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(or even a mediocre cook). However, she was firm in her belief that we should all eat our vegetables. No dinner was complete without at least two green and one yellow vegetable, plus a salad of some sort.

Trouble was she boiled everything to death; tender-crisp was not in her culinary vocabulary. So when my mother thought of asparagus, bright green spears didn't come to mind. No, she pictured something soggy, limp and dull green. Whether it was on the advice of the "Joy of Cooking", her mother-in-law or just dumb luck, Mom never developed the habit of overcooking our vegetables. Thank goodness. On the other hand, no one could accuse her of being overly adventurous or curious when it came to all things gastronomic.

And so, asparagus never found its way into our kitchen until Joyce Chen. Fortunately for us and many families like us, Joyce Chen and her husband Thomas fled communist China and ended up in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She opened a restaurant, started a cooking school and eventually got her own show on public television. Joyce Chen introduced my mother and millions like her to the wok and stir-fry.

Before long stir-fried, tender-crisp asparagus appeared on our plates. Once banished from the kitchen, asparagus was no longer dull and droopy but bright and fresh. We could not believe what we had been missing. Sometimes Mom added fresh ginger and garlic or a squeeze of lemon. I don't think she actually bought a wok, but Mom went on to stir-fry other things, like zucchini, snow peas and bean sprouts. It was all quite exotic for our staid suburban kitchen. She took another lesson, maybe from Joyce, maybe from the Ladies' Home Journal, I don't know, but she bought a steam basket. Soon she was steaming our beans and broccoli. It was wonderful; our vegetables were fresh and crispy and tasted like, well, vegetables.

These new techniques and gadgets were without a doubt wonderful. They made magic with everything from beans to zucchini and we were grateful. But asparagus was still special, probably because the season was so short. In the days before massive global agriculture, vegetables had seasons. We didn't import asparagus from Peru in the middle of winter. We waited with great anticipation until April or May for the first fresh asparagus to arrive from California. Then finally, a month or so later, local asparagus appeared. Then in a flash, it was gone. It disappeared from farm stands and supermarket shelves. We were bereft, forced to wait another year for its extraordinary taste.

Over time, I have developed a short list of favorite asparagus recipes. Most of them are quite simple, allowing the unique flavor of this special vegetable to shine. (Come to think of it, asparagus is in the lily family. Does that make it a flower or a vegetable?) In any case, asparagus is perfect for an easy family supper or an elegant dinner party. It is delicious in soups and wonderful in salads. Add it to an Asian stir-fry, throw it on the grill it or roast it in the oven.

It's a short season and local asparagus will soon be gone. No matter how you choose to prepare it, prepare it often. Why not tonight? Enjoy and,

Bon appétit! - Susan

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Asparagus Soup

This recipe is one of my all time favorites. It is probably the easiest and one of the best soups you will ever make. It is pure asparagus and pure delicious.

Makes about 4 quarts

2 pound asparagus, trimmed and cut into 1-inch pieces
1 large yellow onion, roughly chopped
2-3 tablespoons butter
2-2 1/2 quarts chicken stock
Olive oil
1 cup half & half
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste



1. Heat the butter in a soup pot over medium heat, add the onions, season with salt and pepper and cook until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add 3 quarts of chicken stock and bring to a boil. Add the asparagus (save a few spear tops for garnish), return the soup to a boil, reduce the heat and let it bubble for about a minute. Turn off the heat and let it sit for about 15 minutes.
2. Stir-fry the spear tops in a little olive oil until tender-crisp.
3. Transfer the mixture in batches to a blender or food processor; process until smooth.
4. Return to the soup to the pot, add the half & half, more stock if the soup seems too thick and salt and pepper to taste. Cook over medium heat until steaming. Serve immediately.

This soup can be made a day or two in advance through step 2. Refrigerate in a tightly sealed container. You can also freeze the soup at this point to enjoy in the off-season!