

## Asparagus Spring Fever

In spring a food lover's fancy turns to thoughts of asparagus. In ancient times harvesting the wild asparagus, famous for their medicinal qualities, was a spring-time ritual. These days the ritual is more likely to take place in the produce aisles of the supermarket.

Asparagus folklore credits the delicious green spears with everything from curing toothaches to being a reproductive tonic. Today we know that just five stalks of asparagus is an excellent source of folic acid, a B vitamin that is associated with a decreased risk of neural tube birth defects. Asparagus is also a good source of vitamin C and carotenoids. Our bodies use some carotenoids to make vitamin A, while others are strong disease-fighting antioxidants. Quick cooking best preserves the distinctive taste and nutritional bang of asparagus. Choose spears that are about the same size so they will cook evenly. Break or cut off the tough ends of the asparagus and rinse the spears thoroughly in cool water to be sure they are free of sand. At this point you are only minutes away from enjoying this simple, but elegant vegetable. You can microwave aspara-

gus, stir-fry them, cook them in boiling water or roast them in a hot oven (450 degrees) with a little olive oil. But it only takes a few minutes until they are crisp-tender, so check them after about four minutes.

Warm asparagus are delicious with a little olive oil or butter and a squeeze of lemon juice. The nutty flavor of toasted sesame seeds is also a good match with the fresh taste of asparagus. My kids like them just plain and I confess to overlooking the occasional episodes of mealtime dueling asparagus.

A bowl of chilled asparagus is an invitation to create a wonderful salad or finger food. Wrap them with thin slices of ham, pair them with tomatoes and hard cooked eggs or top asparagus with thin rings of red onions. The opportunities are endless and the results always taste great. Asparagus with Red Pepper Sauce is one of my favorites. It's delicious, beautiful, easy to do ahead for a crowd and packed with nutrients.

**Asparagus With Red Pepper Sauce**  
2 large red bell peppers, cored  
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One of the very first spring messengers of the garden is the perennial asparagus spear. It stands alone in its unique and simple gourmet qualities. Asparagus is related to onions, garlic and members of the lily family.

Asparagus season is short. The bulk of its harvest is generally late April through early June, with its heaviest bearing in May.

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. As other vegetables, it will lose some, though not all, of its B-complex and vitamin C during the cooking process. It 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:

## Asparagus Is Nutritional Winner

- 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 cooking process.

- In a tall covered pot, steam asparagus upright with approximately an inch of water for 10 minutes or until tender. 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 them on your kids. They're mild in flavor and fun to chop down, raw or cooked.

### Storage Tips

- Refrigerate immediately and use as soon as possible. Asparagus' sugars will turn rapidly to starches, reducing flavor quickly.
- 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.

### Asparagus Patties

- 1 pound asparagus
- 3 green onions, sliced
- 1 tablespoon oil
- 1 teaspoon dried basil
- ¼ cup almonds or walnuts
- ½ cup dry bread crumbs
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup cooked rice or bulgur
- 2 eggs beaten

Trim tough ends of asparagus and discard. Cut spears into ¼-inch pieces, steam until tender and set aside to cool. Saute green onions in oil until soft. Stir in basil and set aside. Preheat oven to 250 degrees. Place almonds on baking sheet and toast in oven until slightly browned. Place in a food processor and grind to a fine meal. In a medium-sized mixing bowl, combine almond meal, bread crumbs, salt, and rice. Stir in eggs. Add steamed asparagus and green onions to egg mixture and mix well. Heat a lightly oiled griddle over medium-high heat or heat an electric skillet to 375 degrees. Drop mixture by tablespoonfuls onto preheated surface and spread to form patties. Cook until brown on each side. Serve hot. Makes 2 servings.

Source: From Asparagus to Zucchini: A Guide to Farm-Fresh, Seasonal Produce. By: Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition (MACSAC).

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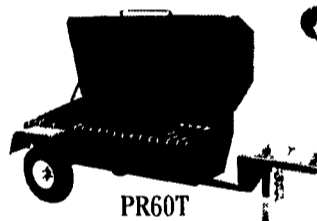


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