

Asparagus Appreciation

Asparagus season is in full swing again. You can enjoy them in a myriad of ways but simply blanching them until just tender is the nicest way to enjoy their flavour and texture. Asparagus lends itself to any cuisine, their sculptural look making a visual impact on platters as shown here where I paired them with a Japanese omelette. Skinny asparagus spears grilled on the barbecue make a great crunchy, smokey green vegetable to serve with meat and fish but are also wonderful slipped into ham or cheese filled baguettes as an tasty alternative to lettuce. Best of all is the breakfast treat of asparagus dipped into a boiled egg; it is a great carb-free start to the day. If you love asparagus then there are lots of ways to enjoy it at every meal of the day and now is the time.

Asparagus Tips: Buy asparagus from green grocers or farmers markets to ensure freshness and eat it within a day or two of purchase for maximum enjoyment. If buying from the supermarket give the tips a sniff for freshness, they shouldn't smell dank nor should the tips be dry and yellowed. Cover asparagus in the fridge, especially the tips. Peeling thick asparagus spears helps to speed the cooking of the stem while not overcooking the delicate tips.

Producers supplying local Farmers Markets: Bridge Farm Asparagus; Jonella Farm



Poached Pears A Timeless Classic

It's well and truly pear season now and a nice way to enjoy them when they are still a bit firm and crisp is sliced in salads or with cheese. Once ripe, pears do not travel well but you can still enjoy a juicy pear at work if you wrap it in

paper and transport it a small plastic container. Pears are luscious in sweet pies, tarts and tea cakes and can be quite a classy dessert when poached in red or white wine. Poached pears are perhaps viewed as an old fashioned dessert but I think of them as the little black dress of desserts; a timeless classic, simple yet elegant. I particularly enjoy the aroma of sweet spices that fills the house when poaching. I like to use star anise as well as cinnamon and cloves but you can use other spices or include some fresh or ground ginger for a bit of warmth. Serve the poached pears with thick cream or the best vanilla bean ice cream you can find.



To Poach pears:

you will need enough small Josephine pears to fill a deep saucepan so that they all remain standing upright once the wine is added. You can use other varieties but they are often quite large and not as neatly compact as the Josephine pear.

Choose pears that are still slightly firm to the touch.

- 1 bottle of light, fruity red wine
- 250 g caster sugar
- 2 star anise
- 1 cinnamon quill
- 6 whole cloves
- lemon or orange peel (optional)

Combine the wine, sugar and spices and bring to boil, stirring until the sugar is dissolved. Peel the pears, leaving the stem intact and once peeled gently rub the outside with the flesh side of half a lemon to stop browning. Reduce to the heat on the spiced wine and add the pears. Poach with a very gently simmer, at the lowest heat setting. You should just see small bubbles rising, no obvious bubbling of the liquid. Add a little water if the wine does not quite cover the pears. Poach for approximately 30-40 minutes, checking for tenderness with a fine skewer. Remove the pears with a slotted spoon to cool. Raise the heat on the spiced wine and reduce the liquid by about half, until it is thick and syrupy. Poached pears can be prepared a day in advance. Serve whole with the wine syrup or halve and segment the pears, fanning out the slices on top of the sauce on a plate. Serve with thick cream or vanilla ice cream.

Spaghetti alle Vongole

Spaghetti alle Vongole, spaghetti with clams is a delicious Italian pasta dish which I love to cook but I can't help being reminded of my first trip to Italy, specifically while on a train to Florence, every time I see clams or think of cooking

them. As it was a public holiday the train leaving Rome for Florence was overbooked and the aisles so tightly packed with people it was only with considerable contortions and by raising our packs above our heads that we managed to reach our seats. After politely ejecting the people minding our reserved seats we eventually wedged ourselves into position as the train silently glided out of Roma Termini. Some time into our journey we heard a commotion from the other end of the carriage. Two women were rapidly moving down the carriage, one walking backwards fanning the other women's ghostly face with a newspaper, all the while crying out , "*Le vongole, le vongole!*" What earlier seemed like a physical impossibility became like the biblical parting of the sea, everyone bending outward like trained synchronized swimmers. Once the crisis passed there was a collective sigh of relief and my first thought was what were vongole and should we avoid them? On reflection a lot of people attribute their ill feeling to the last meal they had. Food poisoning takes several hours to manifest itself, so in all likelihood lunchtime clams were perhaps not the culprit. In any case I didn't encounter clams in Florence and it wasn't until a subsequent trip to Syracuse, Sicily that I had my first spaghetti alle vongole. What I tasted that day was the sea on my plate and it was nothing short of sensational. It surpassed all my experiences with spaghetti marinara and I realised these little shellfish really pack a flavour punch that didn't need any tricking up by a chef or help from other expensive shellfish. Unlike scallops, prawns and Morton Bay bugs there is little meaty substance to clams but you will be surprised by their deliciousness. We are lucky to have wonderful clams, [fished sustainably on South Australia's Eyre peninsula](#). Buy them loose at the fish market or as 1 kg bags of pre-washed South Australian vongole from fish mongers (\$24/kg, hearty meal for two). Despite being pre-washed sand can be hard to remove, so always give the clams a further quick soaking and rinse in running water and then they are ready to toss into a hot frying pan with a lid where they will open, release their

juices and cook in less than five minutes. Add a little white wine, herbs, garlic, chili flakes or a good tomato sugo and then toss with drained spaghetti. No need for Parmesan, just a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil. Eating spaghetti alle vongole involves using your fingers to suck off the clam meat from the shell while twirling the pasta onto a fork with your other hand. An empty bowl on the table can serve as your personal shell midden. I really enjoy eating it this way but those of you who prefer to keep an elegant distance from shellfish might want to remove most the clam meat before adding any sauce and tossing with the pasta. Reserve a few in-shell specimens to place on top of the pasta and maintain the rustic look.



Nuts About An Alpine Autumn

Autumn is a wonderful time of year to explore the Victorian Alpine region. The Autumn colours are at their most vivid right now and in the late afternoon sun the poplars take on

the look of giant golden torches against the soft dusky grey green of the hills. More common are the liquid amber trees which border the Great Alpine Road from Gapsted to Bright, glowing bright pink, orange and various shades of red. The Victorian alps are not just a feast of colour at this time of year but a feast of wonderful Autumn produce. Walnuts, almonds, chestnuts and hazelnuts are all harvested now and feature in autumnal dishes, like rabbit ragu with chestnut pasta ([Ox and Hound](#)), mushroom pizza with rocket and roasted hazelnuts ([Bridge Road Brewery](#)) or beetroot tarte tartin with honeyed walnuts ([Feathertop Winery](#)). It is great to drop into a farm gate wherever you see a sign on the road and purchase some fresh nuts of the season for your own cooking enjoyment. Last weekend I did just that, turning off near Gapsted to visit [Valley Nut Groves at 180 Schlapp Road](#). The shop at this walnut farm has 500 g, 1 kg, 5kg and 10 kg nets of whole nuts ranging in size from large to jumbo to mammoth as well as two or three different varieties. Behind the shop is the processing shed which is full of historic equipment from previous generations of the Schlapp family. It may all look ancient but each machine including the 1920's drying kiln appears to do the job well in what is still a pretty labour intensive production. The owner is happy to explain the ins and outs of producing walnuts starting from the fleshy outer covering of green walnuts which usually split and drop while still on the tree. Removing any of the outer husk remaining is done at the washing stage, where nuts are tumbled and sprayed with water. The nuts are hand sorted to remove duds and then hoisted by a conveyor to the top of the drying kiln, where they are then shifted as they dry by a series of intricate traps from the highest and hottest position to the lowest and coolest position over the course of a few days. The sacks of dried walnuts are then sorted according to size in a trommel screen which spits out small, standard, large, jumbo and mammoth nuts into the appropriate sacks below. Magic. Valley Nut Groves do not use any pesticides or chemicals on their trees and nuts are not bleached as imported ones tend to be.

These local walnuts are just as nature intended and the cockatoos certainly think so too. In addition to nuts, Valley Nut Groves produce walnut oil, great for salad dressing, and a range of walnut extract hair shampoo and conditioners. If you want to immerse yourself in this nut grove idyll the owner has some converted tobacco kiln [cottage accommodation for rental](#) as well.

Don't be put off by unshelled walnuts. Buy a good nut cracker and approach the task in a relaxed fashion, nibbling a few healthy nuts instead of wicked temptations when hungry. After a day of touring in the fresh Alpine air there is nothing more satisfying than cracking nuts while sipping a local Beechworth wine or King Valley Italian varietal in front of an open fire.



Green Walnuts



Walnuts are washed, any remaining green outer husks removed



Duds are removed by hand on the sorting conveyor



From sorting to kiln



Historic drying kiln



Trommel screening to size

Sweet Sapphire Grapes

Sweet Sapphire grapes, with their elongated, black, knobby bodies, may look more like licorice bullets than grapes and perhaps with their extra sweetness they are more like lollies than fruit. My teenage nephew ate the whole plate I put out with cheeses for Easter dinner, clearly giving them the thumbs up. Sweet Sapphire grapes are not just extra sweet but they also have a deep, dark grape flavour that appeals to young and old alike. Sweet Sapphire or Moon Drops are a new variety bred in California for sweetness and a longer shelf life and although they have a slightly thicker skin, selecting for

these qualities has not meant any loss of flavour. This is surprising as flavour is often the first quality lost when shelf life is sought. In Australia, they are grown in Mildura and also in the Gascoigne river region of Western Australia and are a popular export variety. You can now find them at select green grocers around Melbourne.