

MINUTE NUTRITION NEWS

May 2015

EATING LOCAL AND SEASONAL: ASPARAGUS

By Lisa Lau, Registered Dietitian at the Georgina Nurse Practitioner Led Clinic

Spring is officially here, a time to look forward to an abundance of fresh vegetables and fruit in our local grocery store. This month's newsletter will be highlighting *asparagus*.

WHAT IS IT?

Asparagus is a vegetable that grows right here in Canada and is usually available during the months of May and June. There are two varieties that can be found locally – green asparagus (the more common type) and white asparagus. Green asparagus is planted in the ground and its spears rise out from underground when fully grown. White asparagus is planted the same way except with extra soil mounded on top of the growing spears so that it does not get exposed to sunlight. Without sunlight, the plant does not go through “photosynthesis” to produce the green colour.



Asparagus is full of nutritional goodness. It is a low calorie vegetable and a great source of fibre, folate, and vitamins A and C. In smaller amounts, it also contains B vitamins, vitamin E, copper, potassium, iron, phosphorus, magnesium, zinc, and calcium.

WAYS TO COOK ASPARAGUS

To prepare asparagus for cooking, first wash under cold running water. Then remove the thicker, tougher end using one of two ways. The first way is to hold the asparagus stalk about $\frac{3}{4}$ down its length with both hands. Then bend until the asparagus spear snaps. The second way is to use a knife and a chopping board, and cut the ends off at about 3–5cm in from the end.



You can cook asparagus a variety of ways: steam, microwave, roast, blanch, grill, broil, sauté or stir-fry. The key to using any of these methods is to not overcook the asparagus. Most of the cooking methods above should not take anymore than 5–10 minutes if you are cooking for one to two people. The final product should be a bright green colour and a tender-crisp texture. Asparagus can be seasoned simply with a bit of olive oil, garlic, salt and pepper. In fancier recipes, they can be topped with cheese or sauce.

Asparagus can be served on its own as a side dish, or sautéed into mixed vegetable dishes. It can be added in pastas, stir-fries and salads, or pureed to make soups or pesto.

BUYING AND STORING

At the grocery store, choose straight and crisp spears of asparagus with tight heads to determine freshness. Asparagus can keep in the fridge for 2–3 days. To preserve their quality, wrap the ends of the stems in damp paper towels or stand them up in water. Cover the rest of the bunch with plastic wrap.

Asparagus can also be frozen for later in the year when fresh asparagus is not available. To do this, blanch the asparagus by placing it in boiling water. Once the water returns to a boil, allow the asparagus to boil for one minute. Then remove and put in cold water for two minutes. Remove, pat dry and place in freezer bags for freezing. Asparagus can keep for one year in the freezer.

RECIPE OF THE MONTH

May 2015

Pesto Pasta with Roasted Asparagus

Here is a recipe for those busy weeknights where you need to throw something together quickly from what you already have. It's tasty and can be served with local seasonal asparagus or other vegetables of your choice.



Makes 1 serving (1 serving = approx. 2 cups)

Ingredients:

1 cup	bow-tie pasta, half whole grain and half enriched white pasta
½ bunch	asparagus, ends removed and cut into 1-inch pieces
½ tbsp	olive oil, from sun dried tomatoes
1 ½ tbsp	basil pesto
2 pcs	sun dried tomatoes, drained from oil, thinly sliced
30 g	mozzarella cheese, 20% m.f. or lower, diced
	pepper to taste

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 425°F.
2. Bring a pot of water to a boil. Cook pasta according of package instructions. Drain well.
3. While pasta is cooking, cover baking sheet with aluminum foil. Spread asparagus onto baking sheet. Add oil from sun-dried tomatoes and pepper. Place into oven when ready and roast for 8-10 minutes.
4. In a large bowl, combine pasta, asparagus, pesto, sun-dried tomatoes and mozzarella cheese.

Nutrition Tip: Pesto and sun-dried tomatoes both contain olive oil, a healthy oil great for heart health when consumed in moderate amounts. In this recipe, you can reduce the total amount of calories and fat from this recipe by steaming or barbequing the asparagus rather than roasting with olive oil. And drain the oil from the sun-dried tomatoes and pesto as best you can.

Nutrition information (per serving):

590 calories, Fat 24g (37% DV), Carbohydrate 74g (25% DV), Fibre 10g (40%), Protein 22g, Sodium 670mg (28% DV), Sugars 11g, Calcium 229 mg (25% DV)

Recipe adapted from *Pesto Pasta with Sun Dried Tomatoes and Roasted Asparagus* from <http://damndelicious.net/2012/07/21/pesto-pasta-with-sun-dried-tomatoes-and-roasted/>