

Harvesting Spring

ASPARAGUS FIVE WAYS

Liz Tarditi



BLAME PUNXSUTAWNEY PHIL. WE WERE READY for spring weeks ago!

As we finally move out of this hard winter, this month's Brandywine Table celebrates the vegetable that most symbolizes springtime: asparagus. It erupts from the earth with a high-society pedigree. Long before it became a staple of the Brandywine lunch circuit, Roman cooks prized it so highly that Emperor Augustus coined the phrase "faster than asparagus cooks" to signal urgency.

Classical writers also credited asparagus with restorative virtues. Greek and Roman texts praised it as a tonic of vitality, and later herbalists described it as cleansing and diuretic — valued for supporting digestion and kidney health.

Its fleeting spring arrival and upright form gave rise to aphrodisiac lore as well, more symbolic than scientific but persistent across centuries. During the Middle Ages, monastery gardens helped preserve its cultivation, maintaining knowledge of perennial crops that would reemerge in European kitchens generations later.

While most of us in the Brandywine Valley favor the sun-kissed green stalks that signal spring's resurrection, our European counterparts have long elevated a paler form of asparagus. In 17th-century France, white asparagus earned the moniker "Ivory of the Garden." This variety was cultivated under mounds of soil to prevent chlorophyll from forming and was favored by King Louis XIV, who demanded it well beyond its natural season.

Producing white asparagus is significantly more labor-intensive — each spear must be carefully buried and harvested before it reaches sunlight — making it a visible marker of wealth and status. That devotion spread east. From mid-April through June 24, Germany enters *Spargel Fieber* — asparagus fever — a celebratory obsession. It is agriculture as ceremony.

Asparagus is also a lesson in engineered patience: a single bed can produce for up to 20 years, returning each spring with more vitality than the last. It isn't just a side dish. It's the soul of the spring table.

To taste that soul locally, look to local farmers markets or to historic [Thornbury Farm](#) in West Chester. Under the stewardship of Randell Spackman, this farm prioritizes natural cultivation without synthetic fertilizers or chemical sprays. Situated on the very grounds of the Battle of Brandywine, the farm is best known for its weekly CSA baskets and bustling farmstand — a perfect source for a spring menu.

From simple air-fried asparagus spears to indulgent penne with crème fraîche, smoked salmon and caviar — yes, those salt-cured salmon roe "pearls" absolutely count in our book — to a classic Gruyère quiche and a protein-packed red quinoa salad, these recipes prove spring has finally sprung. After months of root vegetables and braises, asparagus reminds us that the table, like the season, is ready to turn the page.

Fried Parmesan Asparagus Spears with Horseradish Dipping Sauce

Crisp, golden and impossible to stop eating, these fried asparagus spears turn spring's most elegant vegetable into a crowd-pleasing appetizer. Served with a bright horseradish dipping sauce, they deliver just enough bite to balance the richness without overpowering the asparagus itself.



Serves 6

- 1½ lb. medium asparagus, trimmed
- ¾ C. all-purpose flour
- 3 large eggs
- 1 T. water
- 1 C. panko breadcrumbs
- ¾ C. finely grated Parmesan cheese
- ¾ tsp. kosher salt
- ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ tsp. garlic powder
- ¾ C. neutral oil for shallow frying

For Horseradish Dipping Sauce:

- 1 C. sour cream
- 2–3 T. prepared horseradish, well drained
- 1 T. fresh lemon juice
- ¼ tsp. kosher salt
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1 T. finely chopped fresh chives, optional

Pat asparagus completely dry with paper towels. Moisture prevents the coating from adhering.

Place flour in a shallow dish. In a second dish, whisk eggs with water. In a third dish, combine panko, Parmesan, salt, pepper and garlic powder.

Working in batches, lightly dredge asparagus in flour, shaking off excess. Dip into egg mixture, allowing excess to drip away. Roll in Parmesan mixture, pressing gently so coating adheres along the length of each spear. Transfer to a rack and let rest 5 minutes to help the coating set.

Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat until shimmering but not smoking. Fry asparagus in batches, turning once, until golden brown and crisp, about 2 to 3 minutes per side. Do not overcrowd the pan.

Transfer to a wire rack set over a sheet pan. Season lightly with additional salt, if desired.

For the dipping sauce, stir together sour cream, horseradish, lemon juice, salt and pepper until smooth. Fold in chives if using. Refrigerate at least 15 minutes before serving to allow flavors to develop.

Serve asparagus hot with chilled horseradish sauce alongside.

Asparagus & Gruyère Quiche

Creamy, nutty Gruyère and sweet spring asparagus bake into a quiche that tastes far more indulgent than the effort it requires. This quiche freezes beautifully — either unbaked or fully cooked — making it a smart meal-prep staple and the kind of emergency dinner that feels effortlessly luxurious.



Serves 6

- 1 lb. fresh asparagus, snapped and cut into 1-inch pieces, separating heads for topping
- 1 T. butter
- 6 oz. Gruyère cheese, rind trimmed, freshly shredded
- 1 C. freshly grated Parmesan
- 4 large eggs
- 1 C. heavy cream
- ¼ tsp. freshly grated nutmeg
- ½ tsp. kosher salt
- ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1, 9-inch deep dish pie crust, homemade or high-quality store-bought

Preheat oven to 375°. In a medium pan, sauté asparagus in butter in batches and season with a pinch of salt and pepper, 3 to 5 minutes, just until bright green and barely tender. Remove from heat and cool slightly.

In a bowl, whisk eggs, heavy cream, nutmeg, salt and pepper until smooth.

Follow package directions for pie crust (many do not need pre-baking for quiche and can be filled straight from the freezer). Place on a sheet pan, and layer in cut asparagus and cheeses so they're evenly distributed. Pour in custard mixture, and gently but firmly tap the quiche against the sheet pan a few times to eliminate air bubbles and ensure custard fully fills the dry ingredients. Arrange asparagus heads on top of quiche for garnish.



Bake on sheet pan for 35-40 minutes, until a knife inserted in center comes out clean. Allow to rest uncovered at room temperature for 10 minutes before cutting.

Spring Asparagus & Cannellini Bean Salad with Lemon

This dish is a light, elegant luncheon when garnished with edible flowers, such as local nasturtiums, violas, chive blossoms or redbud flowers. For a dense, high-protein meal, toss in some shredded chicken, shrimp, tofu or cold sliced London broil to fill a wrap or pita for a summer dinner when it's too hot to cook. Due to its high acidity, this dish holds up to seven days in the fridge, but marinate the beans alone for at least one day for best flavor and texture.



Serves 6

- Juice and zest of 4 lemons
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 2 T. extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and white pepper to taste
- Optional: 1 T. finely minced shallot or 1 tsp. finely minced garlic
- 2, 15-oz cans cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
- 2 bunches fresh asparagus, trimmed
- ¼ C. chopped fresh herbs, such as flat-leaf parsley, basil, tarragon or lemon thyme

In a large bowl, whisk together lemon juice, lemon zest, Dijon and olive oil until emulsified. Season with salt and white pepper. Stir in shallot or garlic, if using.

Add cannellini beans and toss gently to coat. Cover and refrigerate at least 4 hours or overnight.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add whole asparagus spears and blanch 2 to 3 minutes, until just bright green and crisp-tender. Transfer immediately to an ice bath. Drain well, pat dry and cut half into 1½-inch pieces, reserve the other spears whole for topping the salad.

Fold chopped asparagus and chopped herbs into marinated beans just before serving.

With a slotted spoon, plate the portions. Then gently toss the asparagus spears in the extra dressing from the bowl the beans mari-

Be Snappy, Not Snippy!

Don't let the woody reputation of asparagus fool you into throwing away a chef's secret. The point where an asparagus spear snaps naturally is the transition from tender parenchyma to lignified fiber. This trim is essentially a sleeve of tough string surrounding a core of flavorful, sweet pith. Even if there is a "white part," it isn't unripe. It was just tucked under the soil, never developing chlorophyll.

When first learning the snapping method, cooks are often shocked by the waste. In high-end kitchens, some chefs painstakingly peel the bottom third of each stem to save every inch. However, this is incredibly labor-intensive and still results in discarded skins. Waste is simply a lack of imagination. To maximize your product without the tedious prep, embrace the snap and unlock "asparagus gold."

Asparagus stores its natural sugars at its base, making these ends surprisingly sweet — often sweeter than a Granny Smith apple! The challenge isn't the flavor, but the "hairy" fiber. To extract the essence and create a coulis, blanch and refresh those ends just as you would the tender spears. Blitz them in a high-speed blender into a vibrant, electric-green purée, then pass through a fine mesh sieve.

This removes the woody fibers leaving you with a silky, sweet concentrate. Use this waste-to-gold as a fresh sauce base, or a flavor boost for soups and risottos. It's the ultimate lesson in culinary efficiency: what looks like scrap is the soul of the dish.

nated in. Serve spears on top or alongside the bean salad. Garnish as desired. Taste and adjust seasoning, if needed.

Warm Red Quinoa Salad with Asparagus, Beets & Goat Cheese

The superfood red quinoa provides a sturdy, nutty base that holds its shape against the creamy chèvre and earthy beets in this dish. The addition of chickpeas transforms it into a complete, high-protein vegetarian meal. Using orange juice as part of the cooking liquid adds a subtle natural sweetness that balances the sharp white wine vinegar.

Serves 6

- For infused cooking liquid:**
- 2 C. orange juice (pulp-free)
- 1¾ C. water
- ¼ C. white wine vinegar
- 1 tsp. kosher salt

- For the salad base:**
- 2 C. dry red quinoa, well-rinsed
- 1 bunch fresh asparagus, trimmed, blanched, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1, 15-oz. can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 2 C. diced cooked red beets, roasted or steamed

- 4 oz. chèvre, crumbled
- Optional: ½ C. toasted walnuts or slivered almonds
- For the extra vinaigrette (for leftovers):**
- ¼ C. orange juice
- 2 T. white wine vinegar
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 2 T. extra virgin olive oil (optional)
- Salt and pepper to taste



In a large stockpot, combine the orange juice, water, white wine vinegar and salt. Stir in the rinsed red quinoa. Then bring the mixture to a boil over medium-high heat.

Once boiling, reduce the heat to low, cover and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes until the liquid is fully absorbed. Remove from heat and let the quinoa stand, covered, for 5 minutes to allow the grains to fully bloom.

While the quinoa is still warm, gently fold in the blanched asparagus pieces and the drained chickpeas. Next, add the diced cooked red beets. (To preserve the vibrant colors, use a light touch when folding in the beets to prevent the entire salad from turning a uniform pink!)

Just before serving, gently fold in the crumbled chèvre so it softens slightly against the warmth of the quinoa. Top with toasted walnuts or slivered almonds, if using, for a final crunch.

Serve in 2-cup portions as a gluten-free protein power bowl.

Note: Quinoa dries out when stored, so shake the ingredients with the extra vinaigrette in a lidded jar to revive the salad when needed if not enjoying it all at one meal.

Penne with Asparagus Crème Fraîche & Smoked Sockeye

Prepare the asparagus coulis as directed in paragraph 3 of the sidebar, then let it shine here. The crème fraîche softens its Kermit-the-Frog green to a delicate spring shade — provided you keep the heat low and treat it gently.

Serves 6

- 1 lb. penne pasta
- 1½ C. prepared asparagus coulis, strained smooth
- 1 C. crème fraîche

- 1 T. salted butter
- 1 T. extra virgin olive oil
- 1 T. very finely minced red onion
- ½ tsp. kosher salt, plus more for pasta water
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground white pepper
- 1 tsp. lemon zest
- 2 T. fresh lemon juice
- ½ C. reserved pasta cooking water, as needed
- 1 bunch fresh asparagus, blanched, chopped, divided into stems and tips
- 24 oz. smoked Sockeye salmon, cut into ribbons
- 3 T. capers, drained
- 2 T. fresh dill, plucked for garnish
- 1, 1.75-oz. jar salmon roe



Bring a large pot of generously salted water to a boil. Cook penne until al dente. Reserve ½ cup pasta water before draining.

While pasta cooks, heat butter and olive oil in a large skillet over medium-low heat. Add red onion and sauté until softened and translucent, about 2 to 3 minutes. Do not brown.

Reduce heat to low. Stir in crème fraîche and warm gently until loosened. Remove pan from heat and whisk in asparagus coulis, salt, pepper, lemon zest and lemon juice. The residual heat should warm the sauce without dulling its bright green color.

Add drained pasta to the skillet and toss to coat, adding reserved pasta water a few tablespoons at a time until the sauce clings lightly. Gently fold in blanched chopped asparagus.

Plate each serving. Then arrange 4 oz. of smoked salmon ribbons in a rosette on top. Garnish with asparagus tips, capers, fresh dill and roe. Serve immediately. ♦

Liz Tarditi is a chef and wine specialist with more than 30 years of experience in food, wine and event planning. She holds degrees from Villanova University and from a Seattle culinary arts program founded by a Certified French Master Chef, where she trained in a classic brigade-style kitchen. Liz later ran her own catering company and has worked as a wine specialist in Pennsylvania. She brings her training and lifelong passion for seasonal, approachable cooking to Brandywine Table.



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