to grow are tomatoes, cucumbers, green peppers, green beans, and zucchini.

Plan your garden now, while you wait for the ground to thaw. And to prove that vegetables fresh from your garden taste better than those you buy in the store, make a recipe with store bought vegetables, then make the same recipe again in the summer using home grown vegetables or vegetables purchased from a farmer's market. You'll notice a big difference.

BAKED EGGPLANT RATATOUILLE WITH TOMATO COULIS

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 eggplants, medium size
- 1 medium onion, diced, 3/4-inch
- 3 branches celery, diced 3/4-inch
- 2 green peppers, cored and diced 3/4-inch
- 1 small zucchini, diced 3/4-inch
- 1 small yellow squash, diced 3/4-inch
- 2 large tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and diced 3/4-inch
- 2 cloves chopped garlic
- 1 tablespoon fresh basil, chopped
- 2 teaspoons chopped oregano
- 1 teaspoon thyme leaves
- 1/4 cup tomato puree
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese

Preheat oven to 375° F. Gently prick eggplant with a fork, rub lightly with a small amount of the olive oil.

Season eggplant with salt and pepper, place in a baking pan and put into the oven.

Bake for approximately 45 minutes, or until eggplant is fork tender. Remove from oven, let cool while bitter juices drain. Split eggplant length ways, scoop out inside pulp carefully, do not tear shell, reserve pulp.

Meanwhile, preheat saute pan with remaining

See GARDEN, 2B

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Focus on Wine
- Give your epicurean cabinet a spring cleaning.



Elegant entree: Rolled steak stuffed with fresh asparagus is an elegant dish to celebrate spring.

'FOOD OF KINGS' REIGNS IN SPRING

BY KEELY WYGONIK
STAFF WRITER

Even before last Sunday's surprise snowfall, I knew spring was on its way. In late February our pussy willow tree sprouted furry buds, and California asparagus started popping up at the grocery store.

King Louis XIV of France loved asparagus so much that he built special greenhouses so that he could have a ready supply of it year-round. That's why asparagus is called the "food of kings," but most of us crave asparagus in the spring when its freshest and tastes best.

Asparagus plants thrive in sandy soil in early spring when temperatures are 52° F., or slightly above. Hotter temperatures cause the plant to curl up.

According to the Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board, Michigan ranks third in the nation in asparagus production behind California and Washington. Most of Michigan's asparagus is grown along Lake Michigan with Oceana County being the top producer.

You'll have to wait until May to

enjoy Michigan asparagus, but California asparagus is readily available now. Michigan's harvest begins early in May, and peaks in early June.

For me, asparagus was an adult thing. We didn't eat it at our house. Mom served canned corn, green beans, icky peas, and mashed potatoes, but not asparagus, which she won't eat to this day.

My sister-in-law introduced me to asparagus, and from her I've learned that when properly chosen, and prepared, asparagus is absolutely delightful.

"Most people cook it too long so it tastes stringy," said Bonnie Fishman of West Bloomfield, owner of Bonnie's Patisserie in Southfield. "First you have to break off the woody stem. Bend a spear until it naturally snaps off at the bottom, and toss that part away. Sometimes I'll do a couple to see where they break off, and cut the rest with a knife."

Whether you're planning to serve asparagus hot or cold, Fishman recommends cooking it in a lot of water. "I bring a four-quart pot with a gallon of salted water to a rolling boil and immerse one pound of asparagus for no more than two minutes," she said. "If the stems are pencil thin,

cook them for only a minute. If you're going to serve the asparagus cold with a dipping sauce, cook it 30 seconds."

Immediately after cooking, drain and rinse the asparagus under cold water to freshen it. "If you leave asparagus in the pot it will continue cooking," said Fishman. "This is a mistake a lot of people make. Rinsing it brings out the bright green color."

If you're serving asparagus warm, it's not necessary to rinse, but to save time in the kitchen for parties, Fishman recommends cooking asparagus in advance, and warming it briefly in the microwave.

Chef Richard Teople of Plymouth, a chef instructor at Henry Ford Community College, likes to steam his asparagus, but he agrees with Fishman that it's important to cook it right away to avoid over cooking. "I throw ice cubes in the pan to shock the asparagus, and stop the cooking process," he said.

Stay away from large asparagus. "Choose the small, skinny asparagus," said Teople. "It will have a better, sweeter, flavor. You can also peel

See ASPARAGUS, 2B

Before you cook
■ Select bright green asparagus with closed, compact, firm tips. If the tips are slightly wilted, freshen them up by soaking them in cold water.
■ Keep fresh asparagus cool and moist until you intend to use it. Wrap a moist paper towel around the spears, and store them in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator. For best quality, use within three days.
■ Asparagus can be frozen for up to eight months. To freeze, wash, and blanch in boiling water for 1 to 2 minutes. After blanching, cool immediately in ice water. Drain well, and pack in plastic freezer bags or containers. Do not defrost before cooking.



Seasonal pleasures: The new Williams-Sonoma Seasonal Celebration series: 'Spring: Recipes Inspired by Nature's Bounty' pays tribute to this season of rebirth.

New book celebrates 'Nature's Bounty'

BY KEELY WYGONIK
STAFF WRITER

My favorite cookbooks have pictures of the finished product. That's why I like "Spring: Recipes Inspired by Nature's Bounty" by Joanne Weir (Time-Life Books; March 1997, \$21.95 hardcover) the newest cookbook in Williams-Sonoma's Seasonal Celebration series. Every recipe has a matching color photograph so you know exactly what the finished product is supposed to look like.

Equal helpings of tips and recipes make this book appetizing. Novice cooks will appreciate the information for "Selecting Spring Ingredients," and "Spring Techniques" for preparing artichokes, asparagus, fava beans, and rhubarb greens.

There are colorful pictures galore, beginning with a glossary of spring vegetables, fruits, and main course ingredients such as lamb, salmon, and soft-shell crabs. Every item is discretely numbered so that you can match the photo with a detailed description, which includes preparation and serving tips, on the page.

Recipes for openers, soups, and sn-

ads, main courses, side dishes, and desserts offer lots of ideas for "dinner tonight," and special occasions. Step-by-step, instructions make these recipes "no sweat." Quotes by famous people accompany each recipe, providing food for thought and conversation - "To get the best results you must talk to your vegetables," - Charles, Prince of Wales.

You'll relish Weir's recipe introductions, which are often presented with a dollop of history - "Over two centuries ago, English cooks first recognized the culinary potential of rhubarb, until then regarded as an ornamental plant. Although actually a hardy perennial vegetable, rhubarb is generally treated as a fruit and often combined with strawberries, which are also harvested in the spring."

An award-winning cookbook author and professional chef, Weir suggests lots of ways to make this spring menu of memorable meals, and sweet endings.

• See recipes inside