

Asparagus Spring Fever

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(NAPSA)—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 springtime ritual. These days the ritual is more likely to take place in the produce aisles of the supermarket when California's 116 million pound asparagus crop comes to market.



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Asparagus folklore credits the delicious green spears with everything from curing toothaches to being a reproductive tonic. Today we know that just 5 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 asparagus, 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 4 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 and seeded**
- 2 cloves garlic, minced**
- 1 tablespoon olive oil**
- 2 tablespoons raspberry
vinegar**
- 1½ tablespoons chopped fresh
basil**
- ½ teaspoon salt**
- freshly ground pepper**
- 1½ lbs. fresh California
asparagus, trimmed bell
pepper, basil, Parmesan
cheese (garnish)**

Coarsely chop bell peppers. Heat olive oil in a large skillet. Add peppers and garlic; cook over medium heat for about 15 minutes or until peppers are softened, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat and let cool slightly. Place in blender or food processor and purée until smooth; stir in vinegar, basil, salt and pepper. Cook asparagus spears in boiling water for 4 to 5 minutes until crisp-tender; drain. Spoon red pepper sauce on a platter and arrange asparagus over sauce. Garnish with thin slices of bell pepper, basil and Parmesan if desired. Makes 4 servings.

Nutrients per serving: Calories 135; Protein 5g; Fat 5g; Calories from Fat 32 percent; Carbohydrate 21g; Cholesterol 0mg; Fiber 6g; Sodium 450mg.