

THE TASTE OF SPRING AND BEGINNING OF SUMMER

I'm always reminded of that quote from Robin Williams when spring comes: "Spring is nature's way of saying, 'Let's party.'" Everything seems to come alive overnight. There are so many delicious ingredients that are only available basically in Spring: Asparagus, spring peas, wild mushrooms, fava beans, citrus, spring lamb and rhubarb come to mind. Here are some spring recipes to celebrate this magical time of renewal.



WHITE BEAN AND GRILLED ASPARAGUS CROSTINI

Makes 16 - 20 hors d'oeuvres

I also like to use these as an addition to a salad of baby greens dressed with a little citrus vinaigrette.

5 tablespoons olive oil
1 cup chopped onion
3 tablespoons chopped garlic
2 cups cooked and drained white beans such as cannellini, gigande or flageolet
2 tablespoons soy sauce
2 teaspoons finely grated lemon zest
3 tablespoons lemon juice
3 tablespoons chopped parsley
1 tablespoon chopped mint
Salt and freshly ground pepper
1/2-pound tender young asparagus
Lemon or truffle extra virgin olive oil
Toasted crostini to serve

Heat 3 tablespoons of olive oil in a sauté pan and add onions and garlic and sauté over moderate heat until vegetables just begin to color. Add the beans and heat through. Add mixture to a food processor along with soy sauce, lemon zest, lemon juice, parsley and mint and process in short bursts until fairly smooth (still should have a little texture). You may need to add a bit of broth or bean cooking liquid to facilitate. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Lightly oil asparagus with remaining olive oil and season with salt and pepper. On an outdoor or stovetop grill pan, quickly grill asparagus until crisp-tender. Set aside.

To serve: Spread each crostini with a heaping tablespoon of the bean puree. Top with grilled asparagus cut to fit and drizzle each with a few drops of lemon olive oil.



FRESH PEA AND MOREL RISOTTO WITH PEA BROTH

Serves 4 to 6

This is a lovely spring dish when tiny peas and fresh morels are at their best. The pea shoot garnish can be gathered in your garden if you have one or are available in Asian markets. Fresh morels can be hard to find so use whatever special mushroom you can get.

6 - 7 cups rich chicken or vegetable stock
3 tablespoons butter
3 tablespoons olive oil
1/3-pound fresh morels carefully cleaned of any debris
Salt and freshly ground pepper
1/2 cup finely minced onion
2 teaspoons minced garlic
1/4 cup finely chopped celery
2 cups Arborio rice
1/2 cup dry white wine
1 1/4 cups fresh shelled tiny peas
3 tablespoons chopped chives
1/3-1/2 cup freshly grated asiago or parmesan cheese
1 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest

Pea Broth (recipe follows)

Garnish: fresh pea shoots or tendrils

Heat the stock in a saucepan and keep warm over moderate heat.

Melt two tablespoons each of the butter and oil in a sauté pan and sauté morels over high heat for 2-3 minutes or until just cooked thru. Season with salt and pepper and set aside.

Add remaining butter and oil to a deep saucepan and sauté onions, garlic and celery until softened but not brown. Add rice and sauté for 2 minutes more or until well coated. Add wine and stir with a wooden spoon until most of it is absorbed. Add the hot broth in 1/2 cup or so increments and stir until it is mostly absorbed. Continue adding broth, stirring and cooking until rice is creamy on the outside but still has texture on the inside of each grain.

Stir in peas, reserved morels, chives, cheese and zest and remove from heat. Season to taste with salt and pepper and spoon into the center of warm bowls. Pour some of warm pea broth around and top with pea shoots. Serve immediately.

Pea Broth:

The simplest way to make this is to use a juicer. Simply run fresh young sweet peas thru the juicer to make 1 1/2 cups of pea juice. Alternately puree cooked peas in a blender. Place in a saucepan along with 1/4 cup or so rich chicken or vegetable stock. Bring to a simmer and whisk in 1-2 tablespoons softened butter. Season to your taste with salt and pepper



HOT SMOKED SALMON SALAD WITH FAVAS, FENNEL, CITRUS AND ARUGULA

Serves 4

This is a great dish for spring or early summer when favas, fennel and citrus are at their best. Salmon season usually begins in late spring too. All the vegetables requiring blanching could be done a day ahead and stored refrigerated. I'm smoking the salmon with the skin on because the skin adds lots of flavor. You can remove it before serving or smoke it without the skin if you want.

4 five-ounce wild salmon fillets with skin on
Honey lemon vinaigrette (recipe follows)
1 heaping tablespoon hardwood chips of your choice such as alder or apple
1-pound fresh fava beans in the pod
1 small head of fresh fennel, feathery fronds saved for garnish
1 large grapefruit, peeled and segmented
2 large navel oranges, peeled and segmented
1 large lemon, peeled and segmented
2 – 3 cups gently packed young arugula leaves

For the Salmon:

Brush the salmon with 1/4 cup of the vinaigrette and set aside for up to 30 minutes. Meanwhile using a stovetop smoker or wok, place the wood chips in the center of the pan. If using a stovetop smoker place the drip tray on top of the chips. Place a rack covered with foil on top. There should be room around the sides for the smoke to circulate.

Place the salmon skin side down on top of the rack and slide the top of the stovetop smoker or cover the top of the wok with foil, leaving it slightly open. Place over medium heat. When the first wisps of smoke appear, close the lid of the smoker or press the foil down snugly around the edges if using a wok. Reduce heat to low and allow the salmon to smoke for 8 minutes. Check once or twice to see if chips are still actively smoking. Off heat, leave the salmon in the smoker covered for an additional 3 to 5 minutes to finish cooking.

For the Salad:

Remove the favas from the pod and cook in boiling salted water until just cooked through, 1- 2 minutes depending on their size. Remove with a strainer and plunge into ice water, drain and remove the outer shell, which should pop or slide right off the bean.

Slice the fennel paper thin preferably with a mandolin. You should have about 2 cups. Toss the fennel, favas and arugula with 1/3 cup or so of the vinaigrette and mound attractively on plates. Arrange citrus sections around. Arrange salmon on top with a drizzle of the vinaigrette and fennel fronds if using.

Honey Lemon Vinaigrette

Makes a generous cup

2 tablespoons finely chopped shallot
Pinch cayenne pepper
6 tablespoons seasoned rice vinegar
2 tablespoons fragrant honey
4 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
4 tablespoons olive oil
Salt to your taste

Whisk all ingredients together. Store covered and refrigerated up to 5 days.

SPRING LAMB WITH ROSEMARY

Serves 4 to 6

In many parts of the world true tender “Spring” milk-fed lamb is available for a short time and is less than 6 weeks old. You won’t see it in America partly because it is expensive and because many of us have an aversion to harvesting such a young animal. Our “Spring” lamb is three to five months old, born in late winter or early spring and sold usually before the first of July. For the following recipe look for smaller racks hopefully from a local and/or organic rancher. If it hasn’t already been done, ask your butcher to “French” the racks for you. This means trimming the bones of their fat and gristle. You can also do it yourself. There are lots of prompts illustrating on the internet.

Two 8-bone racks of lamb, well-trimmed and frenched
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
3 garlic cloves mashed into a paste with a little salt
2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh rosemary
A glug or two of olive oil

Season the racks liberally with salt and pepper. Using your hands, massage each rack with the garlic, rosemary, and a little drizzle of olive oil. Place the racks, fatty side up, in a roasting pan and leave them at room temperature for an hour or so.
Preheat the oven to 400°F.

Roast the racks for about 20 minutes, until they’re nicely browned and have an interior temperature of 125°F on an instant-read thermometer for medium-rare. Remove from the oven, cover loosely with foil, and let rest for about 10 minutes. Turn off the oven and place a serving platter in the oven to warm.

Transfer the racks to a cutting board. To carve the lamb, simply slice between the bones. Arrange the lamb chops on the warm platter and serve.

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RHUBARB CRISP

Makes 6 to 8 servings

For the filling:

2 pounds fresh rhubarb trimmed and thickly sliced crosswise
3/4 cup granulated sugar
2 tablespoons chopped candied ginger
2 teaspoons grated orange zest
2 tablespoons Grand Marnier, optional

For the streusel topping:

3/4 cup all-purpose flour
1/4 cup light brown sugar
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
Big pinch kosher salt
7 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut into 1/4-inch pieces
Whipped cream or ice cream for serving

Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat to 425°F.

In a large saucepan over medium-high heat, combine the rhubarb, sugar, ginger and orange zest and simmer until the sugar dissolves into a syrup and the rhubarb is nearly tender, about 8 minutes.

Make the streusel topping: Add the flour, brown sugar, cinnamon, and salt in the bowl of the food processor and pulse to combine. Add the butter and pulse until the mixture resembles very coarse crumbs with pea-sized blobs of butter.

Dump the rhubarb mixture into a 6-cup gratin dish and sprinkle the flour mixture evenly over the top. Bake until the topping is golden brown, about 25 minutes. Let the crisp cool a bit and serve it warm with a dollop of whipped cream or a scoop of ice cream.