

Spring Harvest

From asparagus and carrots to leafy greens and peas, Paola Westbeek is inspired by the farmers' market colours and flavours of the springtime

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WHILE IT'S TRUE that every season brings its own bounty, the colours and flavours of springtime always fill me with the most inspiration. There's nothing quite as uplifting as indulging in a leisurely early morning stroll through the farmers' market right around the beginning of April, when the stalls are piled high with everything from fluorescent pink rhubarb to bunches of dewy, vibrant green watercress. For me, spotting the season's first asparagus in all its pristine splendour is always a reason to celebrate with a fine bottle of Riesling (a pairing made in gourmet heaven).

This delectable culinary awakening is not only a feast for the senses, but it also delivers a much-needed health boost after the heavier fare that has comforted us through winter. As the days grow lighter, so does our appetite, which is why we start to crave the simple pleasures of things like steamed new potatoes

dressed with only a drizzle of melted butter, freshly-podded peas sprinkled with the brightness of lemon zest and mint, or succulent strawberries so perfect and sweet all on their own. Winter may be all about spicing things up with warm tastes and aromas, but spring heralds a return to pure, unadulterated flavours.

If you're looking for inspiration to get the most out of the season (whether using produce from the

market or your own edible garden), here are some ideas to create the perfect springtime meal.

Starters

Getting enough leafy greens is easy with the arrival of the season's first watercress. With their pepper flavour, the tender leaves are great in warm potato salads with a mustard and cider vinegar dressing but also wonderful in a zingy salsa verde or as an alternative to basil in pesto. Choose leaves that are dark green with crisp stems and use soon after purchase, or wrap in damp paper towels and store for up to two days. Speaking of pesto, did you

know that you can replace basil with radish greens or the fronds of young carrots too?

The season's first peas and broad beans are excellent in delicate soups seasoned with garden herbs and finished with a swirl of cream. You can also braise fresh peas in stock with caramelised shallots and shredded little gem lettuce. Known as *petits pois à la Française*, this elegant preparation is an easy side dish that truly highlights the

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sweetness of the peas. When buying peas and broad beans, make sure the pods are plump and firm to the touch. Opt for smaller ones, as the peas will generally be sweeter and more tender.

Mains

When in season, from late April until late June, asparagus is more than a side—it's nothing less than the star of many of my main dishes. I love using the green spears in risotto with lemon, tarragon and chervil or in a gratin with a velvety béchamel sauce and a crisp topping of buttery, spicy breadcrumbs. The white variety is lovely in quiches and other



savoury tarts but can also be thinly sliced and eaten raw in a salad with pink radishes, citrus fruit and roasted hazelnuts.

Asparagus is best when locally harvested and consumed within a day or so after being purchased. To determine freshness, make sure the tips are smooth and the stalks squeak when rubbed together.

Young carrots are another beloved springtime delight. I recently tried them in a galette. Simply roast the carrots with good olive oil, flaky sea salt and pepper. Layer on a round sheet of flaky pastry and fold the edges in towards the carrots. Bake at 200°C until golden and serve with a *pistou* (the French version of pesto) made with flat-leaf parsley and fragrant dill. Carrots should be firm and unblemished with lush, vibrant fronds. If using the fronds in pestos

or soups, it's advisable to choose organic carrots.

Desserts

Though it is often used in jams, compotes and popular British desserts such as a crumble with custard or a classic fruit fool, botanically, rhubarb is a vegetable. When it comes to spring desserts, rhubarb is the leader of the pack. Think outside the box and add it to a lavender-infused crême brûlée, or use it in a tiramisu crowned with a fine layer of ground pistachios mixed with a dash of matcha powder. And remember that strawberries, which make their appearance in early May, are a winning combination with rhubarb, especially in an old-fashioned, lattice crust pie. ■



April Showers

A popular English proverb is "March winds and April showers bring forth May flowers," dating back centuries

April is a spring month of transition, with the cold winter days waning and the jet stream (a band of strong winds) moving north—so pack your raincoat on walks!

The frequency of short, regular showers in April is the result of low pressure, cold seas and warming weather causing rain clouds

SOURCE: COUNTRYFILE.COM