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Penne con Salsa di Asparagi

Penne with creamy Sicilian asparagus sauce

One night in Palermo, my husband, Doug, and I were enjoying the passeggiata, the evening stroll, on the grand Viale della Libertà when we passed by a sidewalk book vendor selling inexpensive paperbacks. For the equivalent of three dollars, I purchased *La Pasta Siciliana* by Mariella Conti, a skimpy, low-budget book that proved to be full of interesting recipes, albeit with sketchy directions. I was intrigued by this asparagus sauce, which I have adapted to my taste. With its butter and cream, it hardly seems Sicilian, but it is delicious.

4 eggs
1 1/2 pounds asparagus
4 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature
1/4 cup heavy cream
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 pound penne rigate or other short dried pasta
Freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Put the eggs in a saucepan and cover with cold water. Bring to a boil over high heat, then cover and remove from the heat. Let stand 8 minutes. Drain and cool under cold running water. Peel the eggs, halve, and set aside the yolks. You can eat the whites, sprinkled with salt and pepper, or reserve them for stuffing the next day with tuna salad.

Holding an asparagus spear in both hands, bend the spear gently. It will break naturally at the point at which the spear becomes tough. Repeat with the remaining spears. Discard the tough ends.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the asparagus and cook until tender, about 5 minutes. Lift the spears out with tongs and cool quickly under cold running water. Keep the cooking water at a boil. Pat the asparagus dry. Line the spears up and cut crosswise into 4 or 5 pieces. Put the asparagus, cooked egg yolks, and butter in a food processor and puree until smooth.

Transfer the mixture to a skillet and add the cream. Reheat gently, stirring to incorporate the cream. Season well with salt and pepper.



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Add the pasta to the boiling water and cook until al dente. Set aside 1 cup of the pasta water, then drain the pasta and return it to the warm pot over low heat. Add enough of the sauce to coat the noodles nicely, moistening with some of the reserved pasta water as needed. You may have extra sauce.

Divide the pasta among warm bowls, sprinkle a little Parmesan over each serving, and serve immediately.

Serves 4 to 6.