

Asparagus Fans with Mustard Sauce

I like firm, fat, green asparagus with tight heads and I always peel the lower third of the stalks with a vegetable peeler to make them tender. Asparagus can be served as a vegetable with meat, poultry, or fish, but I often serve it as a first course, as in this recipe.

Fanned out on the plates with the spear ends together and the tips spread out, the asparagus is served with a dressing of mayonnaise, mustard, and vinegar and garnished with hard-cooked eggs and chives. Cook the asparagus fairly close to serving time; it tastes better if it is served directly from the boiling water without being refreshed under cold water.

- 2 large eggs
- 1 1/4 pounds large firm green asparagus
- Salt
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh chives, for garnish

Mustard Sauce

- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 2 tablespoons water
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- Good dash freshly ground black pepper

Lower the eggs into enough boiling water to cover them and cook at a very gentle boil for 10 minutes. Drain off the water and shake the pan to crack the eggshells. Add ice to the pan and set aside for at least 15 minutes to cool completely. Shell the eggs and place them, one at a time, in an egg slicer, cut through them, then rotate them 45 degrees in the slicer and cut through them again to create strips. Alternatively, chop the eggs with a sharp knife. Set aside.

Peel the lower third of the asparagus spears with a vegetable peeler. Bring 3 cups salted water to a boil in a large skillet. Add the asparagus, cover partially, and bring back to a boil over high heat. Boil over high heat for 4 to 5 minutes, until the spears are tender but still firm. Using a slotted spatula, remove the asparagus from the water and put it on a plate.

For the sauce: Mix all the ingredients together in a small bowl. At serving time, arrange about 5 asparagus spears on each of four plates, positioning them so the stem ends are close together and the tips are fanned out. Coat the lower third of the asparagus spears with the sauce and sprinkle the eggs and chives over and around them. Serve immediately.

4 servings

Mini Cheesecakes

- 2 teaspoons unsalted butter, softened
- 1 slice bread, processed in a food processor to make 1/2 cup bread crumbs
- 1 cup (one 8-ounce container) whipped cream cheese
- 2 large eggs
- 1/4 cup sour cream
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
- 1/4 cup crumbled blue cheese, like Stilton or Roquefort

Salad

- 3 cups arugula or butterhead lettuce (Bibb or Boston leaves), or another tender, crunchy lettuce
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon red wine vinegar
- Dash salt and freshly ground pepper

For the mini cheesecakes: Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Generously coat four small (3/4-cup) soufflé molds with the butter. Divide the bread crumbs among the molds and coat the bottoms and sides heavily with the crumbs, pressing them onto the buttered dish so they stick.

Put the cream cheese in a medium bowl and add the eggs, sour cream, salt, pepper, and 1 tablespoon of the parsley. Mix well with a whisk and divide among the soufflé molds. Sprinkle the crumbled blue cheese on top of the cream cheese mixture in the molds. Top with the remaining 1 tablespoon parsley.

Arrange the molds on a baking sheet and bake for about 20 minutes. The cheesecakes will still be slightly wet and soft in the center. Let cool for 10 minutes before unmolding.

For the salad: Meanwhile, toss the lettuce leaves with the oil, vinegar, and salt and pepper. Arrange on four plates.

Invert each cooled mini cheesecake into one of your hands to unmold it, then turn it over so it is right side up and place it in the center of one of the plates on top of the lettuce. Serve immediately.

Roasted Split Chicken with Mustard Crust

I often make this recipe at home when I am in a hurry, because splitting and flattening the chicken and cutting between the joints of the leg and the shoulder reduce the cooking time by half. I use kitchen shears to split the chicken open at the back and to cut the cooked bird into serving pieces and a knife to cut between the joints.

The mustard crust can be made ahead and even spread on the chicken a day ahead, if you like. I pour the cooked chicken juices into a fat separator with a spout and serve over Fluffy Mashed Potatoes, leaving the fat behind.

Mustard Crust

- 2 tablespoons chopped garlic
 - 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
 - 2 tablespoons dry white wine
 - 1 tablespoon soy sauce
 - 2 tablespoons olive oil
 - 1 teaspoon Tabasco hot pepper sauce
 - 1 teaspoon herbes de Provence
 - 1/2 teaspoon salt
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- 1 chicken (about 3 1/2 pounds)
 - Fluffy Mashed Potatoes (page XX; optional)

For the crust: Mix all the ingredients in a small bowl. Preheat the oven to 450 degrees. Using kitchen shears or a sharp knife, cut alongside the backbone of the chicken to split it open. Spread and press on the chicken with your hands to flatten it. Using a sharp paring knife, cut halfway through both sides of the joints connecting the thighs and drumsticks and cut through the joints of the shoulder under the wings as well. (This will help the heat penetrate these joints and accelerate the cooking process.)

Place the chicken skin side down on a cutting board and spread it with about half the mustard mixture. Turn the chicken over into a large skillet so it is flat with the skin side up. Place the skillet over high heat to start the cooking and spread the remaining mustard mixture on the skin side of the chicken. When the chicken has cooked on top of the stove for about 5 minutes, place the skillet in the oven and cook the chicken for about 30 minutes. It should be well browned and dark on top.

Let the chicken rest in the skillet at room temperature for a few minutes, then cut it into 8 pieces with clean kitchen shears. Defat the cooking juices. If you like, mound some Fluffy Mashed Potatoes on each of four warm dinner plates and place 12 pieces of chicken on each plate. Pour some juice on the mashed potatoes and chicken and serve.

4 servings

Apricot Clafoutis

A clafoutis is somewhere between a sweet omelet and a custard. Made with fruit, often cherries or apples, it is a classic throughout France, with small variations from region to region and, sometimes, different names. It can be called *flan aux fruits* or a *flognarde*, but most often is known as clafoutis.

My recipe is made with a small can of apricots and is quite simple to prepare. Try different brands: some are much better than others. I cook my clafoutis in an 8-inch nonstick skillet. Serve it directly from the skillet or unmold it onto a serving plate and serve in wedges.

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 can (8.25 ounces) apricot halves in syrup
- 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 3 large eggs
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/4 cup sour cream
- 1 tablespoon confectioners' sugar

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Melt the butter in an 8-inch nonstick skillet.

Drain the apricots, reserving the syrup. You should have 6 to 8 apricot halves and 1/2 cup syrup. Using a whisk, mix the syrup with the flour in a medium bowl. Add the eggs, sugar, sour cream, and 1 tablespoon of the melted butter from the skillet and mix until you have a smooth batter.

Pour the batter into the butter remaining in the skillet and arrange the apricot halves on top, spacing them evenly. Place the skillet over high heat for about 2 minutes and then transfer it to the oven. Bake for 18 to 20 minutes, or until lightly browned and puffy. Remove from the oven and sprinkle the confectioners' sugar on top. Cool to lukewarm.

Serve the clafoutis directly from the skillet in wedges or unmold. To unmold, make certain that the clafoutis is free from the sides of the pan; if necessary, run a sharp knife around the edge to release it. Then place a piece of plastic wrap on top of the dessert and invert it onto a plate. Place another plate on top of the inverted clafoutis and invert it again so the crusty side is on top. Remove the plastic wrap, cut into wedges, and serve.

4 servings