

# On the table...

## Spring's fresh vegetable best when enjoyed soon after harvest

By Laura Kurella

Nothing beats the taste and texture of fresh-picked, asparagus, and in my many travels I have come to learn that Michigan-grown asparagus offers a delectably-sweet and mild flavor that none other has.

The best source for the freshest asparagus is your local farm stand. This is because farm stands tend to pick asparagus daily. Grocery stores don't have that ability and often asparagus comes from other countries that often use pesticides that are banned in America.

Since asparagus is a vegetable much like strawberries, in that it begins to decline in both flavor and texture from the moment its picked, it's always best to source the freshest locally available.

Since its season is also short-lived, especially in the north, it's a good idea to enjoy asparagus as often as you can in season, and also make recipes with it that freeze well so that you can enjoy its wonderful flavor long after the local season has ended.

Buying "in-season" also benefits you pocketbook because many farm stands not only offer fresher and more fabulous asparagus, but they also offer more affordable pricing too, such as Corey Lake Orchards in Three Rivers, Michigan, a farm stand I recently visited.

"Asparagus is coming slowly this year," reported Beth Hubbard of Corey Lake Orchards, "which is due to our cooler spring weather, but we should have about four more weeks of availability."

She also noted that it is not growing as fast as demand, so people may want to place an order in advance to assure availability. "Feel free to call us and have us hold some for you to pick up at 269-244-5690, but be first to check around in your local area, and support your local growers, too!"

I do love asparagus and I am already planning on twenty pounds, so I have an ample amount to freeze and enjoy all year long!

The best way to store asparagus long term is to blanch it in salted boiling water for just one minute, plunge it into an ice bath to stop cooking, roll it on a clean, dry towel to remove water, then freeze it on a tray in a single layer until completely frozen, then seal in freezer containers.

Here now are two recipes – one that can be frozen for future enjoyment and one that is best made with asparagus that is super-fresh – so you can "spear" it all year long. Enjoy!

**Creamy-cheesy Asparagus Au gratin**

Cooking spray  
1 1/2 cups skim milk  
2 tablespoons butter

or margarine  
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste  
3 large potatoes, peeled  
2 teaspoons minced garlic  
8 ounces, fresh asparagus, chopped in 1/2-inch pieces  
1/2 cup diced red sweet pepper  
4 ounces Jarlsberg cheese, shredded, divided use

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Coat a 1 1/2-quart casserole, or 4 - 6 individual ovenproof ramekins, with cooking spray and set aside. In a medium stockpot over medium heat, bring milk and butter to a boil. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Meanwhile, slice potatoes into 1/8-

inch thick rounds. When milk reaches a boil, drop slices into milk. Add garlic, bring to boiling then reduce heat to medium low; simmer, partly covered with a lid 8 minutes. Add asparagus and simmer 4 minutes more. Add red pepper and simmer another minute. Pour half the potato mixture into prepared casserole, filling casserole halfway, or divide mixture among prepared ramekins, filling each halfway. Sprinkle with cheese, reserving 2 tablespoons for topping. Pour on remaining potato mixture and top with reserved cheese. Bake for five minutes, or until heated through, and cheese is

melted.

**Incredible Parm-crusted Spears**

2 pounds medium-thick asparagus, trimmed  
Salt and pepper  
3 ounces Parmesan cheese, grated (1 1/2 cups)  
3/4 cup panko bread crumbs  
1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted and cooled  
Pinch cayenne pepper  
2 large egg whites  
1 teaspoon honey

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and spray with vegetable oil spray. Using fork, poke holes all over asparagus. Toss asparagus

with 1/2 teaspoon salt and let stand for 30 minutes on paper towel-lined baking sheet. Meanwhile, combine 1 cup Parmesan, panko, melted butter, 1/4 teaspoon salt, 1/8 teaspoon pepper, and cayenne in bowl. Transfer half of Parmesan mixture to shallow dish and reserve remaining mixture. Using stand mixer fitted with whisk, whip egg whites with honey on medium-low speed until foamy, about 1 minute. Increase speed to medium-high and whip until soft peaks form, 2 to 3 minutes. Pour egg white mixture into 13-by-9-inch

baking dish and toss asparagus with egg white mixture. Working with 1 spear at a time, dredge half of asparagus in Parmesan mixture and transfer to baking sheet. Refill shallow dish with reserved Parmesan mixture and repeat with remaining half of asparagus. Bake asparagus until just beginning to brown, 6 to 8 minutes. Sprinkle with remaining 1/2 cup Parmesan and continue to bake until cheese is melted and panko is golden brown - about 6 to 8 minutes longer. Transfer to platter and serve.



*The fresh asparagus of spring is so amazing that adding it in to these oh-so-creamy au gratin potatoes takes this dish from ordinary to extraordinary. Simply spear it! Photograph by Laura Kurella*