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# kitchen work

The Vegetable Issue

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# The Primitive Spear



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"At the restaurant, where we handle large quantities at a time, asparagus is boiled loose in batches, in large shallow hotel pans full of rapidly boiling water, so we can closely oversee its cooking." – Alice Waters, *Chez Panisse Vegetables* (1996)

"This is the French method of vegetable cooking, of having a large pot of rapidly boiling water so that the asparagus is seized as it goes in. I could really even use a turkey boiler, it would be better." – Julia Child, *The French Chef,* Episode 124: "Asparagus From Tip To Butt" (1966)

"Today, the best manner of preparing asparagus is to steam them." – Alexandre Dumas, *The Great Dictionary of Cuisine* (1873)

It is towards the end of the season already, when, as he stands peeling the butt-ends of the spears in the kitchen he shares with his companion in Savigny-lès-Beaune, the Swedish chef Svante Forstorp confirms something I've come to suspect.

"Boiling or steaming asparagus is practically a crime," he says, wide-eyed with amazement that cooks could commit such transgressions. "You're taking this beautiful vegetable, removing all the good elements, and just throwing the water away."

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In France, asparagus season is a national good mood. From April until late June, the vegetable, in its various forms (green, white, purple, wild) is as ubiquitous on restaurant menus as it is in home kitchens. No other vegetable, to my knowledge, has inspired quite so many specific vessels and kitchen equipment as asparagus: there are lidded tall pots to steam them standing up, shallow pans to boil them lying down, gleaming antique slipware dishes embossed with lolling green spears, and custom service platters designed to facilitate drying.

It took me years to realize that they are all foolish and unnecessary baubles. Asparagus rewards primitivization. It takes to water like Ophelia.

"And the stupidest, most wasteful thing," adds Forstorp's companion and co-chef, Laila Aouba, "is the blanching, with all the ice cubes." Forstorp is tall, straight-backed and balding, while Aouba is sparrow-like, Moroccan, with an unruly shock of black hair. They shake their heads at the folly of blanching.

Home chefs like myself, when we're feeling ambitious, typically imitate what we've seen in professional kitchens. There is an instinct to do more, to use all the ice cubes in the freezer, to employ a variety of tweezers and tongs. We seek wisdom in culinary literature and become superstitious about cook times. (Alexandre Dumas, in his Great Dictionary of Cuisine, cites a Roman idiom for getting something done quickly: do it in "less time than it takes to cook asparagus!")

As it happens, I have several friends who are professional chefs, but I find myself vaguely bashful when it comes to asking them direct questions about cooking methods. When I want to learn, I try to observe them at work.

An Australian chef, a mutual friend of mine and Svante's, once invited me for lunch at his farm on the outskirts of Paris, and spent what seemed like a very long time slow-poaching white asparagus in a tide of raw milk butter. I tried it at home once or twice, but found that the method wasted an obscene amount of butter. Furthermore, some months later, in what I assume was a coincidence, my girlfriend gave up lactose, walling off that avenue of asparagal experimentation.

This season, motivated by instinct after almost two decades of unsatisfactory boiling and steaming at home, I finally just threw the spears in a dry pan with a bit of salt and pepper. I twiddled them with my fingers until they were evenly singed. The results were extraordinary.

"You're concentrating the flavor," Forstorp confirms. "Drawing out the oils of the asparagus." I, in turn, venture that cooking vegetables, on some level, is about the adjustment of water content until that adjustment yields, in a given vegetable, an impactful flavor balance and an agreeable texture. One can go too far down this route. Overly dehydrated eggplant is like packing material. Drought-starved arugula, growing wild and tiny as lace trim amid the cracks in the schist of Faugères, tastes like wasabi.

Forstorp introduces me, that afternoon, to the practice of adding fresh herbs to the dry pan. They coat its surface with aromatic oils, which are in turn absorbed into the asparagus flesh. (He uses thyme and bay leaf; I later confirm that sage works, too.) The herbs soon burn, and their smoke also impregnates the asparagus spears.

Among Aouba's contributions to the dish is the addition of a braid of wild asparagus, foraged by a friend's father across the village. This particular variety is known as Rapunzel asparagus, for the long hairs protruding from their tips. Thin-stemmed, with a faintly okra-like tackiness, they must be added to the pan at the last minute to preserve their crunch. (Home cooks of Mediterranean France, where such asparagus is plentiful, usually fling them into omelets and scrambled eggs.)

Aouba drops in a dab of butter and deglazes with a drizzle of sake. Her slender arms whip the wide pan with surprising muscle, sending cascades of asparagus shoots skittering along its diameter. The entire cook time is perhaps five or six minutes. The results—savory, snappy, intense—far surpass anything I've achieved at home, and certainly any asparagus that has ever been steamed or drowned.

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Forstorp and Aouba didn't invent anything, of course. Asparagus has been a grilling staple for as long as it has existed. But it remains unclear how steaming and boiling–with such plainly inferior results, in terms of taste and texture–became the canonical methods for indoor cooks, in homes as in most restaurants.

A number of theories arise, none mutually exclusive.

Cooking aromas are perhaps the most likely reason for chefs to have gravitated towards steaming and boiling. Both methods emit far less vapor than roasting asparagus in a pan, to say nothing of burning fresh herbs. Given the already fragrant nature of asparagus (which famously retains its pungency in our systems even after a meal), it seems reasonable to assume that a significant number of home cooks have historically objected to excessively strong scents. Steaming and boiling are more discreet methods, particularly within the confines of, say, Parisian apartments.

It must furthermore be admitted that pan roasting is a method more suitable for green, purple, and wild asparagus than for the comparatively thick, and thick-skinned, white asparagus that came to be preferred in many European households throughout the 19th century. There appears to have been, in Europe at this time, a kind of genetic arms race among vegetable farmers to produce ever more engorged, luxuriant asparagus, with variety names like "Grosse Blanche Améliorée" (Improved Fat White). It seems possible the runaway European popularity of white asparagus came to dictate the default cooking methods for all asparagus.

White asparagus is, of course, a contrivance in itself, produced by progressively banking the earth around young shoots to prevent photosynthesis. On some level it is a symbol for the progressive "civilization" of asparagus at large, the opposite of a wild Rapunzel: it is grown out of sight, shorn of its skin, cooked without producing undue aromas, and when it appears on the table, it blends in with the plate.

Another potential reason for the eclipse of pan roasting occurs to me as the season winds down; and my girlfriend, otherwise mildly kitchen-averse, takes an interest in the asparagus cooking method I have been crowing about for weeks, and practicing on a sometimes twice-daily basis.

"How do you know when they're done?" she asks from over my shoulder. You cook with your hands, I say, maneuvering the spears in the pan. You feel from the flesh.

This, of course, is the most basic principle of cooking for professional chefs, who are constantly prodding, poking, grazing, and otherwise verifying, in a profoundly tactile way, the progress of whatever it is they are preparing. (It is surely the origin of the famous German word *fingerspitzengefühl*, a "fingertips feeling," often used to describe situational awareness.) Not coincidentally, touching food is also what tends to separate professional chefs from home cooks, many of whom are finicky about getting their hands dirty, particularly in front of guests. As a society, we have lost that fingertips feeling, when it comes to cooking, and not just asparagus.

You cook with your hands, I repeat, engrossed in the contents of the pan.

No tall pots, no lids, no water, no steam, no tongs, no tweezers.

Just a dry pan, a pinch of salt, and your hands.