

GALLERY



Four-meter-tall cloth asparagus spears in Bruchsal, home of Europe's largest asparagus market.

Photos by Moshe Gilad

Asparagus mania

Towns along Germany's Baden Asparagus Route go crazy for the white vegetable during its brief season

By Moshe Gilad

"Look, it's just perfect." Peter Geng has been cultivating asparagus for 25 years. He pre-sets me with a white asparagus stalk, picked a moment earlier from his field, his eyes sparkling with pride. The asparagus season is in full swing, and Geng is very busy. For more than two decades he has been one of the leading asparagus growers in the southwestern German city of Reilingen. My interest in his beloved plant flatters him, and he takes some time to acquaint me with it.

The asparagus season is brief, lasting from mid-April through June. Dur-

look completely bare to me, but the laborers know exactly where to dig. They clear away some soil, exposing a pale asparagus stalk, and snip it 20 centimeters from the top, before quickly covering up the hole. They move a few centimeters down, to hunt the next asparagus. This is a daily process during asparagus season: The harvesters comb the field by hand every day or two, looking for ripe asparagus.

"This is the best kind," explains Geng, examining the freshly picked stalk. "It's white, its base diameter is about three centimeters, and it is about 20 centimeters long."

This quality of asparagus sells for 7

garding the nutritious value of the asparagus. The other popular asparagus dishes – with bechamel sauce, in omelets, with meat, fish or other vegetables, in mayonnaise and much, much more – are not particularly dietetic, either. At any time of day and at every opportunity, asparagus is accompanied by large glasses of white wine, which according to area residents, "is a great help to ingestion."

From the town of Rastatt the Asparagus Route heads north toward Karlsruhe. This big city was once the seat of the royal family in the Baden area. It has palaces, museums, an impressive city hall, a good art center and other modern lures, but during asparagus season, one doesn't want to waste a single minute.

Festivals are for tourists

In small places, further north along the route, it is much easier to partake of the pale pleasure. A bit north of Karlsruhe, the Asparagus Route veers away from Highway 36 and heads toward Bruchsal.

This town has Europe's largest asparagus market, once a year. Growers of the region send their harvest there, and the town holds its annual asparagus festival every May. The festival, Geng says in a somewhat accusatory tone, "is intended only for tourists, because in May growers have no time for festivals." Around the city, at the edges of the fields, asparagus is sold at stands. The town has a large Baroque palace, famed for the beautiful staircase designed by architect and engineer Balthasar Neumann.

From Bruchsal, one heads back toward Highway 36, north to Reilingen. Here, in nearly every yard of this small city, people are sorting asparagus. There are large signs with the word "spargel" next to every house, and local election posters have a photograph of a few white asparagus spears, next to the caption, "A wise head for the local council."

Highway 36 leads to the northern end of the Asparagus Route, at Schwetzingen. The town square has a sculpture honoring the women who sort asparagus. Next to it are real stands, similar to the one in the sculpture. While these workers wear less traditional garb than their metal counterparts, they are engaged in exactly the same work.

On the other side of the road is one of Europe's most beautiful and well-tended parks. The local noble Karl Theodor established it in the mid-18th century as his summer estate. The huge area has a French garden, an English garden, an Italian-style garden and a pink mosque on the bank of a small lake. You could spend many hours here, especially when the flowers are blooming so vividly. During my visit, I saw two weddings and four couples taking photographs there.

At lunch at a small horse farm near Reilingen, Andrea Ballreich, a municipal employee who introduced me to Geng, implored me to eat more. The chef, standing beside us, looked like he would be insulted if we didn't taste all of the dishes at the table. Geng did not seem particularly perturbed when I apologized that I couldn't try even one more asparagus tip.

He looked at me in surprise, stuck his fork into the white vegetable and said: "In a little while the season will be over, and you'll be sorry you hadn't eaten one more, but then it will be too late."



An asparagus stand in Rastatt.

ing this period, an entire region, called the Baden Asparagus Route, revolves around this rather strange stalk. Everyone examines, measures, buys, chills and discusses the annual harvest, the quality, the prices and the recipes. Everyone recommends a different restaurant as serving the best, or most interesting, asparagus dishes.

On the way to the fields, Geng explains that asparagus has been considered a royal delicacy starting in Roman times. The aristocratic vegetable was considered quite nutritious. "They said it is good for the kidneys, but more than that, they said it was an aphrodisiac. This is natural and obvious, because it looks exactly, but exactly, like a large, erect sexual organ," says Geng.

It is impossible to avoid this comparison. We pass a booth with a massive, four-meter-tall bunch of pink cloth asparagus that leaves very little room for the sexual imagination. The two elderly women at the booth giggle and shrug their shoulders when I ask them about the impressive work.

The region's best-known story is about the asparagus-loving prince of Schwetzingen, at the northern end of the Asparagus Trail, who, as legend has it, had 18 illegitimate children, yet not a single one with his wife.

At Geng's field we are greeted by 10 Polish laborers harvesting asparagus. Each has a pail, a sharp knife and a broad spade. The long, sandy asparagus beds

euros per kilo at the roadside stands. There are plenty of buyers, because the season is short and, as Geng puts it, asparagus should be eaten very fresh or not at all.

Baden Baden to Schwetzingen

The Baden Asparagus Route was marked out as a tourist attraction in 1994. It is only 136 kilometers long. You can drive it, of course, but now, at the height of the season, it is pervaded with the joyous bustle of farmers like Geng and his discriminating clients. A narrow path for cyclists and pedestrians stretches the length of the route, parallel to the road.

The whole thing happens parallel to Autobahn 5. The main road on the Asparagus Route is Highway 36. The spa town of Baden Baden is a convenient starting point at the south of the route. Baden Baden is a well-preserved 19th-century vacation site, with prestigious baths, very elegant hotels where the carpets bear royal seals, and above all, the most beautiful casino in the world. From Baden Baden the route follows highway 500 northwest toward the Rhine River, which borders France. The city of Strasbourg is just a few kilometers away. It then continues along Route 36, parallel to the Rhine.

The most popular preparation for white asparagus involves simmering or steaming it for five minutes and serving it with melted butter. This is amazingly tasty, although it does pose certain questions re-

Digging for white gold

Farmers are hoping white asparagus will be as big a hit here as it is in Europe, where the royal vegetable reigns supreme

By Liz Steinberg

White gold, the royal vegetable: That's the reverence white asparagus draws in Europe. Locally, however, it has only a minimal presence on tables and in stores. Green asparagus, which is less labor intensive to grow and cook, dominates the local market instead.

But that's going to change. The Agriculture Ministry is planning to launch a program within a month to teach farmers how to grow Europe's white asparagus, and hopes to see the handful of dunams currently under cultivation expanded to dozens of dunams within the program's first stage.

"The time is ripe to introduce this product in Israel," says Zipi Gadish, whose family has been cultivating white asparagus for two years on their farm on Nir Oz, in the Arava.

They are one of Israel's three growers of the crop.

"Elderly central European ex-pats have known about it; now, with everyone's frequent trips to Europe, more and more Israelis are being exposed to this product and falling in love with it," she says.

White asparagus has a delicate flavor, and is considered sweeter and softer than the green variety. The European asparagus season, which lasts from mid-April through June, features asparagus festivals around the Continent, complete with asparagus-peeling contests and the crowning of asparagus queens, often the woman who presents the largest asparagus stalk.

In Germany, restaurants have a *spargelkarte* – asparagus menu – which offers the stalks with butter, Hollandaise sauce and potatoes, along with a wide variety of other dishes, down to the occasional asparagus ice cream. You can also find asparagus routes between towns famed for the crop.

All this asparagus is white, of course, like the large majority consumed in Europe.

Why all the fuss about a vegetable? Because it's considered a harbinger of the European spring: Asparagus is the young shoot that grows from an underground rhizome, which is similar to a bulb, making it one of the season's first vegetables.

The white and the green are essentially the same plant, except that the white version is entirely sheltered from light: Traditionally, dirt was packed around the shoots; nowadays black covers are sometimes used as well. This prevents the shoot from photosynthesizing and producing chlorophyll, the pigment that makes plants green.

Preparation methods are relatively versatile. The white variety has a tough, fibrous skin and needs to be peeled, and also requires a longer cooking time than the green.

White asparagus has been available sporadically in Israel over the past few years. It's currently in season, and while you're unlikely to find it in restaurants just yet, you may spot a few lone bunches in markets and stores. The Gadish family sells to several supermarkets and have a stand at the farmers' market on the Tel Aviv port every Friday. This week they will be there tomorrow, for a special farmer's market in advance of the Shavuot holiday.

Bunches sell for between NIS 20 and 30, similar to prices in Europe.

The Israeli preference for green asparagus could change as the white variety becomes more prominent, says Omar Zaidan, deputy manager of the Agriculture Ministry's training and professional service, which is launching the program to teach cultivation techniques in partnership with the Plants Production and Marketing Board and the Vegetable Growers Association.

"In a year we'll be able to say fully what potential white asparagus holds," says Zaidan.

He already sees evidence of changing tastes, which puts the onus on growers to ramp



Courtesy of the Gadish family
Uzi Gadish harvesting asparagus in Nir Oz this season. The family is tripling production next year.

up production. "Demand is growing, and farmers will need to better learn the growing methods," he says.

Within two years, the fruits of the program will hit the market, he adds.

The program can expect even greater success if farm-

ers find an export market in Europe, says Zaidan.

Given the Gadish family's experience, the chances of this appear to be good. The Gadish family is ready to ramp up production starting next year, increasing distribution around Israel – and becoming Israel's

only exporter, selling to Germany, an asparagus stronghold itself.

They began growing white asparagus two years ago at their farm on Nir Oz, in the Arava, thanks to a German client with whom they have been working for 20 years, Zipi Gadish says.

"He exposed us to this vegetable that German citizens so love," she says.

The Gadishes and their client came up with the idea of adding this crop to their exports with the aim of expanding the limited German *spargelzeit* – asparagus season.

This year they're growing 13 dunams of asparagus. Next year they'll be cultivating 43 dunams, including some fields in the Galilee; the different regional climates will enable them to harvest from December through June. While a young field yields only 300 to 400 kilograms per dunam, once the crop is established, each dunam can produce up to a ton, explains Uzi Gadish, Zipi's husband.



Liz Steinberg

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