

## Finger food conundrum

Published Saturday August 15th, 2009

**G6** Jay Remer

This is a time of year when we tend to eat more with our hands than usual, at least here in the Western world. I make that distinction because I just watched a television episode where Chef Michael Smith was in Jordan, where a good bit of food is eaten with one's hands, as it is in other parts of the world as well. Why not explore a few of the foods that can certainly be enjoyed using our fingers rather than the knife and fork?

Artichokes, whose use as a food originated most likely in Northern Africa, is a cousin of the thistle, a relation easy to surmise once you discover the 'choke.' This vegetable must be eaten by hand. This is one food that requires either one-on-one training or a detailed how-to video to be able to eat it successfully.

The leaves are peeled gently from the main bulb, gently but firmly, and then the flesh is scraped off with one's teeth. I maintain that it is well worth the trouble though. It has a wonderful sweet earthy flavour which is great with Hollandaise sauce or melted lemon butter when served hot. It also is delicious with mayonnaise laced with curry or garlic or a fragrant vinaigrette when served cold.

The heart, which is identical in taste to the leaves, is the real meat of the flower bud and the ultimate reward after the attenuated time required to reach it. Some less-than-patient diners dive right in to the heart bypassing the delectable petals altogether. This is akin to only eating the tail of a lobster. Each to his own. No matter what your decision, artichokes are versatile and a great addition to many meals as either a main vegetable or served as a starter.

Asparagus, a wonderful vegetable from the lily family, comes to us from Eurasia and is grown all over the world. This is another food, which, according to proper etiquette, is correctly eaten by hand, whether it is served hot or cold. The same accompaniments used for artichokes work nicely with asparagus too. The spears are best when steamed or grilled. They can be boiled, but then so can anything. Much of the flavour and nutrients are lost in that process.

Although not often served at formal dinners, eating this vegetable with your hands is proper at any occasion anywhere in the world.

French-fried potatoes are an all-time favourite finger food. These tuberous vegetables have their origins in Peru. What we eat today descends from a subspecies from Chile. The sweet potato and yam are also immensely popular additions to this finger food family. While the sweet potato originated in equatorial South America, it is distantly related to the potato. However, the yam comes to us from Africa and is no relation to either plant, even though it's similar in appearance and taste.

Cut into long rectangular spears, these nutritious vegetables are usually deep-fried in fat, rendering them less wholesome but addictively delicious. No matter how they are cooked or served, they are customarily eaten with a fork and knife; however, I think they somehow seem to taste better when eaten by hand.

The rule of thumb for eating certain foods with one's hands is usually dictated by a lack of cutlery with which to eat a particular item. No knife, fork or spoon is a good indication that using your fingers is positively appropriate. No one is expected to eat a sandwich or a burrito with utensils. Nor are olives, nuts and most picnic foods such as fried chicken and barbecued ribs.

I'm not sure how the various lists were assembled as to what is expected to be eaten by hand and what with a fork. When in doubt, however, begin with a fork and knife and then follow your host's lead. At picnics, my vote is forks for salads only. At formal dinners, don't taunt your guests with questionable foods.

This brings me back to artichokes. Of course, here's a food one starts eating with their hands and finishes using a fork and knife. It may be unique in that regard. Don't let them scare you off though.

Find a pal who enjoys them and ask for a lesson. They're fun, delicious and nutritious. They're a food that deserves some respect. Making the mistake of eating the choke itself will teach you that lesson in a big hurry. In my book, finger food rules - as often as possible.

Jay Remer is certified by the Protocol School of Washington as a consultant for corporate etiquette and international protocol. He lives in St. Andrews. Email your etiquette questions to [jay@etiquetteguy.com](mailto:jay@etiquetteguy.com) and visit his website at [www.etiquetteguy.com](http://www.etiquetteguy.com).

Please **Log In** or **Register FREE**

You are currently not logged into this site. Please [log in](#) or [register](#) for a **FREE ONE Account**.

Logged in visitors may comment on articles, enter contests, manage home delivery holds and much more online. Your **ONE Account** grants you access to features and content across the entire CanadaEast Network of sites.