



VERSATILE VEGETABLES. Spring Vegetable Pilau with Fennel and Asparagus is seen in Concord, New Hampshire. The combination of rice packed with spiced fennel, onions, and garlic cooked slowly until soft and finished with still-crisp asparagus and peas makes for a perfect spring dish. (AP Photo/J.M. Hirsch)

This spring, embrace vegetables, but don't overpower them

By Meera Sodha
The Associated Press

Spring is nature's fashion week. After winter's endless parade of root vegetables, it feels as though nature has pressed the big green button, refreshing the new season's offerings. Being showcased right now is a new look for your fridge, in a variety of greens.

At my local Sunday market in London, on display are big leafy bunches of spinach, pointed sweetheart cabbages, fennel with thrusting green tops, and spring's favorite darling, the slender asparagus.

Even in the village where I grew up, the fields have gone from empty to busy overnight. Workers lob about with big wooden crates of cut leeks, lettuces, and a renewed sense of purpose. It is catching: All I want to cook and eat is green, something fresh, light, and colorful.

A favorite green supper of mine is a beautiful spring pilau. Buttery rice packed

with spiced fennel, onions, and garlic cooked slowly until soft and finished with a last-minute addition of still-crisp asparagus and fava beans or peas. A handful of fresh mint and a squeeze of lemon juice is stirred in just before serving to lift and unify all the flavors.

It's a gentle dish. The key to spring cooking is never to overpower the flavor of the new vegetables. They've spent a long time getting to the point where they're ready. So don't hijack them with bigger, bolder flavors or spices. A little cumin, green chili, and garam masala are all they need to help them sing.

This dish can be eaten by itself, though adding a little yoghurt and mango pickle won't hurt. But for something a bit more special, some spring lamb cutlets, flash fried with salt, cumin, and chili, would make wonderful sidekicks.

Editor's note: Meera Sodha, an Indian food expert and author of Made in India: Recipes from an Indian Family Kitchen, lives in London.

Spring Vegetable Pilau with Fennel and Asparagus

Start to finish: 35 minutes

Servings: 6

- 1 1/2 cups basmati rice
- 3 cups vegetable stock
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 medium red onions, thinly sliced
- 4 cloves garlic, crushed
- 2 green finger chilies, very thinly sliced
- 2 medium bulbs fennel, trimmed and thinly sliced
- 2 bunches asparagus, trimmed and cut into one-inch pieces
- 9 ounces fresh or frozen peas or fresh fava beans (outer skins removed)
- 1 1/2 teaspoons ground cumin
- 1 1/2 teaspoons garam masala
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/4 to 1/2 cup chopped fresh herbs, such as mint, dill, or cilantro
- 1 lemon, cut into wedges

Use whichever spring vegetables you have available. Green beans and spring cabbage or leeks make for a wonderful pilau, too.

Set the rice in a mesh strainer and run under cool water until the water runs clear. Transfer to a bowl, then add enough cool water to cover. Set aside for 20 minutes.

In a large saucepan, bring the stock to a boil. Drain the rice, then add to the stock. Return to a simmer, then cook until tender, 10 to 12 minutes. Use a mesh strainer to strain the rice, then set aside, covered with a kitchen towel.

In a larger skillet over medium-high heat, melt the butter. Add the onions and cook for six to eight minutes, or until translucent and softened, but not browned. Add the garlic and chilies, then cook for another two minutes. Add the fennel, stir to mix, then add a couple tablespoons of water and cover. Cook for eight minutes, or until soft. Add the asparagus, peas or fava beans, cumin, garam masala, and salt. Stir and cover, then cook for another five minutes. Remove the skillet from the heat.

Stir the herbs and rice into the vegetable mixture; you might need to delicately break up the clumps of rice using your hands. Transfer to a serving dish and serve with wedges of lemon on the side.

Nutrition information per serving: 330 calories (40 calories from fat, 12 percent of total calories); 4.5 g fat (2.5 g saturated, 0 g trans fats); 10 mg cholesterol; 640 mg sodium; 62 g carbohydrate; 9 g fiber; 11 g sugar; 11 g protein.

Prince Harry visiting Nepal, touring quake-hit areas

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Patan — which Queen Elizabeth visited about 30 years ago — hope Harry's visit will generate greater awareness about rebuilding needs and bring in funds to repair damage to many historic structures.

The Buddhist shrine that dates back 1,400 years was mostly spared by the earthquake, but the adjoining monastery, prayer house, and assembly halls were damaged. Only plastic sheets keep the rain off and the damaged areas are closed to the public due to danger of collapse. Harry will also negotiate a narrow alley alongside brick and mud houses that are supported by wooden beams.

Puspa Raj Bajracharya, who is on the committee that takes care of the Golden Temple, said they have sent requests and proposals to the government, saying it was getting dangerous for the devotees who come to the temple, but have not received any response. Repairs are estimated to cost about 25 million rupees (\$227,000), but so far only a fraction of that has been collected from private donors.

"His grandmother had visited the temple in the 1980s when she came to Nepal with her husband and now the young prince is coming," Bajracharya said. "We hope when the prince comes to our temple we will get the attention of the world to come help us."

Prince Harry is also travelling to Bhaktapur, a historic town east of Kathmandu that suffered even more damage, and visiting a nearby temporary camp for about 250 people made homeless by the disaster, a quarter of whom are children.

In Pokhara, a lakeside town that is a base for trekkers in central Nepal, Harry will meet several retired Gurkha soldiers and their families.

The Gurkhas have served in the British army for 200 years and have a reputation for being brave, tenacious fighters.



HOPING FOR HELP. Britain's Prince Harry attends the Commonwealth Day service at Westminster Abbey in London. Ordinary people hope the prince's visit to Nepal and tour of earthquake-hit areas draws attention to the country's struggle to recover from last year's disaster. Rebuilding is slow and tens of thousands remain homeless. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

Thousands of young Nepali men attempt to pass the gruelling test to become a Gurkha, but only a few get through.

Harry will honor those killed in battle and spend a night with a local family.

For years, the Gurkhas fought for equal pay and pension to their British counterparts until a landmark 2008 court ruling that ended most discriminatory practices. Gurkha soldiers now receive equal salary and pension, and their families are allowed to settle in Britain. However, those who retired before 2008 still get roughly one-third of the pension.

The Gurkhas are proud of their heritage and identity, and Harry's visit is a "big event for us Gurkhas," said Krishna Kumar Ale, who served in the British army between 1969 and 1998, when he retired as a major. He recalled seeing the young Harry during a visit to a military exercise in Britain, and said Harry once had a Gurkha orderly.

"He is a good friend of the Gurkhas," he said, "and has always been close with the Gurkhas."

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