

Asparagus and leek risotto with lemon, garlic and thyme dressing



Ingredients (serves 10)

3 medium leeks, white part cut into rounds, light green part cut finely (discard tough dark green)

900g risotto rice (90g per person)

zest from 2 lemons finely grated

200ml white wine

2.5l vegetable stock (250ml per person) either made from scratch or from stock cubes / boullion

1kg asparagus (will end up about 700g once tough stalks are removed)

Olive oil

Butter (optional)

Dressing

100ml olive oil

2 cloves garlic finely chopped / crushed

Juice of 2 lemons

Good handful of thyme / lemon thyme, stems removed

Salt

Garnish

100g pumpkin seeds

100g sunflower seeds

Tamari (a splash) or dark soy sauce

The dressing and garnish can both be made well in advance and certainly before starting to cook the main risotto.

To make the dressing heat a few tablespoons of the olive oil and add the crushed garlic. Sauté for about a minute or two - you want to only slightly cook the garlic so that it keeps a lot of its flavour. Take off the heat and add the rest of the ingredients (adding salt to taste) and store it in an old jam jar or a jug.

To make the toasted seed garnish heat a frying pan over a moderate heat and add the seeds one type at a time and stir as you toast them. It's probably best to do them in individual batches if you want to get the timing just right. They are ready when they start to colour and pop. At this point turn off the heat, add a splash of tamari and stir well. Put the seeds on some kitchen towel to cool down and store in an airtight container so that they keep their crunch. Roughly chopped almonds are also excellent in the garnish... I haven't been adding them during the Spring holidays as the pudding following this risotto has always involved almond meringues.

To make the main risotto you need to prepare the leeks and asparagus. Clean the leeks well, slice the white part into rounds about 1cm thick and finely chop as much of the green part as you can use (discard really dark coarse bits of the leek). Snap the tough ends of the asparagus off and slice on a diagonal into pieces about 2-3cm in length. If some of your asparagus spears are very different thicknesses you will need to slice some of the chunky ones in half - you want them all to cook evenly. Set the asparagus aside in a bowl to be added near the end of the cooking.

If you are making the stock from scratch (or if you can prepare it a bit in advance) it's good to add the tough end bits of the asparagus to add some of their flavour. When you are ready to cook the risotto bring the stock up to the boil and then lower the heat to keep it simmering.

I like to use my big wok to cook risotto... you'll need a good sized flat saucepan as an alternative. Put onto a high heat and add a generous glug of olive oil and/or butter if you are using it. Add the leeks and sauté for a minute or so. Keep the heat high and add the rice and cook for 4-5 minutes stirring all the time to coat the grains evenly with the oil / butter. They should start to go a bit translucent. Add the wine and keep stirring thoroughly until it is all absorbed.

At this point you can actually stop cooking the risotto (put a lid on it) - useful if you want to get as much prepared in advance as possible. Depending on the amount and type of rice you are using and how high you keep the temperature while you cook it you will need somewhere between 10 and 20 minutes to finish it from this stage.

Finishing the risotto is the usual process of adding ladles of boiling stock to the rice and stirring it through until it is all absorbed. If you are cooking a lot (and 10 portions is definitely a lot) you will need to add a couple of ladlefuls at a time. There is a bit of discretion required during this part of the preparation - you may need to turn the heat down a bit or cover the pan if you think its getting either too hot / cold. You want to be adding stock about once a minute.

After 10 minutes or so you should see the rice bulking up nicely. At this stage you need to check it very minute or so to see how cooked it is. You are looking for the grains to be mostly cooked but with an uncooked centre.

When you think you've got to this stage you need to add your asparagus about half a minute before adding the last portion of stock, stirring it through quickly and then

turning off the heat and covering the pan.

After a minute or so take off the lid to check that the rice and asparagus are as cooked as you want (you can add a bit more stock and even put the heat on again if they seem underdone). Once you're happy give the dressing a good mix, add it to the pan and mix well before covering again until you are ready to serve. You can also add more butter and some parmesan at this stage.

Serve out onto warm plates and top with some of the toasted seeds.