
THE ARTISANAL GARDEN

ASPARAGUS

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID COHLMAYER



It was twenty years ago that one of our summer-student workers started bringing in wonderful slender asparagus from his family farm to give to our staff. At the same time, several of our chefs were using slender “baby” asparagus on their menus, but they could only obtain it from California. Why? Because our growers’ association had set a minimum diameter for Ontario asparagus. Our student relayed information about this regulation to his father, who happened to be a regional director. He convened an emergency conference-call meeting to discuss changing the policy. Two days later, fresh slender Ontario asparagus became available for sale.

Sadly, asparagus is now available year-round, with China and Peru dominating the world market with cheap asparagus. In their deserts, they can produce the crop at will by turning on irrigation when they need production; and can force dormancy by turning off the water. They have already shut down over half of our local production. But if you just ignore the imports, you can again savour the annual excitement of springtime-fresh asparagus. This is the first vegetable to be harvested from our local gardens, and we want to make generous use of this delicious perennial shoot for the few weeks it is available – normally from early May until late June.

On a protein-per-calorie basis, asparagus is a better source of protein than any meat, eggs, cheese or beans, and it provides perfectly balanced nutrition. So enjoy it every day it’s in season! Use asparagus spears raw in crudité, steamed until bright green, stir-fried, grilled, in pasta dishes, oven-roasted, pickled, or in a frittata or quiche. Just don’t overcook them. For recipes such as soups and stews that require a longer cooking time, white asparagus looks better. And don’t forget them for marvellous breakfasts.

Just be aware that your urine will have a sulphurous smell soon after you eat asparagus. This is perfectly harmless.

HISTORICAL VARIETIES

The Romans were the first to take spindly *Asparagus officinalis* from the wild and turn it into a very popular cultivated form. Fat-stemmed varieties (the diameter of a loonie) were developed during the 1700s. The thick stems with narrow tips required a special cooking technique of tying the shoots into bundles, as described by Escoffier. But this “improved” asparagus took years to establish and was prone to diseases, so it remained a luxury.

In the 1900s, thinner, disease-resistant varieties were developed. These became more commonly available and did not require special

cooking techniques. They became affectionately known as “sparrow grass.” In the past few decades, breeders have been selecting for varieties that only produce male plants, because these are more productive and live twice as long (over twenty years).

There are now three types available in our markets:

- White-stemmed, harvested while still growing underground (making it more expensive) before chlorophyll-producing sunlight has turned it green, and having a nutty, bitter taste that is most favoured in Europe.
- Green-stemmed, harvested above ground, with a fully rounded flavour that is most favoured in North America.
- Purple-stemmed, a new exceptionally sweet variety that is best served raw because it turns green after cooking.

From time to time I see “baby asparagus,” but this is really springtime shoots from hops plants (and they have a distinct beer flavour). At Cookstown Greens, we harvest and sell immature asparagus branches we call “asparagettes.” We also harvest “bi-coloured” asparagus, but this is really white asparagus harvested one day after it emerges from the ground. A few hours of sunlight after the spear breaks through the soil gives each white tip a lovely green-and-purple blush.

QUALITY GROWING

We start by preparing a very rich soil bed by deep-digging about six inches of compost. Then we spend a year with occasional cultivating to reduce the weed pressure and to let the soil-life acclimate. During this period, you can decide which variety you want to grow. If you choose one of the new all-male (mostly male, actually) varieties, it is probably best to purchase 2-year-old roots of University of Guelph’s Millennium. If you want something more exotic, start some seeds and grow your own 2-year-old plants. You will probably have to join a seed-saver group such as Seeds of Diversity Canada to obtain the seeds you want. If you want to risk trying a giant heritage variety, look for Conover’s Colossal.

Dig a 6-to-12-inch-deep trench (four feet apart if you are doing more than one) to lay in 2-year-old asparagus roots eighteen inches apart. (Deeper roots produce fatter spears.) Fill in the trench. The small roots easily push a spear up through all that soil. Wait at least two more years before you begin harvesting the shoots (well... you can steal a few). Keep the soil cool by growing a cover crop around the asparagus stems. I find that annual weeds work great and presumably provide exactly



what the soil requires. (Just be sure to rogue out any perennial weeds such as twitch grass, which will compete with the perennial asparagus.)

The third year after transplanting you may begin a small (two-week) harvest. In the fifth year you may begin full (six-to-seven-week) harvests. After each spring harvest, let the beautiful ferny leaves feed the roots for next spring's harvest. With such deep roots, the leaves rarely show any water stress, although they do appreciate periodic deep watering during the hot summer months. Originally a saltwater marsh plant, asparagus benefits from a sprinkling of rock salt (a yearly handful around each plant). In the fall, the leaves turn a spectacular brilliant yellow. Leave them there all winter to trap snow over your plants. □

David Cohlmeier is the founder of Cookstown Greens (www.cookstowngreens.com), which grows and delivers premium vegetables and salad greens to many of Toronto's most critically acclaimed restaurants, hotels and caterers.

Left: "Asparagettes" (note their actual size in relation to the quarter); Above: Bi-coloured asparagus

ASPARAGUS RISOTTO

by David Cohlmeier

Risotto is a wonderful dish for highlighting seasonal vegetables. Prepare this with fiddleheads (see preparation directions on page 20), peas, green beans, shelling beans, fennel bulbs, carrots and more. A proper risotto is made with arborio, carnaroli or vialone nano rice, which are now readily available in the rice section of most supermarkets. When cooked with frequent stirring, this rice swells up to be creamy on the outside with a wonderful al dente bite on the inside.

Asparagus is in the lily family, so it makes sense to combine it with another member of the lily family – onions. To highlight these, I like to first caramelize them to a golden brown.

To remove any tough portions of the asparagus, you can bend each stalk until the tough butt snaps off. Alternately, you can tap each spear starting from the butt end using a dull knife. When it cuts through, you have found the tender portion. Modern-day fresh asparagus does not need peeling but if you wish to do so, peel the skin from the tip to the butt.

Makes 4 servings

- 2 medium onions, finely diced
- 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cups arborio, carnaroli or vialone nano rice
- 2 cups dry white wine
- 2 cups chicken or vegetable broth, or water
- 1 pound Ontario asparagus, cut into 1/2-inch lengths, or other seasonal vegetables (see above)
- 1/4 cup whipping cream or half-and-half
- 1 tbsp freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1 tsp hot sauce, optional
- 1/4 cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
- kosher salt or sea salt, to taste

Put the onions and oil into a large saucepan filled with 1/8-inch of lightly salted boiling water. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally until the onions are golden brown, about 5 minutes. Meanwhile, in a medium saucepan, add the wine and broth, and bring up to a simmer.

Add the rice to the onions and cook, stirring often, until the rice is translucent, 1 to 2 minutes. Ladle about one-quarter of the hot wine mixture into the rice and stir well. Cook, stirring often, until most of the liquid has been absorbed. Repeat the process with another one-quarter of the wine mixture. Repeat until all of the wine mixture has been used, adding the asparagus to the pot along with the final portion of the wine mixture.

When most of the liquid has been absorbed, stir in the cream, lemon juice, hot sauce (if using) and grated cheese and cook for 1 minute. Taste the risotto and adjust seasoning as needed. Serve immediately, while the risotto is still runny. Risotto is traditionally served in a bowl and eaten with a fork. Serve with additional Parmigiano-Reggiano for grating at the table. You may want to garnish the bowls with another springtime lily – chive flowers.

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