

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

Traveling with Jewish Taste

Spring As-spear-ations

Asparagus goes, it's one of the most welcome sights of spring

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Among the most welcome sights of spring are the tender and sweet asparagus shoots poking their heads through the sun-warmed soil. There is nothing quite so delicious as asparagus fresh from the garden. It's far superior to the sometimes-woody bundles sold in supermarkets, and not even in the same universe as that mushy, olive drab stuff in cans. You can eat it raw or just slightly steamed, marinated for a cold salad or incorporated into any number of recipes.

But, fair warning: The asparagus season is short. Very short. If you can get three weeks of the veggie from your garden, you are doing well.

And then you're dependent on the greengrocer.

Asparagus is native to the eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor areas. However, despite the vegetable's origin, and Jews' love of food generally — can there be a Shabbat or holiday without a feast? — Israelis are just recently beginning to use it in their cuisine. In fact, of the many cookbooks I've reviewed for this column, only half the Israeli ones include recipes calling for asparagus.

The plant itself is a cousin to onions, garlic, and leeks, as well as to flowering bulbous plants. While the ancient Greeks and Romans adopted the name from the Farsi "asparag," or "shoot," the vegetable has also gone by the name "sperage" in the 16th century, "sparagus" in English speaking countries, and even "sparrow grass."

Legend has it that Egyptians revered the wild veggie so much that they offered it up to their gods, and images of asparagus spears appear on a frieze picturing the ritual, dating back to 3000 BC.

The Greeks also loved their wild asparagus and believed it to have medicinal qualities, but it was the Romans who first cultivated it over 2,000 years ago. They must have planted a lot of the veggie because what they didn't eat fresh, they preserved for winter enjoyment. Roman emperors were so fond of asparagus, in fact, that beginning with Augustus, they kept the "Asparagus Fleet" specifically for the purpose of sailing the seas to obtain it.

Mu ammad ibn Mu ammad al-Nafzawi, writing in Tunis in the 12th century, attributed aphrodisiacal properties to asparagus in his book, *The Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delights*, what many call the Arabic version of the *Kama Sutra*.

Asparagus has been called variously the "food of kings," "the king of foods," and "food of the gods," and for good reason. Although French monks had been cultivating it since the 15th century (luckily, their vows of poverty didn't apply to asparagus) back in the day, only the wealthy could afford such a rare delicacy.

For example, King Louis XIV of 17th century France, builder of that little cottage known as the Palace of Versailles, was so fond of asparagus that he ordered special greenhouses built so that he could enjoy asparagus all year-round.

We Americans came a little late to the game, not growing asparagus until the mid-19th century, but it has become as closely associated here with spring as old Robin Red Breast. But, of course, once we got involved, we were all in. The crop is so economically significant in some parts of this country that communities host festivals to honor it, at least one complete with parade and asparagus queen, are held every year.

And, many German cities host *Spargelfests* celebrating the harvest of white asparagus. One of the highlights of the spring season is the performance of the song "Veronika, Spring is Here," originally sung by The Comedian Harmonists, a pre-World War I group of German singers founded by Jews. Asparagus being shaped the way it is, at the time it was written the song was considered a rather racy tribute to the vegetable.



Scene from a Spargelfest, "voll mit einem schiefen Turm aus Spargel!"

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites and artifacts around the world. She invites readers to read her blog at carolgoodmankaufman.com and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.



Beginning with the emperor Augustus, Romans kept an "Asparagus Fleet" of ships specifically for the purpose of sailing the seas to obtain the prized veggie

"Veronika, spring is here
the girls sing tra-la-la
the whole world seems bewitched
Veronika, the asparagus is growing
Veronika, the world is green,
so let's go into the woods.
Even grandpa is saying to grandma,
Veronika, spring is here!"

As you can well imagine, once the 1930s rolled in, the group disbanded and fled the country.

Now, upon reading this post, if you have decided that you want to grow your own, I have good news. Asparagus is a long-lived perennial plant so you will get about 20 to 25 years out of it. And maintenance is easy. Simply fertilize with 10-10-10 before the spears appear in early spring, and after the last harvest. When the ferns turn brown after frost, cut them down. Make sure to keep the area free of weeds. That's it!

Once the asparagus is established in its second year after planting (although some gardeners say the third year), you can begin to enjoy the delectable spears. To harvest, cut them on an angle close to the ground when they reach a height of about eight inches and are at least a half-inch thick.

Asparagus

The legendary general and statesman Julius Caesar is reputed to have had his first taste of asparagus in Lombardy, in what is now northern Italy. He then ordered it served with melted butter. Boy, was he onto something. When it comes to asparagus, I believe the simpler the better. In fact, I can eat it raw with nothing else added, straight from the garden. But, if you are in the mood for something a little fancier with no real work involved, try this recipe.



Ingredients:

1 bunch fresh asparagus, the thinner the better	Freshly ground black pepper
3 T. olive oil	1 T. fresh lemon juice
1 t. kosher salt, plus extra for sprinkling	2 T. Parmesan cheese

Directions:

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees F.
Rinse the asparagus under cool water to remove grit, and dry thoroughly.
Break off the tough ends of the spears.
Place the asparagus into a mixing bowl (or plastic bag) and pour in the olive oil. Toss (or shake) to coat the spears.
Place the asparagus on a baking sheet and sprinkle with the salt, pepper, and cheese. Roast the asparagus for 25 minutes, until tender but still crisp.