

## GRATINÉED ASPARAGUS WITH BOILED HAM AND CREAM

🍷 *Asparagi Gratinati al Prosciutto Cotto*

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The coupling of asparagus and ham, blessed by heavy cream, is one of the most elegant in Italian vegetable cooking. You will also come across it elsewhere as a pasta sauce, a rather distinguished one known as *alla Saffi*.

Fine sea salt

2½ pounds asparagus, trimmed and washed, as described on page 74 of *The Why and How of Prepping Vegetables*

2 tablespoons butter plus additional for greasing the baking dish

¾ cup chopped onion

¼ pound plain boiled ham, cut into narrow julienne strips

*Marcella Says:* Please do not substitute smoked ham because its smoky accent would be too intrusive. Use the best-quality boiled ham you can get, possibly one of the imported Italian ones, such as Parmacotto, Gran Biscotto, or Beretta. Also see my comments on page 325.

¾ cup heavy cream

A 13 by 9-inch rectangular bake-and-serve dish or another dish of similar capacity

¾ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

**YIELD:** *enough for 4 servings as a vegetable dish, more if one of several small appetizers*

1 Bring water to a boil in a 12-inch sauté pan or skillet, add 2 tablespoons salt, and slide in the trimmed asparagus. Put a lid on the pan and cook at a steady simmer until an asparagus stalk bends easily when lifted with tongs or a fork. Using tongs or a slotted spoon or spatula, retrieve the asparagus and set it aside to cool.

2 Put the butter and chopped onion in a 7- to 10-inch skillet and turn the heat on to medium high. Cook the onion, stirring from time to time, until it becomes colored a deep gold. Add the ham strips, turn them over two or three times to coat them well, and cook for about 2 minutes, stirring from time to time. Pour in the cream and cook it down to half its original volume. Take the pan off the heat.

3 Turn on the oven to 400°.

4 Lightly smear the bottom of the baking dish with butter, lay half the asparagus lengthwise over the bottom, and spread half the cream and ham sauce over them. Sprinkle with 2 tablespoons of the grated Parmesan. Top with a second layer of asparagus, cover with the remaining sauce, and sprinkle with the remaining grated Parmesan.

**AHEAD-OF-TIME NOTE:** You can prepare the dish up to this point several hours in advance, in the morning if you are serving it that day at dinner. Cover with plastic film and refrigerate. Remove the plastic film and return the dish to room temperature before proceeding with the next step.

5 Bake in the preheated oven until the top becomes colored a light golden brown, about 15 minutes. Let settle for about 5 minutes before serving.