



## MICROWAVE MINUTES

By **JOYCE BATTCHER**

The first asparagus of the season is a special treat. Microwave it until just tender-crisp. Then, top it with freshly ground black pepper and a tiny bit of butter or a sprinkle of lemon juice.

When you're tired of asparagus that way, try it with other ingredients and seasonings. It goes well in countless combinations to make elegant vegetable dishes and tempting salads. Try today's recipes and see. But first, here's a brief review of basic cooking directions.

Be cautious about cooking time. Fresh asparagus, especially thin spears, can overcook quickly. A pound of room temperature (or fresh-from-the-garden) pencil-thin asparagus pieces (three to four cups) cooks to tender-crisp in as little as 2½ to 3 minutes. Thick asparagus spears and refrigerated asparagus need more cooking time — but not much more. A pound of medium spears (half-inch diameter stems) cooks in three to four minutes. Ideally, asparagus should be the same thickness for even cooking. If you can, select spears from an open bin at your supermarket or try to pick a package of even-sized spears. When sorting asparagus from your gar-

den, group thin spears together for one recipe and thick spears together for another recipe.

If you don't have the ideal even-size pieces, you can still have evenly cooked asparagus. For asparagus pieces, cut the quicker-cooking tip ends slightly longer than stem ends and be sure to stir halfway through cooking.

For asparagus spears, arrange spears correctly before cooking. Thicker spears and stem ends should be put towards the outside edges of the cooking dish. Tip ends and thin spears should be toward center of dish. If necessary to even out sizes, split stem ends that are thicker than a half-inch.

Add just a small amount of water and cover the dish tightly, using plastic wrap or a tight-fitting lid. Stir pieces or rearrange spears halfway through cooking. Cook the minimum time and allow for continued cooking during standing time. After a couple of minutes of standing time, check for final doneness. If you're adding salt, sprinkle it on after cooking.

Today's recipes feature asparagus to serve as a hot vegetable and as a cold salad. The first, Asparagus Spears with Deluxe Orange Sauce, is a way to serve fresh asparagus in

a most elegant manner. The fancier spears are used. (Ends can be saved for making the salad, asparagus soup or for your favorite asparagus recipes.) The low-calorie sauce has a wonderful rich flavor—almost like a calorie-laden Maltaise sauce (which is like Hollandaise sauce, but made with orange juice and peel). And, it's very easy and almost fool-proof to make — unlike regular Maltaise sauce, which can easily curdle.

Second, there's Greek Asparagus Salad, a wonderful combination of flavors for a side or main dish salad. This calls simply for microwaving the asparagus until barely tender-crisp and stirring in other ingredients. If you don't like Greek flavors, follow the variation and make California Asparagus Salad.

And, if neither of these appeals to you, just microwave fresh asparagus according to the hints and recipes, add a few other seasonings and enjoy the unique flavor of this springtime delicacy.

### Asparagus Spears with Deluxe Orange Sauce

1½ pounds asparagus (24 to 30 medium spears, about ½ -inch diameter)

3 tablespoons water  
¼ teaspoon dried thyme leaves  
½ cup plain non-fat yogurt  
1 tablespoon all-purpose flour  
½ cup fresh orange juice  
1 tablespoon butter or margarine (optional)

1 teaspoon grated orange peel  
Dash ground white pepper and salt

Orange slices, optional

Rinse asparagus well. Snap off tough ends and discard. Hold tips evenly together and cut off bottom ends so spears are about 6 inches long. (Save remaining ends for another use.) Place asparagus in microwavable 6x11-inch rectangular dish or loaf dish, arranging so asparagus tips are to center and stem ends to outside edges of dish. Add water and thyme; cover with plastic wrap. Microwave (High) 5 to 6 minutes or until tender-crisp when pierced with fork. (If necessary, re-arrange pieces halfway through cooking.) Let stand covered while making sauce.

Stir yogurt and flour together until smooth in a microwavable 4-cup measure; stir in orange juice, orange peel and butter, if used. Microwave (High) 3 to 4 minutes, stirring after each minute, or until thick and starting to bubble. If desired, season with pepper and salt. Drain asparagus and arrange on serving plate. If desired, garnish with orange slices. Pass sauce to serve over asparagus. Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Each serving—1/6th of recipe: 34 calories.

### Greek Asparagus Salad

1 to 1½ pounds asparagus (16 to 20 medium spears, about ½ -inch diameter)

2 tablespoons water  
½ teaspoon dried oregano leaves

¼ cup salad oil  
¼ cup white wine vinegar ½ to ¾ cup pitted small black olives  
½ to ¾ cup (2 to 3 ounces) crumbled feta cheese

Freshly ground black pepper  
Salt, optional

Rinse asparagus well. Snap off tough stem ends and discard. Cut tip ends 2 inches long and remaining stems 1½ -inches long. There should be about 4 cups. Place asparagus, water and oregano in a microwavable 1½ -quart casserole. Cover with plastic wrap or lid. Microwave (High) 3 to 4 minutes or until asparagus is barely tender, stirring after 2 minutes. Let stand, covered, 2 minutes. Do not drain; stir in oil and vinegar. Cool and stir in remaining ingredients. Season to taste with freshly ground black pepper and salt, if used. Refrigerate several hours for flavors to blend. Serve cold. Makes 6 to 8 servings.

Each serving — ¼ of recipe: 109 calories.

California Asparagus Salad: Substitute crumbled blue cheese for feta cheese and crushed dried rosemary leaves for oregano. Before serving, sprinkle with coarsely chopped pistachio nuts.

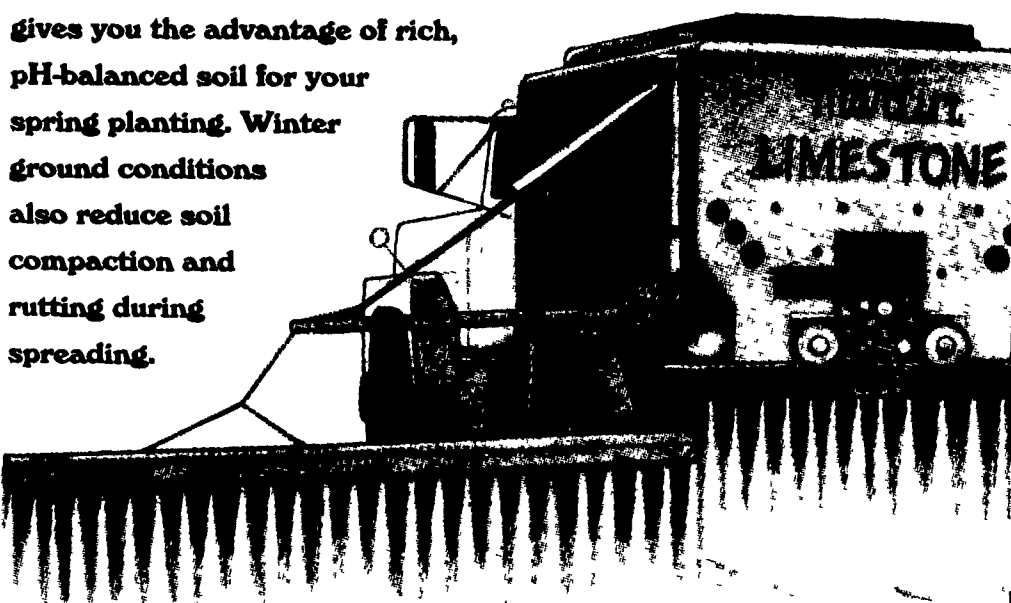
### Questions for Joyce?

Do you have a question about microwave cooking? Send it to Microwave Minutes, % Extra Newspaper Features, P.O. Box 6118, Rochester, Minn. 55903. Please include a self-addressed, stamped, business-size envelope.

Recipes in this column are tested in 600- and 650-watt microwave ovens. With an oven of different watt- age output, timings may need slight adjustment.

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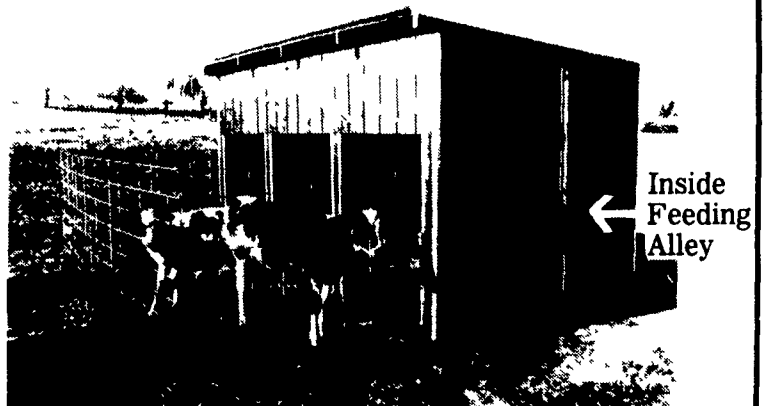
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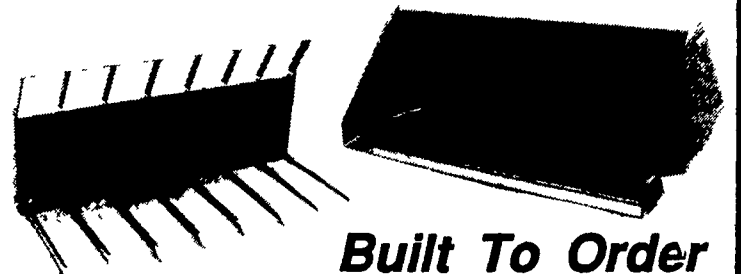


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