

Rhubarb & Asparagus Spring Specials Supreme

by Lydia Lovell

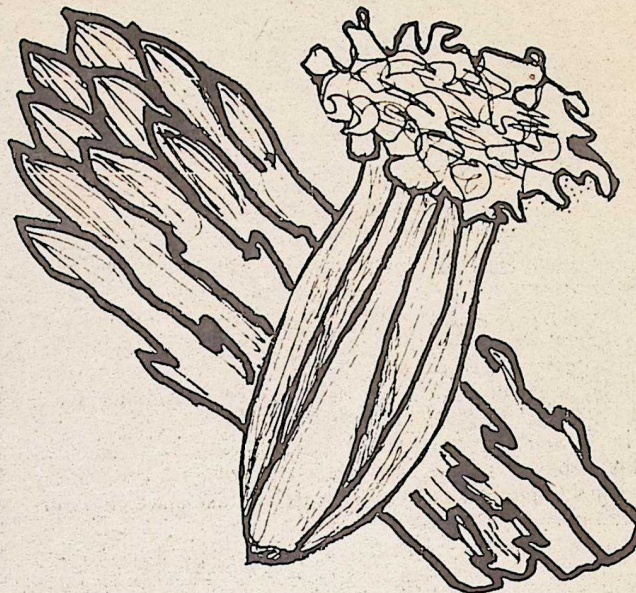
To some people rhubarb tastes sour and bitter, but anyone like me, introduced to rhubarb at the age of three on a warm spring day while the sun streamed down into Uncle Henry's garden, thinks it delectable. Uncle Henry pulled two tender pink and pale-green stalks, removed the broad leaf from each, snapped off the pink cup at the base, and passed one stalk to me. Smiling joyfully, he then proceeded to chew on the other one with evident relish. I followed suit, of course, and enjoyed every crisp and luscious bite. Certainly, rhubarb is not cloyingly sweet, but that fact was no reason for me to reject the new flavor.

Once accepted, I was soon to discover rhubarb marries happily with strawberries a bit later in the season to yield a sauce that compliments either pork or lamb, may be served topped with whipped cream for dessert or, reversing the arrangement, makes a lovely topping for vanilla ice cream.

For **Strawberry-Rhubarb Sauce**, place three cups of rhubarb stalks, cut crosswise into 1-inch lengths, in a heavy covered saucepan. Without adding water, cook over low heat for seven or eight minutes, stirring several times so fruit won't stick to pan. Then add about 3/4 cup of granulated sugar and one cup of washed and hulled strawberries. Continue to cook for two or three minutes longer. Remove from heat and fold in another cup of washed and hulled strawberries. Pour into a bowl and allow to stand until cool. Refrigerate. Serve in sherbet glasses; top with whipped cream. Or pour into a baked pie shell and top with meringue.

Another flavor that blends well with rhubarb is that of ginger. I can give you directions for two approaches to reach the same goal. One is an old recipe Aunt Olivia seldom used because it requires a good deal of work. The other is easy and the results are equally as good. To prepare **Gingery Rhubarb Preserve** the hard way, gather about six pounds of rhubarb stalks and rub them well with a damp towel to lessen chances of the jam's fermenting. Cut the stalks into 1-inch lengths. Wrap two ounces of whole ginger root in a towel and bruise thoroughly with a hammer. Place the ginger in the bottom of a large stainless steel saucepan. Layer rhubarb alternately with six pounds of lump sugar. Allow to stand for 24 hours. Pour through a colander to separate pulp from syrup, saving both. In a smaller saucepan, bring syrup to a boil over medium heat; cook for ten minutes stirring constantly to prevent burning. Return pulp to large saucepan and pour boiling syrup over pulp. Allow to stand another 24 hours. Bring mixture to a brisk boil, stirring constantly. Reduce heat and allow to simmer slowly half-an-hour longer. Remove from heat and skim well, being careful not to stir any scum into the preserves. Pour into ten sterilized pint jars and seal.

The easy way? Buy a pint jar of ginger marmalade. Boil up a few cups of rhubarb cut into 1-inch lengths. Sweeten to taste. Stir enough ginger marmalade into the rhubarb sauce to achieve the desired flavor. Exactly the same results in smaller quantities.



Not long after rhubarb first appears in the garden in April, the month of May arrives. Asparagus then puts up its tender shoots. The fresher you can find it, of course, the better asparagus tastes. Aunt Olivia and Uncle Henry grew their own and never disturbed that section of the garden where it sprouted spring after spring.

Enough recipes exist to serve asparagus every day throughout May and June and never repeat a single dish, but none tastes better than the simplest method of preparation. Remove any sand by washing in cool clear water and brushing the tips gently with a vegetable brush. Bend the butt ends until the woody section snaps off. Lay the spears in half-an-inch of lightly-salted water in the bottom of a 12" skillet. Bring water to a boil and cook asparagus ten minutes. Turn heat off and allow to steam; serve with butter within ten or twelve minutes.

Asparagus on toast, creamed and heaped in patty shells, sauced with Hollandaise, dressed with mint, topped with hard-boiled eggs forced through a sieve, sprinkled with crumbled crisp-fried bacon, tossed with cubed chicken meat, raisins, chopped celery and scallions all together in a curried cream sauce ... or sprinkled with Parmesan cheese ... however asparagus appears, this vegetable is a favorite throughout its season.

Try it this way for a one-dish meal for four: **Asparagus and Egg Casserole**.

2 lbs. asparagus
4 hard-boiled eggs, sliced
1 can mushroom soup,
undiluted

1/2 C. grated cheddar cheese
1/2 C. soft bread crumbs
shake of black pepper

Wash asparagus and snap off tough ends. Cook 10 minutes in boiling water, drain, and arrange half the spears in the bottom of a greased 1 1/2-quart casserole. Arrange half the egg slices on top of the asparagus. Heat the soup and spoon half over the egg slices. Shake a little pepper on top. Sprinkle with half the grated cheese. Repeat with another layer, using up remaining ingredients and finishing off with bread crumbs. Bake in 350° oven about 30 minutes.

Japanese cooks use asparagus too; in some Japanese restaurants, the menu will offer this special delicacy. If you're an asparagus lover, don't miss an opportunity to sample **Asparagus Tempura**. Or attempt it yourself; it is not difficult.

Separate one egg. Make the batter: Beat egg white until stiff but not dry. Set aside. Stir 3 T. cold water into the egg yolk and add 1/3 C. flour. Mix lightly and quickly. Fold egg white into yolk.

Parboil asparagus spears for 8 minutes. Dip into batter and deep-fry in oil at 350° until golden brown. Drain and serve immediately.

Shrimp and asparagus are particularly compatible, and shrimp tempura, cooked in the same Japanese fashion, completes this meal. Aunt Olivia's method of bringing the two together was to use canned shrimp since neither the fresh nor the frozen crustacean was available to her. To the drained shrimp Aunt Olivia added diced scallions and celery, tossing them together with mayonnaise. The shrimp salad mixture was heaped on lettuce cups; then asparagus pieces, sliced on the diagonal, cooked until just tender and drained well, were arranged beside the shrimp. A dollop of mayonnaise and a generous slice of ripe tomato finished the plate.

One of the most outrageously expensive recipes I ever discovered among Aunt Olivia's collection is titled **Nouvelle Asparagus Salad**. I have no doubt this is delicious, but I wonder if Aunt Olivia ever followed it to the letter.

In a large skillet, heat 2 T. olive oil and stir-fry 1/2 C. scallions, sliced in quarter-inch lengths; half-a-pound of mushroom, sliced; and half-a-pound of whole asparagus tips until tips are just tender. Add one pound of sea scallops, cut approximately into one-inch cubes. Stir-fry five minutes or until scallops are cooked through. Remove pan from heat and with a slotted spoon fill Bibb lettuce leaves with mixture. Sprinkle with finely grated fresh ginger root and chopped fresh parsley. To pan juices add 1/2 C. dry white wine. Return to very low heat only long enough to warm wine; do not boil. Stir to loosen any bits that may stick to the pan. Pour pan juices over salad and serve immediately with French bread slices spread lightly with garlic butter and toasted quickly under the broiler.

If you ever use this recipe, I hope you will make soup with the remaining edible asparagus stalks.