

Asparagus & Goat Cheese Risotto

Serves 4 as an entrée



I love asparagus - one of the first signs of spring - because (as well as being delicious) it's so easy to prepare. And I love combining it with two of my other favourite foods, rice and goats cheese, in this simple risotto. I learnt a thing or two about making risotto while working on A Lombardian Cookbook with Alessandro Pavoni. And one of the most surprising lessons was that you don't have to stir it constantly. Another handy tip, picked up from chef Mark Best, is that risotto can taste as good made with water as with stock - just remember it'll need more salt. I think water is preferable to commercial stock, but feel free to use homemade stock for a deeper flavour if you have some handy. Risotto comes from northern Italy, but there are regional variations and my preference is for the Venetian style, which is made with vialone nano rice and is soupier than the thicker Milanese version made with carnaroli. Final tip, all the Italian chefs I know use either carnaroli or vialone nano rice, rather than the more commonly available arborio.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 bunch (about 200g) green asparagus
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- ½ cup finely chopped golden shallots
- Salt flakes and freshly ground white pepper, to taste
- 1.5 litres water
- 300g vialone nano rice
- ½ cup dry white wine
- 50g salted butter, chopped
- ¼ cup freshly grated parmesan
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped chives
- 100g fresh goat cheese (see below)

I used Meredith Dairy fresh goat curd in this recipe because I love its fresh acidic tang.

Two of my favourite wine and food matches are sauvignon blanc with asparagus or goats cheese, and my favourite Aussie region for sauv blanc is the cool Adelaide Hills ... so I particularly enjoyed a glass of O'Leary Walker The Lucky Punter sauvignon blanc with this risotto.

METHOD

1. Trim hard ends off the asparagus and, if they are thick, peel the stalks. Finely slice the stalks and halve the tips. Set them aside separately.
2. Heat oil in a large high-sided frying pan over low-medium heat, add shallot and a good pinch of salt, cover and cook for a few minutes, stirring occasionally, until soft but not coloured.
3. Meanwhile, bring water to the boil in a small saucepan, cover and keep hot over the lowest possible heat.
4. Add the rice to the shallots, increase heat to high and stir for a couple of minutes, until the grains are hot and well coated in oil.
5. Add wine and cook for a minute or so without stirring, just shaking the pan to combine, until most of the liquid has been absorbed.
6. Reduce heat to medium, add enough stock to just cover the rice and cook for 8 minutes, without stirring, adding more stock as it starts to be absorbed and shaking the pan to combine.
7. After 8 minutes, add chopped asparagus stalks, increase heat to medium-high and start gently stirring, adding more stock a ladleful at a time as each lot is absorbed. Stirring constantly, cook for a further 8-10 minutes, until rice is tender but still has some bite.
8. Add another ladle of stock, remove from heat, add butter, parmesan, salt and pepper and beat vigorously with a wooden spoon until all the butter and cheese is incorporated, adding a little more stock if necessary to keep it moist and soupy.
9. Add asparagus tips and stir gently and shake the pan for another minute. Cover and set aside for 1 minute.
10. Stir through chives, taste and add more salt if needed.
11. Spoon onto warmed flat plates, tapping them on a tea towel-covered bench to spread the risotto out. Top with solid pieces of goat cheese and serve.