

“What a delicious bonanza!... For anyone who wants to savor
America’s vast culinary diversity...” –Jane and Michael Stern

Allison Engel & Margaret Engel

FOOD FINDS

NEW & ENLARGED



America’s Best Local Foods and
the People Who Produce Them

MISTER SPEAR

Mister Spear Asparagus

Are you laboring under the misimpression that only thin asparagus stalks are tender? Thin stalks can be young asparagus, but they can also be the last gasps of a worn-out plant. Thick spears are usually associated with the tough cookies left too long in the ground. But they can also be premium-quality spears that are bred to be extremely tender. These plump specimens are stunning on a plate, and, being uniform, are easier to cook to a tender-crisp state.

Mister Spear, located in California's San Joaquin River delta area, has been shipping thick, fresh asparagus nationwide for the past twelve years. The spears, which are hand picked in the morning, washed, cooled, packed, and shipped out the same afternoon, arrive by overnight or second-day delivery in a heavy green cardboard case.

They are available only from early March until early June. White asparagus also is available, but its season is even shorter—from mid-May to early June. Although it had been more than fifteen years since white asparagus had been harvested commercially in this country, Mr. Spear began offering the treat in 1979 in response to customer requests. White asparagus involves more hand labor, because dirt must be hilled over the plant to keep it from the sun (preventing chlorophyll development, which would turn the stalks green). The result is a hefty price tag—\$47, delivered, for 6½ pounds—but fans of its slightly bitter flavor willingly pay it.

Chip Arnett, president of Mister Spear, cautions eaters who have enjoyed white asparagus in Europe to be sure they know how to prepare it. "It is more fibrous and needs to be thoroughly peeled, about one-eighth of an inch all the way around, or else it is like eating bark off a tree," he said.

The green spears, on the other hand, are simplicity itself to prepare. They make an indelible Mother's Day present, Easter showpiece, or first day of spring celebration. Seven and a half pounds, delivered, are \$40. This translates to between fifty and sixty perfect, fat spears—enough to serve twelve or more generously. We shared ours with two other households, and still had enough for two dinners and soup. The spears are so large that two or three per person are plenty. Three-pound boxes are available for \$22.50.

The spears stay fresh seven to ten days after delivery, and can be frozen. The recipe booklet that arrives with the spears makes it unlikely that you'll lack for asparagus ideas, however.

Mister Spear offers canned green colossal asparagus year-round (\$18.50, delivered, for four 15-ounce cans), and will take advance orders for the fresh asparagus. Those living or traveling near Stockton can call ahead and pick up fresh asparagus during the

season at the packing facility (939 West Charter Way), thus saving the overnight air-freight expense.

Arnett, who sees a growing demand for healthy food gifts, is considering expanding Mister Spear to offer different fresh vegetables year-round. "I see it as a vegetable of the month business," he said.

It's a great idea. Using his contacts with the area's top growers and his commitment to good packaging, we think he's uniquely suited to launch it.

ORDERING ADDRESS:

Mister Spear
P.O. Box 1528
Stockton, CA 95201
209/464-5365
Credit cards accepted

RECIPE

STIR-FRIED ASPARAGUS

SERVES 4-6

1 pound Mister Spear asparagus
¼ to ½ cup chicken stock
1 tablespoon soy sauce
½ teaspoon sugar
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
½ teaspoon salt
3 slices fresh ginger root, minced
1 tablespoon finely chopped celery
1 small can water chestnuts, drained
Sesame seeds, to taste

Cut spears diagonally into 1- to 1½-inch sections. Parboil the spears for a few minutes, omitting the delicate tips. Drain and set aside.

In a small bowl, combine the chicken stock, soy sauce, and sugar. Heat the oil in a wok or large skillet over high heat. Working quickly, add the salt, ginger root, and celery, and stir. Add the water chestnuts and asparagus, including the tips, and stir to coat evenly with oil. Add the stock-soy mixture and, stirring, heat quickly. Reduce heat to medium and simmer, covered, until the asparagus is crispy-tender.

Just before serving, sprinkle with sesame seeds.

Recipe courtesy of Mister Spear