



Asparagus Tart with Lemon

Start to finish: 1 hour

Hands on time: 25 minutes

I love to have an easy to make appetizer in my repertoire that looks much more impressive than it has any right to be. This is that appetizer. Crispy, buttery puff pastry all dolled up with lemony cheese and fresh asparagus comes together (almost) effortlessly and satisfies deliciously. Rich with eggs, goat cheese, Parmesan and Boursin cheese (see tip), this tart makes a great appetizer, lunch or light supper dish. Did I mention that it looks like a million bucks?

Asparagus spears can be either thin or thick and it does make a difference in how you'll want to prepare them. Thicker spears should be peeled with a vegetable peeler to remove the tough skin and to allow them to cook to tenderness, but the thinner spears can be left as is, no peeling necessary. Of course it may take a few minutes longer to roast the thicker specimens so check by inserting the tip of a sharp knife into the thickest part of the vegetable. It should just slide in easily with no resistance.

Sturdy or thin has no bearing on how delicious and tender these trumpets of spring will be. For this dish, I like to trim away the tough ends of the asparagus so that the stalk fits perfectly into the shell. The fresh green looks so pretty on the white cheesy filling, dotted with sun-kissed dried tomatoes; kind of like a still-life painting from the early 1900's only you get to eat it.

It's that easy: Boursin is a triple cream cheese flavored with herbs and pepper. It's a time saver in that it carries the herbal notes through this tart without the chore of actually cutting and adding herbs to the recipe.

Makes 2 tarts serving 8 as a luncheon dish or 32 pieces as an appetizer

1 bunch asparagus, bottom 3-inches trimmed, peeled if thick

1 tablespoon olive oil

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

One 17.3 oz package frozen puff pastry (2 sheets), thawed

2 large egg yolks, beaten

5 oz Boursin or other herbed soft cheese, softened

4 oz goat cheese, softened

1/4 cup grated Parmesan

Zest of one lemon

2 teaspoons lemon juice

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

1/2 cup sun-dried tomatoes packed in oil, drained and cut into julienne strips

Preheat oven to 425°F.

Pile the asparagus on a sheet pan and drizzle with the olive oil, salt and pepper. Roll them around so that they're coated with oil and roast in the preheated oven for about 10 minutes or until they're just starting to cook.

On a lightly floured work space, roll out 1 sheet of pastry into a 14-inch by 11-inch rectangle. Transfer the pastry to a parchment lined sheet pan and cut 1-inch strips from each side. Brush the edges of the rectangle with water and lay down the cut strips on top of the edges, creating a border. Poke holes in the bottom of the pastry with a fork. Repeat with the remaining pastry and bake the still chilled pastry in the preheated oven until puffy and brown, about 10 minutes. (Keep the pastry cold in the fridge if not baking it right away.)

Remove from the oven and poke again with a fork. Push the pastry down as it will be puffy and raised and return to the oven to cook for another 5 minutes. Cool on the pan on a wire rack. Reduce the heat to 350°F.

Combine the eggs, Boursin, goat cheese, Parmesan, zest, lemon juice and a few grinds of pepper. Mix with a fork until well combined. Spread the mixture over the cooled pastries. Top with the partially cooked asparagus and sun-dried tomatoes and return the tarts to the oven. Bake until the cheese is set and asparagus is tender, about 15 minutes. Cool the tart on a wire rack. Cut into squares and serve warm or at room temperature.

In the glass: I enjoy Sauvignon Blanc with asparagus and cheese. Look for a nice bottle from Frog's Leap and serve it extra chilled.

Make-ahead: The tart shells can be assembled prior to baking and frozen unfilled for up to 4 weeks. Thaw at room temperature for 30 minutes then bake, fill and bake again as directed. The filling can be mixed and kept covered in the refrigerator for up to 2 days.