



the Educated Vegetable

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Say Hello to Asparagus

As one of the most delicate vegetables available, asparagus is only available locally grown for a few months during the spring each year. Asparagus is actually the tender young shoots of a Eurasian perennial, which grows into a fernlike plant that is around four feet tall with vermilion berries (see photo). Generally the shoots are harvested when they are anywhere from six to twelve inches tall. The white asparagus that is sometimes available is grown using the European technique of “blanching” the shoots as they grow. This is done by constantly mounding dirt up around the shoot which keeps sunlight off of the plant. The same technique is used to produce leeks with a very long tender white section.

Fresh asparagus should be sweet. When even a few days old asparagus will start to become very bitter, so it is extremely important to buy it freshly cut. Fresh cut asparagus will have a vivid green color and the butt end should not be discol-

ored or desiccated. If the shoot is harvested too late (after the plant starts to bolt) the head will have begun to spread out and elongate. At this point the asparagus will taste very grassy and bitter as well.

So now it should be clear why fresh organic asparagus is so expensive. A lot of effort and precision is required to get a high quality product to the market.

So why should one shell out the big bucks for fresh asparagus? As with most fresh produce, it is packed with a whole lot of nutrition, and when prepared properly has the flavor to back it up. Asparagus is a prized vegetable used all over the world for its medicinal value. Ayurveda calls asparagus a tri-doshic food, one that is balancing for all body types.

Asparagus is high in vitamin E, a very potent antioxidant that improves circulation and helps repair damaged tissues

It is also a good source of folate which is very important for pregnant women. Folate is essential for proper cellular division because it is necessary in DNA synthesis. Without folate, a fetus' nervous system cells do not divide properly.

Also, asparagus contains a special kind of carbohydrate called inulin that we don't digest, but the health-promoting friendly bacteria in our large intestine do. When our diet contains good amounts of inulin, the growth and activity of these friendly bacteria increase.

There are many ways to prepare asparagus. It is tasty grilled or parboiled and added to stir-fries or tossed with pasta. Also, when the shoots are very fresh, they can be quite tasty when eaten raw in salads. When working with thicker shoots, it is a good idea to shave the outer layer of skin off with a vegetable peeler, before cooking, otherwise they may be a bit woody. Enjoy!



This Food is Educated

The highly acclaimed private chef to the stars, Roberto Cortez, who is in town designing the menu for a new restaurant, recently took some photos for The Educated Vegetable. Just another example of how gourmet food can be health promoting.



Above: *Tempeh Piccata stacked with Swiss Chard and Wild Rice; Parsley, Pumpkin Seed and Parmesan Salad; Red Pepper Flakes*

Left: *Butternut Squash stuffed with Orange bathed Kale; Sauté of Fennel, Chanterelle and Green Apple; White Bean and Sage Fritter with Asiago*



Miso: A Health Promoting Powerhouse

For many people miso is simply the name of a Japanese soup. What many people don't know is that miso paste, the product that is added to stock to make miso soup, is actually a gourmet food with wide sweeping health benefits.

Miso is a combination of soybeans and fermented grain (usually rice or barley) that is inoculated with a yeast mold, known as koji, and salt that is allowed to ferment from a few weeks up to many years. There are many varieties of miso, each with their own specific flavor. In fact, in Japan people spend years mastering the art of creating this wonderful product. The savory paste is given the same sort of respect that Californians give to their wine.

There are numerous articles about the benefits of moderate soy consumption. The combination of complete protein, isoflavones, essential fatty acids, and lecithin found in soy definitely make it a health promoting food. What is wonderful about miso is that the addition of koji to ferment the soy beans not only makes them easier to digest, but the fermentation process actually enhances their nutritive and medicinal value. The combination of yeasts and molds that feed on the paste create many essential nutrients as a by-product of their digestive process.

Americans drink orange juice to ward off sickness, but in Japan they drink miso broth. Miso has been shown to be very beneficial to the immune system, and it does this in many ways. The natural fermentation process (known as lacto-fermentation) allows beneficial bacteria (lactobacillus) to grow in the paste. Like other naturally fermented products like yogurt and raw sauerkraut, when one eats miso the live bacteria in it colonize the digestive tract and ward off the pathogens that cause sickness. Also, miso is a very good source of zinc, copper and



manganese which are all necessary for proper immune response.

Over and above its basic immune boosting properties miso has been shown to be beneficial in many other areas as well. Researchers in Japan have shown that miso has the ability to flush radiation out of the body. Miso contains dipicolonic acid, a substance that chelates heavy metals, like radioactive strontium, and flushes them out of the system. The fermentation process also creates ethyl ester, a substance which seems to have anti-mutagen properties. Because of this it is able to protect the body from carcinogens like cigarette smoke and charred

meats. Neither of these substances are found in unfermented soy products like tofu or soymilk. Rather they are created from the chemical reactions that occur during the fermentation process.

Genistein is the flavonoid in soy foods that is responsible for much of their anti cancer properties. Genistein essentially blocks cancer cells ability to reproduce and nourish themselves, which eventually kills them. All soy foods, even highly processed ones like TVP (textured vegetable protein) seem to be a source of genistein, but the levels in miso are 25 times higher than any other soy foods.

Most westerners had never heard of miso until George



Ohsawa the father of macrobiotics, brought it out into the mainstream. Now one can find high quality miso at just about any health food grocery store. When purchasing miso make sure to buy the product that is sold in the refrigerated section. The dry products have been pasteurized and because of this have lost much of their flavor and health benefits.

Most stores carry a few different types of miso. White miso is made from rice and soy. Compared to other forms of miso there is considerably more rice used in the paste. Because rice

is mainly carbohydrate, the bacteria (which feed on carbohydrates) ferment the product very quickly. Thus white miso is usually aged for only a few weeks and tends to have a lighter sweeter flavor. This makes it very useful in salad dressings and simple broths. Red Miso is made from a combination of rice and soy that is fermented from 1 - 3 years. It has considerably less rice in it than white miso so the flavor is more savory than the white variety. Like the name implies red miso is a brownish red color and has a rich taste that is best suited for stews and marinades.

Barley Miso is made from a combination of barley and soy. It is fermented for 1 -3 three years. This variety is one of the richest of all the miso available commercially. It is very dark brown and has a significantly different taste than either red or white miso. One of my favorite recipes is barley miso split pea soup with shitake bacon bits. .

Basically, the lighter the miso's color the sweeter and mellow it is. Therapeutically light miso has more probiotic activity than darker varieties (bacteria feed on carbohydrates). Darker miso is generally more savory and will have higher levels of dipicolonic acid, ethyl ester and genistein. So it is more useful for combating radiation and for cancer treatment and prevention.

There are many ways to add miso into ones diet. From the addition of miso to soups and stews to creating dressings and sauces, it is a wonderful ingredient that can always be kept on hand in the refrigerator. Miso and tahini seem to always go well together.

Miso Tahini Dressing

1/4 cup tahini
2 tbsp white miso
1/4 cup lemon juice
2 tbsp fresh dill, minced
1 clove garlic, minced
2 tbsp olive oil
1/4 cup water

Blend all ingredients either by hand or with a blender until well combined.