

Asparagus Soup with Herbed Goat Cheese Croutons

Serves 6-8

You can also make this soup with just water rather than broth, but the flavor will be a bit purer and simpler.

Soup

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 3 cups thinly sliced leeks (from 2 leeks; white and light green parts only)
- 2 bunches asparagus (about 2½ pounds total)
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 quart low-sodium chicken broth
- Kosher salt and pepper to taste
- Pinch cayenne pepper

Croutons

- ½ baguette, sliced about ¾-inch thick (about 20 slices)
- Olive oil
- 3 ounces fresh goat cheese
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh tarragon, dill, mint or basil
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped shallots or 1 teaspoon finely chopped garlic
- Milk or cream (if needed)



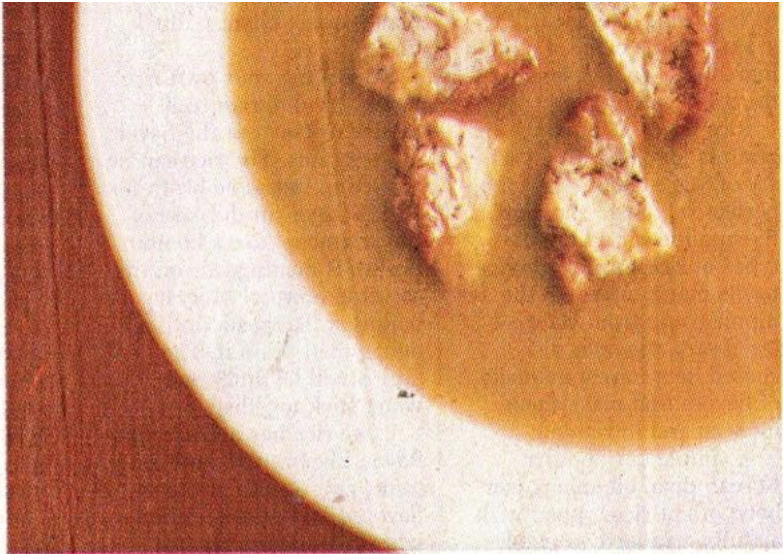
Wine pairing: Asparagus can have a strong green vegetal flavor on its own, though the early spring crop is often mild. These green spears are balanced by other ingredients in this soup. Sauvignon Blanc can have bright acidity and a grassy, herbal note that will echo that of the asparagus. That herbal character is more consistently found in New Zealand bottlings like the 2008 Villa Maria Private Bin Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (\$16). The 2007 Patianna Organic Vineyards Mendocino Sauvignon Blanc (\$18) with a slightly richer, less grassy style will also work.

For the soup: Melt the butter in a stockpot or Dutch oven, then saute the leeks over medium heat until very tender, about 8 minutes, stirring often.

Snap off the woody ends of the asparagus where they naturally break. Slice the asparagus into 2-inch lengths.

Place the asparagus, bay leaf, broth and 1 quart broth in the pot. Return to a simmer, cover and cook until the asparagus is very tender, 10-12 minutes.

Puree the soup in a blender until very smooth, return to the pot to reheat gently and season with salt and pepper and cayenne. (You may need more than 2 teaspoons kosher salt to bring out the flavor, depending on the broth.)



Craig Lee / The Chronicle; styled by Shannon Shafer

For the croutons: Preheat the oven to 375°. Toss the baguette slices with olive oil, salt and pepper in a medium bowl, then spread out on a baking sheet and cook until crisp, 10 minutes.

Combine the goat cheese with the herbs, shallots, salt and pepper to taste and a little bit of milk or cream if needed to get it to spreading consistency. Flip over the toasts and spread each with

about 1 teaspoon of the cheese mixture, then return to the oven until the cheese is a bit dry, 5-8 minutes.

To serve, ladle the soup in bowls. Cut the toasts into quarters to serve on the soup (you can float whole toasts on the soup but they're harder to eat).

Per serving: 171 calories, 10 g protein, 22 g carbohydrate, 6 g fat (3 g saturated), 13 mg cholesterol, 497 mg sodium, 3 g fiber.