

Food ideas: Asparagus

Thielim, Mondeo, Minerve and Mammoth sound more like cars than asparagus varieties, but they are what is being sold by supermarkets at the moment. The asparagus that we eat are the young shoots of the large and very pretty plant *Asparagus officinalis*. The shoots are only in season from April to June, and then the plants need to be allowed to develop their feathery leaves to gain energy for the next year. Young asparagus plants need three years before they start bearing a regular crop, and then carry on for about a dozen years, so they are only grown by people with lots of time and space.

Asparagus is wonderfully low in fat and high in fiber, antioxidants, vitamin C and folate (good for pregnant mothers and prevents heart disease). It is meant to be an aphrodisiac. That's the good part: the bad part is that it makes people's pee smell (more than usual). It has also inspired the military: during World War II, the French and English planted poles in open spaces to prevent German gliders from landing, and called these "Rommel's asparagus".

There are lots of wonderful and simple ways of cooking asparagus. All of them involve snapping off the lower, purple-ish part of the stem which is too fibrous (and often too sandy) to eat. The simplest way is to steam it (or cook it lying flat in a pan of very shallow water covered with a lid) for 2-3 minutes. My 1928 cookbook recommends that one should then "serve it either hot with plain melted butter, or cold with mayonnaise". It can be sprinkled with lemon juice, olive oil or parmesan; sliced and mixed into salads, pastas, or risottos; or stir-fried with chicken, prawns or beef.

My favourite asparagus recipe involves gently heating up 2 tablespoons of sesame seeds in 2 tablespoons of vegetable (or sesame seed) oil with a clove of garlic and a tablespoon of grated ginger. When the seeds start turning brown, turn the heat to high, and add a pack of asparagus (about 12 shoots) which has been chopped into 2 inch pieces, and a teaspoon each of sugar and pepper. Fry for three minutes, stirring regularly. Turn off the heat, add a tablespoon of soy sauce, and serve with rice. Yum!

Although asparagus is available from the supermarkets, it tastes better the more recently it has been cut. Picking asparagus is a specialist job that involves sharp knives so it's not suited to pick-your-own, but you can buy freshly-cut asparagus at Medley Manor Farm on Binsey Lane; Milletts Farm Centre on Kingston Road at Frilford; or Peachcroft Farm at 12 Acre Drive near Radley... or become very good friends with a kind allotment-holder who grows asparagus.