

Asparagus

It is quite possible most of you do not remember Euell Gibbons, a local wild food devotee who lived outside of New Berlin. To everyone's surprise he became something of a celebrity after he published a series of books on the joys of foraging for his dinner- a foodie idea recently come back into vogue- and went on then to be spokesman for Post Grape Nuts (no foraging required), and capping off a mild career as an amusing and eccentric health nut by dying (literally) on the Johnny Carson Show. All this by way of saying that the title of his most popular book, *In Search of the Wild Asparagus*, does nothing more than echo what people had done from Roman times on, if not far earlier.

The wild asparagus grows in marshy ground in a wide swath from Poland and Russia and across the Levant, and presumably was an early food source. We do not know if the ancient Greeks used it, but Pliny describes it, preferring the wild variety to the cultivated forms. Simeon Seth, the Byzantine physician held it in great esteem, saying that “its substance merits a place intermediate between animal and vegetable foods” high praise indeed for a vegetable. We often tend to forget that early writing about nutrition valued meat far above vegetables. Seth says that asparagus is a diuretic, removing obstructions from the liver and kidneys, proof of which he says, is the change in the odor of one's urine, one of the distinctive traits of asparagus consumption. He goes on to say that it is good for settling intestinal colic and nephritis, which kidney problems those of a phlegmatic (cold and damp) constitution are prone to. Are also good to promote procreation, menstrual flow, they check cardiac palpitations and are good for your teeth.

It is somewhat unusual that Seth says they are good eaten with garum, a fish sauce, and indeed Apicius gives a recipe with asparagus which would also bury its distinctive and rather delicate flavor. It is possible though that the wild varieties can stand up to such treatment, however.

The Arabs learned to cultivate asparagus, and brought it to Spain early in their conquest of Iberia. That they did so ensured the science of cultivating asparagus, since the collapse of the Roman Empire more or less doomed the practice in Europe. The problem is that growing asparagus requires waiting for two years for the bed to become productive- not a desirable trait in a world where famine occurs with distressing regularity. And even then, the beds, as well as the plants require a lot of work.

Sometime after the 1300s, asparagus beds began appearing around Paris, but one finds no mention of them in the *Menagier* nor in *Vivander*- so one guesses the popularity of this once important food was slow to take hold.

Platina, however, does make mention of it, and he too prefers the wild strains, saying that it is good for eyesight, that it combats flatulence, and is good for chest pain, back pain, and various intestinal complaints. He seems also to believe it to be an aphrodisiac. The asparagus is to be boiled and served with salt and vinegar, but it is “more effective” to cook it in wine. He seems skeptical to the claim that the juice of the vegetable, when mixed with wine will act as an antidote to poisoning.

Not everyone was won over by asparagus however, some Renaissance dieticians viewed the odoriferous urine it provokes as symptomatic of a food that had no digestive value whatsoever, and simply putrefied within the body. It is helpful to recall however, that later period dieticians did not tend to view the supposed aphrodisiac qualities of food in the same sanguine light that previously applied. Thus Platina, not at all prudish, says simply that eating too much of it may be bad for the bladder, whereas others are suspicious if not downright contemptuous of yet another food novelty, the use of which could be construed as dangerous- physically, if not morally.

Nor did this dour outlook win the day: at the end of period, asparagus is trumpeted as “the prince of delicacies”, and an English dietician sniffs that “in old time it was meat for Emperors such as *Julius Caesar*: now every boord is served with them” Every table or no, they would still remain expensive, as indeed they remain so- whether cultivated, or in their wild state, and the gourmands of the Renaissance would have had people combing the hillsides to find them. As a substitute, sometimes the shoots of wild and cultivated hops have been used.

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