

THE CHEF

Diane Forley



ASPARAGUS comes into season soon, and it's the sort of ingredient that really should be eaten in its prime — from late April through May. This dish is a good example of how to use all the parts of a vegetable, something that home cooks do not always do.

Most people cut off the bottom ends of the asparagus and throw them away. They also discard the peelings. But there's a lot of flavor in there, or in any stem you can think of, for that matter. The stem of an artichoke, for example, is fibrous but very flavorful and can be used in soups, sauces or vinaigrettes.

It's the same with mushrooms or broccoli. By using the parts of the vegetable you would normally discard, you're being efficient and coaxing all the flavor out of it.

This dish layers asparagus flavors, using the puréed ends in the vinaigrette for an intensifying effect, while at the same time imparting a mild character to the dressing. I use grapeseed oil because it has a neutral taste, much more so than peanut oil or soy oil, and I don't want the oil to compete with the other flavors in a dish. It's important to strain the vinaigrette, to remove the fibers

This is the fourth of eight columns by Diane Forley, the chef and owner of the Manhattan restaurant Verbena. Her collaborator on these columns is William Grimes.

From stem to tip, coaxing out the full flavor of asparagus.

from the woody part of the asparagus.

A crumble of egg yolk makes a bright garnish. Traditionally, egg sauces like hollandaise have been paired with asparagus — because it's a watery vegetable, it can take a rich sauce. (It's watery because it is a stalk, which carries water from the roots to the rest of the plant.)

I use a lot of salt when cooking the asparagus because you don't season it again. I want to get the salt *into* the asparagus, to give it a little zing.

When it's tender, it's plunged into ice water to arrest the cooking; I put a tablespoon of salt in the ice water, too, because when you shock a vegetable in ice water and it sits there, some of the flavor leaches out, so you want to compensate with a little seasoning.

If you would like a little more color and crunch to the salad, toss in some julienned strips of raw red and yellow bell pepper.

ASPARAGUS VINAIGRETTE

Time: 40 minutes

- 2 teaspoons minced shallots
- ½ cup sherry vinegar
- 1 pound jumbo asparagus
- Salt
- 1 large bunch basil, leaves only
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 cup grapeseed oil
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 2 hard-boiled eggs
- 1 head frisée
- 1 bunch chervil, leaves only
- ¼ pound prosciutto or Serrano ham.

1. In a small saucepan over medium heat, combine the shallots and vinegar. Bring to a boil, and reduce the liquid by half. Remove from heat, and reserve.

2. Peel the bottom 2 inches of the asparagus stalks, reserving the peelings. Fill a medium saucepan with water, add 2 tablespoons salt, and bring to a boil. Fill a large bowl with ice water and 1 tablespoon salt, and place near stove. Add the asparagus peelings to the boiling water, and blanch for 3 minutes; then, transfer to ice water. Add basil to boiling water, and blanch until green color brightens, about 45 seconds, then transfer to ice water. Cook asparagus in

boiling water until quite tender when squeezed at the ends, about 5 minutes. Transfer to ice water.

3. Remove asparagus stalks from water, and drain well. Cut off the bottom 2 inches of the stalks, and place in a food processor or blender. Reserve asparagus stalks. Remove peelings and basil from water, drain and add to food processor. Add mustard and vinegar-shallot mixture. With processor running, pour in the grapeseed oil in a thin stream. Season mixture with salt and pepper, and strain through a fine sieve or chinois, discarding the solids.

4. To assemble salad: Remove the yolks from the hard-boiled eggs, press through a sieve and set aside. In a large mixing bowl, combine the frisée, chervil and vinaigrette. Cut ¼-inch rounds from the bottom 4 inches of the asparagus stalks, and add to mixing bowl. Arrange the asparagus spears on a serving plate or individual plates. Place the mixed greens on top of the asparagus. Arrange prosciutto slices around the greens, and sprinkle sieved egg yolks on top.

Yield: 6 servings.