

The Curve

EAT ASPARAGUS!

A serious contender for heavyweight champion of the eat the seasons year, the asparagus season is tantalizingly brief but the quality is frequently exceptional. Asparagus deteriorates relatively quickly after picking, which is why freshly picked English asparagus is to jet-lagged imported asparagus what dining at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons is to eating a microwaved frozen Chicken Tikka Masala on your lap in front of the TV.

Traditionally matched with hollandaise sauce, asparagus picked just a day or so ago (try your nearest farmers' market) requires minimal messing with. Enjoy it with a drizzle of olive oil, a twist of black pepper and perhaps a few shavings of Parmesan cheese.

HISTORY - Earliest records of asparagus cultivation trace it back to Greece some 2,500 years ago. The Greeks believed that asparagus possessed medicinal properties and recommended it as a cure for toothaches. It was highly prized by the Romans who grew it in high-walled courtyards. Asparagus has been grown in England since the sixteenth century (it is not widely cultivated anywhere else in the UK) and during the nineteenth century it caught on in North America and China.

BIOLOGY - A member of the lily family, *Asparagus officinalis* is the edible variety of the asparagus family. Unusually the plant has virtually no leaves; the stems are examples of phylloclades (photosynthetic branches).

White asparagus is popular in much of Europe and is produced by keeping the growing shoots hidden from light under soil. The less tender but more fully flavoured green variety predominates in England.

NUTRITION - Asparagus contains more folic acid than any other vegetable. It is also a source of fibre, potassium, vitamins A and C and glutathione, a phytochemical with antioxidant and anticarcinogenic properties.

TIPS:

BUYING - Look for firm but tender stalks with good colour and closed tips. Smaller, thinner stalks are not necessarily more tender; in fact thicker specimens are often better due to the smaller ratio of skin to volume.

COOKING - Scan the QR code below with your smartphone to view and download the recipe for 'Asparagus Pizza'

