

Wonders of asparagus

SYBIL KAPLAN

In Israel, asparagus is not widely seen in the outdoor markets but, when it is, I am always happy to buy it. There are at least 10 reasons why we should eat more asparagus.

1. It contains lots of fibre, making it a good choice if you're trying to lose weight, because your body digests fibre slowly, which keeps you feeling full in between meals. (It is also low in fat and calories: one cup is a mere 32 calories.)

2. It contains high levels of the amino acid asparagine, making it a natural diuretic. In other words, eating more of the spears can help flush excess fluid and salt from your body, which may help prevent urinary tract infections.

3. It is full of antioxidants that could help your body fight free radicals.

4. It contains vitamin E, another important antioxidant, which helps strengthen your immune system and protects cells from the harmful effects of free radicals.

5. It is a natural aphrodisiac, thanks to vitamin B6 and folate.

6. The minerals and amino acids in asparagus extract may help ease hangovers and protect liver cells from the toxins in alcohol.

7. It beats bloating by promoting overall digestive health – another benefit of all that fibre.

And, thanks to prebiotics, which encourage a healthy balance of good bacteria, or probiotics, in your digestive tract, it can also reduce gas. Relatedly, since asparagus is a diuretic, it helps flush excess liquid, combating belly bulge.

8. It's a rich source of folic acid, providing 22% of the recommended daily allowance of folic acid.

9. It's filled with vitamin K, crucial for coagulation, which helps your body stop bleeding after a cut, as well as bone health.

10. It boosts your mood because it is full of folate, a B vitamin that could lift your spirits and help ward off irritability. Asparagus also contains high levels of tryptophan, an amino acid that has been similarly linked to improved mood.

Need I say more? Buy asparagus with straight stalks, closed compact tips and good green colour. Keep refrigerated and use within one or two days. Bend the stalk near the bottom to snap off the part that is too tough to eat. Cook in one inch of boiling salt water. Let the water boil again and cover. Cook whole stalks about five minutes and cut-up pieces about three minutes. Here are some ways to use asparagus.

VINAIGRETTE

1/4 cup olive oil or canola oil
1 tbsp red wine vinegar
1 tbsp Dijon mustard
1/2 tsp sugar
salt and pepper to taste

Combine all ingredients in a blender and mix for one minute. Pour over cooked asparagus.

MICROWAVED IN LEMON BUTTER DIJON SAUCE (3-4 servings)

2 1/2 tbsp canola or olive oil
1 tbsp lemon juice
2 tsp Dijon mustard
1/2 tsp low-sodium soy sauce
1/2 tsp minced garlic
2 tsp minced white onion
salt and pepper to taste
1/2 pound asparagus
chives or green onions for garnish

Arrange asparagus in a microwave steaming bag. Add oil, lemon juice, mustard, soy sauce, garlic, onion, salt and pepper. Microwave four to five minutes; let stand one minute. Place in serving bowl and garnish with chives or green onion.



PINKO/CON

FLAMANDE SAUCE (6 servings)

4 mashed hard-boiled egg yolks
1/4 cup + 2 tbsp olive or canola oil
or 1/2 cup melted margarine or butter
1/4 cup minced fresh parsley

Whisk oil or butter or margarine into egg yolks in a saucepan. Add parsley and heat sauce. Pour over cooked asparagus.

STEAMED WITH TARRAGON SAUCE (6 servings)

1 1/2 pounds trimmed asparagus
2 tsp olive oil
6 thinly sliced scallions
1 1/2 tsp chopped fresh tarragon
or 3/4 tsp dry tarragon
3 tsp lemon juice or cider vinegar
dash sea salt
3 tsp water

Steam asparagus two to five minutes, rinse, drain and place in serving bowl. Heat oil in a pan and sauté scallions one to two minutes. Add tarragon, lemon juice or vinegar, salt and water; cook one to two minutes. Pour over asparagus. 🍴

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Accidental Balabusta



Chocolate babka debacle

SHELLEY CIVKIN

After I conquered challah and cholent, I felt it was time to tiptoe into the forbidden realm of babka. I say the word with a great deal of reverence, because, well, if you've ever eaten a spectacular babka, you know it's something awe-inspiring. There are limitless variations of babka: chocolate, Nutella, boozy, apricot and cinnamon, pumpkin, butterscotch and more. I even found a recipe for babka ice cream sandwiches and babka bread pudding. This is not diet food. Never was. Never will be.

Babka is comprised of a basic challah dough or a butter challah dough. Every recipe is different and, sometimes, to achieve the perfect babka (which I am far from accomplishing) you need to do a bit of mixing and matching of recipes.

My first attempt at making chocolate babka was an unmitigated disaster. Not only was my dough so velvety soft that I couldn't even roll it, but the filling was so thin that it smooched out all over the place. Part of the problem was math. I have always been math challenged. In fact, I have a pair of socks that say: "The three things I hate most are math." My brain shuts down when faced with mathematical conversions (yes, I know there are apps for that). Long story short, I mistakenly used a half-pound of butter instead of a half-cup of butter for my babka dough. Hence, the flaccid, unresponsive dough. Nobody likes flaccid dough. Most people don't even like the word flaccid. Except sex therapists. Anyway...

My other challenge was not realizing that you have to refrigerate the dough for a bit before rolling it out and filling it. There are tons of YouTube videos on how to make babka – I recommend viewing several of them before attempting this at home. Also, check out lots of Jewish cookbooks, too. I stress "Jewish" because we Jews know how to accentuate the caloric value of our food so that it tastes impossibly rich and irresistible. Jewish baking is famous for a reason. If a recipe calls for eight ounces of dark chocolate, what the hell, 12 ounces must be better. Half a cup of butter – why not half a pound? Don't bother pointing it out. I see the error of my ways.

If my first attempt at babka was less than a stellar success, it's not just because of the aforementioned infractions. My main excuse is my minuscule galley kitchen. I lay the blame squarely where it belongs: on the almost-nonexistent counter. Things are so squished in my kitchen that there's very little room for food. Or utensils. Take, for example, my long, articulated spatula. It's the perfect implement for smearing the chocolate onto the dough before rolling it up. I digress.

Back to the babka. I started smearing the chocolate and, part way through, I had to sneeze. So, I put the long spatula into the bowl with the melted chocolate sitting on my teeny, tiny counter. The sheer force of my sternutation – it was probably a 7.8 on the Richter scale – caused the chocolate-covered spatula to fly out of the bowl and splatter chocolate everywhere, and I mean everywhere. It ended up on the walls, the floor, me, the counter, the carpet and Harvey, who looked on in mute husbandly horror. It was like something out of a slasher movie. Except the splatter was 85% bittersweet cacao chocolate instead of blood. I could have been arrested for assault with a confectionery weapon. All that was missing was the yellow police tape.

As if that wasn't enough, the excitement of it all caused me to knock the recipe into the sink, which was filled with dirty bowls and brown water. At that point, I almost cried. But I didn't. Instead, I casually looked at my chocolate-covered hubby and said: "OK, no one died. I'm going to try again." I was determined not to let this babka get the better of me. I was going to show it who was the boss.

After wiping chocolate off my face, the walls and



ANIMATED LETTERS

Babka gone bad: The Accidental Balabusta's first attempt at this Jewish treat was less than a stellar success.

the counter (I may have licked the counter), I rolled up the flaccid babka, shoved it into the fridge and poured myself a teeny, tiny single malt Scotch. Just to shore up my nerves. Once I'd consumed the liquid fortification, I took out the babka, sliced it down the middle lengthwise, which is kind of difficult when it's not really a shape, and proceeded to twist it so that the layers of dough and chocolate showed on the outside. Then, I carefully laid it to rest in a parchment-lined coffin. I mean loaf pan. Said Kaddish.

Since I'd made enough dough for about 15 babkas (by mistake, of course... remember my math impairment?), I now had to figure out what to do with the rest of it. I was tempted to sell it on Craigslist, but how would I even describe it? "Blob of velvety soft dough for sale. Nearly house-trained. Enough to make several loaves of bread or a small border wall. If frozen. Pick-up only. \$10 obo." In all honesty, I would have paid someone to take it off my hands at that point.

Stuck with all that dough, I smeared and shaped the rest of it into circles, rectangles and free-form sculptures, jammed them into every available pan I had, and shoved them into the oven to bake. The entire procedure took about 11 hours. My bone graft and tooth implant took less time. I think I started the whole process at around 9 a.m. and didn't remove the final "babka" (I use that word loosely) until around 8 p.m. Of course, I'm also factoring in the time it took the restoration team to steam clean our entire apartment. Should have just moved.

By that time, there was no way I was making dinner. So, we ate three-quarters of one chocolate babka for dinner. Slathered in even more butter. I think I may have sent both of us into a slight sugar coma. Not sure. No paramedics were called, so it couldn't have been that traumatic.

I put the rest of the evidence into the freezer, for when I want to scare some unsuspecting dinner guests. I promise, here and now, that my next foray into babka-making will start with single malt Scotch.

If I'm lucky, it may end there, too. 🍴

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