What to Eat Now: April

With its bounty of ramps and rhubarb, morels and asparagus, and sweet garden peas, April showers us with some of the year's rarest and most fleeting delicacies.

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In April, early spring vegetables make their first appearance at markets across the U.S. This time of year is notable for some of the more unusual farmers-market finds — in particular, wild foraged delicacies such as ramps and morels. As far as more "mainstream" veggies are concerned, spring gets its official welcome with two favorites, just in time for Passover and Easter: tender green peas and fresh asparagus. Of course, all of these seasonal treats go so well together that you'll see a lot of these vegetables sneaking into recipes across each of the ingredient sections below.

Asparagus

While asparagus is generally available year-round in the grocery store, once you've tried some local, garden-fresh asparagus in the spring, you'll see why veggie fanatics get so excited for this treat. This is primarily an issue of freshness: Asparagus spears start to lose flavor as soon as they're cut, so fresh is definitely best.

Asparagus comes in three colorways: green, white, and purple-tinged. Unlike green asparagus (which is allowed to grow in the sun), white asparagus is grown with soil mounded around it to protect it from the sun and block the development of chlorophyll, while the purple-tinged varieties are grown *partially* underground. Keep this in mind if you're looking for health benefits: The more sun asparagus gets, the greater the amount of vitamin C it contains.

From Farm To Fridge

When buying, look for straight spears with tightly closed tips, and no dark spots or other discoloration. The size of asparagus can range from as thick as a thumb to skinnier than a pencil — both are tasty in their own right, so the size you choose is just a matter of personal preference. Once purchased, store in the fridge wrapped in a damp paper towel or an open plastic bag.

When ready to cook, cut or break off the bottom end of each spear. For thin spears, you can simply bend them until they snap, leaving just the tender upper part. Larger thick spears may have tough skin (particularly at the bottom) that you can peel off if you like. Generally speaking, however, there's no need to peel green asparagus; If you do choose to peel the stalk, just peel the bottom third. White asparagus, on the other hand, is traditionally peeled from top to bottom. Don't want to waste the peels? You can make a quick stock by cooking the peelings in water and use it to flavor soup or even to cook the spears.

Combos To Try

Once prepped, asparagus can be cooked in many ways. It can be steamed, roasted in the oven with sea salt and olive oil, grilled, or shaved to be served raw in salads, as seen in many upscale farm-to-table restaurants. Asparagus makes for a natural pairing with butter and other spring greens like fava beans, green garlic, leeks, garlic scapes, scallions, and peas. It's also delightful with cheeses such as parmesan, pecorino, Taleggio, or goat cheese — and of course, with a perfect poached egg on top. For a meatier combination, try asparagus recipes with ham, bacon, or mushrooms; for example, all of these ingredients would make excellent additions to the quiche recipe in the collection below.

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One Skillet Chicken Thighs With Asparagus And Peas

YUMMLY

★★★★☆

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Yum'd

Asparagus with Hollandaise Sauce

SIMPLY RECIPES

★★★★★

Prosciutto Wrapped Asparagus

DAMN DELICIOUS

★★★★☆

Creamy Lemon Risotto with Asparagus

WILLIAMS SONOMA - TA...

★★★★☆

Ravioli with Asparagus and Mushrooms

GIRL GONE GOURMET

★★★★☆

Spring Asparagus Quiche

THE NUTRITION ADVENT...

Asparagus Salad

101 COOKBOOKS

★★★★★

Peas

Common peas go by many different names, including English peas, garden peas, sweet peas, shelling peas, and pod peas. Peas have a long history in cuisines around the globe, and continue to be a power food for today's diets. High in fiber, low in sugar, and with plenty of protein and vitamins, there's a reason the pea has endured. They are easy to store, but to enjoy the sweet flavor that only the freshest pea can provide, you'll need to hurry: Once the pea harvest begins, they'll produce for about six weeks, so you've only got a month and a half to find and enjoy these spring luxuries.

At The Market

Look for peas that are green, plump, and not dry, but avoid overly large peas, which can be starchy and lack flavor. The sweeter petit peas — more often seen in the freezer than the produce aisle — are in fact a separate variety of pea, not a baby version of common peas. All types of peas can turn starchy rather quickly, so eat them as soon as you can after buying, or within a few days. And make sure to look for a sign or ask your farmer what you're buying before you start filling up your sack with pods — it's easy to get garden peas confused with **snap peas**.

Shell Yes, English Peas!

Unlike sugar snap peas or snow peas, the shell of the common pea is usually thrown out, not eaten (thus the name "shelling peas"). To shuck a pea, find and pull the string on the side, like undoing a zipper, then pop out the peas with your finger. Next, quickly blanch the peas in boiling water for 30 seconds. You can then serve them right away with a pat of butter or, if using in another recipe, put the blanched peas in ice water to stop the cooking.

Once shelled, peas do freeze very well; in fact, peas are one vegetable that is a-ok to buy frozen if you can't find them fresh. However, store-bought frozen peas have already been blanched, so take care not to overcook them; all you need to do is heat them up.

Pea lovers will tell you that the very best peas are eaten raw straight out of the pod (preferably while standing in the garden where they grow), or simply blanched and served with some butter and sea salt. However, they're also great with lemon, cream-based sauces, ricotta, and, of course, all the other vegetables on this month's list!

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English Pea-Radish Salad With Celery and Miso

REAL SIMPLE

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Yum

Parmesan Peas and Shallots

ITS A VEG WORLD AFTE...

Minted English Pea Soup

VEGANOSITY

Spring Pea Guacamole

TORI AVEY

★★★★★

English Pea & Ricotta Tart

WILLIAMS-SONOMA

Lemony English Peas and Asparagus

INSTANT POT-US

★★★★★

Spring Pea Ravioli with Prosciutto...

SAVEUR

Rhubarb

Rhubarb is a common vegetable with an uncommon flavor. And yes, it's a vegetable, not a fruit! From the knotgrass family, rhubarb (along with its close relative, sorrel) is known for its distinctive sour taste. Tart, tangy, and acidic, rhubarb recipes typically call for quite a bit of sugar to balance its naturally sour flavor.

Red And Green: It's Not Just For Christmas

There are two main types of rhubarb: a milder, red-stalked rhubarb and an extra-sour all-green rhubarb. Red rhubarb isn't quite as sour as green varieties; if you're looking for a milder taste, go for the reddest stalks you can find. If you see green stalks at the market, that doesn't have anything to do with ripeness; this variety will never turn red, no matter how long it grows. For both red and green varieties, choose rhubarb with firm, unblemished stalks. Store your purchase in the refrigerator wrapped in a damp paper towel to keep the stalks from drying out. Preparation is easy: Just rinse to remove any dirt, remove the leaves and trim the ends, and then chop the stalks as directed in your recipe.

Is Rhubarb Poisonous?

Quick answer: not the part we eat! The eye-poppingly large green leaves at the top, however, are not edible; the leaves are poisonous to humans if eaten, and should be removed before preparing if not already removed upon purchase.

Rhubarb softens quickly during cooking, making it suitable for an applesauce-style side or a tangy spread for your morning toast. Its color will also become more subdued when cooked, turning a gentle pink. Taste as you go when cooking; some stalks of rhubarb are less tart than others, so you want to start with a small amount of sweetener and add until the balance of sweet and tart is just right.

A Fruitful Friend

Rhubarb is most frequently combined with strawberries, which come into season around the same time as field-grown rhubarb. Unlike many of the other items on this list, however, rhubarb does have a long growing season, and you should be able to enjoy it straight through to the fall. So don't limit yourself to strawberries when looking for a companion fruit for your rhubarb — it works well with many other fruits, such as apples, stone fruits, raspberries, and blackberries. Often used in dessert recipes, spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, and vanilla are natural complements to zingy rhubarb.

Strawberry Rhubarb Turnovers
JUST A TASTE

Strawberry Rhubarb Pavlova
SUGARHERO
★★★★★

Rhubarb Cherry Jelly
ALLRECIPES
★★★★★

RHUBAR
sorb

Rhubarb Sorbet
PALEO HACKS

Rhubarb Bars
CHOCOLATE WITH GRACE
★★★★½

Rhubarb Butter
VIEW FROM GREAT ISLA...
★★★★★

Fava Beans

Fava beans, aka broad beans (or, less commonly "faba beans"), are typically only found fresh in farmer's markets, where they make a brief appearance in the spring. Their flavor is buttery and green, closer to the taste of edamame than, say, a lima bean. The beans, not the pods, are the delicacy here, and you'll have to do a bit of work to get to them: once freed from the pod, the beans themselves need to be peeled. While this two-step process can seem a bit fussy, the reward inside is worth the effort!

Picking Your Pods

Fava beans are easily distinguishable in markets by their large, bumpy pods, often thicker and longer than a man's fingers. It's not uncommon to see little black bumps on the shells; some spots here and there are fine, but too many can indicate that they're overripe. Your beans should be firm and bright green for best flavor. When overripe or stored for too long of a time, favas will become starchy — so buy them fresh and eat them up soon! They're best stored in a paper bag in the refrigerator as they can retain too much moisture if kept in a plastic bag.

Two-Step Prep (#freethefava)

To prepare, first shell the beans the same way you would a common pea: Just pull the string on the side and pop the beans out of the shell. Next, blanch the beans by putting them in boiling water for about a minute, then run them under cold water or drop them in an ice bath to stop the cooking. This will make things easier during the second step:

removing the skin from the beans. When cool enough to handle, simply peel off the outer layer of skin to reveal the bright green treasures inside. Very young fava beans can be eaten without removing these skins — and in some cultures are left on regardless of age — but the exterior pods are not typically eaten.

Feasting on Favas

Once the beans are free, they're typically boiled and served whole in salads, pastas, or mixed vegetable sides. Favas can also be sauteed in butter as a simple topping for toast, or mashed to make a delightful green spread (I tend to prefer a loose mash to a whipped puree; try both and see what you like best!). One of my favorite preparations, if messy to eat, is to grill the whole pods. This does put the onus on your guests to then pop them open and, if they choose, remove the beans from the skin. Much like a clam bake or BBQ, preparing them this way makes for a hands-on feast for enthusiastic (and unself-conscious) eaters. Fava beans pair well with other bright spring-like flavors and simple, fresh ingredients like pasta and butter with mushrooms, spring alliums, and a touch of citrus.

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Rice Salad with Fresh Fava Beans and Pistachios

WILD GREEN SAND SARDINES BLOG

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Grilled Fava Beans

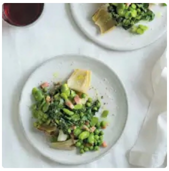
101 COOKBOOKS

Fresh Fava Bean Dip

CRUMB

Fava Bean Crostini with Pecorino …

COLEY COOKS



Artichoke, Peas, Fava & Lettuce Stew

ANDREW-ZIMMERN

Grilled Rainbow Chard with Fava Bea…

EPICURIOUS

Ramps

Ramps, a type of wild leek, look quite similar to scallions, but with flat, wide leaves. They're famous for having a much stronger flavor (and smell!) than scallions, with a taste that is a little bit onion, a little bit garlic. Small ramps have little bulbs that are almost straight (again, like a scallion), but as they get older, they'll become more bulbous — these older ramps are great for pickling and are no less of a find. Ramps are wild, not cultivated, and grow primarily on the East Coast and the Midwest, so they can be harder to find in other parts of the country. If you're lucky enough to come across ramps in the market or in the wild, store them in the fridge in an opened plastic bag for up to a week — if you can live with the smell for that long!

Ready Your Ramps

To prepare ramps, remove the outer layer, and cut off the root. Cut off the leaves and rinse the stalk in cold water several times to remove any persistent dirt — like leeks, it can take a bit of time to get all the dirt out from in between the layers. Slice the stalk and bulb, then stack the leaves on top of each other to chop.

Some dishes call for the greens; others the bulb. All parts of the ramp are edible, so save any parts you don't use for another recipe and don't waste a bit of this rare treat. Similar to asparagus, you can use the roots to make a wonderfully flavorful stock for use in cooking. When cooking your ramps, be careful not to overcook them, as they lose flavor quickly over heat. Try using ramps in uncooked preparations such as pesto (which can then be frozen to savor the flavor year-round), swap it out for the parsley in a chimichurri, or use it as a bold substitute for other recipes using leeks.

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Caramelized Ramps

THE CREPES OF WRATH

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Vegetable Hash of Ramps, Fava Beans…

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Pickled Ramps

FROM A CHEF'S KITCHEN

Ramp Pesto

FOOD AND STYLE

★★★★★

Ramp Butter

LEITE'S CULINARIA

Ramp Frittata with Asparagus and Po…

PLAYIN' WITH MY FOOD

Ramp Carbonara

CLOSET COOKING

Morels

Morel mushrooms are known equally for their sponge-like appearance, unique meaty flavor, and their cult-like following. Followers of this fungi will doggedly hunt them down in markets and woods, guarding the knowledge of their whereabouts like a secret barbecue sauce ingredient. Because morels can't be cultivated and therefore are only found in the wild, they *are* a bit harder for us non-sporting types to find — and they have a price tag that reflects this scarcity. Their growing season is somewhat short as well, so do jump on them if you see them fresh.

Working With Dried Mushrooms

Fortunately, many recipes use dried morels, making it much easier for home cooks to find the needed ingredient for their feast. Dried morels can be bought online from reputable sellers such as **Far West Fungi**. And don't worry, rehydrating mushrooms isn't hard or time-consuming! Just rinse and soak the dried morels in cold water for 2 minutes, shaking gently to remove any dirt that's collected in the crevices. Then, soak them in a clean bowl of hot water for about 10 minutes, or until soft. Save the flavorful second soaking liquid to use in stocks or to flavor your pan sauce — just give it a quick pass through a strainer before using.

If you do find fresh morels, they'll need to be cleaned well, as they can be quite gritty, particularly at the beginning of the season. Like all mushrooms, these are best stored in a paper bag.

If you've gone through the trouble of seeking out morels, be sure to use them in recipes where the mushroom gets to be the star of the show! Morels are delightful in a cream sauce on toast, sauteed with butter, or mixed with fresh pasta. Check out some of the best morel recipes on Yummly here:

GO TO RECIPE >

Farm egg with Morels, Peas, Crème Fraiche and Basil Purée

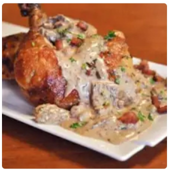
ZEN CAN COOK

View Recipe Yum

Wild Mushroom Ragout with Creamy Po…

ANDREW ZIMMERN

★★★★☆



Roast Chicken with Bacon & Morels

D' ARTAGNAN

Morels in Cream Sauce

SAVEUR

★★★★★

Warm Avocado Tartine with Morel Mus...

TASTING TABLE

Pasta with English Peas & Morels

WILLIAMS SONOMA - TA...

Morel Mushroom and Oloroso Sherry G...

MYRECIPES

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Mushrooms
Rhubarb
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