

In Season Now : Asparagus



(This post is the first in a series of posts planned for Cooking Monster, where we'll take an item that's in season right now, and help you figure out delicious ways to take advantage of them.)

Asparagus is at its peak in the months of March, April, and May. Whether you prefer thick or thin asparagus stalks, look for specimens with tight, closed buds. White asparagus is exactly the same plant as green asparagus, but they've been grown in the dark to prevent photosynthesis, with the farmer either mounding the dirt over the plants as they grow, or by covering them with a box.

The bottoms of the stems tends to be a tough and inedible. You have two options of dealing with this problem. Option one has you taking one stem in your hands and bending it until it snaps, then trim the rest of the stems to that length. Option 2 has you trimming off tough green skin towards the bottom, and then snapping it off further down.

One easy, delicious method of cooking asparagus is to roast it, which will intensify the flavor. Toss trimmed asparagus in a bowl with some olive oil and plenty of salt. Spread them out in a single layer on a sheet pan, and roast in a hot oven for

15 to 30 minutes, depending on the thickness of the stalks. Or toss them on the cool side of the grill for a smoky flavor.

Another of my favorites is to make an asparagus risotto..

Asparagus Risotto

1 c. short grain rice (risotto)

1/2 c. white wine

1 lb. fresh asparagus

1 T olive oil

1 t salt

6 oz. cooked Virginia ham, or browned bacon, or diced prosciutto

3 T butter

6 oz. parmesan cheese, grated

6 cups boiling water

Roast the asparagus in the oven with the olive oil and the salt, turning once or twice, until the stems are soft, and the tips are crispy. (No need to peel or break the bottoms off yet.)

Once the asparagus is cool enough to handle, chop off the bottom 1/3 to 1/2 of the stem, and set aside, then cut the remains in bite sized pieces. Put the bottoms in a food processor with a little water, or maybe cream, and turn into a paste.

Put the water on to boil.

Sweat the shallots for a few minutes in the bottom of a saucier or sauce pan in a little butter. Add the rice, and stir occasionally for a couple of minutes. You don't want to toast it, but you do want the oil to penetrate. Stir in the wine and let it evaporate.

Now start ladle in the water. 2 cups for the first addition. Stir and let simmer for a few minutes, cover off. You want to

wait until the water is absorbed or evaporates enough so that when you pull the spoon through the rice, it doesn't immediately refill with liquid... but you don't want to wait so long that the rice begins to scorch at all. Add some more water, less this time, and repeat the process. It'll take about 20 minutes this way, with 4, maybe 5 additions of water. Taste a grain when you think it's close. It should be soft, but still have a little bit of a bite. With the last addition of water, you want the consistency to remain a little soupy, sort of like oatmeal. You may not end up using all of the water.

Now add the condiments ... the ham, the asparagus, the asparagus paste, the cheese, and the rest of the butter. A few grinds of pepper wouldn't hurt, or maybe even some nutmeg.

Serve steaming hot.

Have you got a favorite recipe for asparagus? Let us know! Add your comment below!

Sunday Supper : Stovetop Spring Gratin

1½c orrchetti or capelletti

½ package frozen vegetables (spinach, asparagus, edamame, broccoli)

4oz diced cooked ham

chopped leeks
2T butter
1T dijon mustard
 $\frac{1}{2}$ t dried thyme
salt & pepper
 $\frac{1}{4}$ c cream
4oz shredded cheese (I used jack)

So I start the well-salted water boiling for the pasta. Once that was going, I toss in the pasta and set the timer for 10 minutes. In a large frying pan, over high heat, I put in the frozen vegetables and some water, and put a lid on to let the steam thaw them. Meanwhile, I diced the ham, and the leeks, and stir them in to heat up, too, along with the mustard and thyme, mixing the mustard in with the water to loosen it. Once the pasta is done, I remove the lid and, using a spider, I put it in the pan with the butter. I waited until the water was almost gone, stirring frequently, at which point I turned the heat to low, and added the cream and the cheese, and let it simmer for a couple of minutes. Start to finish, 17 minutes, not counting the time it took for the pasta water to come to the boil.