

Asparagus: Welcome to Spring and Let Us Aspire to Green Glory

SARA THOMPSON, KP NEWS

My appreciation for asparagus took time to develop. I was a child of the 1950s, a time when vegetables were overcooked or canned. Hardly a winning combination for asparagus. Not to mention what asparagus did to the smell of my pee. Yes, we're going there.

A trip to Italy in the 1980s brought me to my senses. My husband was invited to speak at a scientific conference, and I got to tag along. We were in Florence and wandered through museums and churches, and picnicked in parks. The art was magnificent and so was the food. I ordered asparagus Tuscan style for dinner one night. Fat tender spears topped with butter and Parmesan. A glass of wine with crusty bread and my meal was complete. I never thought of asparagus in the same way again.

Joshua McFadden, chef and the author of the book "Six Seasons: A New Way with Vegetables," has useful insights. Size doesn't matter — thickness or thinness doesn't correlate with tenderness. Be sure the asparagus tips are tightly closed and that the stalks aren't dried out or woody. Purple and green varieties taste the same. Prep is easy, but removing the lower fibrous part of the stalk is important. Just bend it and let it snap — it's a foolproof way to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Here are some of my favorite recipes.

Roasted Asparagus

1 pound of asparagus
2 teaspoons olive oil
Kosher salt, fresh ground pepper

Toss asparagus with olive oil. Place on a baking sheet and roast at 350 or 400 for about 10 minutes, until the stalks are just tender. Serve plain or sprinkle with fresh Parmesan, lemon zest, or the herb of your choice — basil, dill, marjoram, rosemary, try whatever you've got handy.

Asparagus Potato Salad

2 pounds of red potatoes
3 large shallots, minced (I often use half a red onion instead)
¾ cup parsley — stems removed and coarsely chopped
2 tablespoons wine vinegar
1 cup mayonnaise
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
3 tablespoons capers
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
1 pound asparagus



You can successfully grow your own asparagus in gardens on this side of the Cascades with a little patient tending. *Shutterstock photo*



Cut potatoes into bite-sized pieces. Place in salted water, bring to a boil, cook until barely tender (about 5 minutes). Drain and cool.

Steam asparagus until crisp-tender, cool, and cut into 1-inch pieces. Sauté if preferred.

Mix the vinegar, mayo and mustard. Season with salt and pepper.

Place potatoes, shallots, asparagus and capers in a large bowl and mix with the dressing. Garnish with parsley and serve.

Asparagus Risotto

The esteemed Katrina Herringbottom had a great recipe for risotto in the November 2023 edition of the Key Peninsula News. Just cut asparagus into bite-sized pieces, sauté in butter until tender, and add to the risotto before serving. Or here's a variation:

5 cups warm chicken stock
1 ½ tablespoons butter
1 ½ tablespoons olive oil
¼ cup diced onion
2 cups arborio rice
¼ cup dry white wine
½ cup Parmesan cheese, grated
2 tablespoons lemon juice

The distinctive odor in urine following asparagus ingestion is due to asparagusic acid, a compound named after the vegetable, which breaks down into several sulfur byproducts.

In January 2011, four scientists published an academic article, "Excretion and Perception of a Characteristic Odor in Urine after Asparagus Ingestion: A Psychophysical and Genetic Study" in the journal *Chemical Senses*.

The study concluded that about 8% of 38 subjects studied did not produce the characteristic asparagus odor in sufficient concentration to be detected. About 6% of subjects were unable to detect asparagus odor, although their sense of smell was otherwise normal. The two traits were independent of each other. And the ability to detect asparagus odor was linked to a specific olfactory receptor gene.

1 tablespoon grated lemon peel
1 pound asparagus, cut into 1-inch pieces

Bring broth to simmer in a large saucepan over medium heat. Cover to keep warm.

Melt butter with oil in a heavy large saucepan over medium heat. Add onion and sauté until tender, about 6 minutes. Add rice; stir for 1 minute.

Add wine and stir until evaporated. Add 1 ½ cups hot broth; simmer until absorbed, stirring occasionally to keep rice from sticking.

Add remaining broth ½ cup at a time, allowing broth to be absorbed before adding until rice is creamy and tender, about 35 minutes.

Sauté asparagus in butter and/or olive oil until tender. Stir in cheese, lemon juice and lemon peel. Add asparagus to

risotto. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve.

Asparagus Soup

This is adapted from a Julia Child recipe for cream of spinach soup. It works for about any green vegetable.

5 cups chicken stock
1 pound asparagus, cut into pieces, tips set aside
1/3 cup rice
Nutmeg or other herb/spice as desired
Salt and pepper to taste

Bring stock to a boil. Add rice and asparagus. Simmer until rice and asparagus are tender. Use an immersion blender to purée desired consistency. Steam or sauté asparagus tips until barely tender and add to soup just before serving. ■