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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 poncey 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
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup finely grated Parmesan plus a piece for shaving
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ Tbsp. fresh lemon juice
- $\frac{1}{4}$ 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 $1\frac{1}{2}$ " 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.

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