

Session #4: Sicilian Eggplant Caponata

In Italy, eggplant is known as a Jewish fruit, perhaps because Jewish immigrants brought it to the region. The Italians initially thought eggplant to be poisonous. That left more for Sicilian Jews, who found gastronomic treasure in its meaty flesh, which took well to roasting and frying.

For Shabbat-observant Jews, eggplant also proved to be perfect for pre-Shabbat preparation, as it would keep well and be good to eat the next day. They stewed it with a little vinegar and other vegetables, sometimes adding pine nuts and currants. Our dish, *Eggplant Caponata*, became popular throughout Sicily (it's known today as *Sicilian Caponata*), and “the Jewish fruit” has remained a staple of Jewish-Italian cooking ever since.

Roasting eggplant gives a deeper flavor to this dish. A cross between a dip and a sauce, *Caponata* goes equally well on bread or crackers or over couscous or pasta!

Ingredients:

- 2 medium eggplants (approximately 2 pounds), cut into ½-inch cubes (leave the skin on)
- Kosher salt
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 bell peppers (preferably 1 red and 1 yellow), seeded and chopped
- ½ cup finely chopped celery
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 3 cloves garlic, crushed or minced
- 1 can (14½ ounces) diced tomatoes and juice
- 1 tablespoon capers, drained (optional)
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- ¼ cup shredded fresh basil
- You will need a hand blender.

Directions:

Place eggplant cubes in a colander and toss well with ½ tablespoon kosher salt. Allow to drain for 45 to 60 minutes (or up to 3 hours). Rinse well, then press out liquid and pat dry with paper towels.

Preheat the oven to 475 degrees. Line a rimmed baking sheet with foil. Add the eggplant and toss with enough olive oil to lightly coat. Spread eggplant in a single layer and sprinkle with a generous teaspoon of kosher salt. Roast, stirring approximately every 10 minutes, until browned and tender, 20 to 30 minutes. (If the eggplant is browning too quickly, reduce heat slightly and add a little more oil if needed.) Remove and set aside. Heat a thin layer of olive oil in a large nonstick pan over medium-high heat. Add the onion, peppers, and celery, and season lightly with salt and pepper. Sauté until the vegetables begin to soften, 8 to 12 minutes (adding more oil if mixture dries out). Stir in the garlic and cook for about 30 seconds. Stir in the tomatoes, reserved eggplant, capers, sugar, black pepper (½ teaspoon or to taste) and vinegar. Simmer over low heat 5 to 10 minutes until the vegetables are cooked but not mushy. Stir in the basil during the last minute or so. The mixture will be thick. Taste and add salt if needed.

Best served at room temperature. Store in the refrigerator.

Yield: 8 servings

Looking forward to learning & cooking with you soon!

Shani