



Edible Paradise: Fresh Picks at the Market

By Andrew Cohen, MBCFM Chef In Residence

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- **Featured Produce:** *Fava Beans and Asparagus*
- **Recipes:** *Sauté of Fava Beans and Radishes, Asparagus Soup*

FAVA BEANS

Although favas, also known as broad beans, take some work, they are worth the effort. When buying them, look for firm pods that are not marked by “rust” or have blackening mushy ends. The pods should be plump and look like they have a bean in them. Many people like the youngest, smallest favas, but I prefer them a little larger, before they can get tough and starchy but large enough so the work shelling them seems more rewarding.

To peel them, I use a short paring knife with a good sharp tip and run it the length of the pod, avoiding cutting into the beans inside. I then strip the beans from the pod, and get a pot of water boiling large enough to easily hold all of the beans. Add a large pinch of salt to the water. Prepare an ice bath in the sink, and then blanch the favas in the boiling water for about 30 seconds or just until the skins soften. Immediately drain the beans and then plunge them into the ice water. When the cooking has stopped, pick up a bean in one hand and use the thumbnail of the other hand to pinch a bit of the skin off. Squeeze the bean out of the shell with holding hand until they are all peeled. You can rinse the beans in cold water if you will not get to them right away as this may help prevent them from going sour right away.

Besides the intense “green” flavor, favas are often characterized as having a slightly nutty flavor, as well as having a “cheesy” flavor. You will find favas paired very often with Pecorino Romano cheese, a younger cheese being preferred so as not to overwhelm the delicate flavor of the beans. I like favas cooked simply, as in the Radish and Fava recipe. I also braise them in olive oil seasoned with garlic and a little white wine and stock. Stewing them in olive oil that has been flavored with herbs and then mashing them is also a nice way to enjoy the flavor of favas. Spread the mash on slices of toasted rustic bread for a great starter. Flavors that complement favas well are lemon,

especially Meyer lemon, mint, garlic, thyme, oregano, and small amounts of rosemary. I like coarse salt on them as a foil to the softer texture and stronger “vegetable” character of favas. Both artichokes and asparagus share flavor components with favas and are excellent sharing the dish.

A couple health warnings about favas: people taking MAO inhibiting antidepressants should avoid eating favas. A disease called G6PD Deficiency or “favism” (an enzyme related anemia) can be triggered by favas. This disease, although uncommon, tends to afflict people of Mediterranean origins.

ASPARAGUS

When choosing asparagus, check the bottom of the bunch to see that the cuts are fresh and wet looking, not dried out and shriveling. The tops should look fresh and not decayed or falling apart, and of course the stalks themselves should look full and smooth. You will hear some folks say they think the thicker spears are older and less tender, or prone to be tough, but after a conversation with Fred Minazzoli (who brings asparagus, among other things, to market) I found out the truth. For the first three years all the spears from an asparagus plant will be thin. After that, the same plant may produce both thick and thin spears. After a lot of taste trials, I can say that the thicker ones tend to be more succulent, and can be cooked in many ways. The thinner spears tend to want a moist cooking method to keep them tender.

When preparing asparagus, simply snap the stalk and it will break where the skin turns tender. When the spears are thick, I peel them by laying them flat on a board and using a sharp swivel peeler to take away the tougher skin. Then I cut off the bottom part where it is tough.

For cooking pencil thin to “normal” size (~3/8”) spears, I snap them and lay them in a 10” sauté pan. I then add cold water to come just below the top of the spears, and put a tight fitting lid on the pan. Put the pan over high heat and bring the water to a boil. Once the water is at a full boil, pour out the water, re-cover the pan, and allow

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the asparagus to steam for three minutes. The asparagus are perfect at this point for serving hot. If you are going to use them in a cold preparation, submerge the spears in an ice bath after 2 1/2 minutes of cooking. If you are going to add the asparagus to another dish such as risotto or pasta, blanch the asparagus briefly, say 1 1/2 minutes, then cool or put it directly into the dish. I prefer to cut the asparagus to the size required for the dish before cooking as I find it much easier to cut something that is firm. If the asparagus is soft and you cut it with a less than very sharp knife, you risk mashing the spears.

The fat spears are my favorite. 1 inch diameter? Bring 'em on! I love to roast them. Peel the bottoms, and then you can decide to leave them whole or cut them on the bias into 2 inch pieces. Either way, drizzle with a high quality olive oil, and either roll the spears or toss the chunks in a bowl to coat them entirely with the oil. Then, put the asparagus on a heavy sheet pan (the heavy pan won't flex when it heats, tossing around the asparagus. They also won't get hot spots as easily and scorch your food as readily) and spread the asparagus out so there is room between the pieces. If they are too close, they will steam and just get sort of mushy. Sprinkle with some salt and fresh pepper and roast in a preheated 400°F oven for around 15 minutes, until the asparagus are tender and starting to crisp and caramelize on the outside/edges.

This is the basic roast method. It is also great with orange juice added to oil and allowing some time to marinate. Around the house, the favorite way is to oil the asparagus, then drizzle it with a shot of white truffle oil. Then, as the asparagus come out of the oven, they are anointed with a few more drops of the truffle oil while still really hot, and the smell that comes up is amazing.

When it warms up here, I like to cook on the grill as much as I can. When asparagus are on the menu, I prefer to grill the medium spears loose, and the real thick ones get threaded onto two flat metal skewers. While the grill is warming up, I prep the asparagus, and if they are the thinner spears, I soak them in cold water for half an hour. It seems to add a little more moisture that helps the asparagus steam on the inside as the outside grills. This yields asparagus that are cooked inside at the same time as the outside is done, instead of charring the outside and just cooking the center. After the soaking, or before the skewering, oil the asparagus and season as you wish. Grill the asparagus over the coals, not a live flame, until done. They should be tender, a little smokey, and have a sweetness that wet cooking never gets.

SAUTÉ OF FAVA BEANS AND RADISHES

2 pounds of favas in the shell (about 2 cups)

1 bunch of red radishes

1/2 tablespoon good unsalted butter

2 tablespoons flavorful extra virgin olive oil

High quality large crystal sea salt or kosher salt

Fresh ground pepper

White vermouth

1 teaspoon sugar

1 tablespoon white wine vinegar (you may or may not need this)

- (1) Bring a 3 quart pot of water to a boil.
- (2) While the water comes to a boil, slit the fava pods and remove the beans. When the water is boiling add the favas and blanch briefly (large favas about 60 seconds, little ones for 30 seconds). Drain the beans and immerse in cold water to arrest the cooking.
- (3) Use a thumbnail to break the skin of the bean a little and then pinch the bean to eject it from the skin. Place the beans in a bowl and set aside.
- (4) Stem the radishes and use a sharp knife to cut off the ends so they are flat. Slice the radishes into coins. If the favas are small, slice the radishes 1/8 inch thick. For larger favas, cut the radish coins around 1/4 inch thick.
- (5) Heat two pans over low to medium heat. When the pans are hot, add the butter to one and oil to the other. When the fats are hot (butter melts and oil shimmers) and the radishes to the butter and the favas to the oil.
- (6) Cook gently to just cook through/heat the vegetables. When they are warm through, turn up the heat under the favas to high and when they start to sizzle add the radishes, tossing to mix. Remove from the heat and season with a dusting of pepper and a generous sprinkling of salt. Serve right away.

Variations: A clove of garlic can be cooked into the oil to season the favas, shreds of sage are also a nice touch, but go lightly. This is dish about subtlety, both in flavor and color. The dish is a lovely contrast of pale green and red, almost pink.

ASPARAGUS SOUP

For a simple yet elegant soup, try this asparagus soup. Subtle and velvety, without any cream. By the way, you do not want this soup to boil—by not allowing it to boil it will retain a greener, more pleasant color. Beware—boil this soup and it will turn khaki.

1 pound thick asparagus

1 medium brown onion

1 leek

1 stalk of celery

1 smallish carrot

1 large Yellow Finn or Yukon Gold potato

1 quart rich vegetable stock

A few sprigs of fresh thyme

1 bay leaf

Salt and white pepper

Minced chives or chervil for garnish

2 tablespoons grapeseed oil or olive oil

- (1) Snap the spears, the peel the parts you snapped. Cut the rest of the spear into smallish bits (1 inch), reserving the tips for garnish.
- (2) Heat the stock over medium heat, and when it is hot, add the peeled bases to the stock. Reduce the heat so the stock is at a chuckle and cook the bases for 20 minutes or so. This is to build the flavor of the asparagus into the stock.
- (3) Finely slice the leek and onion. Peel and finely slice the carrot, and finely slice the celery stalk. In a pot large enough to hold the finished soup, sauté them in the oil over medium heat until they are translucent.
- (4) Peel and medium dice the potato. Add it to the vegetables and sauté until all are quite soft.
- (5) Strain the hot stock into the pot. Add the chopped asparagus and simmer (Remember—do not boil the soup!) for 5 minutes.
- (6) Carefully, puree the vegetables in the blender. Use just enough of the liquid to get it moving. (Remember—hot liquids in the blender want to explode out when the machine turns on. Only fill the machine partway and cover with a towel.)
- (7) Strain the puree into a fresh soup pot, and add enough stock to the puree to give it a nice smooth texture. Season with salt and white pepper.
- (8) Blanch the tips just long enough that they are no longer raw and garnish the soup with them.
- (9) Sprinkle the soup with either chives or chervil. The soup is also good served cold, although the seasonings might need to be turned up a bit.