



# The First Tastes of Spring

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At last the long hard days of winter are drawing to an end. Cool-weather vegetables such as asparagus, fresh peas, crunchy radishes and rhubarb are the first local fruits of the garden to grace our tables. Their presence trumpets the arrival of spring and the beginning of a much-awaited season of fresh local produce.

**ASPARAGUS** Fresh local asparagus is one of the delights of the year. Its appearance signals that the seasons are finally changing. Whereas imported asparagus is available year-round, the stalks of a tender, freshly picked asparagus offer a flavor far more sublime than the out-of-season variety. Look for firm, bright green stalks with tightly closed tips.

**PEAS** A fresh, young English pea is so tender and sweet that it is best eaten raw straight from the pod. This favorite of all ages can be tossed cold in salads or warm with pasta. They truly shine in a creamy risotto accented with bright lemon zest.

**RADISHES** Radishes are at their best when grown in the cool weather of spring. These cheerful little vegetables add color and a peppery flavor to the table. Wash them well, cut off the root and leaves, and slice thinly. As the French do, serve radishes simply with sea salt for dipping, fresh butter and a crusty baguette. They also make a lively addition to salads, sandwiches and soups.

**RHUBARB** Rhubarb is a vegetable that pretends to be a fruit. A stalk resembles a rib of celery, except that it is a rich red color. Be sure to remove the poisonous leaves, as only the tart stalk of this plant is edible. Sweeten this extremely tart vegetable with sugar and your favorite fruits for traditional desserts such as crumbles, crisps and tarts.

## ASPARAGUS WITH CITRUS, PARSLEY AND GARLIC

From *Molto Italiano* by Mario Batali

Serves 4 to 6

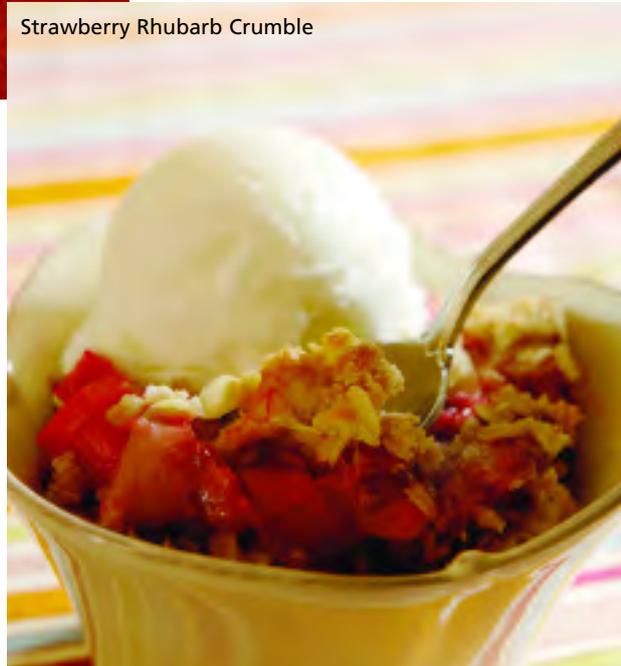
1 1/2 lbs. jumbo asparagus  
Zest and juice of 2 large lemons  
Zest of 1 orange  
2 cloves garlic, roughly chopped  
2 tbsp. finely chopped Italian parsley  
2 tbsp. fresh mint, cut into chiffonade  
1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil  
Coarse sea salt



Snap off the fibrous bottom part of each stalk of asparagus. Bring 4 qts. of water to a boil in a large pot, and add 3 tbsp. salt. Set up an ice bath next to the stovetop. Drop the asparagus into the boiling water, and cook until crisp-tender, about 1 1/2 minutes. Remove



Boston Lettuces And Radishes With A Dijon Caper Dressing



Strawberry Rhubarb Crumble



Lemony Pea Risotto

and immediately submerge in the ice bath to cool for 5 minutes, moving the stalks frequently to be sure no hot spots remain; add more ice if it all melts.

Remove the asparagus and drain on a kitchen towel, then transfer to a large bowl. Add the lemon zest and juice, orange zest, garlic, parsley, mint and olive oil, and toss gently to mix well. Arrange the spears on a platter, and pour the mixture remaining in the bowl over them. Sprinkle with the sea salt, and serve with a flourish.

### BOSTON LETTUCES AND RADISHES WITH A DIJON CAPER DRESSING

From *Young and Hungry* by Dave Lieberman  
Serves 4

- 1 large head Boston lettuce
- 1 bunch radishes (about 8 medium), thinly sliced
- 1/3 cup capers, drained
- 2 tbsp. finely chopped flat Italian parsley

#### For the dressing:

- 1 clove garlic, pressed
- 3 tbsp. olive oil
- 3 tbsp. mayonnaise
- 2 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 1 tsp. white vinegar
- Juice from 1/2 lemon
- 3 pinches of salt
- 10 grinds of black pepper

Remove the leaves from the lettuce, and discard any browned, wilted or holey outer leaves as well as the bitter inner leaves. Wash and dry all the good leaves.

To make the dressing, mix all the ingredients together in a bowl or shake in a sealable container until fully incorporated.

In a large bowl, toss the lettuce leaves with the radish slices, capers, chopped parsley and most of the dressing. Divide the salad among the serving plates.

### LEMONY PEA RISOTTO

Serves 6

- 5 cups chicken broth
- 4 tbsp. unsalted butter
- 1 cup fresh shelled peas or defrosted frozen peas, not cooked
- 2 tbsp. olive oil
- 3 tbsp. finely chopped yellow onion
- 2 cups Arborio rice
- 1 tbsp. grated lemon zest

Bring the broth to a slow steady simmer on the stovetop.

Place 2 tbsp. butter in a sauté pan over medium-high heat. When the butter begins to foam, add the peas and sauté until just tender, about 4 minutes. Set aside.

Place the remaining butter and the olive oil in the bottom of a heavy-bottomed pot. Heat over medium-high, and then add the onion. Cook the onion until it is softened and translucent, being careful not to brown them.

Then add the rice. Stir with a wooden spoon until all the grains are well coated.

Add 1/2 cup of the simmering broth and cook the rice, stirring constantly, until there is no more liquid in the pot. Then add an additional 1/2 cup of broth and continue adding broth 1/2 cup at a time, waiting until all the liquid has been absorbed before each new addition. After about 20 minutes, begin to test the rice. It should be fully cooked when it is tender but firm to the bite.

Carefully fold in the peas and the lemon zest. Serve immediately.

### STRAWBERRY RHUBARB CRUMBLE

From *Food to Live By* by Myra Goodman  
Makes one 2-quart crumble

#### For the filling:

- 2 pints fresh strawberries, hulled and quartered (about 3 cups)
- 1 lb. fresh rhubarb, trimmed and cut into 1/2-inch pieces (about 3 cups)
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1 tbsp. whole wheat pastry flour
- 1/4 cup minced crystallized ginger
- 1 tsp. fresh lemon juice

#### For the topping:

- 1/2 cup whole wheat pastry flour
- 3/4 cup old-fashioned rolled oats (not instant)
- 1/2 cup firmly packed light brown sugar
- 1/4 tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1/4 tsp. ground ginger
- Pinch of salt
- 8 tbsp. cold unsalted butter, cut into small bits
- Vanilla ice cream or whipped cream, for serving

Position a rack in the center of the oven, and pre-heat to 375° F.

Make the filling: Place the strawberries, rhubarb and granulated sugar in a large bowl, and stir to combine. Add the flour, crystallized ginger and lemon juice, and stir to combine. Set the filling aside.

Make the topping: Place the flour, oats, brown sugar, cinnamon, ginger and salt in a medium-size bowl, and stir to combine. Add the butter. Using a pastry blender, two knives or your fingers, blend the butter into the mixture until it is crumbly and well combined.

Transfer the filling to a shallow 2-quart baking dish. Loosely crumble the topping over the filling.

Bake the crumble until the filling bubbles up around the edge of the baking dish and the topping turns golden brown, 30 to 35 minutes. Serve the crumble hot or warm, with vanilla ice cream or sweetened whipped cream. ●

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