

Asparagus

Asparagus officinalis

One of the very first spring messengers of the garden is the perennial asparagus spear, with its nose poking through the moist soil. Asparagus stands alone in its unique and simple gourmet qualities. Interestingly, asparagus is related to onions, garlic, and other members of the lily family.

Asparagus has been used since ancient times in many parts of the world. Its name is most likely derived from the Persian word *asparag*, meaning “sprout.” However, the Greek word *aspharagos* means “long as one’s throat,” and in England during the 18th century this vegetable was known as “sparrow grass.” Regardless, its popularity lives on.

Asparagus season is short, adding to its specialness. Enjoy it thoroughly while it’s here!

Not only is asparagus a culinary delight, it is also a nutritional winner. Generally, raw asparagus ranks high in vitamins A, B-complex, and C, and is also rich in minerals from the soil, particularly potassium and zinc. Nibble on some tender asparagus raw for its full flavor and nutritional value. Like other vegetables, it will lose some, though not all, of its B-complex and vitamin C during the cooking process. Popular also with those who are counting calories, asparagus contains no fat and only 35 calories per one-cup serving.

Cooking Tips

- Snap off or remove with a knife the bottommost woody part of the spear.
- Try tender asparagus spears raw. Chop into a salad, or enjoy with a dip.
- Asparagus is best cooked simply. Here are two suggestions:

Arrange spears loosely in a skillet with an inch of lightly salted boiling water. Simmer for 3-5 minutes or until bright green and tender, but not mushy. Remove from heat and run under cold water to stop the cooking process.

Steam asparagus upright in a tall covered pot over approximately one inch of water until tender, about 10 minutes. This method cooks the tougher bottoms more thoroughly while gently steaming the tender tops.

- Try serving asparagus *warm* topped with butter, lemon, and a sprinkle of Parmesan cheese.
- Try serving *cold* with a simple vinaigrette, or try olive oil with fresh-squeezed lemon and a sprinkle of salt.
- Try it on your kids! It’s mild in flavor and fun to chomp down, raw or cooked.

Storage Tips

- Wrap asparagus in a damp cloth and store in the hydrator drawer of the refrigerator. An alternate storage technique to retain vitality is to bundle spears with a rubber band and place upright in a container with an inch of water.
- Refrigerate immediately and use as soon as possible. Asparagus’ sugars will turn rapidly to starches, reducing flavor quickly.

For additional recipes that feature asparagus, see the Seasonal Combinations chapter.

Asparagus Risotto Cakes MACSAC

1 pound asparagus, tough ends removed	6-8 cups chicken stock, hot
1 tablespoon olive oil	2 tablespoons butter
1 cup finely chopped onions	1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
1 tablespoon minced garlic	1 teaspoon lemon juice
1 1/2 cups arborio rice	salt and pepper to taste
1 pinch saffron threads, crushed	1/2 cup bread crumbs
3/4 cup white wine	oil or butter for pan-frying cakes

Steam asparagus over boiling water 4-5 minutes. Rinse in cold water and chop. Heat olive oil in saucepan over medium flame; add onions and cook until translucent. Add garlic; cook 1 minute longer. Add rice and stir 2 minutes. Add saffron and wine. Simmer hard, stirring, until liquid is reduced by half. Add 1/2 cup stock; stir until absorbed. Continue to add stock 1/2 cup at a time and stir constantly until absorbed, until rice is cooked through and begins to clump (this is more than you would cook it for normal risotto). Add butter, cheese, lemon juice, asparagus, salt, and pepper. Spread on baking sheet; cool. Form patties and dip into breadcrumbs. Heat oil or butter in skillet; sauté cakes until golden brown on both sides. Makes 4 large or 6-8 small servings.

Asparagus alla Milanese Patrick O’Halloran, Lombardino’s Restaurant

3-4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided	1 tablespoon white wine
1 1/2 pounds slender asparagus, trimmed and peeled	salt and pepper to taste
1 shallot, minced	6 organic eggs (as fresh as possible)
1 clove garlic, thinly sliced 3-4 tablespoons	1/2 cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano

Heat 2 tablespoons olive oil in large skillet over medium-high heat, add asparagus, and sauté 1 minute. Add shallot and garlic; cook another minute. Add wine, stirring to release bits sticking to bottom of pan. Add salt and pepper. Keep heat low while you fry the eggs sunny-side up in more olive oil in a nonstick pan. Divide asparagus onto 6 warmed plates. Top each with one egg, a drizzle of olive oil, some Parmesan, and freshly ground black pepper. Makes 6 servings.

Simply Delicious Asparagus Soup Matthew and Susan Smith, Blue Valley Gardens

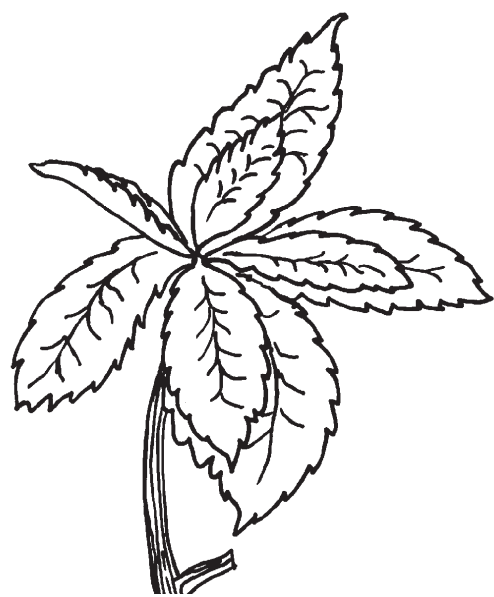
8 tablespoons (1 stick) butter	2 pounds asparagus
3 1/2 - 4 cups chopped onions	1/2 cup cream
8 cups chicken stock	salt and pepper to taste
	fresh lemon thyme or dill to taste

Heat butter in soup pot, add onions, and cook until tender. Add stock; bring to boil. Cut tips off asparagus; reserve. Chop stems and add to pot. Simmer gently until asparagus is very tender, 15-20 minutes. Puree in a food processor and return puree to pot. Add tips; cook gently 5-10 minutes. Stir in cream, salt, and pepper. Add lemon thyme or dill; if you use dried herbs, add them to the onions as they cook. Makes 8-10 servings.

Asparagus Guacamole MACSAC

2 cups chopped, cooked asparagus	1 tablespoon minced cilantro
2 tablespoons plain yogurt or sour cream	1 teaspoon minced garlic, pressed to a paste with a fork
2 tablespoons fresh lime juice	1/2 teaspoon cumin
2 tablespoons minced green onion	salt and pepper to taste
2 tablespoons tomato salsa	

Puree asparagus, yogurt, and lime juice in food processor or blender. Stir in remaining ingredients. Serve with tortilla chips or crackers, or as a sandwich spread. Makes 1 3/4 cups.



Basil

Ocimum basilicum

Basil, an annual herb in northern gardens, adds delicate flavor and aroma to many cultural dishes of Greece, Italy, and the Near East, as well as adapting itself well to varied dishes created in imaginative kitchens.

Basil is believed to have originated in India. There it was viewed as a holy plant and was grown around shrines and temples, infusing the air with its fragrance. A good Hindu was supposed to leave this life with a basil leaf on the chest to aid in passage to the next.

Basil is more commonly known for its primary role in tomato sauces, pesto, and salad dressings. Play around with these recipes and discover how flexible they are. Create your own tasty variations.

Basil, like tomatoes, thrives in the heat of the summer. The cool of spring and fall quickly weaken and damage the delicate herb. A spell of hot, humid weather will provide an abundance of basil—that's the perfect time to dry it or make tons of pesto to freeze for brightening up a bleak winter menu.

Cooking Tips

- Remove basil leaves from stems before using. Wash these gently to remove any garden grit.
- Chop basil with stems into soups and stews.
- Toss fresh whole basil leaves into green salads and chopped into pasta or rice salads.
- Top slices of tomato with chopped fresh basil leaves, olive oil, and a little salt and pepper.
- Layer basil leaves in a sandwich with slices of garlic and tomatoes, and cheese if you wish.
- Basil is famous in salad dressings (vinaigrettes), tomato sauces, and as the main ingredient in pesto, but don't forget to throw it into egg or cheese dishes, sautés, stir-fries, pureed vegetable soups, dips, and sauces. Experiment with its flavor and you'll find out where you like to use it.

Storage Tips

- Fresh basil deteriorates quickly. Use as soon as possible.
- For short-term storage, wrap in a lightly damp towel and refrigerate. Do not wash prior to refrigeration.
- Freeze fresh leaves in a plastic zip-lock bag. Remove air, seal, and freeze. Do not thaw before use.
- Pesto freezes very well in an airtight container. Some people freeze it in an ice cube tray. When well frozen, pop out pesto cubes. Bag them in a zip-lock bag and freeze. Take out only as many cubes as you need at a time.
- Basil can be dried easily. See chapter on home food preservation for information on drying herbs.

For additional recipes that feature basil, see the Tomato and Seasonal Combinations chapters.

Easy August Sandwiches Linda Taylor, Good Earth Farm

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| 1 loaf crusty French or Italian bread,
sliced 3/4-1 inch thick | 1/2 red onion |
| 1/3-1/2 cup basil pesto | 1-2 tablespoons olive oil |
| 2-3 large tomatoes | 1-2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar |

Heat oven to 375 degrees. Spread bread slices on cookie sheet. Spread pesto on the slices and toast the bread. Meanwhile, thinly slice tomatoes and onions and marinate in equal amounts of olive oil and balsamic vinegar. When bread is toasted and pesto is warm, remove from oven. Top with drained tomato/onion mixture. Makes 4-6 servings.

Tomato Basil Dip Ruth Chantry, Common Good Farm

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| 3 cups diced fresh tomatoes | 1 tablespoon olive oil |
| 1 tablespoon or more minced garlic, mashed
to a paste (use a garlic press or flat of a knife) | dash of balsamic vinegar |
| 5 tablespoons chopped basil (chop it medium-fine) | salt and pepper to taste |
| | thinly sliced, lightly toasted baguette slices |

Lightly toss tomatoes, garlic, and basil. Drizzle with olive oil, splash with balsamic vinegar, and sprinkle with salt and pepper to taste. Give a quick stir and serve with baguette slices. This recipe, from cooking instructor Yana Beranek, easily doubles or triples. The quantities and flavors can be adjusted to one's own taste. It's beautiful when made with yellow and red tomatoes. Leftovers are good as a salad dressing. Makes about 8-12 servings.

Sunny-Side Ups with Pesto and Tomatoes MACSAC

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| 1 teaspoon olive oil | 2 tablespoons pesto |
| 6 small tomatoes (about golf-ball size), quartered | 4 eggs |
| 1/2 small sweet onion, finely chopped | salt and pepper |

Heat oil in medium-size nonstick pan over medium-high flame. Add tomatoes and onion and cook them quickly, stirring often, until tomatoes give off juice and begin to thicken slightly, about 5 minutes. Reduce heat to medium and stir in pesto. Push mixture to sides of pan, creating a "ring" of sauce. Carefully break eggs into center of pan, cover, and cook until eggs are set, 4-6 minutes. Season with salt and pepper and serve immediately. Makes 2 servings.

Lemon Basil Shortbread Cookies Jenny Bonde and Rink DeVee, Shooting Star Farm

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| 3 cups flour | 3 tablespoons chopped fresh lemon (or lime) basil |
| 1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder | 1 tablespoon finely grated or minced lemon or
lime peel (use only the yellow or green portion
of the peel) |
| 1/4 teaspoon salt | 1 cup finely chopped walnuts |
| 2/3 cup butter, softened | |
| 1 cup sugar | |
| 1 teaspoon vanilla extract | |

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Mix flour, baking powder, and salt in a bowl. Mix butter, sugar, vanilla, basil, and lemon or lime peel in a separate bowl and beat with an electric mixer until well combined. With mixer set on low speed, slowly add the dry ingredients to the butter mixture. The mixture will be crumbly. Stir in the walnuts. Dump mixture into an ungreased 9-by-13-inch or similar-size pan. Press mixture to even thickness. Bake until edges begin to turn light brown, about 20 minutes—do not overbake. Using a sharp knife, slice shortbread into two-inch squares while hot. Let cool 10 minutes, then carefully transfer pieces to a plate or cooling rack. Adapted from a recipe on the Internet. Makes 24-30 cookies.