
Asparagus appears anything but sparingly: Chefs say goodbye to winter with lighter appetizers, entrees appropriate for new season

Nation's Restaurant News, April 4, 2005 by Carolyn Walkup

Few foods signal spring quite as clearly as asparagus, according to chefs who work with the green, white and purple varieties as soon as they sprout from the soil.

"I like asparagus because it speaks of new life in spring," says Bruce Sherman, chef-partner of North Pond in Chicago. "It means warmer weather, flowers and shorter sleeves."

One of Sherman's asparagus appetizers is a green-asparagus strudel with caramelized onions, nuts and goat cheese rolled in phyllo dough. He often pairs the strudel with other vegetables, such as baby carrots and beets, on a colorful all-vegetable plate.

Kevin Binkley of Binkley's in Cave Creek, Ariz., also pairs asparagus with beets, in this case pink Chioggia beets, in a salad. He explains that the combination symbolizes a crossover from the root vegetables of winter to the first aboveground produce of spring. He serves the salad with horseradish sabayon and a pancetta chip.

Asparagus grows in almost all regions of the United States, allowing chefs to buy from local suppliers. Patrick Clark of Sutro's at the Cliff House in San Francisco features it for about a month in the spring.

"Asparagus is one of my favorite vegetables," Clark says. "I always wait until spring so I can start using things that grow above the ground. I love the varieties."

This spring he is using purple asparagus in an appetizer he describes as "asparagus slaw," which is accompanied by a Napoleon prepared with white and green asparagus layered between phyllo crisps with whipped chevre. Clark uses raw purple asparagus for the slaw. "The acid from the vinaigrette breaks down the crunch a little," he explains. He flavors local chevre with tarragon and chervil and garnishes the plate with drops of oil infused with the same herbs.

Green asparagus is the favorite of Martial Noguier, executive chef of one sixtyblue in Chicago. "I love the color. The green color makes me think of spring, and it tastes like spring," Noguier says. He is less fond of white asparagus.

One of Noguier's dishes this spring is jumbo asparagus salad with crab, mango, mache, spring onion, tarragon and lobster vinaigrette.

Hans Rockenwagner, chef-owner of Rockenwagner in Santa Monica, Calif., grew up eating white asparagus in his native Germany and still prefers it to the green American variety. "The best white asparagus should be buttery, sweet and earthy," he says. "You should be able to taste the terroir of the region where it grows, like a fine wine. There's always a slight bitterness, which we have come to love."

Rockenwagner finds that the German white asparagus season ends around the summer solstice. He likes to use it in both salads and entrees.

One of his classic main courses is veal tenderloin medallions with asparagus and morel cream sauce. He peels the asparagus and lightly cooks it in water seasoned with salt, sugar, lemon juice and butter. "Morel mushrooms and white asparagus are a great marriage," he says.

Another fancier of white asparagus--in this case, from Holland--is David Meyers of Sona in Los Angeles, who is serving it with lemon-grass veloute and Champagne gelee. He poaches the asparagus and slices the lower stalks to make a salad with baby arugula, sea salt and Meyerlemon juice. The tips are placed on top of the salad with the veloute and gelee.

Many chefs in addition to Rockenwagner are marrying asparagus with morels and other wild mushrooms. For example, Cathal Armstrong of Restaurant Eve in Alexandria, Va., pairs braised baby white asparagus with roasted morels as accompaniments to Carolina black sea bass. "Asparagus has a good, rich, earthy flavor that works very well with the black sea bass and the mushrooms, too," Armstrong says. "I don't look for trendy products; I look for the best quality."

He adds that he thinks the climate in Virginia is "the best in the world" for growing asparagus and many other vegetables.

Sanford D'Amato at Sanford in Milwaukee is featuring a citrus-seared halibut on morel-and-asparagus risotto cake with asparagus nage. Asparagus appears three ways on the plate: the bottoms of the stalks are diced and mixed into the risotto cake, along with scallions, shallots and Wisconsin Asiago or Parmesan cheese; the tips are mixed with chervil in a relish on top of the halibut; and more pureed trimmings are in the nage, along with lemon oil.

Marlin Kaplan's take on asparagus this spring is to pair it with a melange of wild mushrooms for a "short course" or appetizer at One Walnut in Cleveland. He sautes the mushrooms with garlic, shallots and white wine and then arranges the blanched asparagus in a vaguely checkerboard-style design over the mushrooms on a rectangular plate.

Asparagus with seafood is another classic combination favored by many chefs. Jeff Gaetjen, chef de cuisine at Colvin Run Tavern in Vienna, Va., prepares an entree of grilled salmon with white and green asparagus, smoked salmon, salmon pastrami, dill and cucumber relish, sorrel cream and potatoes Anna. The peeled and blanched asparagus stalks are fanned to form the base of the dish. The other ingredients are layered on top.

Shea Gallante at Cru in New York has created a crab and asparagus sandwich, actually an appetizer, this spring. He uses various kinds of crab, depending on what is most in season, and rolls the crab with the peeled, cured and blanched asparagus to resemble a crab salad. He tops the mixture with a thin slice of house-cured pancetta and places it between two thin slices of Portuguese white bread. The garnishes are a parsley emulsion and glazed grape tomatoes.

Japanese accents work well with asparagus and seafood combinations. Anita Lo at Annisa in New York makes a colorful tossed salad with shaved, raw green asparagus, pickled red onion and Meyerlemon ponzu with white soy sauce dressing and black nori. She serves the salad as a spring special on her tasting menu.

In Boston, Pino Maffeo at Restaurant L makes a composed hot and cold asparagus salad with soft-boiled quail egg and truffle vinaigrette. The base consists of cold poached asparagus in addition to warm, pan-fried asparagus that has been coated in panko crumbs, Parmesan, chopped chives and Italian parsley. He uses both white and green asparagus.

Maffeo tops that layer with tied bundles of very thin wild asparagus from France sauteed in almond butter and then adds the quail eggs and a sudachi-soy sauce, olive oil and shallot dressing for a dish with various textures.

Kevin Rathbun at Rathbun's in Atlanta adds a Southern twist to an entree that includes locally grown, preferably organic asparagus. His description is sea-scallop Benedict on country-ham grits with asparagus and spiced hollandaise.

He plans to run the dish as long as the asparagus is local and fresh."We get a lot of vegetarian requests," he notes, which he says he can accommodate by combining asparagus with non-meat or seafood ingredients.