New season asparagus is already a hot seller at farmers’ markets, but Lynda Hallinan reckons posh albino asparagus should be even more profitable.

seen it for sale in a supermarket or at a farmers’ market here. Compare that to Europe, where ashen asparagus is commonplace at food markets in Germany, France, the Netherlands and Italy.

“It’s so common in Europe that we had a German agricultural student here this year who had never seen green asparagus before,” chuckles Canterbury asparagus authority Dr. Peter Falloon.

Peter is the South Island representative on the New Zealand Asparagus Council – he also chairs its research committee – and his Lincoln company, Aspara Pacific Ltd, is the southern hemisphere’s only commercial asparagus breeder. (Asparagus isn’t his sole interest; when I talked to him he had 72 new varieties of tissue-cultured potatoes on the go too.)

Peter has been breeding, growing, harvesting and exporting asparagus almost as long as I’ve been alive. It’s a family affair: his wife Linda also sells fresh asparagus at the Canterbury Farmers’ Market at Riccarton House.

If anyone knows how to make a buck from this spring speciality, it’s Peter. His variety ‘Pacific 2000’ (you’ll see it branded in supermarkets as ‘Pacific Crown’) was the highest-yielding green variety in nationwide trials. Not only did it outperform its nearest rival by 60 per cent, it also topped blind taste tests for Marks & Spencer in the UK, with their chef declaring it the sweetest asparagus he’d ever tasted.

Asparagus, like baby potatoes and fresh peas in the pod, should be eaten within a few hours of harvest for the best flavour and tenderness. As time goes by, the amputated spears slowly cannibalise their own sugar content, turning limp and bland.

Freshly picked purple asparagus – and it’s Peter’s ‘Pacific Purple’ variety that’s best for blanching – is even sweeter than the standard green types. It’s delicious raw in salads. That’s because the levels of lignin – the fibrous tissue that turns asparagus woody – are naturally lower in purple asparagus. (The longer a spear is left to grow, the more lignin it develops. Try snapping an old spear; the spot where it breaks is the boundary between tough and tender.)

In Europe, blanched asparagus is traditionally grown in metre-high mounds of sandy soil. When the spears crack the surface, pickers carefully burrow down by hand to cut the base of the spear, then build the mound back up
to prevent light getting to the spears still
to come.

“It’s far too labour intensive to be
profitable. It takes a minute to pick each
spear,” says Peter.

Figuring there had to be a better way, a
couple of years ago the South Island Asparagus
Growers’ Association sought funding
to investigate the feasibility of white
asparagus production. They purchased a
50m x 5m portable FlexiTunnel, lined it
with black polythene and rigged it up over
an established asparagus bed.

A single sheet of black plastic isn’t
sufficient. Peter recommends an outer
layer of 150 micron black/white plastic
like a traditional silage or baleage cover
with an inner layer of heavy duty 200
micron black polythene.

“You need at least 300 microns to block
out every bit of light, as even the slightest
rack results in off-colour asparagus. It
develops a pinky tinge.”

Harvesting in the dark
is like playing blind man’s
bluff. It helps to own an
LED headlamp. In the
dark, asparagus spears
grow rapidly yet still keep
their tips tight. If left
unpicked for any longer than 48 hours,
they turn from timid periscopes, just
peeking out of the soil, into thigh-high
tentacles. And whereas outdoor-grown
asparagus is traditionally cut at 23-25cm
then trimmed to 10-15cm, blanching
allows for supple asparagus spears as long
as your arm.

The beauty of a portable tunnelhouse,
adds Peter, is if there’s a strong demand
for blanched produce, you can cover
more rows. But if the market is flat, simply
peel the covers off and let the colour
come back into the cheeks of your crop.

In Cust, Mark and Diana Phibbs of
Tasty Tips have two hectares of asparagus.
They mainly export their crop of ‘Pacific
Purple’ and heritage green asparagus but
save some to sell at the Oxford Farmers’
Market. Mark also grows white asparagus
under cover for the restaurant trade.

In September this year his portable
tunnelhouse was ripped apart by the
high winds that lashed Canterbury the
day after the big quake, but it was back in
action by October. Mark waits until after
the first flush of purple spears has been
harvested before he covers his designated
rows.

“You don’t get white asparagus straight
away. The first lot of spears will still have
a hint of pink even in a total blackout
situation.”

You can’t keep asparagus in the dark for
too long. By late November, Mark starts
taking samples to test carbohydrate levels,
“to see how much fuel is left in the tank”,
before the covers come off so the spears
can go to fern to nourish the crowns for
the following season.

Even though white
asparagus commands
premium prices – chefs
are prepared to pay up to
$30/kg – it’s still not cost-
effective on a commercial
scale, once you factor in
the cost of the tunnelhouse. Not wanting
to burst my bubble, Mark suggests that I
could successfully blanch small quantities
under 44 gallon drums or upturned 20
litre plastic buckets.

He also reckons I’ll need to sharpen up
my powers of retail persuasion to sidestep
the notoriously conservative Kiwi palate.

“It’s taken five years for purple
asparagus to become popular,” he
says. “You also need to know that most
customers won’t buy a more than 200g of
asparagus at a time – that’s an average-
sized bunch.”

Patience isn’t one of my virtues, but
given how much cheaper it is to raise
asparagus from seed ($5–7 per packet)

than plant dormant crowns ($2 per plant),
I’m prepared to wait an extra year for my
first crop.

Seeds sown in spring must be coddled
in trays or seed beds for twelve months
before the crowns are ready to transplant
into deep trenches filled with the finest
mix of soil and manure money can buy. I’ve
already started stockpiling alpaca manure
from a lifestyle block up the road.

“I’m starting my asparagus empire with
‘Pacific Purple’ and the French heirloom
italianseedspronto.co.nz). ‘Argenteuil’
dates back to the 18th century, where it
was discovered in a convent garden. It’s
an early variety that produces 2cm thick
silver green/purple spears about three
weeks earlier than most other varieties.
I’ve also put in two packets of ‘Fat
Bastard’, a male hybrid I sourced from
The Digger’s Club in Australia. I bought it
just for its name, though it’s said to have
the fattest spears of any variety. Here’s
hoping fat spears equal fat profits.

* To order seed of ‘Pacific Purple’
or the high-performing ‘ Pacific
2000’, contact Dr Peter Falloon
at Aspara Pacific Ltd by email:
falloonz@xtra.co.nz

Lifestyle Block 37