

Sunday, April 29, 2001

CULINARY ADVENTURES



BRUCE KONOWALOW

Asparagus: It's nutritious and delicious

With the spring season comes one of the great Michigan cash crops: asparagus. Michigan is the third-largest among states in asparagus production. This crop brings \$25 million into the state's agricultural economy.

Unusual, but interesting

Asparagus is an unusual and interesting member of the lily family. When the conditions are just right, it is possible for an asparagus spear to grow 10 inches in one 24-hour period. Each crown (or asparagus plant) will grow spears for about six weeks starting in early spring. When the temperatures are cool, asparagus fields may be picked every five days, but as the temperature increases so do the amount of harvest days. Some fields have to be picked every 24 hours at the height of the season.

Now you may be ready to go out and become asparagus farmers, but hold on. You won't be able to reap the benefits of your labors for three or four years after you plant the asparagus seeds.

■ Asparagus is a great source of nutrients, particularly for pregnant women, because it is high in folic acid. It also is a good source of potassium and chock full of other vitamins and fiber.

The good news is that if you take care of them you will not have to replant for about 15 years.

Stalks cherished
Man has eaten asparagus for thousands of years. The ancient Roman emperors cherished the tender stalks and would have them picked and preserved by freezing them at the base of the Alps, so that they could be served at the Feast of Epicurus. (And you thought Clarence Birdseye was "The Man.")

Master Chef Leopold Schaefer once vividly described the love of asparagus in his native Switzerland. During the season, special asparagus menus were created. Buffet presentations with a multitude of asparagus preparations graced restaurant tables.

Waiters served one-pound bundles of freshly cooked asparagus, accompanied by a choice of Hollandaise, Béarnaise, or Maitaise sauce. These menus included sizzling spears of Asparagus Milanese, garnished with prosciutto and Parmesan cheese, cream of asparagus soup and an unusual asparagus sorbet. Even the water in which the asparagus was cooked was served as a menu item and touted as beneficial for the kidneys. It was called a wonderful elixir to flush out the system and welcome the spring.

In Europe white asparagus is most prized. It is formed when the asparagus stalks are covered in mounds of loose dirt, shielding them from sunlight and restricting the production of chlorophyll. The process gives the normally green plants their white color.

Asparagus is a great source of nutrients, particularly for pregnant women, because it is high in folic acid. It also is a good source of potassium and chock full of other vitamins and fiber. The fact that it contains no fat or cholesterol makes it a good choice for those that are looking for healthy, good-tasting food.

Enjoy a favorite

One of my favorite spring recipes is asparagus and Swiss cheese chutney. (This recipe is so good that real men

Please see CULINARY, D2

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Mother's Day
- Focus on Wine

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PHOTO FROM "ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HERBS"

Summer treat: This simple potato salad uses the green part of leeks and a generous sprinkling of chives.

BY KEN ABRAMCZYK
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At first, you'll smell them. You snap off a leaf and place it in your mouth, capturing its essence. If you're an herb buff, you'll recognize each of them immediately - pungent cilantro, aromatic dill, hearty thyme, sweet basil, snappy chive and oh-so-fresh parsley.

Always blooming

Herbs come in handy all year long. Use them to flavor simmering stock or stew. Punch up green beans with an herb flavored butter or create a perfect accent to fish. Fresh herbs can turn a novice cook into a pseudo-chef.

■ Marinades containing soy sauce, barbecue sauce, balsamic or apple cider vinegars can flavor meat heartily and thoroughly, but often contain excess salt and sugar, which can override a meat or chicken dish.

Add fresh herbs to marinades with citrus juice or oils to create balance, strength and delicate flavor without robbing the freshness of an entrée whether it's fish or chicken.

Nice and handy

Dorothy Young of Farmington Hills dries common herbs like chive, parsley, basil and garlic. She grows some outside on her patio. "It's nice and handy," Young said. "I use the basil and garlic for a pesto and I like to make tabbouleh."

Peter Stark, who grows organic herbs on his farm in Whitmore Lake, just mixes them together when he cooks. "I like to make stuff up as I go along," he said. "You can pick thyme, lemon verbena, sage, rosemary or dill and use on chicken or fish."

Stark, a vegetarian, shares his recipes in a cookbook *In the Herb Garden* (Morris Press, \$9.50). He also instructs a class on cooking with herbs at McFit Culinary Center in Ann Arbor.

Stark, a vegetarian, shares his recipes in a

"My suggestion to people is to follow a few simple recipes and see what you like and what you don't like," Stark said.

He wrote the cookbook after hearing inquiries from several people. "They'd always ask 'what do I do with it once I grow it?'" Stark said.

Most herbs can be harvested all summer long with the exception of chive, which can dry up and become bitter in the hot summer months. (Spring is a prime time to clip chives.)

Plant lots of basil, Stark says. "If you're making pesto, you may need to do six plants," Stark said.

Test and taste
Shelly Buckman, who oversees herbal gardens as director of horticulture for Unique Restaurants Corp., a restaurant group, which includes Morels in Birmingham Farms and Northern Lakes Senfoid Company in Bloomfield Hills, recently visited the Farmington Garden Club to discuss herbs.

Buckman recommends using two teaspoons of fresh herbs to start in flavoring a dish, then the dish should be tasted, then a third teaspoon added, if desired.

Dry herbs are more concentrated. "Fresh herbs have more water," Buckman said. "Some books recommend three times as much (fresh herbs), others two times."

"Everybody likes basil, so don't be afraid to try it."

Buckman likes a good variety in her dishes, including a parsley pesto or tabbouleh.

To dry herbs, Buckman recommends putting them on a cookie sheet in the sunlight.

Ann Audette of Farmington Hills

Rosemary

COOKING WITH HERBS

Give me just a little more thyme....
and lavender, dill, and basil...

POTATO SALAD

- 1 pound potatoes, cooked and sliced
- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh chives
- 4 tablespoons chopped leeks

Put three-quarters of the potatoes into a bowl. Add the mayonnaise, lemon juice, oil, seasoning and half the chives. Using two large spoons, carefully toss until the potatoes are thoroughly coated.

Spoon the mixture into a serving bowl. Arrange the remaining potato slices over the top of the salad and sprinkle with the remaining chives. Scatter the leeks around the edge of the bowl.

Cover the bowl and put into the refrigerator to chill for 30 minutes before serving.

Makes 4 servings.

Recipe courtesy of "Encyclopedia of Herbs"



Basil

grows parsley and chives. "You can grow herbs in a large container with a hole in it, in a sunny spot near your back door," Audette said. "They grow well and you can have a lot for cooking and drying."

Harvest in the morning

Stark recommends harvesting herbs between 9 and 11 a.m., when the flavors remain up into the plant and its leaves. As the day gets hotter, the flavors tend to retreat more toward the lower part of the plant, Stark says.

Gardeners should harvest only about 5 to 10 percent of the plant at one time, Stark said.

Herbal flowers can also flavor dishes. The flowers of many herbs, including rosemary, oregano, chive and basil, are edible, Buckman said. "Bee balm tastes great," Buckman said. Many tea drinkers use it for the spiciness.

Chive flowers work well in mashed potatoes, while lavender sauce can be used in milder foods like chicken and fish, Buckman said. "You can make rose butter. Instead of herbal butters, use flower butter."

Scented geraniums are good in, of all things, a pound cake, Buckman said.

For a lengthy supply of sugared flowers, gardeners can coat edible flowers with egg whites, then coat with superfine sugar. "It dries and preserves it," said Buckman. "Do that for one summer's day and you will have enough for a year."

Peter Stark's Renaissance Acres Organic Herb Farm, 4450 Valentine Road, will be open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Thursday, Friday and Saturday, May to September. Take U.S. 23 to North Territorial, west to Jennings Road. Turn right on Jennings to Valentine and watch for nursery on right side, just past Merrill Road. Call (734) 449-8336.

See inside Taste for recipes.



Dill

RECIPES TO SHARE

Stew offers healthy main or side dish

BY KEN ABRAMCZYK
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Athena Andrews of Farmington Hills fixes a Greek vegetable stew for those cool evenings when a warm, but light, dish is welcome.

Flavored with potatoes, carrots, celery, onions, lemon juice and stewed tomatoes, the dish is enjoyed by Andrews during Lenten season, but she says it can be served anytime during the year.

"It's a lowfat recipe, and a lot of people go for lowfat dishes," Andrews said. "There's no butter or margarine in it."

Of course, a little olive oil can add a little more flavor to the dish, Andrews said.

Andrews said it makes a great side

dish. "It can be served with rice," she said.

Everyone knows the best recipes are the ones you share. Send us your favorite original recipe, and if it's chosen to be featured in the Recipe to Share in Taste, we'll send you a cookbook.

Send recipes for consideration in Recipe to Share to Ken Abramczyk, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or fax them to (734) 591-7279, or e-mail kabranczyk@oe.homedcomm.net

Please include a daytime phone number and the best time to call, so we can contact you about your recipe. Try to be as specific with recipe details such as can and package sizes.

GREEK VEGETABLE STEW

- 3 potatoes, peeled and cut into eighths
- 3 celery stalks with leaves, cut up
- 3 carrots, chopped into 1-inch pieces
- 1 onion, sliced
- Juice of 1 lemon
- Black pepper
- 1/2 cup stewed tomatoes or tomato sauce

Cut up vegetables and mix with lemon juice. Add tomatoes or tomato sauce and one cup of water. Cover and cook for one hour.

Fresh zucchini can be cut up and added to the stew or olive oil can be added, if desired.

Tell us about your potato salad

Nothing beats summer heat like a great potato salad.

While we're just getting into the gardens and spring produce and planting, soon the summer barbecue season will be upon us. And that means family get-togethers and parties with friends.

Do you have a potato salad you truly enjoy or your family and friends badger you for the recipe? Why not share it with us and our readers?

If your recipe is featured in an upcoming story in Taste, we'll send you a free cookbook. Send the recipe and why your potato salad is such a hit to Taste Editor, Ken Abramczyk, Observer Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150 or e-mail kabranczyk@oe.homedcomm.net