

EGGPLANT AND PASTA

Eggplant is one of the major items in Sicilian cooking. Aside from the traditional eggplant parmesan, the Sicilians also use eggplant in pasta dishes, which makes a wonderful way to eat your eggplant. This next recipe, from Syracuse in the southeast corner of Sicily, uses traditional Mediterranean ingredients of tomatoes, eggplant, capers, olives and anchovies.

You'll need a medium eggplant, which you trim and cut into ½ inch dice. Don't peel it, as the peel helps hold it together as it cooks. Mature eggplants can sometimes be a little bitter, so you may want to put the eggplant pieces in a colander and sprinkle them with some salt, mix well, and let drain in the sink for an hour or so. Rinse off the eggplant before cooking and pat dry with paper towels. This pulls out the bitter juices. However if you've gotten some nice young fresh eggplant from the Farmer's Market you can omit this step. Then chop a small bunch of fresh basil and divide it into two piles.

In a large frying pan, brown a couple of cloves of crushed, peeled garlic in ¼ cup of olive oil. Remove and discard the garlic. To the flavored oil, add the eggplant, 3 anchovies, finely chopped into a paste or about a tablespoon of anchovy paste, ½ a cup of pitted and quartered black olives, either kalamata or the wrinkly oil-cured ones, 2 or 3 red peppers, roasted, peeled and cut into strips (buy a jar of them or get them at the salad bar at Safeway), 1 heaping tablespoon of capers, 4 large ripe red tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped, and half the basil. Cover and simmer for about 15 minutes. Add some freshly ground black pepper to taste.

While the sauce is simmering, cook a pound of spaghetti or your favorite long pasta in plenty of boiling salted water according to the package instructions. Drain well and toss in a warmed serving bowl with a tablespoon of olive oil. Add the sauce, toss well, and sprinkle the remaining chopped basil over the top. Serve immediately, and pass some grated Romano cheese.

Syracuse is one of Europe's oldest cities, having been founded by the ancient Greeks several hundred years before Christ. It was the home of the scientist Archimedes who, while sitting in his bath, discovered that he could measure the density of an item by measuring the amount of the water it displaces. He then ran naked and dripping through the streets shouting "Eureka", which means "I have found it", thereby creating the state motto of California as well as the name of Humboldt county's largest city.

An hour drive up the coast from Syracuse is the university city of Catania. Sicily's second-largest city, it was the birthplace of opera composer Vincenzo Bellini. His most famous opera is *Norma*, which gave its name to this dish of pasta and eggplant. Traditionally pasta a la Norma is made with slices of eggplant deep-fried in lots of olive oil, served over pasta with a fresh tomato sauce. This is an excellent technique but is tricky, expensive and time-consuming. Here is a quicker and easier method.

In a large saucepan, combine 1 ¼ cup of finely chopped onions along with 3 cups of tomato juice and a cup of water. Bring to the boil, cover, reduce the heat and simmer for about 10 minutes. Add 4 to 4 ½ cups cubed unpeeled eggplant along with a teaspoon or so of salt and ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil. If you like things a little spicy, add about ¼ teaspoon of cayenne. Stir to mix, bring it back to the boil, cover and let it simmer for about 40 minutes, stirring from time to time. The eggplant should become meltingly tender and the sauce should thicken. If it is still too thin, take the lid off and boil over high heat for about 5 minutes, stirring constantly.

While the eggplant is cooking, bring a large pot of salted water to the boil and cook a pound of pasta, whatever you like, according to the directions on the package. Drain thoroughly and put into a warmed bowl. Ladle over some of the sauce and toss, to coat the pasta thoroughly. Serve, passing the rest of the sauce and some grated dried cheese, like parmesan or Romano.

This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.