

## Asparagus

Asparagus is a flowering plant species whose young shoots are eaten as a vegetable. Native to Western Europe, North Africa and western Asia, it is also cultivated in North America. Asparagus has been enjoyed from early times, by such diverse groups as the ancient Egyptians, the ancient Greeks and the Romans.

Only the young shoots of asparagus are eaten, which contain no fat or cholesterol, are low in sodium and are good sources of folic acid, potassium and dietary fiber. Peru is the world's top asparagus exporter, followed by China and Mexico. Asparagus is also grown in our own Sacramento River delta, in and around Stockton. And in northern Europe, where asparagus is grown in the Rhine River delta, the preference is for white asparagus--which is ordinary asparagus that is grown under the soil so that it avoids photosynthesis and never turns green. It is sweeter, milder and more tender than ordinary green asparagus. The Italians developed a purple variety as well which they use in cooking. By the way, thin asparagus is not younger than thick. The first shoots that appear during the season are thin--ones that come up later are thick.

The Chinese love asparagus in stir-fried dishes, along with beef or chicken. It can be quickly grilled over a charcoal fire, or boiled or steamed. It is also delicious in soups and stews. The Greeks make a veal and asparagus stew thickened with egg and lemon juice that is simply wonderful. The Stockton Asparagus festival features deep-fried asparagus. And although asparagus is often topped with mayonnaise or parmesan cheese, really fresh asparagus needs only a little melted butter and salt.

For a delicious fried asparagus side dish, trim a pound of asparagus and cook them in a large frying pan of boiling salted water until just tender—it only takes a few minutes. Then remove the asparagus and drain and dry on paper towels. In a small bowl, beat one medium egg with a tablespoon of milk. Pour the egg mixture onto a plate. Put a cup of fine dry breadcrumbs onto another plate. Dip the asparagus spears into the egg mixture and then roll them in the breadcrumbs. Fry the spears in a large skillet in about 1/4 cup of olive oil until lightly browned. I also like to cook a couple of mashed cloves of garlic in the oil first until the garlic turns a light tan, then remove from the oil and discard. This gives the oil a great garlic flavor. Drain the fried spears on paper towels, sprinkle with a little salt and freshly ground black pepper and some grated Romano or Parmesan cheese and serve.

For a quick and elegant asparagus quiche for brunch or a light dinner, peel and thinly slice half a medium onion. Sauté the onion in a couple of tablespoons of melted butter over medium heat until soft and the onion just starts to turn color. Don't let the onion get too brown, but a little color is fine. Then, in a large bowl, beat together 3 large eggs, one green onion, trimmed and finely chopped, the sautéed onion, 1/2 cup of milk, and 1/2 cup of cream. Mix in 1 cup of shredded Swiss cheese and 1 cup of shredded cheddar cheese. Add one cup of cooked and diced asparagus. You can add some crumbled bacon if you like, but it's not really necessary. Pour the mixture into a nine-inch store-bought pie shell and bake in a preheated 375 degree oven for about 45 minutes, until a toothpick or knife blade inserted near the middle comes out clean. Allow the quiche to stand for five to ten minutes before serving.

While supermarket pre-shredded Swiss and cheddar cheese will work fine, for a more elegant taste get some real Gruyere cheese and some real English cheddar and grate it yourself. The taste will amaze you.

For brunch, serve your asparagus quiche with a bowl of mixed fruit. Right now I would use equal amounts of fresh strawberries and fresh pineapple. Sweeten the fruit mixture with a little pure maple syrup. Add some elegant breakfast pastries or some home-baked biscuits for a delightful brunch.

For supper, add a butter lettuce salad dressed with lemon juice and extra-virgin olive oil and garnished with some thinly sliced fresh white mushrooms and some shavings of real Parmesan cheese. A crusty loaf of bread and a glass of dry white wine are all you need. For dessert, one of Andrae's Bakery's gooey chocolate brownies makes a wonderful end to a delicious supper. Enjoying this season's asparagus, this is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.