

Aubergines!

Written by Debbi Covington

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Eggplant is in season and it's quite abundant at all of the farmers' markets. This time of year they're plump and firm and perfect! The eggplant (aka aubergine) is a member of the nightshade family. They're very filling, supply few calories and contain virtually no fat. Their meaty texture makes eggplant a wonderful vegetarian main-dish choice.

When shopping, look for a well-rounded eggplant with a smooth and uniformly colored skin. Tan patches, scars or bruises on the skin indicate decay which will appear as discolorations in the flesh beneath. A good eggplant will feel fairly heavy, a light one may be woody. A medium-sized eggplant, 3 to 6-inches in diameter, is likely to be young, sweet and tender. Be sure to cook eggplant in a glass baking dish. Aluminum pans will cause them to discolor.

Grilled Eggplant Rolls

4 pounds eggplant, thinly sliced lengthwise (unpeeled)

Olive oil, for brushing

1 jar marinara sauce

For the filling:

3 tablespoons olive oil

1 small onion, diced

½ cup chopped Italian parsley

Salt and pepper, to taste

1 pound chopped frozen spinach, thawed and squeezed dry

2 roasted red peppers, seeded and diced

2 cups ricotta cheese

2 tablespoons Parmesan cheese

4 ounces feta cheese, crumbled

1 large egg, lightly beaten

Feta cheese crumbles, for garnish

Generously salt the eggplant slices and place them in a colander for half an hour to sweat.

Heat 3 tablespoons of olive oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Saute the onions until

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translucent, about 5 minutes. Add the parsley and spinach and saute for approximately 5 minutes or until heated through. Season with salt and pepper and set aside to cool. In a medium-sized mixing bowl, combine ricotta, Parmesan, feta, diced red pepper and lightly beaten egg. Fold in the cooled spinach and mix well. Chill the filling in the refrigerator until ready to assemble the dish. Rinse the eggplant slices and pat them dry. Brush them lightly with olive oil and grill over medium-high heat, turning once. Cook each side about 5 minutes. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a 9x12-inch glass baking dish. Place a heaping spoonful of spinach stuffing at widest end of each slice of eggplant. Roll the stuffing in the eggplant slices and place in the baking dish with the seams on the bottom. Spoon a generous amount of marinara sauce on each roll and bake for about 45 minutes or until the rolls are heated through. Sprinkle with additional feta cheese before serving. Serves 4 to 6.

Eggplant Yogurt Dip

2 eggplants

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

Juice of 1 lemon

2 tablespoons tahini

1 cup Greek yogurt, strained

Sea salt

¼ cup Italian parsley, chopped

Pierce the eggplant with a fork and broil for 10 to 15 minutes or until the eggplant turns black and is very soft. Set to cool on a rack with paper towels underneath. Peel as soon as they can be handled. Place eggplant in a bowl and mash with a fork. Add olive oil and lemon juice and mix well with a wire whisk. Add tahini and whisk until thoroughly blended. Add yogurt and continue to whisk. Add sea salt to taste. Place dip in a serving bowl, sprinkle with parsley and chill before serving. Serve with raw vegetables or wedges of lightly toasted pita bread. Serves 6 to 8.

Eggplant Fritters

1 egg, beaten

2 teaspoons baking powder

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

1 medium eggplant, about 1 cup mashed

Salt and pepper to taste

1 tablespoon butter, softened

Vegetable oil, for frying

Peel, slice and cook eggplant in salt water until tender; drain well and mash. To 1 cup eggplant, add egg, flour, baking powder, salt, pepper and butter. Blend well. Drop by rounded spoonfuls into hot vegetable oil and fry until brown. Serves 6 to 8.

Stuffed Eggplant with Tomatoes

1 medium eggplant

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 tablespoon butter

2 tablespoons minced onion

1 (14.5-ounce) can tomatoes

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1 teaspoon salt

1 cup soft bread crumbs

Wash eggplant and cut in half. Scoop out pulp to about ½ inch of the skin. Heat olive oil over medium heat. Add onions and saute for about 2 minutes. Add eggplant pulp, tomatoes, bread crumbs and salt. Cook through; fill eggplant shells. Bake in a preheated 375 degree oven until browned, about 30 minutes. Serves 4.

Eggplant Delight

1 medium eggplant

1-1/2 cups water

1/3 cup chopped onion

½ cup chopped celery

1 can cream of mushroom soup

½ cup milk

½ cup chopped bell pepper

½ cup shredded Cheddar cheese

½ cup fine bread crumbs

½ teaspoon salt

3 slices bacon, partially cooked

Peel and cube eggplant. Place in cold water for 10 minutes; drain and cook in boiling water with onions and celery until tender. Drain and mash. Combine soup and milk; stir into eggplant. Add bell pepper, cheese, bread crumbs and salt. Pour into greased casserole. Top with partially cooked bacon and bake uncovered at 350 degrees for about 35 minutes. Serves 4 to 6.

The writer owns Catering by Debbi Covington and is the author of two cookbooks, Celebrate Everything! and Dining Under the Carolina Moon. Debbi's website address is www.cateringbydebbicovington.com

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