

# A Spring Menu for Lamb

High-quality ingredients and simple cooking techniques  
set you free to enjoy your guests

BY BRUCE LEFAVOUR

*Search out the best ingredients. Professional chefs know that using top-notch ingredients can do more to improve the final dish than reading a host of cookbooks. Shown at right are the makings for Lamb Loin with Spring Vegetables. The recipe appears on p. 31.*



Photos: Ruth Lively

**C**hefs have anemic social lives. That's because we're always in the kitchen preparing the food while everyone else is having a good time. So, during the 23 years that I was a professional chef, when I cooked at home for my guests, the meals were simpler than those I cooked in the restaurant, the courses fewer, the sauces and garnishes less elaborate. I feel the same way today. I don't want to spend any more time than necessary at the stove because I want to talk and interact with the people my wife and I have invited into our home.

Therefore, my menu here features those items that are in season and hence at their best: asparagus, lamb, and strawberries. By choosing ingredients that are at their peak of flavor, I can prepare them simply, letting their own good taste make the meal memorable.

Choosing the best possible asparagus, lamb, and strawberries is all-important. A big factor in becoming a successful chef is to establish solid relationships with the top growers, producers, and purveyors in the area: you become aggressive and demanding, always seeking the best varieties of vegetables, fresher fish, free-range eggs, tender organic meat. The quality, the good taste of every ingredient used in the kitchen is important.

The home cook, without an established network of suppliers, has a harder time, but there are some things you can do no matter where you live. Establish personal relationships with area farmers. A good place to do this is at farmers' markets or roadside stands run by growers. If you're lucky enough to have a small grocery store nearby with an active butcher department, get to know the butcher. Tell him what

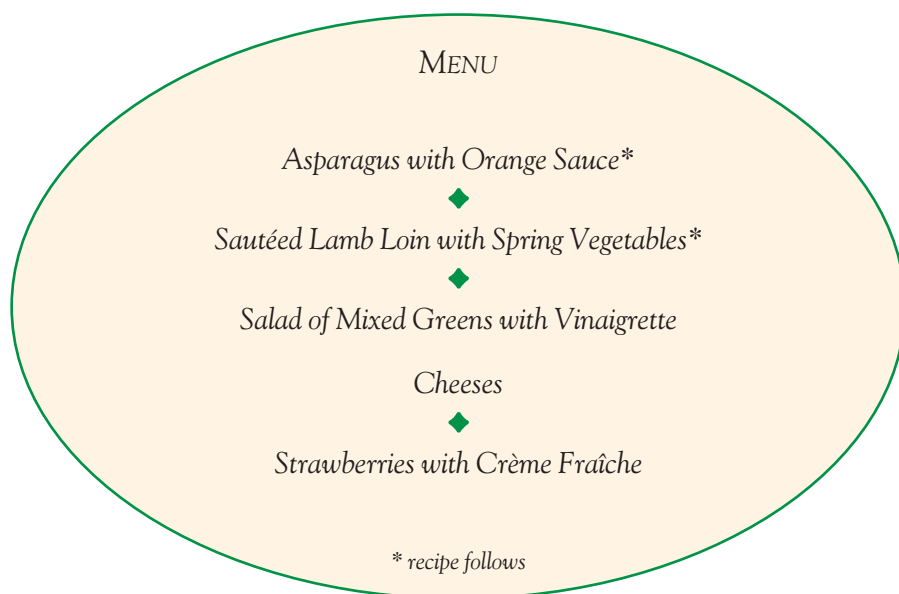
you want. Ask for high-quality cuts and don't be too shy to comment when you're disappointed or delighted. Similarly, ask the produce manager to buy from local growers. Suggest varieties you know to be good. This tactic may even work in a supermarket. Cajole. Flatter. Plead. All this may seem like a lot of trouble to go to for the raw ingredients of a meal, but if you're serious about your cooking, it's well worth the effort. Developing sources for fresh, high-quality ingredients will do more to improve your cooking than reading dozens of cookbooks.

#### THE MENU

So, with all this in mind, let's consider the specifics of our spring meal.

**Asparagus, the quintessential spring vegetable,** is a perfect first course. It tastes so good that it needs only steaming and the simplest accompaniment to become extra special. The best and most delicious asparagus is the freshest, for as soon as the stalk is cut, natural processes start to convert its sugars into strings of fiber. (Refrigerating the spears with the cut end kept damp slows but doesn't stop this degeneration.) Regardless of their thickness, fresh asparagus spears have firm stalks that are bright green, waxy-looking, and not wrinkled from dehydration. The cut ends should appear white and moist, showing little or no gray from prolonged exposure to the air. The tips should be tightly closed and compact.

I like the taste of citrus with asparagus. Freshly squeezed orange juice, reduced on the stove, is the basis for a good but simple sauce (as shown in the photo on p. 30). Here in California, blood oranges are available in spring, and their sweet, full flavor







**Let the flavor shine through.** Steamed Asparagus with Orange Sauce is a simple, delicious, and spectacularly beautiful first course. The sauce, easily made from freshly squeezed orange juice, reduced to half its volume and lightly seasoned, lets the natural flavor of the asparagus speak for itself.

and red color make them perfect for this treatment; however, any good, sweet orange variety, such as navel or Valencia, or even a tangelo will do.

**Lamb is our main course.** For many people, the leg is the traditional cut to serve. Like many chefs, I prefer to cook leg of lamb for a short time at very high heat to avoid drying out the meat. But I don't use this method at home because the smoke produced during the 500°F roasting process rolls out of the oven like one of our local fogs and overwhelms my house's weak ventilation system. Also, the lamb odor lingers in the house for days, clinging to furniture, walls, even bedding.

Therefore, the cut I prefer to prepare at home is the boned and defatted loin rack. The meat can be quickly sautéed, with minimal smoke and fuss, and then sliced for the plate. You probably won't see a lamb loin at the meat market; this is the part that is typically cut into chops. You'll need to request whole lamb loins from the butcher. You can either ask the butcher to bone and trim the loins for you, or do this yourself at home. (For a step-by-step explanation, see p. 32.)

Before my guests arrive, I simmer the bones and meat scraps to make a stock with which, at the last minute, I deglaze the frying pan. The resulting liquid, with the addition of a bit of butter, becomes the sauce. To accompany the lamb, I steam several different spring vegetables, say, fava beans, small carrots and turnips, peas, string beans, new potatoes, and baby crookneck squash (see photo at right).

Following the main course, I serve a lightly dressed salad. The acidity of a vinegar dressing overlaying the sharp taste of a mix of rocket (also called

arugula), corn salad (mâche), red mustard, mizuna, and leaf lettuces is pleasing after the richness of the lamb. I also set out a plate with one or two cheeses along with a fresh supply of crusty bread. This gives my guests something delicious to nibble while they drink the last of their wine.

**The dessert is strawberries,** as sweet and full of flavor as I can find. Finding really good berries can be a problem: appearances are deceiving. Those big red globes, shiny and overflowing the basket, can taste flat and bland as if they'd been injected with water. Unfortunately, most strawberry growers consider long shelf life, color, and large size more important than flavor. As a rule, I look for small berries. Often they've been on the plant as long as the big guys, but they've spent that time building flavor instead of taking on water. Sniff the berries. Flavorful ones have a powerful strawberry aroma. Any doubts can be dispelled by tasting a berry, something the grower or produce manager should always be willing to let the customer do. If you're lucky enough to find just-picked berries, don't refrigerate them when you get home. Like tomatoes, strawberries lose sweetness when chilled.

Once you have good berries in hand, keep the service as simple as possible. I like plain strawberries served with confectioners' sugar and a bowl of *crème fraîche*. (Lacking *crème fraîche*, unsweetened whipped cream will do.) I serve the berries on a platter so that the guests can serve themselves, dipping the berries in sugar and *crème fraîche* as they like. Sometimes I make flat, individual tart crusts from sugar-cookie dough and serve them with sugared berries and *crème fraîche*.

So the menu is set: asparagus with orange sauce, sautéed lamb loin with spring vegetables, salad, cheese, and strawberries. Because all but the final cooking for each dish can be done before your company arrives, you should be able to spend most of the evening with your guests.

### ASPARAGUS WITH ORANGE SAUCE

Freshly squeezed orange juice is an absolute must for this recipe; don't be tempted to substitute frozen concentrate. Use white pepper here if you can, to avoid black specks in the sauce. I also prefer the taste of white pepper. Serves six.

**3 lb. asparagus spears**  
**1 Tbs. unsalted butter**  
**Salt and freshly ground white pepper**

#### THE SAUCE:

**Zest of 1 orange**  
**Zest of 1 lemon**  
**3 cups freshly squeezed orange juice (sweet blood orange if available)**  
**2 tsp. French champagne vinegar or other highest-quality, mild white-wine vinegar**  
**¼ cup (approximately) lemon juice**  
**Salt and freshly ground white pepper**





**Before your guests arrive**—Immerse the asparagus briefly in cold water, stirring and rolling the stalks to remove any sand lodged in the tips. Snap off the tough bottoms, peel the spears, and then store them, wrapped in a damp towel, in the refrigerator. Set up the steamer.

With a vegetable peeler, remove the zests from the orange and the lemon in strips. Slice the strips lengthwise into thin needles, blanch for 1 min. in boiling water and then drain, dry, and roll in plastic wrap. Over low heat, reduce the orange juice by half in a heavy, large pan. Be careful because it boils over easily. Remove from the heat, add the vinegar, and taste. The juice will still be quite sweet. Add the lemon juice bit by bit until a pleasant balance is reached between sour and sweet. Salt and pepper the sauce to taste and reserve.

**Just before serving**—Put the sauce over a low flame to reheat but not boil. Steam the asparagus just until tender. The exact timing depends on the size of the spears. After 2 or 3 min. (less if the spears are very small, more if they're large), cut a slice off the base of a stalk and taste. If it's firm but not crunchy at the center, the upper part of the stalk is probably perfectly done. Eat a whole stalk to make sure. Remember that the asparagus will continue to cook from its own heat even after it's on the plate. When done, roll the asparagus quickly in the butter. Salt and pepper lightly. Spoon the sauce onto hot individual dishes or a platter. Arrange the asparagus on the sauce and sprinkle with the slivers of zest.

### LAMB LOIN AND SPRING VEGETABLES

When buying the lamb, be sure to specify lamb loin on the bone. Whether your butcher bones the lamb or you do, save the bones and meat scraps to make the lamb stock (see the recipe on p. 33). The sauce for the lamb is light and brothy, just the ticket for springtime. To drink with the lamb, I would pour a red wine, perhaps a young merlot with lots of fruit and mild tannins. *Serves six.*

#### THE LAMB:

*3 lamb racks from the loin*  
*2 Tbs. olive oil*  
*Salt and freshly ground pepper*

#### THE VEGETABLES:

*About a cupful of each of at least five spring vegetables, selected for a variety of colors: small new potatoes, fava beans, small carrots and turnips, sugar snap peas, English peas, tiny crookneck squash, young golden beets, little creamer onions, baby leeks, French string beans (haricots verts), whole immature garlic bulbs, small zucchini.*

*Extra-virgin olive oil*  
*Salt and freshly ground white pepper*

#### THE SAUCE:

*2 cups lamb stock (see p. 33)*  
*3 shallots, peeled and chopped fine*  
*2 to 3 Tbs. unsalted butter*  
*½ cup chopped fresh herbs—half tarragon, the rest parsley and chives*

*Lamb without the fuss and smoke.*

*The loin, boned and trimmed of fat, is easily and quickly sautéed at the last minute. Stock from the bones and trimmings makes a flavorful sauce for tender steamed vegetables—springtime on a dinner plate.*

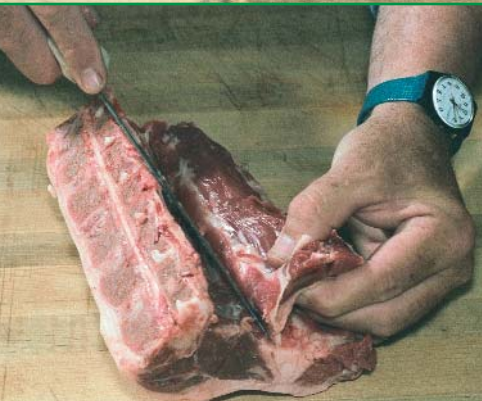


## Boning a lamb loin

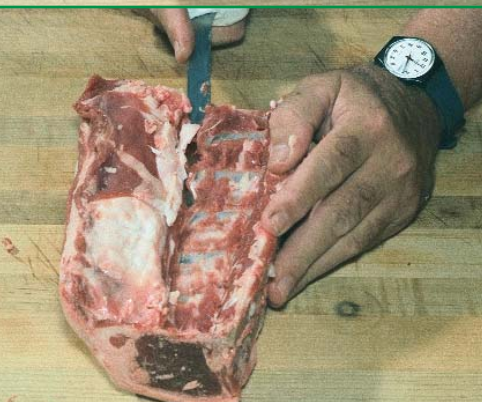
It isn't difficult to bone a lamb loin. One advantage to doing it yourself is that you can be certain of getting every bit of scrap and bone to add to the stock. When boning the lamb, avoid gouging the meat, and cut as close to the bone as you can. To do this, your knife should be very sharp, flexible, and pointed.



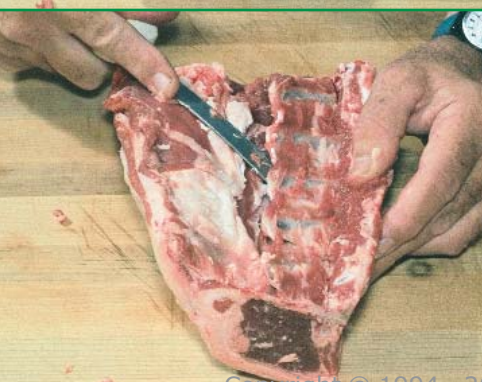
**1** Place the loin, fat side down, on the cutting board. To avoid slicing into the meat, keep the sharp edge of your knife tilted slightly toward the bone throughout the boning process. Start by cutting away the smaller filet.



**2** The bone of the loin is T-shaped. Complete the freeing of the filet by cutting down the leg of the T.



**3** Now turn the piece of lamb around. To free the loin, start by working around the bottom of the T. Feel with your fingers to find where the bones start. Cut back up the other side of the leg of the T.



**4** Right where the bone turns at the top of the T, there's a half-inch bump which you must carefully cut around. Do not hurry. Feel your way with your finger and the knife.

**5** After you've negotiated your way around the bump, cut the loin completely from the bone.



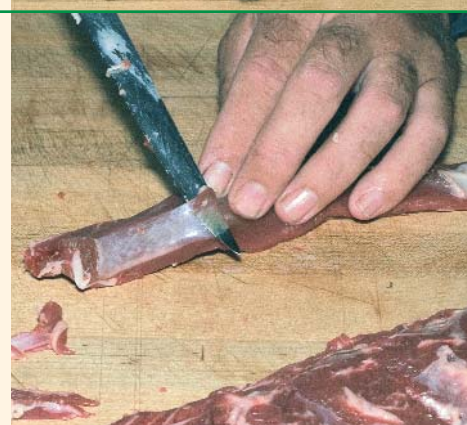
**6** To separate the loin from the shell of fat that clings to it, work carefully, making small cuts with the tip of your knife between the meat and the fat.



**7** Roll the loin toward you as you free it from its fat. When this process is complete, only a thin layer of very tough "silver skin" will remain on the meat.



**8** Remove the silver skin on both the filet and the loin by running your knife between the meat and the skin. Also trim away any remaining bits of fat.



The meat, free of the bones and all visible fat, is now ready for cooking. —B.L.





### Prepare the lamb for cooking and make the stock.

If your butcher has not already done so, bone the lamb. (See the sidebar at left.) Each rack will yield two tubular pieces of meat, a larger, flatter one from the loin and a smaller one from the filet.

Trim the meat, cutting away all fat and silver skin, wrap in plastic, and refrigerate. Discard the fat but save all the meat trimmings, scraps, and bones. Break the bones into small pieces with a heavy cleaver (or have the butcher saw them up) and use them to make the stock (see the recipe at right).

**Prepare the vegetables** as required. Arrange them, covered, in separate bowls so that you can add each of them to the steamer at the right moment. Set up your vegetable steamer.

**Cook the lamb.** Two hours before you plan to sit down at the table, take the lamb out of the refrigerator. Salt and pepper the meat generously and set aside, covered, in the kitchen so that it rises to room temperature. Raising the meat's temperature 30° or 40°F before cooking allows you to cook the center of the meat to medium rare without overcooking the outside. After the meat is warmed, you should never keep it uncooked for use later. For health reasons, you *must* cook the meat after it comes up to room temperature.

Fifteen min. before serving the asparagus, heat 2 Tbs. of olive oil in a heavy skillet that's large enough to hold the meat without crowding. Use two pans if necessary. Over medium to high heat, sauté the large pieces of lamb, pushing and turning them frequently so that they brown and cook evenly. After 3 or 4 min., add the filet pieces and continue cooking. The room-temperature lamb will cook quickly, particularly the filets. I like lamb quite pink but not blood rare.

Because the cooked loins will be resting in a warm place while the asparagus is eaten and the vegetables and the lamb sauce are prepared, you should undercook the meat somewhat. As it rests, it will continue to cook as the heat penetrates to the center. When the lamb is cooked satisfactorily, place it on a rack on top of a larger plate. (Meat that's allowed to sit in the hot juices that drain from it as it rests is liable to taste stewed.) Cover loosely with aluminum foil and keep warm.

**Prepare the sauce and the vegetables.** Drain the grease from the skillet, and, back on the fire, add the shallots and then the lamb stock, bringing it to a boil as you scrape the bottom of the pan to dissolve the caramelized cooking juices. Cook for a few minutes and taste. If the sauce seems flavorful enough to you, set the pan aside. If not, reduce it a little more.

Just before serving, steam the vegetables, starting with those such as potatoes, heads of young garlic, and creamer onions, which take the longest time to cook. At the appropriate moments, continue to add vegetables until, at the last, you throw in those like zucchini and fresh fava beans that take only a few minutes. Ideally, everything will be done at the same moment.

Remove the cooked vegetables to a bowl and roll them in a couple of teaspoons of olive oil, only enough to make the vegetables glisten (lacking good olive oil, use butter). Salt and pepper them liberally, rolling again to coat everything evenly.

Put the sauce on the heat and, when it comes to a simmer, salt and pepper to taste. Add the juice from the resting meat and, just before serving, swirl in the butter and half the chopped herbs. Slice each large loin crosswise into six pieces and the filets into as many pieces as you have guests.



Divide the sauce among warm dinner plates. In the center of each plate, arrange the loin slices and a piece of filet. Scatter the vegetables around the meat at random, sprinkle with the rest of the chopped herbs, and serve.

### LAMB STOCK

This stock makes a flavorful base for a sauce to accompany many lamb dishes. You can prepare the stock the day before you plan to use it. *Makes 2 cups.*

**3 Tbs. olive oil**

**Lamb scraps and bones from 3 loin racks**

**1½ large onions, chopped coarse**

**3 large carrots, chopped coarse**

**6 cloves garlic, crushed but not peeled**

**12 sprigs fresh thyme or 1 tsp. dried thyme**

**6 sprigs Italian parsley**

**1 bay leaf**

**Water**

Over medium to high heat in a large, heavy pot, heat the oil. Brown the bones and scraps, the onion, the carrot, and the garlic. Stir frequently to prevent scorching. When the meat and bones are nicely browned, add the herbs and stir for a minute until you can smell the oils from the heating thyme.

Almost cover the bones with cold water (5 to 6 cups should do it), and bring to a boil. Skim off any scum that rises to the surface and then lower the heat so that the liquid just simmers. Reduce slowly until only 2 cups of liquid remain. Discard the bones. Strain the stock through a fine sieve, pressing with the back of a spoon to extract all the liquid. After the stock cools, skim off and discard any grease that has risen to the top of the stock.

*Select vegetables with an eye to color. The author prepares sugar snap peas, fresh fava beans, baby leeks, tiny string beans, baby squash, and small turnips, carrots, and potatoes. No extra work is required, because they're all cooked in the same steamer—each vegetable added at the appropriate time.*

---

*The first time Bruce LeFavour ever worked in a restaurant was the day he opened The Paragon in Aspen, Colorado, in 1965. He has also owned restaurants in Idaho and most recently in California's Napa Valley, where he still lives. ♦*