



The Virtues of Eggplant

The eggplant, known, by the name of brinjal in Southern India, as "The King of Vegetables," is used in cuisines around the world. A nightshade, and once thought to be poisonous, eggplant is one of those mystery fruits used as a vegetable in cooking, like its relative, the tomato. It is a short-lived perennial plant generally grown as an annual. More than four million acres are devoted to the cultivation of eggplant around the world.

Eggplant can be bitter, which can irritate the stomach lining and cause gastritis, but this effect can be eliminated by slicing and salting the eggplant, letting it stand for an hour, and then rinsing thoroughly in cold water (known as "degorging"). The salting process also reduces the amount of oil absorbed in cooking – a plus!

The versatility of the eggplant, aka Aubergine (British); Melongen (Caribbean); the above-mentioned brinjal (Sanskrit); and Melanzane (Italian) is legend: it can be stewed, roasted, sliced, battered and deep-fried, grilled and mashed. Eggplant can be stuffed (meat, rice, vegetables, walnut paste, whatever) and baked. It is used in curries and chutneys. It is made into delicious entrees, appetizers and snacks by the Turks, the French, the Greeks, Lebanese, Thai, Japanese, Chinese and the Spanish. It can be big and luscious, small and thin, shaped like cucumbers, ovals, eggs (hence the term "eggplant, from the small, white and egg-shaped variety), striped, purple or green. There are many cultivars.

My favorite is Eggplant Parmesan, Melanzane alla Parmigiana, made with marinara, mozzarella and parmesan. I like to use my own marinara, frozen in plastic zip locks every fall during the bumper crop period of tomato harvest. This September I was fortunate to receive a five-gallon bucket of beautiful Roma tomatoes from an associate in Santa Rosa.

Below is the recipe for Eggplant Parmesan I created last night – in an eight-inch glass baking pan, really enough for four. The two of us ate it all, with a salad. Delicious.

Melanzane alla Parmigiana

One large eggplant, 1/4 inch slices

Salt

12 ounces Marinara Sauce

1 ball fresh Mozzarella, sliced

Bread Crumbs

2 eggs, beaten

3 tablespoons flour

1/4 cup safflower oil

1.4 cup Parmesan Cheese

Several hours before cooking, place the slices in a large bowl and sprinkle liberally with salt. Let stand.

Rinse with cold water and dry on paper towels.

Heat oil in large skillet to smoke point. Dip the eggplant slices in flour then eggs then bread crumbs and fry on both sides until golden and crispy. Drain on paper towel.

In baking dish, spread a little of the marinara sauce, then layer eggplant, mozzarella, sauce, eggplant, sauce, parmesan. Place in 350 degree oven for about 30 minutes or until bubbly.