

# In the kitchen



Celebrate spring with a delicious dish of asparagus, says **Paola Westbeek**...

The beauty of seasonal eating is not only that produce is at its best (I think we can all agree there isn't any charm, much less taste, to strawberries in winter), but also the delicious anticipation that comes with the arrival of fragrant peaches in summer or the first harvest of Brussels sprouts when temperatures drop.

And what would spring be without the decadence of asparagus? To me, that first asparagus meal signifies the end of winter and welcome warmth of sunnier days. Sure, you can find bunches of asparagus at the market year round, imported from places like Peru, but they will never please the discerning palate, for fresh they certainly are not!

Alsace is one of the top asparagus producers in France and 98% of the production is of the more delicate white variety. Pastor Louis Gustave Heyler introduced the vegetable to the region in 1873 after discovering it in Algeria. Convinced that the sandy soils of his native Hoerdt were similar to those of Philippeville (now Skikda) where he first tasted the vegetable, he encouraged local farmers to cultivate it - with great results. Today, 225 producers harvest roughly 2,000 tonnes of asparagus during the season, which starts in early April and lasts about 70 days. Two-thirds of the production takes place in Bas-Rhin and one-third in Haut-Rhin.

I first sampled Alsace's asparagus many years ago at La Charrue, a cosy restaurant in Hoerdt, the vegetable's capital. The cream-coloured spears were boiled until



tender and served with smoked and cured hams, tangy mayonnaise and a vinaigrette. Though in my opinion, this classic preparation is the best way to enjoy them, some chefs present the vegetable with fancy accompaniments such as lobster, duck breast or foie gras. Whatever your preference, it's good to know that many restaurants in the area offer special asparagus menus during the season and that there's even an annual Fête des Asperges held in Hoerdt every May. Between all the feasts, you might want to stop by the Musée de l'Asperge to learn more about its history and cultivation.

Asparagus is best when locally harvested and consumed within a day of purchase. To determine freshness, make sure the tips are smooth and the stalks squeak when rubbed together. White asparagus can be used in soups and savoury tarts (they make a lovely addition to a classic *tarte flambée* with smoked salmon or bacon) and can even be thinly sliced and eaten raw in a salad. The green spears are best roasted, drizzled with olive oil, sprinkled with *fleur de sel* and finished with a squeeze of lemon.

## serve with...

A crisp Muscat d'Alsace. The wine's subtle floral aromas and lively acidity beautifully complement asparagus's slightly bitter notes.

