HERALDS *of* SPRING

It's asparagus season!

WE INVITED CHRISTOPHER HIRSHEIMER AND MELISSA HAMILTON OF *CANAL HOUSE COOKING* TO HELP US CELEBRATE THIS NUTRITIONAL POWERHOUSE IN JERSEY-FRESH STYLE.

by Patti Verbanas

Canal House Cooking's prep tip: "Instead of shaving raw asparagus with a mandoline, which is time-consuming and can be a little dangerous, use a vegetable peeler."

CANAL HOUSE COOKING

Pasta Primavera

SERVES 8

2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
1 cup diced smoked ham
1 cup fava beans, blanched and peeled
1 cup shucked fresh or frozen English peas
1½ cups chopped thin asparagus
Pepper
1 lb spaghetti
1 tbsp tomato paste
Extra-virgin olive oil
Finely chopped fresh mint leaves
Grated Pecorino Romano

- Fill a large pot with water, add a few pinches of salt, and bring the water to a boil over medium heat.
- Meanwhile, heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the ham, and cook, stirring often, until the ham is lightly browned. Add the favas, peas, and asparagus. Season with salt and pepper, then add a splash of water. Cook, stirring often, until the vegetables are just cooked, about 3 minutes. Remove from the heat, cover, and set aside.
- Add the pasta to the boiling water and cook until just tender, about 10 minutes.
- Drain, return it to the pot, add the tomato paste, drizzle with extra-virgin olive oil, and season with salt and pepper.
- Add the ham and vegetables and all their pan juices to the pasta, and gently toss everything together.
- Divide between 8 individual warm bowls, and sprinkle with fresh mint and Pecorino Romano.

"TO ME, ASPARAGUS IS ONE OF THE FIRST signs of spring," declares Christopher Hirsheimer. "If you're out walking in the early spring, you'll actually see wild asparagus growing by the side of the road."

For the best stalks, Melissa Hamilton, Christopher's *Canal House Cooking* co-editor, says nothing beats farm-fresh spears. And with New Jersey as the fourth-largest producer of asparagus in the nation, you won't have to look far. When visiting your farmers' market, look for cultivated asparagus, Melissa advises — and don't be turned off by their "gnarly" appearance. "They're not these straight spears in tight little bundles," she explains. "You can pick them by the spear. We love the big fat ones — so succulent. They're great to cook with butter and lemon and a poached egg on top. Some people prize the thin ones because they think they're more delicate, but they are easy to overcook. It's best to toss up those skinny ones raw in a salad for a delicious fresh green taste with mild sweetness and a crunch."

"Oh, that green flavor," Christopher chimes in. "You can imagine when people really were eating what was growing — before supermarkets — that by the end of the winter they were just dying for that green flavor." When selecting asparagus, she recommends looking for crisp, strong, smooth, bright-green spears with compact, non-flowering blooms at the tips. "Asparagus begins to lose its natural sugars the moment it is harvested; moist ends indicate the spears have been recently picked," she says. "If they are split or dry, pass them up."

Asparagus is one of the most nutritionally balanced vegetables you can put on your plate, packing a low-calorie power punch of folic acid, potassium, fiber, thiamin, and vitamins A, B6, and C. To take advantage of the freshness and flavor of spring asparagus, eat the spears as soon as you can after purchase. Asparagus can be stored in the refrigerator for up to four days. The cooks each have different storage preferences: Melissa stands the asparagus in water; Christopher snaps the tips off, wraps the spears in a damp cloth, and stores them in a plastic bag in the vegetable bin.

We asked Christopher and Melissa to

Christopher Hirsheimer and Melissa Hamilton in their Lambertville studio.

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—Christopher Hirsheimer

share with us their favorite asparagus recipes and pair them with a dessert perfect for outdoor spring dining. They start with a chopped raw asparagus and pea salad, featuring those lovely slender stalks that lend a bit of crunch to your bite, then serve their version of pasta primavera, and finish with a lemon curd tart, featuring Meyer lemons, which due to demand, now can be bought fresh year-round. Just don't mistake the Canal House's classic spring pasta primavera with what is typically served. "Pasta primavera has become a bastardized recipe. Many people serve it with tons of pasta and vegetables on top. Some versions have carrots, cherry tomatoes, bell peppers, *herbes de Provence*, and rotelli," Christopher says. "Ours is the reverse. To us, pasta primavera should be all about the spring vegetables, made with just the first young vegetables — little favas, peas, and asparagus — all tangled up in a few strands of spaghetti. It's really all about that green flavor." ✳

For more on Lambertville-based Canal House, and information on Christopher and Melissa's latest book, Canal House Cooking, N° 6: The Grocery Store, *visit thecanalhouse.com.*

Chopped Raw Asparagus and Pea Salad

SERVES 4

¼ cup grated Pecorino Romano
¼ cup hot water
¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
Pepper
2 bunches pencil-thin fresh asparagus, trimmed and sliced crosswise
1 cup shucked peas, blanched
4 scallions, finely chopped
4-8 large butterhead lettuce leaves
8 pieces cooked bacon, finely chopped
1 handful fresh mint leaves, chopped

› Put the cheese into a big bowl, add water and stir until the cheese melts. Whisk in the olive oil and season with pepper. Add the asparagus, peas, and scallions; toss well. Adjust the seasonings. Arrange the lettuce leaves on individual plates or on a serving platter. Spoon the salad onto the leaves, then scatter the bacon and mint on top.

Lemon Curd Tart

MAKES ONE 9- OR 10-INCH TART

CRUST

1 ½ cups flour
¾ cup powdered sugar, sifted
Pinch of salt
10 tbsp cold unsalted butter, cut into small pieces

FILLING

2 whole eggs
4 egg yolks
4-6 Meyer lemons, depending on their juiciness
1 ½ cups granulated sugar
6 tbsp unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
Freshly whipped cream

CRUST:

› Whisk the flour, powdered sugar, and salt together in a medium mixing bowl. Using your fingers, work the butter into the flour, then rub the flour and butter together until the dough forms a smooth ball. Shape the dough into a disk. Press the dough evenly into and up the sides of a 9- to 10-inch round false-bottom fluted tart pan. The dough should be about 1/4-inch thick. Trim off any excess dough. Prick the crust all over with the tines of a fork. Cover the crust with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least an hour or overnight.

› Preheat the oven to 350°F. Set the tart pan on a baking sheet and bake the crust until it is golden (20-30 minutes). Set the crust aside to cool completely.

FILLING:

› Gently whisk together the eggs and the yolks in a medium bowl and set aside. Wash the lemons in warm water and pat them dry. Finely grate the zest of 4 of the lemons into a medium nonreactive saucepan. Juice the lemons to make about 2/3 cup of juice. Add the juice to the saucepan and whisk in the granulated sugar.

› Set the saucepan over medium-low heat and whisk in the eggs. Cook the filling, whisking constantly to prevent it from boiling, until it has thickened (5-8 minutes).

› Remove the saucepan from the heat and add the butter, a few knobs at a time, whisking until the butter has melted. Strain the lemon curd filling through a sieve into a medium bowl. Cover the surface with plastic wrap or parchment paper to prevent a skin from forming. Set it aside to cool.

› Spoon the filling into the prepared tart crust and smooth out the top with a rubber spatula. Refrigerate the tart for at least an hour and up to 8 hours so that the filling can set. Serve the tart with big dollops of whipped cream.

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