



STALK MARKET

In rural New Jersey (you know, away from the interstates and the Bada Bing), you'll find some of the country's best asparagus. **Melissa Hamilton and Christopher Hirsheimer** share their tips (and spears) for savoring the first taste of spring

OUR DAILY LIVES straddle the Delaware River. The studio where we develop and photograph recipes for our *Canal House Cooking* books is in a former newspaper printing office in rural New Jersey, and often we cross the old iron bridge to do our marketing in Pennsylvania. No matter which side of the river we're on, spring can be slow and fickle—it's warm one day, cold and showery the next. She just doesn't want to commit. In May, nothing is growing yet and we wonder if anything ever will. Then, one day, a friend drops by to announce: Asparagus are up! We drop everything, grab Henry the studio dog, jump in the car, and head over the river. If it's true,

there will be asparagus for lunch.

On the way, we see that the trees are wearing the sheerest slips of green. In the store there's a big basket of red-stalked rhubarb, a sure sign of spring, and rounding the potato bin, we see four large pails filled with tall, curving emerald spears with tight purple tips: the first asparagus of the season. We choose the straightest and fattest (our favorite—so luscious and succulent), matching the lengths. We buy too many, of course; we just can't help ourselves. This is an ancient rite of the vernal equinox—eating a spring tonic.

We return to the studio carrying armfuls of zaftig first-of-the-season

beauties, and within minutes the sink is filled with cold water. Asparagus from commercial producers is pre-washed, but these spears, grown on a small farm, as well as the ones we harvest nearby from a friend's garden, need extra care to rid them of their grit. They're plunged into the water and given a gentle swish to loosen any silty sand trapped in the tight, finlike leaves. We let them soak for a short while, swish them some more, then lift them from the water. Some get stored in the fridge in an open plastic bag until the next meal, their bottoms wrapped in wet paper towels. The rest we'll have for lunch. *(continued on page 98)*

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We always peel fat asparagus. Using a rattly swivel-blade peeler to remove the tough outer skin allows the spears to cook evenly. Then we discuss the merits of steaming versus boiling. Today, since someone gave us a very poncy asparagus steamer, we'll cook them both ways to compare the taste. (In the end, we're not gadget hounds, so we'll stick with the boiled.) We stand at the counter and eat the juicy spears with our fingers. Later in the season we'll douse shaved asparagus with olive oil, fold chopped spears into tender risottos, and fry up a lacy fritto misto, but right now this is the true taste of spring. •

ROASTED ASPARAGUS (shown on page 96)

4 SERVINGS Roasting asparagus brings out the vegetable's inherent sweetness.

- 24 large asparagus spears (about 2 lb.), trimmed and peeled
Extra-virgin olive oil
Coarse sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
Aged balsamic vinegar
Parmesan, for shaving

Preheat oven to 400°. Arrange asparagus spears in a single layer on a large rimmed baking sheet. Drizzle oil over asparagus and turn to coat. Season with salt and pepper. Roast, turning occasionally, until lightly browned and just tender, 18–20 minutes.

Transfer asparagus to a platter. To serve, drizzle vinegar over hot asparagus and use a vegetable peeler to shave Parmesan over the spears.



SHAVED ASPARAGUS WITH PARMESAN VINAIGRETTE

4 SERVINGS Shaving asparagus with a vegetable peeler transforms the texture of a raw stalk into silky strips. This revelatory technique works well with all kinds of vegetables, from carrots to zucchini.

- 12 large asparagus spears (about 1 lb.), trimmed and peeled
¾ cup finely grated Parmesan plus a piece for shaving
1½ Tbsp. fresh lemon juice
¾ cup extra-virgin olive oil
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Working with 1 asparagus spear at a time, use a vegetable peeler to shave spears into long, thin shavings. Transfer to a medium bowl (the tips will snap off as spears get thinner; add to bowl). Combine grated Parmesan and lemon juice in a small bowl and slowly whisk in oil until well blended. Season vinaigrette generously with salt and pepper. Drizzle vinaigrette over shaved asparagus and toss to coat. Divide asparagus salad among plates. Use peeler to shave more Parmesan over salad.

Melissa Hamilton and Christopher Hirsheimer produce and publish Canal House Cooking, a series of seasonal cookbooks. Their newest release is Canal House Cooking N° 6: The Grocery Store.



ASPARAGUS TIPS

PEELING FAT SPEARS

A vegetable peeler is just the tool. Lay a spear on a flat surface. Hold the tip of the stalk and, starting an inch or so below the tip, peel the thin skin from the spear.

TRIMMING FAT SPEARS

There's often more edible spear below the



breaking point, so we peel fat spears first to see where they begin to look dried out, then trim off the end with a knife.



STEAMING FAT SPEARS

A tall, narrow asparagus pot fitted with a basket is a nice tool for steaming the spears.



Add about 1½" of water to the pot (make sure the basket sits above the water). Bring to a gentle boil. Meanwhile,

using kitchen twine, tie peeled, trimmed asparagus into a loose bundle and lower it into the basket. Put the basket into the pot, cover, and steam until spears are tender, 4–5 minutes. Remove the basket and transfer asparagus to a clean kitchen towel. Cover and keep warm.

Alternatively, lay stalks in a steamer or colander and place it in or over a pot of boiling water. Cover with a lid and steam until tender.

BOILING FAT SPEARS

Fill a deep skillet with water, season generously with kosher salt, and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Add peeled, trimmed asparagus to the skillet and boil until tender, 4–5 minutes. Carefully lift the spears from the water with tongs or a slotted fish spatula and drain on a clean kitchen towel. Cover and keep warm until ready to serve.

—M.H. and C.H.