

## ASPARAGUS

Spring is actually here, and with it some of the wonderful spring vegetables. My favorite is that beautiful green stalk from our own delta, asparagus. This time of year it's plentiful and relatively inexpensive.

While there are all sorts of fancy things you can do with asparagus, like putting pieces of cooked asparagus into a savory custard, I like it just plain, maybe with a little mayonnaise on it. While you can buy a fancy asparagus cooker that cooks the spears upright, a simple large frying pan does just fine.

A few years ago, at the Stockton Asparagus Festival, I got a tip from Narsai David, host of the KCBS Food News, on how to cook asparagus. He snaps off the bottom part of the spears—there's a spot where they will break naturally—and puts the washed spears into a large frying pan of boiling salted water. He doesn't cover the pan, as the cooking asparagus gives off gases that will turn them a dingy gray-green if not allowed to escape. And he boils them for a few minutes, until they're tender but not mushy. He then takes the asparagus out of the hot water with a pair of tongs and puts them on a plate, and dresses them with a little butter and salt, or a little mayonnaise.

Another way I like to cook asparagus is to break off the fibrous bottom part of the spears, then cut the spears into about 2-inch lengths. Then I sauté the asparagus in some extra-virgin olive oil, stirring frequently, until the pieces soften. If some of the asparagus pieces get a little browned, so much the better. Then I serve the asparagus, topping it with some freshly grated Parmesan cheese. Often I'll add some roasted-garlic flavored oil to the cooking oil for extra flavor—or sauté a couple of crushed garlic cloves in the oil for a garlicky taste. By the way, thin asparagus isn't any younger than thick asparagus—the spears just come up that way—some thin, some fat. However, if I'm using thick asparagus, I'll often peel the stalks first with a vegetable peeler before cooking them—they're more tender when you do that.

I also like to make a pasta sauce that involves sautéing some chopped shallots in some butter, then adding some sliced mushrooms and sautéing them until soft. Then I add some sliced cooked asparagus spears and some heavy cream and boil it down until the cream thickens, add salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste, then pour that over some cooked pasta and top with lots of freshly grated Parmesan cheese. Yes, it's fattening, but so delicious!

Here's an easy frittata that uses asparagus and my other favorite springtime vegetable, sugar-snap peas. First, preheat your boiler. Slice about 5 asparagus spears diagonally into ¼ inch lengths, after trimming off the bottom ends. String about 12 sugar snap peas and then slice the pods diagonally into ¼ inch lengths. Heat about 1 ½ tablespoons of olive oil over medium-heat in a frying pan that can go under the broiler (without melting the handle). When the oil is hot, add the sliced asparagus and sugar-snap peas, a pinch of salt and some freshly ground black pepper, and sauté until the vegetables are soft, about 4 minutes.

Add another tablespoon of oil to the pan and add five beaten eggs, and sprinkle the mixture with a little more salt and pepper. Reduce the heat to low. As the eggs cook, the edges will begin to firm. Using a spatula, lift the edges and tilt the pan slightly, allowing the uncooked egg to run under the frittata. Continue cooking until a firm base has developed but the top is still uncooked.

Place the frying pan under the hot broiler just until the surface of the frittata is barely firm, about 3-4 minutes. Remove, carefully, and with a spatula loosen the edges and bottom of the frittata. Cut into wedges and serve. This serves four, with some salad, as an elegant lunch or a light supper. You can garnish the frittata wedges with some chopped parsley or some chopped mint, but I like some freshly grated Parmesan cheese over the top. Add a glass of a light dry white wine and you're all set. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Cook.