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TOP CHEFS' ASPARAGUS TIPS



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Across Niagara-on-the-Lake, chefs are firing up their creative juices and making culinary delights from the first asparagus crops of the season. RICHARD HARLEY PHOTO

Vaccines contributing to sharp decline in COVID cases, says Niagara's top doctor

Richard Harley
The Lake Report

Cases of COVID-19 are dropping more sharply than expected across Ontario, says Niagara's chief medical officer of health.

Dr. Mustafa Hirji said it's a "good news" story, with a steady drop in the reproduction number (the average number of people one person will infect) — despite large numbers of people ignoring lockdown rules.

On Tuesday, Hirji said hospitalizations and ICU numbers are also coming down — a positive indicator that things are on the right track to reopen, though there is still "a ways" to go.

He attributes the decline in cases to rising vaccination rates, particularly in COVID hot spots. As of Wednesday, the region had 882 active cases (down from 1,247 a week ago) and Niagara-on-the-Lake had 19 (down from 39).

"With a lot more vaccines over the last few weeks having been directed towards the hotspots where most of the infection is spreading, I think it's actually made a noticeable difference in the spread of infection."

In Niagara, about 60 per cent of adults have been vaccinated, with about 70 per cent scheduled to receive a vaccine.

Niagara's cases are not coming down as quickly as the provincial average,

however the numbers are falling. Hirji said he is optimistic cases will be down by mid-June, the date he has suggested would be the right time to end the stay-at-home order — if things continue on the current path.

Niagara hospitals continue to take patients from regions that are over capacity.

He said he thinks the province and region should have no trouble meeting Ontario's

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Splash pad and parks open up to much relief

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The Gate House's steamed Thwaites Farms asparagus salad with local Pingue prosciutto, poached egg, shaved parmesan cheese, Kozlik's crunchy mustard, aged balsamic vinegar.

COOKING WITH ASPARAGUS

Photos by Richard Harley | Words by Jill Troyer

Asparagus is in season and it's not just Niagara-on-the-Lake residents heralding its arrival with joy.

With locations like Thwaites Farms on Lakeshore Road offering freshly harvested, farm-to-table asparagus direct to consumers, some of your favourite restaurants are cooking up special takeout dishes in honour of the green stalks.

The Lake Report spoke with a few local chefs about asparagus and they were resoundingly enthusiastic. Even with dining options limited to takeout for now, you'll find lots of asparagus items on local menus this month.

Here is what some of NOTL's top chefs are doing with this popular spring vegetable, both at home and in their restaurants:



David Watt
The Garrison House

"It's a sign of things to come, you get tired of braising things all winter! There was a lineup at Thwaites today, I was getting two cases. You don't have to do much to it. I like to just blanch it, in water as salty as seawater, then put it in an ice bath if you're not serving it right away. Add butter, salt and pepper, and eat it. It's great combined with other ingredients foraged in early spring, like morel mushrooms, fiddleheads and ramps. We'll be all things asparagus at the restaurant, you'll see it in our new daily takeout menus, for sure. I love it grilled, with a crisp Niagara Chardonnay, or even a dry Rosé."



Poached Thwaites Farms asparagus with vodka smoked salmon, sauce gribiche, everything bagel crunch, cured egg yolk.



Jason Williams
The Gate House

"Asparagus is the first real thing available in the spring, so I like to incorporate it into as many dishes as possible. It's so good in a salad with prosciutto, grilled with butter sauce or hollandaise, or just blanched and buttered. Another favourite is chilled local asparagus with fior di latte mozzarella, brown butter crumbs and sherried vinaigrette. The way my mom used to do it at home was in an aluminum pan with butter on the edge of the barbecue, so it cooked right in the butter. We always get our asparagus from Thwaites Farm. It's unbelievable how much great asparagus they grow. Asparagus and wine can be a tricky match, but I'd say something greener, like a Sauvignon Blanc or Riesling."



Pan roasted sea scallops with Thwaites Farms asparagus, breakfast radish, chive blossom and spring leek veloute.



John Vetere
Ravine Vineyard Estate Winery

"Asparagus is a celebration of spring, a signal the season has changed, and it's only around a short time, so it's special. We have an asparagus patch here at Ravine, it pops up every year. You can use it in so many dishes. I love to keep it simple, grilled with a soft-boiled egg, or an egg-based custard, with a little truffle oil, and let the asparagus flavour shine through. We will definitely be incorporating it into dishes on our takeout menu."



Charred Ontario asparagus, golden heart potato dressed with a fresh dill and mustard vinaigrette, soft cooked egg, sliced radish and sheep milk feta.



Ryan Crawford
Ruffino's Pasta Bar & Grill

"Asparagus represents spring, it's the first real spring vegetable. It's so sweet, it just tastes so good! We grow asparagus on our farm, we have purple asparagus as well as green asparagus. At the restaurant, we grill it on our wood fire, with a little olive oil. I like to keep it as simple and natural as possible, and let the ingredient speak for itself. We're adding it to our menu as a vegetable side, and an asparagus carbonara. Also white asparagus risotto when that's in season. It's going to be on our dinner table at home tonight, just grilled. People say Sauvignon Blanc is the best wine to pair with asparagus, and it's good, but really most Niagara whites are beautiful with asparagus, with their crisp acidity."



Asparagus risotto with foraged morel mushrooms.



Chris Moses
OLIV

"I love asparagus. Of course, at this time of year we purchase it locally, in fact I'm on my way out now to pick some up. We use it in our Lobster & Asparagus Fettuccine, which is our top seller pasta dish. I also like to cook it just in the oven, with a little olive oil, salt and pepper. The trick is not to overcook it. Never boil asparagus."



Grilled lobster asparagus with fig balsamic and Italian herb olive oil.



Joe Marchese
Twisted Vine

"The first thing is asparagus soup, but there are so many ways to enjoy asparagus. We make asparagus frittata, roasted asparagus pizza. It's great in vegetable lasagna and we'll serve it as the side vegetable to our mains. My mother was a chef and she liked it in an omelette with leeks, some red peppers for colour. At home, I just grill it with a little olive oil, salt and pepper. You want to get the full taste of the asparagus. As for wine, I suggest something white, light and citrusy. A Niagara off dry Riesling would be a good choice."



Spring asparagus prima vera with garlic olive oil sauce.

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