
WHAT'S IN SEASON?

Asparagus & Strawberries

BY BARBARA KOBSAR

Sturdy bundles of fresh local asparagus standing tall on a farmers' market table are the quintessence of spring. The local "grass" season begins in March and lingers into June if weather conditions cooperate.

Barbara Cecchini from Cecchini and Cecchini Farms in Brentwood runs a hands-on operation. "All of our asparagus is cut and packed by hand," she says; "it's the only way to do it." Once the ideal 80-degree weather hits, the asparagus spears can produce a noticeable growth spurt during a single day.

Cutting is necessary every day or so during the peak, prime season. Ninety-degree temperatures may actually stop the growing process, and asparagus spears don't seem to like anything under 50 degrees at night. "We watch and wait for the ten-inch plump spears to cut," Cecchini says, "the ones that are the most

tender and flavorful."

Sixty to 70 percent of the nation's asparagus is produced in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta area, hence the reference to "Delta grass." Asparagus is a perennial; its crowns lie dormant during the cool winter months and send out shoots (spears) as they're tempted by warm spring days. A spear just poking through the ground takes five to seven days to mature to the point of being ready for harvest.

Color of the spears and condition of the tips are what determine asparagus quality. "The pencil-thin asparagus are really old and coming from stressed crowns," says Cecchini, "and probably show up at the end of the season." These small asparagus spears are not to be wasted though—Cecchini recommends using them in frittatas where you don't need all that moisture.

While some asparagus aficionados still insist on shopping for small stalks, I shop for plump and crisp. Look at the cut end first: moisture indicates freshness. A small, woody white portion at the end of the bright green spear helps to retain moisture.

Buds forming the tip of the asparagus should be dry, firm, and tightly closed to form a point. Most hint of a purplish color, with those exposed to excess cold showing deeper shades.

The ubiquity of asparagus this time of year reminds me I can stand behind my philosophy of buying only the fresh vegetables I need for a few days at a time. Asparagus is very perishable. If storage is necessary, cut ¼-inch from the ends and wrap the asparagus in damp paper towels. Place in a plastic bag and refrigerate for two to three days. Asparagus slowly loses its natural sugars and becomes tough over time, so the sooner you enjoy it the better.

Simple preparation is best for asparagus. Asparagus may be served raw, but I find blanching it for a minute helps to release some of its natural sweetness. Bend each spear gently to break it naturally between the tender and tough portion. (Alternatively

SPRING CROPS

Apricots
Arugula
Artichokes
Asparagus
Avocados
Blackberries
Blueberries
Cherries
Cilantro
Cucumbers
English peas
Fava beans
Garlic
Green garlic
Lettuces
Mushrooms
Nectarines
New Potatoes
Olallieberries
Onions
Parsley
Plums
Radishes
Raspberries
Snow peas
Spinach
Strawberries
Tomatoes



Photo by Carole Topalian



tion is necessary to control diseases and pests in agriculture. Methyl bromide, as an effective product in controlling plant pathogens and other soilborne pests, is being replaced. In 1992 methyl bromide was identified as an ozone-depleting substance by the Montreal Protocol.

According to Dan Legard of the California Strawberry Commission, methyl bromide was not used on approximately 50 percent of the total acres of strawberries being grown in California. The most popular

alternative is a combination of telone (1,3-D) and chloropicrin. “There are some problems that have arisen from using the alternatives,” he says, citing increased costs associated with reduced yields and increased weed pressure. However, Legard says the relatively lower cost for the alternatives has helped to buffer the impact of lower production. More information is available at www.calstrawberry.com.

Several varieties of strawberries are available during the season. Getting to know each variety gives me the edge on choosing a rich, flavorful berry. All are low in fat and calories and naturally high in fiber, vitamin C, folates, potassium, and antioxidants. The size of the strawberry does not affect its flavor—this is determined by growing conditions, stage of ripeness at harvest, and variety of the berry.

Growers are constantly coming up with new varieties in search of the perfect match between location, soil, and plant. Camarossa, Diamante, and Seascape make their way to market during the season. Chandler, an old-fashioned variety, remains high on my list as the perfect berry for eating and jam-making. I’ll keep my eyes open for the newest addition: the Albion strawberry. Reports of a deep red color and a consistent sweet flavor are encouraging.

STRAWBERRIES

Strawberries are easily crushed by their own weight, so if storage is necessary, place unwashed berries in a single layer between paper towels. Place in a moistureproof container and refrigerate for three to four days if necessary.

Strawberries freeze well. Rinse, drain and hull berries. Place in a single layer on a baking sheet to freeze, before storing in freezer bags for up to 6 months.

Asparagus is shipped worldwide from farms here in the East Bay. It takes specially designed containers to ensure the “grass” arrives in good condition. A moist, absorbent fiber pad is placed on the bottom of the container to prevent the spears from drying out, and space is left at the top to allow for the elongation of spears, which continue to grow.

cut 1½ to 2 inches off the bottom of the spears and use a vegetable peeler to peel up the stalk about 4 inches).

Wash asparagus thoroughly—the tips may be a little sandy. Add to 1 inch of boiling water in a wide, shallow pot or pan, cover and cook for two to three minutes or until just tender when pierced with a fork. Drain and serve immediately with a little lemon, or butter and salt and pepper. Or cut cooked asparagus into smaller sections and toss into pasta dishes, stir-fries or on a bed of fresh salad greens with red pepper garnish and a vinaigrette dressing. Delicious.

Baskets of berries are beautiful to behold, but a closer look reveals that some changes have taken place in agricultural practices in the strawberry fields. The fact is that pre-planting soil fumiga-

Enjoy, and see you at the farmers’ markets. 🍓

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