

Cream of Asparagus Soup

serves 8–10

This is the first spring soup I make here in New England. Pick some ramps (wild leeks), pick or buy just-picked asparagus, get some local butter and cream, and you've got a mostly local, delicious, rich, nourishing, beautiful soup!

3 T. butter

1 T. olive oil

1 1/2 c. onions, 1/2" dice

1 1/2 c. leeks, 1/4" 1/2 rings 2

T. dry sherry or white wine

2 T. white flour, optional

4 lbs. fresh asparagus

4 c. vegetable stock

1 tsp. salt

1/4 tsp. fresh ground black pepper

1 to 1 1/2 c. heavy cream

Heat the butter and olive oil in a large soup pot over medium high heat. When the butter is melted, add the onions and sauté for 8–10 minutes, until soft and translucent, stirring often. Add the leeks and sauté for 5–6 more minutes, stirring often. While sautéing the onions and garlic, add the sherry/wine, a drizzle at a time, when the onions begin to stick. This wants to be a light, delicate soup so the onions and leeks want to stay on the light side, not dark and caramelized. If you like a thick soup, add the flour at this point and cook for 3 minutes, stirring constantly, until light brown. For a thinner soup that has a more "pure" flavor, skip the flour.

Cut the top 1 to 1 1/4" tips off the asparagus. Soak and rinse thoroughly if gritty. Cut the tough white bottoms off the remaining stalks by snapping them by hand individually (they will break in exactly the right spot) or by cutting them with a knife. Set the tips aside. If using prepared stock (your own or packaged), add the tough asparagus bottoms to your stock and simmer an additional 20–30 minutes, or prepare fresh stock using the bottoms (see stock instructions below). Lightly peel the stalks and cut them into 1/2" chunks and add to the soup pot. Add the stock, salt, and pepper. Simmer until the asparagus is completely soft and tender, 20–30 minutes. Simmer the cream in a small pot on medium heat for 5–10 minutes to thicken it a bit. If you like richer soup, use more cream and less stock.

Bring a medium pot of water to a boil. Blanch the asparagus tips for 2 minutes and drain immediately. To retain maximum bright green color, drop the blanched tips into ice water. This is optional; I usually skip this step. Drain well and set aside.

Blend the soup in batches in a blender, thinning each batch with some of the thickened cream. Don't fill the blender more than half full to ensure you won't blow the lid off and spray boiling liquid on your neck and face. That REALLY hurts. Hold a towel over the lid while blending to be extra safe. Pour each batch into a clean pot until all the contents are done. Taste and adjust the seasoning as desired.

Serve with a vegetable-filled frittata or omelet (local eggs of course!), a salad made with local greens and dressed simply with your best olive oil and balsamic vinegar, and crusty bread or popovers. Celebrate spring. It doesn't get any better!

Vegetable Stock

Vegetable stock brings many of the foods I prepare to life. It gives body and depth to otherwise bland foods, preserving their simplicity, yet rounding out the flavor. Vegetable stock increases the nutrient content of the foods that you are preparing, and allows you to glean nutrients from foods that you would ordinarily discard.

Vegetable stock can be used in place of water in most foods, except for desserts and most sweet baked goods. It gives a wonderful flavor to soups and stews, grains and beans, and to many breads and rolls.

Not all vegetables add a pleasant flavor to stocks. My favorite ingredients for stock are onions and their skins (skins in moderation), leek greens, leek greens, leek greens (I really like this one!), carrots and tops, celery and tops, parsley with stems, garlic with peels, mushroom stems and whole mushrooms, asparagus ends and peelings, and winter squash peels and seeds. Vegetables I avoid because of bitterness and strong flavors are broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, eggplant, strong or bitter greens, and other pungent or bitter foods. I generally add salt to the stock while it is cooking, and occasionally I will add other spices, whole or ground, or fresh herbs.

Many people feel that making stock is too much of a bother. I **strongly** encourage you to get in the habit of preparing stock. It doesn't have to be a big deal ... you **really** can do it! I have two hints to offer to help make stock preparation one of your easy cooking habits. Because many home cooks don't have a variety or quantity of vegetables on hand at any one time, finding enough ingredients to make a rich stock can be difficult. First hint: Whenever you are preparing something using the good stock ingredients I listed above, take the trimmings and some of the whole cut-up vegetables and put them in a tub or bag in your freezer. Continue to add to that stash until you have enough vegetables to make your largest pot of stock.

When you have some free time or are already in the kitchen working on projects, pull out your largest pot. You want a ratio of about 1 part solid to 4–5 parts water. Chop all vegetables in 1–2" chunks. Bring the water to a boil. Add salt and whatever other flavorings you'd like (wine, fresh herbs, peppercorns, etc.) Cook for 1–2 hours. Second hint: Let it cool, strain it, pour into half-pint, pint, and quart containers and freeze. It's also convenient to fill a couple of ice cube trays with stock, and after they are frozen dump the stock cubes into a bag and place in your freezer. You now have stock in many quantities available at a moment's notice. Melt frozen chunks of stock in a pot on high heat or overnight in the refrigerator before using.

Jazz up many of the foods you prepare and get added nourishment too! Cultivate this habit; it will add so much to your cooking!