

## PASTA WITH ASPARAGUS

Spring finally arrived a few weeks ago, and with it the first of the spring vegetables. One of my favorite spring vegetables is asparagus. We're lucky to live near the Delta, which is where much of the country's asparagus is grown. I eat asparagus plain, dressed with mayonnaise or butter or lemon juice, cold and dressed with a vinaigrette, just about any way it comes.

This next recipe was originally made with peas and penne when I first saw it, and I changed it to use asparagus and fettuccine—although the type of pasta you use is up to you—you can use long pasta, like spaghetti or fettuccine, or short pasta, like penne or bow ties. You'll need a couple of shallots, a pound of asparagus, a package of prosciutto, butter, cream and freshly grated Parmesan cheese. This is a time to splurge and buy real Reggiano Parmagiana and grate it fresh—it makes a big difference.

I like to use thick asparagus for this dish, which I peel with a vegetable peeler. I think the thicker stalks have more flavor and peeling them lets them cook more quickly. Put a large kettle of water on to cook your pasta. While the water is heating, peel and finely chop the shallots and trim the ends off and peel the asparagus. Cut the asparagus into two-inch lengths. Take the prosciutto out of the package, pull it apart, and chop it very roughly.

Melt a tablespoon of butter in a frying pan over medium heat, and when hot add the chopped shallots. If you don't have any shallots, you can use a couple of tablespoons of chopped onion. Stir for several minutes until the shallots become translucent. Don't let the shallots brown. Add the chopped prosciutto and stir for just a minute or so. You can leave the prosciutto out if you're cooking for vegetarians. Add the asparagus and cook, stirring frequently, for several minutes. Pour in about  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of cream, turn the heat up, and let the cream boil for several minutes, stirring often, until it thickens up somewhat.

Season to taste with salt and freshly ground black pepper—but go easy on the salt as the prosciutto is quite salty. Taste a piece of the asparagus—I like it cooked but not mushy—still with a little firmness. By the way, if you don't want to bother peeling the asparagus, buy a pound of the thinnest stalks you find, break off the fibrous ends, cut the stalks into 2-inch lengths and cook them the way the same as for the peeled asparagus. Turn off the frying pan when the asparagus is cooked.

Cook half a pound of pasta (or a little more) according to the directions on the package. By the way, never put olive oil into your pasta cooking water. It just makes the pasta slippery and the sauce won't stay on it.

When the pasta is cooked, save half a cup of the pasta water and then drain the pasta. Put the cooked pasta into the frying pan with the asparagus and cream and turn the heat back on to medium. Cook, stirring constantly, for a few minutes until the dish is well mixed and the flavors of the sauce have gotten into the pasta. If the dish starts to get a little dry, moisten it with some of the saved pasta cooking water. Serve at once, with lots of freshly grated Parmesan cheese to spoon over the top. This serves two as a main course or four as an appetizer, and can easily be doubled.

If you don't like asparagus, (perish the thought!), this dish is also excellent made with sugar snap peas, or even with just plain ordinary peas, either fresh or frozen. You can add some sliced mushrooms when you start sautéing the shallots if you like. You can add some grated Gruyere or Fontina cheese to the dish when you put the pasta back into the frying pan with the asparagus and cream. You can garnish the dish with some chopped parsley.

When tomatoes are in season I like to serve this dish with some sliced ripe tomatoes, dressed simply with some balsamic vinegar and extra-virgin olive oil, salt and pepper, and with some chopped chives sprinkled over the top. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.