

Published April 27th, 2011

Hail, Caesar - and Asparagus!

By Susie Iventosch

Last week, I was trying to come up with other great ways to serve asparagus, and saw a recipe that called for roasted asparagus served in a Caesar dressing. I thought it looked delicious and since my husband makes a terrific Caesar, he set about the business of the dressing, while I made the salad. Then I spied the beautiful Campari tomatoes in my produce drawer, and added them to the mix. We no sooner sat down to have the first bite of salad, than it dawned on me the hearts of palm sitting in my cupboard would be a fabulous complement to the roasted asparagus. This is how recipes often develop at our house! It's a wonder I ever sit down to eat, between photographing the dishes, and adding ingredients here and there! Anyway, we loved the result and wanted to share it with you.

Believe it or not, asparagus is a member of the lily family, and it comes in three color varieties: green, purple and white. I have never seen purple asparagus, although often the tips have a bit of a purplish cast. The name "asparagus" comes from the Greek meaning "shoot" or "sprout" and was believed to have both medicinal and aphrodisiacal qualities. Asparagus dates back some 2000 years to origins in the eastern Mediterranean region. Asparagus is a perennial crop and can be grown in the home garden. We've never grown it, but it is said to yield a harvest for years. Just think of how many children's pockets that could fill. (Rumor has it that my brother did that with his broccoli one time when he was little!)

Hearts of palm, also known as "palmito" is a wonderful addition to any salad, and can be made into an au gratin side dish, too, by adding a little cheese and perhaps some bread crumbs or panko. It is sometimes difficult to find just exactly the texture you like, but be patient and test out a few brands. I much prefer the firm heart of palm to the mushy. I have found that those bought at Costco are usually pretty firm, but it can also be hit and miss-even within the same jar. It seems that the wider ends are softer, while the narrower parts are more firm. Some processors cook the product longer to obtain a softer texture, which many in Central and South America prefer. But, since we prefer the firmer texture, those are what we strive to find in the markets.

Hearts of palm come from the center cord that runs right up the middle of certain varieties of young palm trees. The trees are harvested at about one year of age, to produce the most optimum texture. Nowadays, most hearts of palm we produce or import are a domesticated farm species, instead of from the wild, where fatal damage occurred to the tree during harvesting.

The bulk of the hearts of palm we buy in the U.S. comes from Costa Rica, but also from an assortment of Latin American nations, and more recently from Florida and Hawaii. In Costa Rica, they serve Palmito (Hearts of Palm) Salad everywhere and it is so fresh and delicious.

Interestingly, the hearts of palm contain none of the risky palm oil, (that comes from the nuts of the mature palm trees) and have no cholesterol or fat. And, in fact, an entire jar is said to have less than 100 calories! What could be better? Great taste and good for the figure, too!

Caesar "Asparagustus" Salad

(Serves 4)

INGREDIENTS

- 1 head Romaine lettuce, torn into bite-sized pieces
- 3-4 small tomatoes, quartered or cut into eighths
- 12-16 spears asparagus, roasted and cut into 1 1/2-inch pieces (toss with olive oil, S&P, and roast for 6-8 minutes at 375°. Make sure it is still al dente.)
- 4 spears of hearts of palm, cut into 1/4-inch rings (each spear should be approximately 4-5 inches long)
- 1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan for garnish
- 1 recipe Caesar Dressing:
 - 1 clove garlic, minced (can use more ... I seem to get garlic overload easily, so I prefer less)
 - Juice of about a 1/4 of a regular (not sweet) lemon
 - 8 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
 - 5 tablespoons white or red wine vinegar
 - 1 tablespoon of Dijon mustard



Photo Susie Iventosch

- 2-3 dashes of Worcestershire
- Dash of Tabasco Sauce (or Crystal Louisiana Hot Sauce)
- 1/2 teaspoon anchovy paste, optional
- Liberal shake or grind of black pepper

- Dash of sea salt, optional
- 1/4 cup finely grated Parmesan

Mix all dressing ingredients (except Parmesan) and shake well. Then whisk in the Parmesan until well-integrated. The creamy texture of this dressing comes from whisking in the Parmesan- notice there are no eggs.

To assemble salad, place lettuce in large salad bowl along with tomatoes, cooled asparagus, hearts of palm and tomatoes. Toss with dressing and grated Parmesan.

Reach the reporter at: suziven@gmail.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA