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once it turns brown in the fall. Side dress with compost in the fall and repeat the above for year two, and so on. When stalks are 6 inches tall and the width of a pencil or larger, they can be harvested. Be sure to harvest daily, as spears can grow 6 to 10 inches in one day if the conditions are ideal. They will continue to grow for a period of two to three weeks.

Third-generation Violini Farms has been growing asparagus for more than 45 years in Gonzales, which is ideal because the climate is so temperate. Both organic and conventional asparagus are grown and some is marketed under the label Coastal View Produce. Their fresh, crisp crop of organic grass can be found March through June at all of the Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Markets except the downtown market, where L&J Farms out of Greenfield sells its organic crop. Bounty of the Valley Farm of Greenfield sells L&J's organic asparagus for it at the Old Monterey Farmers' Market on Tuesdays and the Carmel market on Thursdays. Bounty of the Valley's Matt Hayes began growing asparagus in 1986 but stopped in 2013: "You have to 'touch' asparagus 10 times before it gets onto the market tables; it is very labor intensive," Hayes says.

HOW TO CHOOSE AND STORE ASPARAGUS

Look for blemish-free spears with tightly closed tips and rigid-looking stems; avoid wilted stalks. Cut off the ends and store them upright in cold water in the fridge if possible, or cut and wrap the ends with wet paper towels and place in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. Cut the last few inches off the spears right before you cook them and for the best flavor, eat as soon as possible. The thick stems have more carbohydrates, therefore are sweeter when cooked. Thin versus fat asparagus is a personal preference, but both are tasty and full of fiber, vitamins C and K and folic acid as well as naturally low in calories.

TIPS FOR PREPARING ASPARAGUS

Roasting brings out a sweet, nutty flavor; simply coat with olive oil, salt and pepper, a little lemon zest and roast in the oven for 15 minutes.

For salads, blanch then cut in bite-sized pieces. Or use a vegetable peeler to make thin strips of raw asparagus and use them in a salad or on top of a pizza. Pickled asparagus is also very good. Try it in risotto, like in the recipe provided here by Carmel Valley Ranch's Tim Wood.

Jamie Collins is the owner of Serendipity Farms, which grows organic row crops in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties and distributes them through U-picks, farmers' markets and a virtual farm stand, which can be found on Serendipity's Virtual Farm Stand Facebook page.

RECIPES: See p. 17 and 18 for Carmel Valley Ranch executive chef Tim Wood's Valley Kitchen Spring Asparagus Purée, Asparagus Risotto, and Monterey Bay King Salmon with Asparagus Purée.

TIM WOOD:

Cooking with the Seasons



While growing up the youngest of three boys in the Hudson Valley, N.Y. hamlet of Stone Ridge, it was Tim Wood's job to watch for and pick the tender asparagus tips after they began poking up through the hay the family had spread over its backyard crop the prior fall.

"It was a big deal. It's still a big deal," the executive chef at Carmel Valley Ranch's Valley Kitchen says, referring to the anticipation of when the local asparagus and later, sweet corn, season would begin. To this day, asparagus and corn remain two of his favorite vegetables.

While many chefs only discover the myriad benefits of cooking with local, peak-of-season produce through culinary school, mentors or trial and error, eating with the seasons has always been Wood's way of life.

"I never realized that not everybody had that," he says, referring to his family's 15-by-20-foot asparagus plot, and the opportunity he had to eat "really well-executed fresh food" at his family's table. "We'd only pick what we needed that night."

Today, Wood and his culinary team are able to shave over their soups freshly picked purple asparagus grown in their own organic garden, and Wood is trying to grow a new row of asparagus in the property's vineyards for recipes like the ones that accompany this story. But daily shipments from Hollister's Swank Farms are key to ensuring that the vegetables he cooks with are fresh-picked earlier the same day.

Wood began cooking professionally at age 13 (yes, he fudged his age) at a resort that was a half-hour bike ride from his home, and went on to train at the Culinary Institute of America in nearby Hyde Park, thinking that cooking would be a good skill to pay the bills while he launched an acting career.

But Wood never became an actor and says that his philosophy of cooking—which he shares prodigiously as a volunteer chef at community fundraisers—comes back to simply making food that tastes good, and checking his ego so that his ingredients can capture the spotlight.

"I don't want to cover up the brilliance of the ingredient," he says. "I want to put it on as the star of the show." —*Sarah Wood*

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MONTEREY BAY KING SALMON WITH ASPARAGUS AND SPRING VEGETABLES

*Courtesy Tim Wood, executive chef,
Valley Kitchen at Carmel Valley Ranch
Serves 6*

One of our most important local ingredients is Monterey Bay king salmon. We are fortunate to have our own fisherman, Jerry Wetle, and his fleet of well-trained professionals who supply us twice a week with fresh local fish. I met Jerry on a fishing boat here in Monterey 17 years ago, and we have been working together like family. Jerry is featured on our menu at the Valley Kitchen with his line-caught fish of the day, which rotates based on seasonal availability.

My advice for where to purchase fresh fish would be to seek out a good market or your favorite restaurant, where you feel the quality is above par, and simply ask places they would recommend in the area. Not all chefs are willing to give up their secrets, but asking is a great start. As with many things in life, buying fish can be trial and error, but when you find an exceptional fish shop, it can make all the difference.

6 7-ounce filets Monterey Bay king salmon

2 pounds asparagus, blanched

Spring vegetables, such as peas, green onions and mushrooms

1 bunch of thyme

Butter

Olive oil

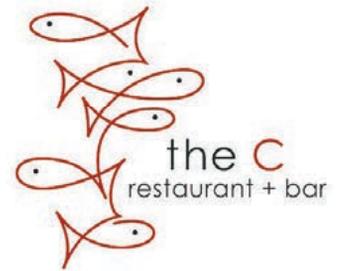
Salt and pepper

Spring Asparagus Purée (see accompanying recipe)

Heat oven to 350° F. In a large heavy-bottomed sauté pan add olive oil, salt and pepper. Bring to medium/medium-high heat. Season fish with salt and pepper. Add fish to the pan in batches, allowing it to cook evenly without overcrowding, for 4 minutes on each side. Remove from pan and place in an ovenproof dish with a sprig of thyme and teaspoon of butter on each fillet and baste accordingly. Roast in oven for 3 to 6 minutes depending on thickness of fish. Prepare vegetables as desired.

To finish, pour the asparagus purée on a warm plate. Place salmon in the middle and place the warm vegetables and asparagus spears around it.

Chef Hack: Peel the bottom half of the asparagus with a vegetable peeler and blanch in salted, boiling water. Have ice bath ready to cool asparagus, so it does not overcook.



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ASPARAGUS RISOTTO

*Courtesy Tim Wood, executive chef,
Valley Kitchen at Carmel Valley Ranch
Serves 8 to 10*

- 1 large onion, finely diced (same size as grains of rice)
- 1 pound Arborio rice
- 1 cup white wine (Chardonnay)
- Hot water or stock, simmering
- 3 tablespoons butter
- 1½ cups Parmigiano-Reggiano, grated
- 1 cup Spring Asparagus Purée (see accompanying recipe)
- Olive oil
- Salt and pepper

Preheat a medium size, heavy-bottomed pot. Add a small amount of olive oil. Sauté onions until translucent. Add rice and stir until combined. Deglaze pot with the wine.

When the alcohol has cooked off, begin adding the liquid in small amounts, about a cup at a time. This much rice needs about 9 cups of liquid. When he's at home and doesn't have homemade stock to use, Wood uses filtered water, as he believes it's better than using canned and he wants the asparagus to shine through anyways, but organic vegetable stock works well here. Continue stirring rice and test the doneness at intervals.

When the rice is cooked to your liking, add asparagus purée, butter and cheese. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Should be creamy when finished.

Chef Hack: To make ahead, stop the cooking when rice is almost done. Spread rice on a cookie sheet and put in the refrigerator. When ready to serve, reheat by adding a cup of water. Add purée, butter, cheese and salt and pepper to finish.

Garnish with small, inside celery leaves and extra virgin olive oil, or radishes and pea shoots.

VALLEY KITCHEN SPRING ASPARAGUS PURÉE

*Courtesy Tim Wood, executive chef,
Valley Kitchen at Carmel Valley Ranch
Yields 6 to 8 3-ounce portions*

This recipe is truly as simple as it looks. Mother Nature made the ratio easy to remember—one bunch of asparagus to one onion—and the keys to the purée's success are simply the quality of the ingredients and the technique of sweating of the onions. Another beauty of the recipe is its versatility as a sauce, purée or a simple soup. For soup, adjust the consistency with more liquid, as desired; for a sauce or purée, less liquid is necessary. The pan used should be large enough to hold the asparagus and onion—a 2-quart saucepan with a heavy bottom to allow for even cooking should do.

- 1 pound fresh asparagus
- 1 medium onion
- 1 stick (4 ounces) sweet butter
- Kosher salt
- Black pepper, freshly cracked
- Olive oil for cooking as needed
- Water or vegetable stock

Begin by cutting the onion in half from tip to root and removing outer skin. Slice the onion with a radial motion from top to bottom to keep consistent sizing. Ultimately you will end up with ¼-inch onion slices. In a heavy bottomed pot, start cooking the onions over low heat with a good amount of olive oil, about 2 ounces (¼ cup). Cook slowly to allow the bitter onion taste to sweat out and the onions to become sweet, about 25 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. This is always a good time to put together a salad or another part of your meal, but don't wander too far off, as the onions could burn and make the puree bitter.

While the onions are sweating, clean the asparagus by snapping the "woody" end off then chop into 1-inch pieces. This will allow the vegetable to cook evenly.

When the onions are soft and tender, take the chopped asparagus and add it to the onions. Cover the onion and asparagus mixture with enough water or vegetable stock to cover by about 1½ inches. Cook on a slow simmer until fork-tender (about 15 minutes).

Ready your blender or food processor and cut butter into small, manageable chunks. With a slotted spoon, take the solids from the pot and add to the blender in batches (about halfway up the blender) then add a half cup of the liquid from the pot to thin the mixture to desired sauce consistency. Add about 3 tablespoons of butter per batch for a texture that is rich and smooth. Repeat this process until all solids are blended. There may be some of the stock left or it may be necessary to add some water to thin as you go. You can always thin your sauce down, but it's hard to thicken if you add too much liquid.

it. Her recipe started my journey of making my own chèvre every time our neighbors went out of town.

Years later, I met a man named Charlie Cascio. We had heard legends about him and had visited the famous redwood tree in Big Sur named “Charlie’s Tree,” where he was said to have lived in a large natural cavity for two years. When we first met Charlie, he was living at his Sweetwater Farm in Palo Colorado Canyon, where he tended olive and fruit orchards, raised vegetables and kept bees as well as goats.

Charlie was herding his goats along the dirt road when we drove up, and we hopped out to take a walk with him. He was the first person I ever met who actually spoke goat. As we walked with the goats, he called when they drifted too far and they would bleat back to him, as if in conversation. It was remarkable. We received a tour of his milking shed and homestead, and Charlie taught me his style of making goat cheese. Charlie, who was the head chef at the Esalen Institute from 1998 through 2004, is a perfectionist in the kitchen, and he also makes a variety of aged hard cheeses. I was impressed by his passion for quality although his technique was a little more complicated and precise than I was used to.

Charlie’s homestead in the canyon burned in the Soberanes Fire in 2016. He and his goats took shelter in his cheese cave as the fire tore through; his goats were taken in temporarily by another goat herder while he considered the future. At this point Charlie was at a crossroads as he was faced with either rebuilding or relocating. Chef Tim Wood at Carmel Valley Ranch was a long-time friend and buyer of Charlie’s hard cheeses, featuring them on his menu. He wanted to offer any help he could to Charlie, so he suggested the goats take up residence right on the ranch where guests could enjoy seeing directly where the cheese comes from. It was a wonderful solution and the goats are happily adjusting to life on the ranch!

The main difference between Lynn’s and Charlie’s cheese is that Charlie adds a flavor-boosting enzyme called Flora Danica and is more exact with his temperatures and times. The end results are completely comparable, and I think it has to do with a matter of personality and preference. I love them both! 

CHÈVRE

Courtesy Jordan Champagne, chef and proprietor, Happy Girl Kitchen Co. in Pacific Grove

Chèvre is a rich creamy cheese that you can only make with goat milk. It is a wonderful place to start for the home cheesemaker, as there is very little that can go wrong! You will need to source the vegetable rennet and mesophilic culture. I source mine from a website called New England Cheesemaking, and it is often available at Mountain Feed & Farm Supply in Ben Lomond. Both cultures are very inexpensive for a year’s supply. The rennet helps separate the curds from the whey, and if you find your cheese is too firm, then add a little less. If your cheese is not separating enough, then perhaps your rennet has expired. The mesophilic culture thrives at a “medium” temperature, close to room temperature, and is very easy to work with. The process takes two days, but most of that is tender loving neglect. The warm temperature of the milk fresh from the goat is perfect for making this chèvre.

1 gallon goat milk*
7 drops vegetable rennet
1/8 teaspoon powdered mesophilic culture
1/8 teaspoon powdered Flora Danica culture
¼ cup pure water (nonchlorinated), room temperature

Warm the milk to 86° F in a nonreactive pot. Add 7 drops of vegetable rennet and 1/8 teaspoon powdered mesophilic culture to ¼ cup room temperature water (nonchlorinated). Mix well and add to milk. After about 30 minutes you will begin to see the milk separating into curds and whey. Once it starts, you know the chemistry is taking root and you do not need to tend to it any longer. Let it sit out on your counter at room temperature for 8–12 hours. Next, pour off the whey through cheesecloth to strain out the curds. For my cheesecloth I use a fabric called “flour sacks,” which can be purchased at any hardware store and used over and over again. At this point you can save the whey for whatever you desire; on most farms it is fed back to the goats—they love it!

Hang the cheesecloth with a bowl underneath to catch the remaining drips of whey. If there is no obvious spot, you can get creative with a high beam or hook or anywhere you can leave it dripping for 18 hours. I usually lay a wooden spoon across a tall pot and tie the cheesecloth to the spoon, and the whey drips into the pot. Let it strain and culture for 18–24 hours or longer if you want it to become a little sharper. Take curds out of the cheesecloth and shape with your hands. Knead in ½ teaspoon of sea salt. Wrap in wax paper and put in an airtight container in fridge. Chèvre will keep for 1 week.

Before serving, you can add flavorings to your cheese, like chopped fresh herbs or cracked pepper; chili flakes add a nice smoky undertone. Then get ready for your cheese to become the hit of the next potluck!

***Editor’s Note:** Lynn Selness’ Summer Meadows Farm makes weekly deliveries of raw goat milk to Happy Girl Kitchen; other goat farms in our area that could be contacted for fresh, local milk include Pasture Chick Ranch in Hollister, Evergreen Acres in Tres Pinos and Harley Farms in Pescadero, to name a few. And Champagne says that goat milk she has bought at Trader Joe’s works just fine for her cheesemaking.

Jordan Champagne is the co-owner and founder of Happy Girl Kitchen Co. She has a passion for preserving the local, organic harvest and loves sharing her secrets at workshops she teaches in Pacific Grove and Oakland.