

Spargelzeit- Its Asparagus Time!!

Food and Recipes



The last vestiges of winter frost have disappeared. The sun is shining and the gardens are full of flowers. The warmth in the air signals one of my favourite culinary times of the year- Spargelzeit (Asparagus time).

Most people wrongly assume that Austrian cuisine is only about sausages and schnitzel. But Austrian cuisine is so much more – a wonderful fusion of Hungarian Empire culinary delights and seasonal specialities.

Spargelzeit heralds the arrival of spring. In early April, the odd crate of exorbitantly priced imported asparagus appears in the market. A few weeks later a trip to the Naschmarkt confirms that Spargelzeit has arrived. Seems like every Naschmarkt stalls is displaying baskets brimming with carefully aligned knobby white stalks of asparagus. Facebook and twitter posts by the hundreds announce:

“Das Spargelsaison hat begonnen!” Asparagus season has begun!

Restaurants follow suit and proudly announce their asparagus-themed menus on blackboards. The menus follow a strict faithfulness to the established much loved dishes: creamy asparagus soup; asparagus with hollandaise sauce and parsley-potatoes ; asparagus cordon bleu” (white asparagus spears wrapped in cheese and ham, then breaded and fried like a schnitzel); spargelrisotto. Just reading the menus, makes my mouth water!



A typical Spargelzeit menu- taken from Beisl in Sigmundsgasse

This is when you know *Spargelzeit*, "Asparagus season", has arrived.

Why do Austrians go crazy for Spargel?

You may ask yourself, has the entire Austrian population gone crazy?

Why are they excited about a vegetable?

Firstly, this is not the green asparagus more common in North America, France, Italy and Australia. Spargelzeit is celebrating the tender, more naturally sweet white asparagus.



Spargel

Secondly, as Austrian supermarkets tend to only stock local, seasonal produce. If you want white asparagus, then you make sure you eat it during the short asparagus season (mid-April to mid-June).

To Austrians, white asparagus is something like foie gras or caviar. From the 17th century, asparagus was seen as a "luxury vegetable" exclusively available to the Austrian aristocracy and their selected guests. The white asparagus is precious and more expensive due to its short season and tedious harvest. Whereas, the "common" green asparagus is readily available all year and can be found all over the globe.

Where is the best spargel from?

The best asparagus is from the Marchfeld, the fertile plains of Lower Austria located between Vienna and the Slovakian border. Marchfeld spargel is recognised by the EU with a protected

geographical mark-

“ Marchfeldspargel”

Fields of asparagus have been found in the Marchfeld landscape since the 19th century. A number of the local producers even supplied the Imperial Court with asparagus. The area is characterised by sandy soil, a mild to cold climate with ample sunshine that is perfect for growing asparagus.

The Marchfeld asparagus is white because it grows while covered under a mound of soil, so that the stalks are not exposed to light and therefore do not produce chlorophyll (which would turn them green). The harvest is extremely tedious and is still done by hand. The asparagus must be harvested early in the morning before the sun rises. The workers scour the field for the tiny tell-tale cracks as the asparagus spears push their way upward. Using a hand-tool the workers bore into the soil and carefully snap the precious white stalk from the root. Once they are picked, the stalks are classified according to their diameter (bigger is better), whether their tips are closed tightly (which indicates freshness), and whether they are straight.

Buying and Preparing Spargel

To ensure that you are getting the best white asparagus, buy it fresh and locally. Marchfeld asparagus is carefully hand-picked, immediately chilled and marketed throughout Austria within 24 hours. Check to ensure that the ends are not dried out as old woody stalks do not taste good at all. Asparagus should always be kept cool, dark and moist and is best kept in the refrigerator and wrapped in a damp cloth.

To prepare white asparagus, snap off the woody ends and then remove the fibrous skin with a vegetable peeler. Start just below the flower heads and ensure that you remove all the bitter skin. Place the stalks of the white asparagus in a wide pan and simmer gently for 12-15 minutes. Asparagus gourmands tie the asparagus with string to form a bundle and boil it standing in a Spargeltopf (asparagus pot), a tall, narrow pot which allows the spears to stand so that they are steamed gently.

Recipes

Cream of Asparagus soup

Cream of Asparagus soup is one of the most popular asparagus dishes. (Serves 6)

- 750g white asparagus
- 1½ tsp salt
- 1½ tsp sugar
- 4½ tbsp butter
- 3 tbsp plain flour
- 150ml white wine (or 150ml vegetable stock plus 1½ tbsp lemon juice)
- 225ml single cream
- Salt and pepper
- Small bunch of fresh chives or chervil, finely chopped

Wash the asparagus spears, snap off their woody ends and peel each one carefully from beneath the flower head down. Put all the ends and bits of peel into a pan with 1.5 litres of water and the

salt and sugar, and bring to the boil. Simmer on a low heat for 20 minutes before draining through a sieve into a large bowl. Leave to cool.

Slice off the tips of the asparagus spears just below the head and slice them lengthwise. Cut the rest of each spear into 3cm pieces. Melt 3 tbsp of the butter in a wide pan that will be large enough to take all the stock, and add the chopped asparagus stalks (not the tips). Saute over a medium heat for two minutes, then add the flour. Stir and allow to sweat for one minute before adding the wine to deglaze the pan; then add the stock. Bring to the boil and simmer gently for 10 minutes.

Once the asparagus pieces are soft (check by poking one with a sharp knife), remove from the heat and blend them with the stock. Once smooth, pour the puree through a sieve, using a wooden spoon to push it through and scrape any liquid clinging on to its underside, and return your soup to the pan. Stir in the cream, season with salt, pepper and sugar to taste and reheat gently.

Finally, melt the remaining butter in a frying pan and slowly cook the asparagus tips for about five minutes, until they're golden brown around the edges. Ladle the soup into bowls and garnish with the asparagus tips and chopped herbs.

Wine Tip: A medium-bodied Grüner Veltiner, unwooded-Weissburgunder; young not grassy Sauvignon Blanc-

[White Asparagus with hollandaise sauce and parsley-potatoes](#)

This is the most classic of all of the dishes during Spargelzeit.

(Serves 4)

- 2kg white asparagus
- 1 tbsp butter
- 1 tbsp sugar
- 1 tsp salt

For the hollandaise sauce:

- 4 medium-sized egg yolks
- 1 tbsp freshly squeezed lemon juice
- A pinch of salt
- A pinch of cayenne pepper
- 225g butter 2 tbsp cold water

To serve:

- 700g new potatoes
- Fresh parsley to garnish

Make sure white asparagus has been kept in a moist environment and it's best to prepare it as soon as possible after purchase. Snap the hard, woody ends off the asparagus and peel the remaining spears from just beneath the flower head. Put the ends and peelings into a wide, shallow pan, cover with water, bring to the boil and leave to simmer for 15 minutes before draining through a sieve. Add the butter, salt and sugar to the stock. Lower the asparagus into

the liquid and cook gently for 10 to 15 minutes, until you can slide a knife easily through the thick end of the spears.

While you're making your asparagus stock, prepare your potatoes. Peel them, put them in a pan, cover them with cold water, bring to the boil, add a little salt and leave them to simmer for 15 to 20 minutes.

For the hollandaise sauce, whisk the egg yolks in a medium-sized bowl with the lemon juice, salt and cayenne pepper. Heat the butter in a non-stick pan until it has just melted. Add the water and drizzle the mixture very, very slowly into the egg, whisking constantly. Pour back into the pan and cook on a very low heat, whisking constantly until the sauce has thickened.

Spoon the hollandaise over the asparagus and serve with the parsley-potatoes.

Wine Tip: Ripe Weißburgunder and Grauburgunder (Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris), Chardonnay and Grüner Veltliner in Reserve quality.

Asparagus Risotto

(Serves 4)

- 8 spears asparagus
- 2 shallots
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 200 g Risotto
- 1/16 L white wine
- 1 L chicken broth
- 3 tablespoons Parmesan
- 1 teaspoon chopped chervil
- Lemon; salt; pepper

Finely chop the shallots and sauté them in olive oil.

Add the Risotto and heat together for a short amount of time; then pour in white wine. Cook for 18 minutes, stirring constantly.

Add the white asparagus – peeled and cut – for the last 10 minutes, and let cook. Finally, season with butter, lemon, Parmesan and chervil, then serve.

Wine Tip: A robust Grüner Veltliner, unwooded Chardonnay or a weighty Wiener Gemischter Satz harmonises wonderfully with asparagus risotto.

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