

Notes on Asparagus

Asparagus is a great spring vegetable, with a fairly short season. Fresh asparagus is sweeter than most people expect, and surprisingly versatile. When preparing asparagus be sure to snap the ends (no need to cut, they will break off at a natural point) and not to over cook. No matter how you are preparing asparagus, it will cook quickly and will be a vibrant green when done. Asparagus is especially good with acid (citrus fruits, vinegars) as well as with salty meats and cheeses. It pairs nicely with a number of dishes, but particularly fish.

Simple Ideas for Asparagus

- Sprinkle with sea salt and olive oil. Grill on the BBQ or in a fry pan. Serve as is or with a splash of lemon juice and a bit of grated Parmesan cheese.
- Bake asparagus in a preheated 350° oven for 5 to 10 minutes with a drizzle of olive oil and balsamic vinegar.
- Prepare asparagus as desired, cut into pieces and add to any favorite pasta dish. Asparagus is particularly good in cream or wine sauces, and with a classic Pasta Carbonara.
- Boil asparagus for 5 minutes and drain. Serve drizzled with melted butter, fresh mint, lemon juice, salt and pepper
- Prepare asparagus as desired, then dress in favorite tangy vinaigrette.
- Wrap stalks of asparagus in bacon. Place on baking sheet and bake in a preheated 425° oven for 10 minutes or until bacon is crispy. Serve as a side or appetizer.
- Quickly pan fry a few asparagus stalks and add to grilled cheese sandwiches.

Creamy Asparagus Soup

Adapted from Jamie Olivers' *Jamie at Home: Cooking your way to the Good Life*

Ingredients (serves 4)

¾ lb. asparagus
olive oil
1 onion
1 stick celery
1 quart Chicken or vegetable stock
salt and pepper

Prep your asparagus by snapping the ends, cutting the tips off and setting aside, and then chopping up the remaining stalk into ½ inch lengths. Peel and dice onion, and chop celery. In a large saucepan with a good glug of olive oil, sauté onion and celery until they are soft and sweaty. Add prepared asparagus stalk and stock and simmer the mixture for 20 minutes. Remove from heat and use an immersion blender, standard blender, or food processor to puree the mixture (be careful, it's hot!). Season the soup to your liking with salt and pepper. Return pureed soup to stove, add reserved asparagus tips, and bring to a boil. Then turn soup down to a simmer. When the asparagus tips have softened, the soup is ready to serve.

Serve this soup with toast, poached eggs, a dollop of plain yogurt or whatever else suites you.

Savory Spring Bread Pudding

Adapted from Georgeanne Brennan's *Potager: Fresh Garden Cooking in the French Style*

Notes: This dish is a great use of leftover bread. You can store ends of bread in a bag in the freezer for a week or so, and then thaw a day before preparing this recipe. This dish is excellent for any meal of the day, including breakfast!

Ingredients (serves 4)

6 to 8 thick slices of dry bread

1½ c. milk

½ lb. asparagus

3 eggs

½ tsp. salt

½ tsp. ground black pepper

6 ounces of two to three varieties sharp and creamy grated cheese

(examples: Fontina, Parmesan, Swiss)

¼ c. chopped fresh herbs (whatever is in season, chives, parsley, sage, thyme, etc.)

butter

Break bread into pieces and place in a shallow dish. Pour 1¼ cup milk over bread and let soak until bread has absorbed the majority of the liquid (about 30 minutes). While bread is soaking snap the ends of the asparagus, and cut each stalk in half lengthwise. Steam asparagus until just tender, 2 to 3 minutes. Beat the eggs, salt, pepper and remaining ¼ cup milk in a bowl until blended and slightly frothy. In a deep, greased ovenproof pan layer one third of the soaked bread, then layer 1/3 of the asparagus, 1/3 of the cheese, and 1/3 of the herbs. Repeat process twice more for a total of three layers. Pour the milk mixture over all the layers, and dot the top with butter. Bake in a preheated 350° oven for 45 minutes, or until the top is a crusty golden brown and a knife inserted into the middle of the dish comes out clean.

Stir Fried Asparagus, Three Ways

Adapted from Mark Bittman's *How to Cook Everything*

Snap asparagus ends. Simmer or steam, drain and pat dry. Use immediately, or store in refrigerator for up to 2 days.

Heat wok, or large skillet over high heat for 3 to 4 minutes. Add 2 tbsp. of peanut oil (or other oil) and wait a few seconds. Add asparagus. Cook, stirring carefully over high heat for 3 to 4 minutes.

1. When asparagus is starting to brown, remove from heat, sprinkle with salt and serve immediately.
2. Substitute a tbsp. of soy sauce for the salt, and add a 1 tbsp. dark sesame oil if you like.
3. Add 1 tbsp. minced garlic with the asparagus, and/or red pepper flakes to taste. When the asparagus starts to brown, add ½ cup stock or water and cook until the liquid evaporates. Serve asparagus dressed in 2 tbsp. hoisin or oyster sauce.