

Beyond Basil . . . Asparagus Pesto

When pesto is mentioned one often conjures up a vision of the classic Genovese preparation, which blends basil, garlic, pine nuts, cheese, and olive oil. It can be used as a sauce on a bowl of pasta, as a dressing for a Caprese salad of tomatoes and mozzarella, or floated on top of a steaming bowl of a Mediterranean soup, such as pistou. Nothing signifies the Summer seasonal cooking as this classic sauce.

The term pesto, derived from the Italian word *pestare*, literally translates as “pounded,” and refers to any paste traditionally made with a mortar and pestle. There are as many variations of this uncooked sauce as there are countries in the Mediterranean region from which it hails. Tapenade, aioli, anchoiade, hummus, taramosalata, brandade, pistou, and mantecato are all variations of this preparation.

What I would like to share here is an approach to making a pesto without using one of the most familiar and popular ingredients—basil—at all.

Instead, this variation is made with asparagus and combined with other pantry staples often found on the ingredients list of the more familiar and popular basil variation enjoyed in the Italy’s Ligurian region, particularly in the capital city of Genova.

Meanwhile, in a post I published in 2014, *Pesto Perspectives*, I wrote: “A few other points to consider in how I handle pesto: A food processor is the tool of choice (sorry purists). No cheese is added to the mix but is instead grated fresh and sprinkled over the finished dish to taste. The nuts are all toasted before being ground into the mix and pine nuts are not the only variety. Fresh garlic is used at a minimum and supplemented with [roasted] garlic jam to soften the raw garlic assertiveness, and fresh parsley leaves are added for a little sweetness to the finish.

“ . . . an approach to making a pesto without using one of the most familiar and popular ingredients—basil—at all. ”

Garlic jam is a pantry staple comprised of oven-roasted and/or olive oil-poached garlic, which is processed into a smooth paste along with preserved lemon, parsley, olive oil, salt, pepper, and a pinch or two of crushed hot red pepper.

With regard to cheese—whatever you prefer is fine; however, I recommend trying one of the many aged pecorino varieties other than Pecorino Romano. Try ricotta salata, or even an aged chèvre dry enough for grating.”

Why asparagus, well, why not? Even though they are available in the grocery markets all year long, asparagus are at their peak of freshness and flavor between April and May. In warmer regions their season extends from late February through June. I recently read that approximately 80 percent or more of the asparagus we enjoy here in the US are imported from Mexico and Peru, so with that in mind, the asparagus you might be cooking with this Summer could be subject to tariffs . . . just saying!

With or without the tariffs I was bored looking at the imported asparagus displays in the local markets and broke my own rule of using all fresh ingredients from their place of origin and during their peak season. I finally bought a batch to use as the main ingredient in this pesto recipe. Here is how I put it together.

Asparagus Pesto

Ingredients

1 bunch fresh asparagus, woody ends trimmed and then cut into 2-inch sections

1 large clove of garlic, pureed using a rasp

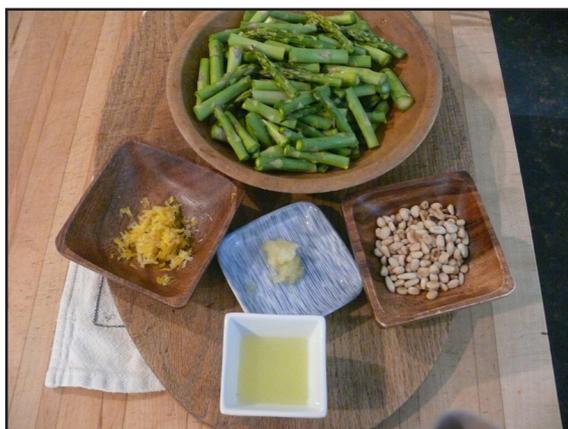
1/4 cup pine nuts, lightly toasted

Zest and juice of 1 small lemon

1/4 cup olive oil or as needed

Salt and pepper to taste

Freshly grated pecorino cheese to finish (if serving pasta)



Mise en place

Note: There is enough pesto for several meals. If you choose pasta, allow 1/4 pound per person.

Method

Prepare the ingredients list as noted above.

Bring a large stockpot of salted water to a boil. Add the asparagus and fully cook 10 to 12 minutes until tender. Drain and allow the asparagus to cool.

Place the pine nuts, lemon zest, and a few drops of olive oil into the work bowl of a food processor. Run the processor at high speed to combine those ingredients. After scraping down the sides of the food processor with a spatula, add the cooked asparagus, the lemon juice, and some salt and pepper to your taste. Run the processor at high speed again to puree all the ingredients together.



Asparagus pesto processed

Scrap down the sides of the work bowl again, check and correct the seasoning to your taste, and then while the food processor is running, drizzle olive oil down the feed tube until a light green, smooth-textured puree of the asparagus pesto comes together.

Make one final check of the seasoning, then turn out the pesto into a bowl or glass container to be used later to sauce your favorite pasta, dollop onto a crostini, some freshly sliced tomatoes, or dress a piece of pan sautéed or grilled seafood . . . but I'll leave you to figure that out.

We enjoyed our asparagus pesto atop a bowl of Trofie pasta (same as served in Genoa), sprinkled with freshly grated pecorino cheese and minced fresh herbs.



Trofie pasta



Plated

What are you waiting for? Why not step outside of tradition and try your own variation of pesto? You might be pleasantly surprised by what you come up with.

Enjoy.



Eat well • Drink well • Be well

A simple preparation of extremely fresh ingredients is the secret of truly elegant eating. Eat first, judge later!