

RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Kirk Taylor, co-owner and manager of the Nino Salvaggio Strawberry Hills vegetable market, adjusts a display of artichokes and asparagus in his Farmington Hills store.

## Spring vegetables that have class

By Anne Lehmann  
special writer

Two vegetables leave me heady with delight each spring — asparagus and artichokes.

These curious vegetables have a lot in common. Both were first grown in the Mediterranean region, discovered by the ancient Roman elite. They are ultra delicate and perishable, low in calories and rich in vitamins. Their peak seasons fall in the spring. California is chief supplier. They may be eaten hot and cold.

They are thought to be elegant vegetables, more likely to be served when dining as opposed to just plain eating.

Happily, these vegetables are in bountiful supply and consumers can enjoy what has turned out to be a good year for these crops.

"The volume is high and the prices are low," says Kirk Taylor, co-owner and manager of the Nino Salvaggio Strawberry Hills fruit and vegetable market in Farmington Hills. "People are more interested in nutrition nowadays, and as a result, there has been an increased demand for these, like all vegetables."

Artichokes, otherwise known as "green globes," are a member of the daisy family, easy to prepare and versatile. When shopping for artichokes, "Look for a compact green head, with tightly closed leaves," writes Joe Carbone in his book "The Green Grocer." "A good test for freshness," he suggests, "is to rub one artichoke against another . . . fresh ones are crisp and will sing or squeak."

If you find the thorns objectionable, take heart. The thorns are harmless, meatier variety of artichoke soon will make its way to market shelves.

Interestingly, this vegetable was considered a delicacy by the ancient Romans who preserved them in vinegar and brine. When Catherine de Medici left Florence to become Queen of France, she took along her

kitchen staff and an ample supply of artichokes. It is said that this marked the beginning of French haute cuisine.

When preparing artichokes, dip them, upside down, into a bowl of water. Cut off the stem, and remove the tough or discolored outer leaves. Trim the prickly tips of the leaves, individually, or use a sharp knife and cut off a bit less than a third of the vegetable.

Place the artichokes right side up

in a pan filled with two or three inches of water and steam boil for 20-40 minutes, until tender. To microwave, put four artichokes into a non-metallic dish with ½ cup of water, cover and microwave on high for 13-16 minutes, turning twice. Add some lemon juice to the water to prevent discoloration during cooking. Allow for one artichoke per person.

Asparagus, once believed to cure heart trouble, dropsy and toothaches

and to prevent bee stings, is highly delicate and perishable and therefore must be hand-cut. The need to move these delicate stalks on to market stands quickly and carefully accounts for its relatively high price, yet bear in mind that there is very little waste with this exalted vegetable.

Lois Thieleke, Oakland County Extension Service home economist, recommends saving the tough, fibrous portion that so many people tend to toss. "They are a wonderful flavor enhancer for things like soups and stews," she notes.

Carbone's advice for buying asparagus is to "look for firm, straight stalks with tips that are well-formed and tightly closed. They should be green for about two-thirds of the length."

Though well-known cooks like James Beard have encouraged shoppers to go for the "slim and succulent stalks," Strawberry Hills' Taylor says thicker stalks are just as good, if not better. "Thicker asparagus will be just as tender but will have better flavor," he comments.

Julia Child and Simone Beck write in their "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" that the best way to prepare asparagus is to "peel it, tie it in bundles, plunge it into a very large kettle of rapidly boiling, salted water, boil it slowly until it is just tender and drain immediately."

"The trick," Carbone says, "is to cook it al dente." To microwave, place 1 pound of spears in a non-metallic dish with 1/4 cup of water. Add 3-4 tablespoons of water and microwave on high for 4-6 minutes, turning once. Let stand, covered, a few minutes until tender. Generally 5-10 medium stalks equal one serving.

Because of their growing popularity, these vegetables have been added several pages in many of today's best-selling cookbooks. As you will see from the following sampling of recipes, these vegetables are well-placed in creative hands.

## Cook asparagus and artichokes

### ARTICHOKE SOUP

4 large fresh artichokes, or 2 packages of frozen artichoke hearts (do not substitute canned artichokes)  
4 tablespoons butter  
1 tablespoon flour  
2 cups chicken stock  
1 cup heavy cream  
1 tablespoon minced parsley  
1 teaspoon lemon juice  
½ teaspoon salt  
¼ teaspoon white pepper  
¼ cup pine nuts (for garnish)

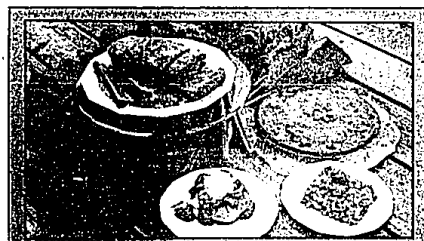
In a large enameled or stainless-steel pan, bring 2 quarts of water to a boil. Trim the stem ends of the artichokes and wash them well. Salt the water and add the artichokes. Cover the pan and simmer for 35 to 45 minutes, until the artichokes are

cooked and a knife point can pierce the stem with no resistance, or boil according to package directions if using frozen artichokes.

Drain the artichokes upside down in a colander, and let them cool until they are easy to handle. Pull the leaves off the heart, and scrape the hairy choke away and discard. With a spoon, scrape the bottom of the artichoke leaves to get the edible meat off. Place the hearts and scrapings in a blender or food processor fitted with a steel blade and puree them until smooth, adding a little of the stock if necessary.

In a saucepan, melt the butter and add the flour, stirring over low heat for 2 minutes to cook the flour.

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Artichoke and bread (top left), Mary Julia's artichoke (top right), Dave Maulo's strawberry artichoke (bottom left) and Jayne Walker's artichoke (bottom right).

## Whatever happens eat that rhubarb?

In your backyard that appears each spring but never gets harvested, or if you see the odd-looking pink stalks in the produce section this time of year, but never consider buying any, you may have a rhubarb plant.

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## Wanted for summer: potato salad recipes

The Memorial Day holiday traditionally introduces the season of picnics and hot-weather outdoor parties.

From now to September, picnic hampers are filled and buffet tables spread with a bevy of favorite summer dishes. One of the staples to accompany the main course is salad, including potato salad.

If you have a favorite potato salad recipe, we'd like you to tell us about it. Maybe it has an extra-special spice or similar ingredient that gives it zing. Or

maybe it's a way you have of using the potatoes or another vegetable that adds to the appearance and taste.

Send your recipe by Friday, June 10, to: Taste, the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36551 Schoolcraft Avenue #818. After selecting the most interesting possibilities, we'll test 'em and taste 'em.

Our taste-off crew will vote for the ones they like best. The winning recipes will be published in Taste, with prizes for first and second place.

## So many ways to enjoy fresh spinach

You have to understand that I'm not a big television addict. Sure, I can tell you what happened in last week's episode of "L.A. Law" or "St. Elsewhere," but with the exception of our local broadcast of Tiger baseball, television is a rarely enjoyed commodity.

So, to and behold, there I found myself sitting one cloudy, rainy overcast Saturday morning, sipping my coffee and taking notes about all the food commercials kids are bombarded with. Right off the bat, I can personally attest to what seems to be more frequent commercials.

Are the cartoons shorter or are our future Americans being subliminally coerced into buying "Fruity Marshmallow Krispies" and packaged drink mixes that actually show the maker pouring a full cup of sugar into the feed container with a big happy smile on its face? Even my old friend Popeye (who, thank goodness, still likes spinach) succumbed to the pre-wetted food industry by allowing commercials touting the goodness of cookies that make you laugh. (Cousin Omar used to make brownies that did that!)

All together now, in your best Olive Oyl imitation . . . "Popeye, Pleeceeeeee."

O.K., off my soapbox, now onto (or into) spinach, a vegetable grown for its highly nutritious leaves. It's a member of the goose-foot family and actually is a hardy weed related to various types

### taste buds

chef Larry Janes



of beets. Spinach originated in Persia or Southwestern Asia and has made its way to North America via the early settlers. Each year, about 200 metric tons of spinach are produced in North America.

MUCH OF THE crop is grown in California, but you'll find it doing its best in cool climates because it has a tendency to go to seed when the daily temperature reaches 80 degrees or more. Yours truly planted spinach in the garden more than six weeks ago (early April), and I now have a healthy crop that should be ready to harvest in the coming weeks.

Back in 1979, more than three-quarters of the spinach crop harvested was immediately processed by canning, freezing and baby-

food making. Today, more of us are consuming fresh spinach in salads, soups and pasta so only 60 percent is processed, with the remainder going to market as a fresh product.

Spinach leaves should be washed thoroughly before using. Not that they're overly dirty or contaminated, but soil has a tendency to cling to the leaves, especially during rain and watering. I recommend placing the fresh leaves in a sink full of cold water to soak for a few minutes to loosen the dirt particles and then run the leaves under cool water individually to remove any excess traces of dirt.

Remove the stems and place on paper towel to dry. Store, wrapped in paper towels, in the crisper of your refrigerator until ready to use.

Tossed in a salad, they add a dark contrast to other greens but I enjoy them steamed in a little wine vinegar. A favorite way of preparation is using finely chopped spinach in vegetable casseroles, lasagnas and soups, a great way to hide nutritious vegetables for the youngsters who would sooner die than eat something green.

You'll be seeing fresh spinach real soon in the markets (if you haven't seen it already), so try these recipes for a different approach in cooking something fresh and healthy.

Bon Appetit!