

Mini Specialist

Found Food | Wild Asparagus

During May asparagus are in season across Europe and North America, but which variety is the true “wild asparagus?”

A gourmet debate.

By: William R. Snyder



Courtesy of David Lebovitz

A bundle of asperges sauvage

May 28, 2009 - All great thinkers are ahead of their time. And Euell Gibbons is no exception. The Plato of the plate emerged in the 1960s as an advocate for foraged foods, pre-dating the latest crop of books and authors indicting the industrial food complex. His treatise, though, is not a book of dialogues or logic, but a simple field guide for the art of finding food and its tradition throughout history. Entitled “Stalking the Wild Asparagus,” he explains the role of wild foods in man’s diet and pays particular attention to the eponymous green.

With several varieties showing up in markets around the world, the question remains, *What* is the true variety of wild asparagus?

“What we call ‘wild asparagus’ in the U.S. are actually cultivated asparagus whose seeds were distributed by birds or the wind,” says Russ Jackson, a weekend forager from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The strain is called *asparagus officinalis* with a few differences between the cultivated and wild cousins. The plush life of the garden makes them plump, but the flavor lacks.

In the wild, these asparagus are leaner but the taste is stronger with bitter hints. “In my opinion, it’s like the idea of concentrate with juice. You only need one wild asparagus to get the kick of ten from the greenhouse,” Jackson says.

In the south of France and along Italy’s Mediterranean coastline grows the *asparagus acutifolius*, a true wild variety that prefers sandy soils near beaches and in scrub tree forests. Sold in the markets as “balais,” they have dark stems with very thin tips that look similar to the American variety. “Of all the wild

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asparagus, these have the most intense flavor,” says Peter Schuler, an ex-pat chef who learned to cook in Aix-En-Provence. “And the color is great. The purple-ish hues create a beautiful contrast with eggs if you’re making a frittata,” he adds.

But it turns out the asparagus that holds the place of honor at the gourmet markets of Paris is not actually a member of the asparagus family. Though called “asperges sauvages” they are actually a wildflower native to the slopes of the Pyrenees that grow from bulbs. “The name is misleading, but these are the most delicate,” says Schuler. They look like a green wheat stalks with a narrow shoots and wider fronds and are sold in bouquets like flowers. (Import prices are astronomical, easily rising above \$10 a pound.)

“People come to Paris and think these wild asparagus are the height of chic,” says David Lebovitz, author of “The Sweet Life in Paris” and “The Perfect Scoop” among others.

Because of the rarity and the aesthetic appeal of asperges sauvages they are best as a side dish for fish or spring lamb. “I wouldn’t do much with them because they’re so special. You want to keep the form as it is,” Lebovitz says. “These wild asparagus are more about the vegetable’s texture than the taste.”

As for a wine pairing, Lebovitz suggests a grassy white. “Even a Chablis would be good with its buttery texture.”

Despite the different varieties, it isn’t the “wild” moniker that is important, Jackson says but instead the act of foraging. “What matters is that you are going to nature to find it, not the supermarket.”

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