



# SEASONS AT HIGHCLERE



GARDENING, GROWING, AND COOKING THROUGH THE YEAR  
AT THE REAL DOWNTON ABBEY

THE COUNTESS OF CARNARVON

RIZZOLI  
LONDON



# Asparagus

Emperor Caesar Augustus was a great connoisseur of asparagus and he actually organised elite military units to procure it for him. The famed 'Asparagus Fleets' brought back the best varieties to Rome. Furthermore, the fastest runners were hired to carry fresh spears high into the Alps, where it could be frozen for later use.

If you have neither fleets of ships nor speedy runners to hand, asparagus is surprisingly easy to grow, thriving on either well-drained soil or in raised beds. Asparagus plants are either male or female. Male plants produce more and better spears, so many modern cultivars are all-male. Any female plants can be distinguished as they produce orange-red berries. If you are growing an all-male cultivar, you will need to remove any female plants as well as any seedlings that appear.

Plant asparagus crowns in March, weed by hand (their roots are shallow), and use stakes and garden twine to make a 'fence' either side of the asparagus row for support, because during the summer the plants are tall and feathery. Allow the foliage of your asparagus plants to yellow in autumn before cutting down to soil level for the winter. Do not harvest for the first two years after planting. In the third year, harvest spears from mid-April for six weeks.



# Asparagus Tart

## INGREDIENTS

150g (5oz) plain flour, sifted,  
plus extra for dusting  
75g (3oz) butter, cubed,  
plus extra for greasing  
85g (3oz) Cheddar or another  
hard cheese, finely grated

### For the filling

5 eggs  
175ml (6fl oz) milk  
100g (3½ oz) Cheddar or similar  
hard cheese, grated  
300g (10oz) asparagus, trimmed  
and cut in half lengthways

**PREPARATION TIME** 30–40 mins **COOKING TIME** 30–35 mins **SERVES** 4

First make the pastry. Put the flour into a bowl, add the butter to the flour and rub in with your fingertips until it resembles breadcrumbs.

Add the grated Cheddar to the pastry and mix. Add 3 tablespoons of cold water and mix with a spoon or in a food processor until the pastry forms a ball. Wrap in cling film and chill for 5 minutes.

Butter a 20 × 6cm (8 × 2½ inch) deep loose-bottomed tart tin or a 35 × 12cm (14 × 4½ inch) rectangular tart tin.

Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F/Gas mark 4.

Lightly dust the work surface with flour, roll out the pastry and line the tin with it. Chill in the freezer for 20 minutes.

Line the pastry case with baking paper, fill with beans and cook for 15 minutes. Remove the beans and paper, then return the pastry case to the oven for 10 minutes.

Crack the eggs into a jug, whisk, then add the milk and whisk again. Sprinkle half the grated cheese over the pastry case, then arrange the asparagus and pour over the egg mix and remaining cheese (if using a rectangular tin, you may not need all the mixture, so add it gradually).

Bake in the lower half of the oven for 30–35 minutes or until the egg mixture is set.

# Asparagus with Parmesan

## INGREDIENTS

Asparagus spears  
Olive oil, for drizzling  
Parmesan shavings  
Sprig of thyme, to garnish (optional)  
Salt and freshly ground  
black pepper

**PREPARATION TIME** 10 mins **COOKING TIME** 10 mins

Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F/Gas mark 4.

Trim the ends of as many asparagus spears as you have (or want to eat – I can never have too much!). Lay them out on a foil-lined baking sheet.

Drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle over some crunchy sea salt and plenty of fresh pepper.

Roast the asparagus for about 10 minutes.

Grate or shave plenty of Parmesan over the top and serve immediately, maybe garnished with a sprig of thyme.