

from Aunt Oli

"Purify" with rhubarb and asparagus

by Lydia Lovell

When April's rain and snow showers depart and May arrives, even Cape Codders suffer the delusion that spring is here. And in some years May does look, does smell, does feel like spring. Nobody can mistake jonquils and daffodils, golden forsythia, and gay tulips for mid-summer blossoms... so it must be spring!

Look, too, to the garden... why, there's rhubarb! And asparagus! And lo and behold, the herring are running! It IS spring! And don't curse the dandelion and poke weed, either. These were once put to good use in springtime cookery.

Uncle Henry was delighted to find knobby red fiddleheads of rhubarb poking up at the same time jonquils started blooming beneath south-facing kitchen windows. In his opinion, rhubarb sold in supermarkets wasn't worth carrying home. He enjoyed rhubarb only when he'd grown it, pulled it, and rushed it to Aunt Olivia's kitchen where she made sauce of it, sweet and fresh. In choosing rhubarb stalks, Uncle Henry pulled only tender, medium-sized ones; he trimmed off leaves and peeled dry skin from the bases. Aunt Olivia peeled only larger tougher stalks; she used small tender ones Uncle Henry delivered just as they came. After washing and cutting the stalks into one-inch lengths, she sprinkled each quart of rhubarb with a cup of sugar and allowed it to stand for a couple of hours. She then drained the syrup that formed into a saucepan, added 1/4 C. of orange juice, and brought it to a hard boil before adding the rhubarb. The sauce cooked only about five minutes until just tender.

Rhubarb sauce accompanied most dinners during the month of May. If it hadn't appeared as a side dish, you counted upon rhubarb pie, rhubarb with custard, rhubarb over sliced hot-milk cake, or on ice cream and, later in the season, rhubarb in combination with strawberries.

Eating a piece of Aunt Olivia's rhubarb pie was a gastronomic experience no true Lovell ever purposely missed. Since she is no longer here to prepare them, I've attempted to duplicate her rhubarb pies. Mine are just as delicious... but not exactly the same... as hers. What secret ingredient she used that's not listed in her recipes, I cannot imagine. I only now there's a well-remembered, completely elusive flavor in **Rhubarb Pie** lacks even though I follow her instructions to the letter. It's too late to ask.

4 C. peeled rhubarb stalks, cut into pieces 1/2" long.

1/4 C. sugar, 1/4 t. salt, 1 t. nutmeg

Pastry for a two-crust pie

Reheat oven to 375°. In a saucepan combine rhubarb,

sugar, salt, and nutmeg. Bring to a boil over high heat. Remove from heat immediately. Have ready a pie plate lined with pastry. Fill pie with boiling mixture and cover immediately with top crust. Seal edges carefully. Be certain to slash top crust in several places, allowing steam to escape. Because juice may run over, place pie plate on a large square of aluminum foil and set on center rack in oven. Bake about 45 minutes until crust is golden.

Not so terribly long ago, comparatively little was known of nutrition; people ate whatever came into season locally. They seemed to thrive. Foods like rhubarb, asparagus, spinach, watercress, in spring, not to mention sulphur and molasses, received credit for "purifying the blood." No one ever explained why blood needed purifying... few old folks asked the question. Such notions, by the time I was growing up, were almost enough to induce me to reject rhubarb and other spring delicacies from the garden. happily, sulphur and molasses were never forced on me. Instead, after being treated to Aunt Olivia's **Hot Milk Cake with Rhubarb Filling**, I anticipated with pleasure the blood-purifying season.

2 eggs

1 C. sugar

1 C. flour

1 t. baking powder

1/2 t. lemon extract

1 t. butter

1/2 C. milk

In a medium bowl, beat eggs until lemon-colored and foamy. Stir in sugar. Sift flour with baking powder twice; stir into egg mixture. In a small saucepan, melt butter, add milk, and heat to scalding but do not boil. Stir milk into batter. Add flavoring. Pour into a well-greased-and-floured loaf pan and bake at 350° for 35 to 40 minutes until cake tests done. Remove from pan and cool on rack.

Filling: In a saucepan combine:

1 C. chopped rhubarb

1/2 C. chopped raisins

1-1/2 C. sugar

Juice and grated rind of half-a-lemon

Boil together until sugar is melted and syrup transparent. Cut thoroughly cool Hot Milk Cake into three horizontal layers. Divide filling over two lower layers; stack layers together again and frost cake if desired.

Asparagus appears shortly after rhubarb, and no one needs reminding that the fresher it is, the better it tastes. When my brother and I were children, Aunt Olivia often made asparagus-on-toast for our supper. Much as I loved asparagus, mushy toast was, perhaps, the only thing Aunt Olivia ever served me that I refused to eat. Not only did the toast get mushy from the wet stalks of asparagus, Aunt Olivia softened the toast crusts by dipping all four edges into the cooking water. YUCK. Much later, I learned to

make **Asparagus on Toast** to suit myself.

Wash 10 to 16 (depending on size) asparagus spears; snap off and discard woody ends. Bring one cup of salted water to a boil in a large frying pan. Lay asparagus in water, cover pan, reduce heat to low, and cook 10 or 12 minutes. Toast and butter four slices of cracked wheat bread. Cut two slices into quarters. Place whole slices on plates surrounded with quarters. Using tongs, drain asparagus and arrange spears on toast. Sprinkle sparingly with pepper and top with a pat of butter. Pass Parmesan cheese. Serves two people.

Inevitably, usually on the day you contemplate doing some serious spring housecleaning, comes an unexpected knock at the door, and you know summer is almost upon us because company has arrived from the city, taking advantage of lower motel rates before the season goes into high gear. Glad to see them? Of course! And they MUST have lunch... (but WHAT? Never mind. You'll think of something.)

If you happen to have a little left-over ham and a good-sized bunch of asparagus in the refrigerator, you can whip together a company meal in practically no time. Here's how, with **Asparagus in Ambush**.

6 hard rolls- stale ones are fine

2 lbs. asparagus

2 C. (more or less) ham in

1 1/2" cubes

2 C. milk

4 eggs, beaten

1 heaping T. butter

salt and pepper to taste

Wash asparagus and cut into half-inch lengths. In a saucepan, boil asparagus 15 minutes. Drain in a sieve and set aside. Meanwhile, cut tops off rolls, remove doughy centers, and place shells and tops in 200° oven to dry out. In the top of a double boiler, heat milk to scalding. Beat eggs until light and foamy; stir into hot milk. Bring to boil, set over boiling water, and stir until mixture begins to thicken. Add butter, salt, and pepper. Remove from heat and add cubed ham and drained asparagus. Fill roll shells with mixture, sprinkle with paprika perhaps, or garnish with a sprig of parsley. Pop on the tops and serve hot. Accompanied by a simple lettuce and tomato salad with oil and vinegar dressing, this meal is fit for royalty. (I think the hostess, not the asparagus, should be called "ambushed.")

If you happen to be fresh-out of rhubarb pie, homemade rhubarb sauce over vanilla ice cream is a treat most city-dwellers seldom experience. Pass lemon cookies and pour hot, strong tea. You'll be surprised how festive your luncheon will be.

Bon appetit.