

Spring Vegetable & Herb Risotto

This spring vegetable and herb risotto is full of seasonal asparagus, double peeled broad beans, peas, fresh young herbs and finished with a spoon of sorrel “pesto” for extra lemony tang. I guarantee you will love this combination. [Sorrel is](#) not widely used in Australia but is popular as a creamy soup in France or to make a wonderful lemony sauce, good with fish, poultry or other light meats. The leaves are a lovely spring green but when cooked and wilted quickly become a less pleasant grey green colour. Cooking also reduces the lemony bite somewhat, giving way to a more earthy lemon flavour. To retain a bright tang you can eat the leaves raw in a salad; just slice several leaves thinly and toss in with a mix of leaves. Another way to maintain the sharper tang and the bright colour is to blitz the leaves in a blender with some olive oil to make a paste. A couple of spoons added to the risotto at the end of cooking gives it a real lift. If you are familiar with sorrel you will be amazed at the result. The combination of herbs I have suggested (mint, tarragon, parsley, thyme and sorrel) are well balanced with none being overwhelming; the mint and sorrel, in particular, partnering well. Asparagus, peas and young broad beans are wonderful seasonal stars and combining them in a risotto with soft herbs really does put spring on a plate. Enjoy.



I use the Italian carnaroli variety of rice, which is quite firm and gives its starch readily without the need for constant, gentle stirring like arborio rice. The Ferron brand of carnaroli (available from [Entoteca Sileno](#), various grocery stores and some supermarkets) is more expensive but worth it for the texture and taste and the reduced stirring during preparation.

For Two

- 1L chicken or vegetable stock
- 1/2 a small leek or a shallot, finely sliced
- 1/4 cup finely diced fennel bulb
- salt
- olive oil
- 1 cup carnaroli rice
- 100 ml white wine – something with a bit of acid zing
- 1/4 cup of peas (fresh or frozen)

- 1/3 cup broad beans, double peeled*
- 6 large spears of asparagus, cut into pieces about 1 cm long (keep the tips whole for their decorative quality)
- leaves from 3 sprigs of fresh thyme
- 1 tbs of finely sliced fresh mint
- 2 tbs chopped parsley
- 1 tbs tarragon leaves
- 6-8 sorrel leaves, washed and patted dry
- 80 g unsalted butter
- 50 g grated parmesan cheese

Warm the stock in a small saucepan and keep it on a simmer while you cook the risotto. Melt a small knob of butter in a sauté pan (or whatever pot or pan you like to use for risotto) and gently cook the leek or shallot for a minute or so until soft and translucent. Turn the heat to medium, add the rice and stir to coat in the butter; after a minute or so when the grains show a slight translucence, pour in a glass of white wine. Pour another glass and keep handy: by the end of the cooking process this should be empty. Keep the heat up to bring the wine to a rapid simmer and reduce. When almost evaporated, add a ladle or two of hot stock, swirl the pan and allow to simmer gently until nearly all the liquid is absorbed. Keep adding ladles of stock and occasionally swirling the pan until the rice is cooked to *al dente*, with just a fine thread of chalky white in the middle of the rice grains while a slightly thickened, starchy liquid surrounds them. All up, it will take 15 to 20 minutes to cook the rice, longer if you are on a mountain.



sorrel leaves blended with olive oil

While the rice is cooking, add each of the vegetables in time to allow them to cook through while retaining their freshness: first the diced fennel, then the peas, the cut up asparagus stems and finally the asparagus tips. The herbs can be added near the end to keep their colour and flavour, then the broad beans and the sorrel pesto. Finally, when the rice is almost cooked and there is just a little more liquid left than you want, turn off the heat, add the grated parmesan and a good knob of butter and stir them in gently so as to amalgamate with and thicken the remaining starchy liquid without breaking up the rice grains. Serve for an evocation of spring.

***To double peel broad beans:** remove the broad beans from their pods and blanch in boiling water with a pinch of salt for 1 minute. The skins will loosen in this time and young broad beans should not need more than a minute to become tender. Drain and run under cold water to cool them down and then

using your thumb nail pinch an edge to pierce the outer skin and gently push out the tender little green gems without crushing them. This is relaxing work for some people and also a great job for little fingers, so enlist the kids.

Smoked Trout Strudel

A smoked trout strudel is great for a light lunch or dinner and works well for a party buffet as it can be cut up into small snack size portions. Strudels don't need to be confined to sweet fillings of apple or cherry. Savoury fillings such as smoked trout, potato and silverbeet are equally delicious as are cheesy vegetable combinations. I like to use Irene's ready made traditional Greek pastry that is more like the original home-made strudel dough in taste and texture than filo pastry and not as rich as using a puff pastry. It needs to be stretched out after rolling just like strudel dough to be nice and thin and brushed with melted butter for that characteristic flakiness. This smoked trout strudel also tastes great cold the next day as a portable lunch but the pastry will no longer be crispy. Instead of smoked trout strudel you could omit the fish, substitute the smoked trout with another smoked fish or even use fresh, uncooked salmon. A rich decadent version could be made with mushrooms and scallops. You could also stick to a vegetable strudel and use sliced mushrooms, potato and caramelised onions. Chef and television personality, Sara Wiener, made an interesting radicchio and fontina cheese strudel as an Austrian riff on Italy's much loved braised bitter lettuce. A strudel allows you to get creative, so do your own riff on a strudel.

- 500 g [Irene's Traditional Greek pastry](#)
- 1 bunch silverbeet

- 2 large potatoes
- 1 tbs pine nuts
- 1 smoked trout fillet, flaked and bones removed
- olive oil
- salt
- 2 heaped tbs cream (45% fat) or creme fraiche
- 2 eggs
- 50 g butter, melted
- nigella seeds

Take the pastry out of the freezer at least 1 hour before baking and leave it to thaw at room temperature. Meanwhile peel and thickly slice the potatoes and boil until tender. Drain and set aside. In a frypan with a little olive oil gently toast the pine nuts until golden, drain onto kitchen paper. Wash and de-stem the silverbeet. Roughly slice the leaves and dry them in a salad spinner to remove the moisture. Slice the stems finely and saute in olive oil until softened and then add the leaves and cook until wilted, carefully rotating the leaves with tongs or a spatula. Leave to cool completely. Once cool add the potatoes, eggs, cream, pine nuts and a couple of pinches of salt and gently mix to combine.

Preheat the oven to 180°C.

Dust the bench and the pastry with flour and roll it out, easing it outwards from the centre towards the edge in every direction. Once the pastry is twice the original size place it on top of a tea towel on a large upturned oven tray. Place the tray onto four cans of tomatoes or a large heavy bowl (anything to elevate and stabilise the tray). Using your fingers carefully stretch the pastry downwards around all the edges. Gravity will help you do this without the need for an assistant chef. Once the pastry is a nicely stretched square or rectangle lay it on the bench keeping the tea towel in place. Brush the top with melted butter. Place the filling along the length of the edge closest to you and lifting the

tea towel gently roll over the filling like a Swiss roll. Brush the top of the roll with melted butter on every turn. Place the strudel on the oven tray lined with baking paper. Brush with melted butter and sprinkle with nigella seeds. Bake at 180°C for 10 minutes and then turn down the heat to 160°C and bake for another 20 minutes or until golden brown.

Ajvar – Balkan Roasted Pepper Relish

Ajvar (EYE-vahr) is a popular roasted pepper relish throughout the Balkans. The word, Ajvar, is Turkish for fish roe but the method of roasting peppers and eggplant, slowly cooking the skinned and chopped flesh with lemon juice, sunflower oil and salt seems to be of Serbian origin. Ajvar is a great accompaniment to barbecued meats, is delicious on garlic sourdough toast, in a burger or tossed through pasta but I recently found it is also a great way of jazzing up cooked green beans. New season beans are available now and you can also get large flat beans which are not adverse to a little stewing or just reheating with a couple of tablespoons of this relish. You could also use it in home made baked beans or with other stewed pulses. I served my beans with ajvar on a Turkish plate; fish roe or not, it's all been part of the mix for centuries.



You can easily make ajvar when there is a glut of the long red bull's horn peppers but late Summer is quite a few barbecues off yet, so I would invest in a jar or two bought from a Mediterranean or Turkish grocery store or your local supermarket. Woolworths stock Mama's Home Style Avjar. Most commercial Ajvar available here is made in Macedonia but whatever brand you buy make sure the ingredients don't go beyond the basics of roasted red peppers, eggplant, lemon

juice or vinegar, salt and chilli, if you like it hot.



Avjar is the very essence of summer, packed full of sweet red peppers that have had their skins blackened over a charcoal grill or inside a covered BBQ. With the hint of smokey flavour remaining the flesh is then slowly stewed to tenderness on the stove. I'm thinking a clay pot in the oven would be perfect for gentle stewing. When summer finally arrives I will be making a batch.

Freekeh Pilaf With Asparagus And Egg

This freekeh pilaf recipe is in essence the recipe on the back of the box of Mt. Zero cracked freekeh. [Mt Zero](#) sell a wonderful range of locally grown grains and pulses that are available at most supermarkets and grocery stores, so make sure you stock a few boxes in your pantry for easy meatless meals and lunchtime salads. The addition of a touch of ground cinnamon, chilli flakes and lemon zest gives this freekeh

pilaf a certain umami character which, with the nutty freekeh, is really delicious. I have topped the freekeh pilaf with some lovely thick, peeled and blanched in-season asparagus and poached eggs, creating quite a substantial meal. You could omit the eggs if they are not to your taste and just add a dollop of labne, some fresh herbs... anything really.

For Two

- 250 g cracked freekeh, rinsed and drained
- 1 medium purple onion, finely diced
- olive oil
- salt
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- just less than 1/4 tsp ground cinnamon
- just less 1/4 tsp chilli flakes
- zest of half a lemon
- 2 bay leaves
- 600 ml chicken stock or concentrated vegetable stock

Saute the onion in olive oil with a good pinch of salt until soft and translucent. Add the chopped garlic, spices, bay leaves and lemon and stir well. Add the freekeh and stir well to coat in the oil and spices. Pour over the stock, cover with a tight fitting lid and simmer for 25-30 minutes or until all the liquid is absorbed. If there is still some liquid remaining after cooking remove the lid and dry off the pilaf over a medium heat, stirring occasionally. Turn off the heat and set aside while you prepare your asparagus, herbs or salad greens and poached eggs.

Variations: add small, quartered, lightly oven roasted Brussels sprouts; top with thick, drained yoghurt; top or mix through fresh soft leaf herbs or baby spinach leaves; add blanched chopped kale; top with toasted seeds.

Note that Mt Zero cracked freekeh takes less time to cooked than whole grain freekeh, so if you have bought whole grain

freekeh cook it for about 40-45 minutes.

Pomegranate and Tomato Salad

This pomegranate and tomato salad is a lovely tangy, eye-catching side dish to enjoy in winter. While winter tomatoes may look perfect, they are basically hard and pretty tasteless and a waste of money but cherry tomatoes of all shapes and colours do have flavour and are perfect paired with seasonal pomegranates for this dish. The pomegranate and diced tomato sit on a bed of roasted eggplant that has been mashed with garlic and lemon juice which gives the dish even more zing. You can really enjoy this while you wait for juicy summer tomatoes to appear again.

Serves 6

- 1 pomegranate
- 2 medium eggplants
- 1 -2 punnets red cherry tomatoes or cherry tomato medley
- 4 spring onions, sliced
- 1 clove garlic, crushed to a paste
- juice of a lemon
- 3 tbs extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tbs chopped mint
- 1 tbs chopped parsley
- salt
- freshly ground black pepper

Prick the eggplants in a couple of places with the point of a

knife and roast them on the BBQ with the lid down over medium to high heat for 30 minutes. Rotate them after 15 minutes. Alternatively roast them in the oven at 220°C. Meanwhile cut the pomegranate in half and carefully pull apart each half with your fingers or tap firmly with a wooden spoon to release the seeds into a deep bowl. Do this inside the sink to minimise spread of the juices. Remove and discard any white bits of the pulp. When the eggplants are completely soft in the centre cut them open with a knife over a colander and scrape out the flesh. Allow the flesh to drain away the liquid for a few minutes. Place the drained flesh in a bowl and mash with a fork, adding in the garlic, lemon juice, olive oil, herbs and seasoning. Taste and adjust the seasoning. Dice the tomatoes and mix them with the pomegranate and spring onions. Spread the eggplant mix over a plate and top with the pomegranate and tomatoes.