

## Color asparagus beautiful

Ninety-nine percent of asparagus grown in Washington is the green garden variety, *asparagus officinalis*. Virtually no white asparagus is grown here, and only scant amounts of purple asparagus. If you're curious what the fuss is all about across the Atlantic, imported white or purple varieties are available at specialty purveyors such as **Metropolitan Market** ([www.metropolitan-market.com](http://www.metropolitan-market.com)), **Whole Foods Market** ([www.wholefoods.com](http://www.wholefoods.com)) and **PCC Natural Markets** ([www.pccnaturalmarkets.com](http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com)).

### White asparagus

**Basics:** Revered in Europe, white asparagus is green asparagus grown under a mound of dirt in a process called etiolation. Deprived of light, the chlorophyll (green-producing) and anthocyanin (purple-producing) pigments don't develop, resulting in a paler specimen. Exuding a milder flavor emulating hearts of palm and artichoke, the white asparagus available in the United States often comes

from South America.

**Serving:** White asparagus must be totally peeled before cooking until truly tender, not just al dente. Enjoy them the German way—boiled then served ham slices and a choice of vinaigrette, mayonnaise or hollandaise.

### Purple asparagus

**Basics:** Though common in European markets, purple-hued asparagus is fairly rare in the United States. Purple Passion, developed from the Italian Violetto di Albinga asparagus, is North America's first purple variety. Purple spears are much larger in diameter than their green counterparts and have a 20 percent higher sugar content, resulting in a sweet and juicy spear that can be eaten raw. This variety comes in all shades of violet, with a greenish undertone over the white interior.

**Serving:** Purple asparagus barely needs a trim at its base unless the stalks are old. Simply boil (add a touch of vinegar or lemon juice to the water to prevent the asparagus from turning green) and enjoy.



# spear elegance

Washington produces more asparagus than you can shake a stalk at. | by Pat Tanumihardja

**I**ts firm uprightness, regal crown and purple overtones perhaps belie the origins of asparagus: It was found growing wild in the Mediterranean centuries ago. Roman emperors were so fond of it they reserved an elite fleet to fetch it. King Louis XIV of France, who craved asparagus even in the dead of winter, ordered that it be grown in Versailles' forcing beds. It is also rumored to be a food of love (or lust?)—Louis XV mistress Madame de Pompadour all but withered away on a daily diet of asparagus, which she ate almost to the exclusion of every other food.

A delicacy once reserved only for nobility, asparagus is now ubiquitous. This member of the lily family is gathered into green bundles and bedecks Seattle stores year-round, thanks to imports from Chile, Peru and Mexico. But the superfresh locally grown asparagus is that much better, notes Mark Janicke, produce buyer at Whole Foods' Roosevelt Square location. Upon harvesting, the sugars in asparagus quickly turn to starch, so the faster they go from the farm to your plate, the better.

Local asparagus appears during a short spring window. From April to June, it arrives direct from farms east of the mountains in the mineral-rich Columbia Basin, Yakima Valley and Walla Walla region. Growers here cultivate 80 million pounds of asparagus annually, making Washington State the country's second largest producer of the vegetable. Sixty percent is processed—Washington's the world leader in whole-spear canned asparagus production—while the remainder is sold fresh across the United States, in Asia and in Europe.



dish



Local asparagus appears during a short spring window.

Alan Schreiber, executive director of the Washington Asparagus Commission, says the state's warm spring days and cool nights provide perfect asparagus-growing conditions, producing its trademark purple tips and sweet taste. Washington Extra Fancy asparagus is so good it exceeds the USDA's No.1 grade standards.

Washington asparagus varies in size from small (a quarter of an inch in diameter) to

## tagliatelle with asparagus, cipollini onions and red peppers



Recipe courtesy chef Matt Fortner, Marjorie restaurant

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 lb tagliatelle pasta; fresh\* or store bought
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 shallot, minced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ cup white wine
- ¼ cup chicken stock
- ⅛ cup heavy cream
- 2 bunches asparagus, stems peeled, cut into 2-inch pieces
- 8 cipollini onions, peeled and quartered
- 1 red bell pepper, diced into ½-inch pieces
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 tablespoon chopped Italian parsley
- ¼ cup grated or shaved Parmesan

### \*FRESH TAGLIATELLE

- 1 lb all-purpose flour
- 8 egg yolks
- 1 whole egg
- 1 tablespoon olive oil



### DIRECTIONS

Bring 4 quarts of water to a boil.

Heat olive oil in a large nonstick sauté pan. Add cipollini onions and cook for two minutes, until translucent. Add asparagus and red peppers, cook for another minute. Add shallots and garlic, and cook until garlic turns slightly golden. Add wine and reduce until almost dry. Add chicken stock and cream, and reduce until thickened. Season with salt and pepper.

Meanwhile, salt boiling water and add pasta. For store-bought pasta, cook according to directions on box. For fresh pasta, cook 1 to 1½ minutes, until al dente. Strain thoroughly, then toss with extra virgin olive oil. Place pasta on warm serving dish, top with asparagus mixture, parsley and Parmesan. Toss gently. Serve immediately.

#### \*To make fresh tagliatelle

Place low, wide mound of flour on work surface. Create a well in the center large enough for eggs and olive oil, but do not let work surface show through. Start working in flour from outer edges slowly with your fingers, using a circular motion, being careful not to touch the work surface. Once flour is worked in more, you can start adding the rest more quickly. Once all the flour has been incorporated, knead dough until smooth, about 10 to 15 minutes. Let dough rest 30 minutes before rolling. Roll in pasta machine according to manufacturer's instructions.

jumbo (about an inch). Ancient asparagus was by no means wimpy. Three stalks of Ravenna's (Italy's Ravenna, not ours) amazing asparagus, documented by Pliny in the first century AD, easily made a pound—a hefty girth that remains unparalleled even today. But does size matter? Whole Foods' Janicke believes many people have a misperception that skinny asparagus is more tender. The fact of the matter is a plant's age determines the spear's size— younger plants produce slimmer spears and older plants thicker ones. And as long as the asparagus is fresh, it will be tender. He himself prefers bigger stalks because "there's more edible inside meat."

Skinny, medium or fat, chef Jerry Traunfeld of the Herbfarm restaurant in Woodinville conjures creations with them all. Thin asparagus is pureed into soups—it doesn't need to be peeled, and the skin produces an attractive green potage—and fat asparagus makes a superb side dish. "The texture is great, it's meaty, it cooks nicely and evenly, and looks beautiful peeled," he explains. "I'd definitely use fat asparagus when grilling or roasting."

While size is subjective, freshness isn't. Select straight spears of similar size (for uniform cooking) with firm and plump stems, and intact, tightly furled tips.

Asparagus is not a vegetable for keeping, mind you. If you must store asparagus, do not wash it. Trim the ends and refrigerate the stalks standing upright in a container with one inch of water. Before you cook, chop off the bottom one to two inches and peel thicker stalks downward from the tip to remove any woody fibers.

Although purists relish asparagus spritzed with lemon juice and traditionalists swear by hollandaise, asparagus is very versatile. Grilled asparagus doused in balsamic vinegar and olive oil, topped with shaved Parmesan is heavenly. Puree asparagus and aromatic herbs into a pasta sauce or combine it with nutty morels to elevate risotto from regular to regal. Asparagus with egg, a very popular partner, marry beautifully in omelets, quiches and soufflés. And there's always the courtesan's way—dipped in creamy soft-cooked eggs, eaten with your fingers, of course.

Whether steamed, boiled, sautéed or grilled, cook only until the spears are bright green and al dente. You'll know asparagus is done when the stem meets a knife with slight resistance. Take a hint from Augustus Caesar, who coined the phrase "*citius quam asparagi coquantur*" (faster than you can cook asparagus). ✨