

thriftygourmet

THE BALHAM-BASED CHEF JASON ATHERTON, BEST KNOWN FOR HIS MICHELIN-STAR MAGIC AT MAZE, COOKS UP A FRUGAL FEAST.

AS SOON AS a recession hits, everyone starts telling you how to save money. You'll find bookshops crammed with cookery books based around frugal food – predictable pasta recipes, endless variations on jacket potatoes and other boring, bland ways to fill your stomach. I see things differently. Inexpensive food can – and should – be exciting, beautiful and delicious. Cook with the seasons, making the most of ingredients when they are at their best and least expensive, and you will eat well. Big food doesn't stem from big wallets. With these full-of-flavour and exquisitely presented dishes, here's proof that you can entertain with style for comparatively little...



ASPARAGUS WITH POACHED EGG AND SMOKED PRAWNS

(SERVES 4 AS A STARTER)

Ingredients

Smoked prawns:
250g medium raw prawns in shell, heads on
120g oak dust or wood chips (for smoking)
150g butter
2 tsp (5ml spoon) finely chopped chervil
2 tsp finely chopped dill

2 tsp finely chopped tarragon
a drizzle of vegetable oil
Asparagus and poached eggs:
4 large organic eggs
1 tsp white wine vinegar
sea salt and black pepper
16 asparagus spears, trimmed
olive oil, to drizzle
To finish:
dill leaves, to garnish
lemon wedges, to serve

Directions

1. To prepare the prawns, remove the shells and the heads, reserving these in a flat-based metal colander or steamer. Rinse the prawns, drain and refrigerate in a covered bowl.
2. Scatter the oak dust evenly in a heavy-based pan (over which the colander will sit snugly), and place over a medium heat. Fit the colander of shells into the pan. When the dust starts to smoulder and smoke, after 5-8 minutes, immediately cover the colander with a double layer of cling-film, securing it firmly around the sides. The cling-film will bubble up and fill with smoke. Turn the heat down and let the shells infuse with the smoke for 30 minutes. Turn off the heat and release the smoke by popping a hole in the cling-film with a knife.
3. Melt the butter in a large saucepan over a low heat. Add the smoked shells, stir and cook gently for 4 minutes, then turn off the heat, cover and leave to infuse for 20 minutes. Pass through a sieve, pressing the shells to release any trapped butter. Mix about 75g of the butter with the chopped herbs (reserve any excess in the fridge for another use: to baste fish, etc).
4. To cook the smoked prawns, heat a drizzle of vegetable

oil in a large frying pan over a medium-high heat. Add the prawns and sauté for 1-2 minutes until pink and just firm to the touch. Pour in the herbed butter and toss well to glaze the prawns. Immediately tip into a bowl and set aside in a warm place.

5. To poach the eggs, bring a medium, wide pan of water to the boil, with the vinegar added. Crack each egg into a separate cup. Stir the water gently to make a slow whirlpool. Drop an egg into the eye of the pool, so it seals itself in the swirling water; repeat with the other eggs. Poach gently for 1½-2 minutes, then remove with a slotted spoon; to check press gently with your finger – the egg should feel quite soft. As soon as they are ready, place on a warm plate, season with salt and pepper and keep warm.

6. Meanwhile, toss the asparagus in olive oil to coat and season with salt. Heat a drizzle of olive oil in a large frying pan over a high heat and pan-fry the asparagus spears, rolling them around with a spatula, until lightly golden brown and blistered.
To plate: Place a poached egg in each serving bowl and top with the prawns, spooning the herbed butter over them. Garnish with dill and serve a stack of asparagus and lemon wedge on the side. If you're serving a meal for two, arrange in a bowl on a platter to share (as shown in image).

- Dipping asparagus into soft-boiled eggs like toast fingers is a fun way to eat.
- Smoked prawns are well worth the effort; you should be able to buy oak dust or wood chips at a garden centre. ▶



Asparagus With Poached Egg And Smoked Prawns

PHOTOGRAPHS BY YUKI SUGIURA