

Florida Food Fare

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Tarragon

Tarragon, *Artemisia dracunculus*, is called the "King of Herbs" by the French, and with good reason. It is the main flavoring in many of the sauces that form the foundation of classic French cuisine, such as béarnaise, rigavote and tartare. The name tarragon is derived from the French word esdragon meaning 'little dragon' - probably in reference to the plant's serpentine root system, which may strangle a plant if it is not divided. This attractive green shrub has a branched root system with runners that produce erect, bushy, branched stems. Its shiny narrow leaves have an aroma similar to licorice with a hint of vanilla and a delicate sweet flavor.

All tarragon is NOT the same. French tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*) is the variety most often preferred and used in recipes. Its flavor is sweeter and its leaves are more delicate than its relative Russian tarragon, (*Artemisia dracunculoides*), which tends to have coarser, paler leaves and a bitter, inferior flavor. There is also a Mexican tarragon which is actually a member of the marigold family (*Tagetes lucida*), commonly called Mexican marigold or winter tarragon. The flavor of this variety is a bit spicier than that of French tarragon, having an accent of cinnamon in addition to the sweet licorice taste normally associated with tarragon. It can be used in the same manner as French tarragon, and gives whatever dish it is in an extra dimension of zest.

Both the French tarragon and Mexican tarragon grow well in Florida. They will almost always make it through the winter here, unless there is a severe freeze. They will also usually survive the hot summer if planted in partial shade, allowing you to have fresh tarragon year round.

This is preferable as tarragon has much more flavor when fresh. Unlike most of the other herbs, tarragon loses the potency of its flavor when dried. When using tarragon in cooked dishes, it is best to add it at the end, as heat tends to decrease its flavor. This may be one reason it is so frequently preserved in vinegar, which captures tarragon's essence and creates a tasty condiment that can be used in many sauces.

Tarragon combines very well with a number of foods even with its assertive flavor. It blends well with garlic, chives and onion, as well as the traditional fines herbs blend of chervil, thyme, parsley and tarragon. This aromatic blend enhances the flavors of egg, chicken and fish dishes, and is also used as a basis for salad dressings. Try it with fish and shellfish, pork, beef, lamb and poultry whether they're grilled, sautéed or roasted. Use tarragon with vegetables like potatoes, tomatoes, carrots, asparagus, green beans, peas and beets. Use it in sauces for grains like rice and barley or add it in the last fifteen minutes when cooking soups and stews. Long cooking decreases the strength of tarragon's flavor and it is typically added to dishes near the end of cooking or completely raw.

To preserve fresh tarragon that cannot be used in a few days try freezing it. Simply put the stripped leaves in a freezer bag or container and freeze dry. You can also stretch the fresh life of tarragon 3-4 days by placing it in a jar of water in the refrigerator. Any fresh tarragon that cannot be used within one week of picking or purchasing should be frozen.

Recipes:

Tarragon Vinegar Combine 2 cups of white wine vinegar and 1/2 cup fresh tarragon. Bring to a boil, steep for two weeks, then strain and enjoy.

Tarragon Butter 1 tablespoon chopped fresh tarragon leaves 1/2 cup butter, softened

Mix tarragon leaves and butter together. Spread tarragon butter on the food to be grilled before, during and after grilling. Great on fish or serve it melted with boiled lobster.

Note: The next two recipes are great accompaniments to grilled or baked fish and often recommended particularly with salmon.

Tarragon Mustard Sauce

2 ounces Dijon mustard
6 ounces low fat sour cream

1 bunch fresh tarragon, chopped

Mix all ingredients, season to taste, let stand to blend flavors. Makes 1 cup.

Tarragon Mayonnaise

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| 1 cup low fat mayonnaise | 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice |
| 1/4 cup plain fat free yogurt | 1 tablespoon chopped fresh tarragon |
| 4 green onions, chopped | 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard |
| 1 tablespoon drained small capers | 2 teaspoons prepared white horseradish |

To make mayonnaise: combine all ingredients in bowl and mix well. Season with salt and pepper. (Can be made 1 day ahead. Cover; chill.) Makes 1½ cups

Tarragon Vinaigrette

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| 1/2 cup fresh lemon juice | Freshly ground black pepper |
| 1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil | 4 tablespoons whole fresh tarragon |
| Kosher salt | leaves, snipped |

In a small bowl, whisk together lemon juice and oil until well blended. Season with salt and pepper. Just before serving, stir in tarragon. Serve this vinaigrette on the day it is made.

Hot Artichoke-Tarragon Dip

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| 2 (6-ounce) jars marinated artichoke hearts, drained, coarsely chopped | 1/2 cup fat free sour cream |
| 1/2 cup low fat mayonnaise | 3/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese |
| | 3 tablespoons chopped fresh tarragon |

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Combine all ingredients in medium bowl. Transfer mixture to 3-cup ovenproof soufflé dish or small casserole. Bake dip until heated through, about 30 minutes. Serve with assorted crackers and/or vegetable crudités. Makes 2 cups.

Scrambled Eggs with Cream Cheese and Tarragon

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| 10 eggs | 5 tablespoons unsalted butter |
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1 teaspoon dried tarragon 3 ounces fat free cream cheese, cut into small bits
1/2 teaspoon salt 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
1/8 teaspoon Tabasco

Combine eggs, tarragon, salt and Tabasco until well blended. In a large heavy skillet, melt butter over moderate heat. Add eggs and reduce heat to moderately low. Cook, scraping the bottom of the pan and folding the eggs over on themselves as they begin to form curds, until they are firm but still moist and runny in spots, about 3 minutes. Add cream cheese and season pepper. Cook, folding the eggs and cream cheese over the heat about 15 seconds. Remove from heat and continue to fold until cream cheese is melted and coats the egg. Serves 5.