



MEDIA RELEASE

TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
MARKET DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

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CONTACT: Rob Beets, Marketing Specialist
615-837-5160
Robert.Beets@TN.gov

Asparagus Quick, Easy, Elegant – and a Sure Sign of Spring

NASHVILLE – The very first crops of the year are beginning to make appearances in Tennessee gardens and farmers markets – turnip greens, lettuces, radishes, early potatoes, sugar snaps and snow peas, plus that most elegant of vegetables, asparagus.

“Asparagus is set apart among early crops on so many levels,” says Tammy Algood, food expert and spokesperson for the statewide Pick Tennessee Products campaign. The promotion is part of the efforts by the Tennessee Department of Agriculture Market Development Division to help consumers identify and choose foods grown or processed in Tennessee. “Asparagus has a lot of flavor, and can fit into lots of places at the table – as an appetizer, salad, soup or side dish.”

Algood’s recipe celebrating early crops is Asparagus Mornay. Algood creates recipes featuring foods grown or processed in Tennessee. Her recipes are available at www.PickTnProducts.org.

“These graceful spears have always been a sign of elegance, and in times past, were a delicacy only the wealthy could afford,” says Algood. “Luckily, these days we all get to enjoy this nutritious vegetable that’s especially quick and easy to cook, making it a smart choice for busy cooks who also want to eat fresh.” Asparagus crops are harvested from now until May, with April being the prime month.

Asparagus is a heart-healthy food, containing no fat, cholesterol or sodium. It’s also a good source of folic acid, potassium, vitamin C, beta-carotene and dietary fiber. The amino acid asparagine gets its name from asparagus, since the plant is rich in this compound.

In addition to the prevalent green variety, white and purple hued types can be found in the marketplace. “Whichever type of asparagus you buy, just be certain it’s fresh,” says Algood. “The sugar in the plant quickly converts to starch after harvesting, causing a loss in flavor and the development of a woody texture. Select firm, straight, smooth stalks with tightly-closed tips. A dull color and limp stalks are indicators of old age. Choose stalks of uniform thickness for more control in the cooking process.

“Do not wash asparagus before storing and never soak it,” says the food expert. “Trim the ends of fresh asparagus and stand them upright in a jar with about an inch of water in the bottom. Cover with a plastic bag and store spears in the refrigerator for up to two days.” Wait to wash the spears until ready to cook, then clean the vegetable by gently sloshing it up and down in a sink of cool water, gently rubbing any sand from the stalks with your fingers.

MORE

ELLINGTON AGRICULTURAL CENTER
BOX 40627, NASHVILLE, TN 37204
PickTNProducts.org

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One popular cooking method is to stand asparagus in three inches of boiling water, cover and cook for 8 minutes or until the tips are tender. This method cooks the thicker bottom stalk while steaming the more tender tips. It is a good idea to tie the asparagus in bundles of 10 to 12 stalks for cooking, so they can be quickly removed from the water all at once, says Algood; “It is imperative not to overcook asparagus. Remember, the stalks will continue to cook a bit, even after removed from boiling water.”

The flavor of asparagus is so distinct that it can stand up to lots of other strong flavors; the mornay sauce in Algood’s latest recipe is a tasty – but not overwhelming – companion for the asparagus. “This is a creamy, mild sauce,” says Algood, “and the secret to making it smooth is simple: whisk, whisk, whisk! A spoon won’t do it, and neither will a fork. The wires of a whisk serve to break up particles in a superior way. Add in a little of the mixture in a steady stream, whisking all the time.”

“Ideally, asparagus should be served warm or at room temperature as refrigeration dulls the flavor. The buttery cracker crumbs add a nice crunch to the dish.”

For more recipes featuring Tennessee farm and processed products or listings of more local and artisan food products, visit the TDA Market Development Web site at www.PickTnProducts.org.

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Please find a hi-res downloadable photograph of the attached recipe at www.PickTnProducts.org. Click on the featured recipe.

Asparagus Mornay

1 ½ pounds fresh asparagus, trimmed	1 cup half-and-half
½ teaspoon chicken bouillon granules	1/8 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons hot water	1/8 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1 tablespoon butter	½ cup shredded Swiss cheese
1 tablespoon all-purpose flour	5 buttery crackers, crushed

Cook asparagus in boiling water for 8 minutes or until crisp-tender. Drain and pat dry. Leave whole or cut into 1-inch pieces. Arrange in a greased 11 x 7-inch pan. Stir together bouillon and hot water until granules dissolve. Set aside. In a small saucepan over low heat, melt butter. Whisk in flour until smooth. Cook, whisking constantly, for 1 minute. Gradually whisk in bouillon, half-and-half, nutmeg and salt. Increase heat to medium and cook, whisking constantly until thick and bubbly. Remove from heat and stir in cheese until melted. Pour mixture over asparagus and sprinkle with crushed crackers. Broil 8 inches away from heat source for 4 minutes or until lightly browned. Yield: 4-6 servings.

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