

EGGPLANT: EXPLORE THE POSSIBILITIES

By DANIEL NEMAN
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Purple and bulbous with a neat green cap, eggplant is a funny-looking thing. And sometimes when you eat it, it makes your mouth itch.

No wonder people avoided eating it for centuries. It is a member of the nightshade family, and people reasoned that it must be poisonous.

But somewhere, at some time, someone took this bizarrely shaped fruit with the evocative emoji and fried it in a little oil with garlic and probably added a tomato sauce — and a whole new culinary world opened up to glorious exploration.

It also happens to be still in season, though the window for straight-from-your-garden eggplant is quickly shutting. Fortunately, through the magic of science and modern transportation, eggplant is available throughout the year.

And that is good, because I eat it throughout the year.

This particular week, I ate it five different ways.

I began with a classic, Eggplant Parmesan, though some of the other selections are going to get a little weird.

Eggplant Parmesan is beloved because it is the perfect use for eggplant and also for Parmesan cheese — not to mention tomato sauce and garlic. It is also an exceptional reason to use mozzarella cheese, but to be perfectly frank the ultimate application of mozzarella cheese is on pizza.

Typically when making eggplant Parmesan, thin slices of eggplant are breaded and fried before being stacked between layers of cheese and tomato sauce. But this version, which I gleaned from “The Silver Spoon” cookbook (it’s kind of the ubiquitous Italian version of “Joy of Cooking”) does not bread the eggplant.

It still pan-fries them, but it does not bread them. This way, the eggplant is a little creamier in texture. On the other hand, it may also have more calories, because nothing soaks up oil like unbreaded eggplant.

Either way, it is a rich and hearty meal that deserves a place in anyone’s cooking repertoire.

My next eggplant dish was a sandwich that would be entirely at home in a fancy sandwich shop or a restaurant focusing on fresh, healthful flavors.

You can tell, because it has a long name: Roasted Eggplant Sandwich With Arugula Walnut



Eggplant Terrine.

Pesto Mayonnaise.

You roast eggplant and put it in a sandwich with a spread made from arugula-walnut pesto and mayonnaise. But it’s even better than that, because it also has roasted red peppers and more arugula in it. It’s best when the bread — sourdough or ciabatta, if you have it — is toasted first.

To be honest, the eggplant isn’t the star of this sandwich. The sandwich stands out because of that pesto mayonnaise. It’s a brightly flavored spread, an exuberant combination of arugula and basil with a light citrus kick that could enliven any number of sandwiches, especially vegetarian ones.

But try it with eggplant. It’s a natural combination.

Because there is a long, thin variety of eggplant that is native to Japan, I decided to look for a recipe from that country’s cuisine. The one that intrigued me the most is Pickled Eggplant With Oil and Vinegar.

This is a quick and quite simple side dish made from julienned eggplant pickled for a few hours in a combination of sugar, vinegar, soy sauce and vegetable oil. It’s mildly salty and mildly tart, reminiscent of any number of popular pickles.

It’s how you present it that really gets your notice. Combining cold pickled eggplant with hot rice takes the dish to a higher plane of dining excellence.

My next dish was an Eggplant Terrine, and terrines are always fun to make. They are even more enchanting to serve to guests, who will be suitably impressed.

A terrine is a loaf of meats or vegetables pressed together and served in slices. Meatloaf, for instance, is technically a terrine, though terrines usually come more aspirational than that.

This eggplant terrine is made from layers of thinly sliced, broiled eggplant and Emmentaler cheese, held together with a combination of eggs, colorful

chopped bell peppers and more cheese. It is served with a simple tomato sauce that you can whip up in the time it takes to bake the terrine.

It’s a great meal to serve when you want to make someone feel special.

Finally, I tried a Chinese dish, Eggplant With Peanut Butter, that comes from the province of Shandong.

Peanut butter is not unknown in China — think of the famous cold noodles in peanut sauce — and the rest of the ingredients are absolutely essential for a basic stir fry: ginger, garlic and toasted sesame oil. The only question is how well the eggplant pairs with the peanut butter.

I could see where it would be popular in Shandong, but the combination is not immediately pleasing to the Western palate — though neither is it entirely displeasing.

Let’s just call it interesting, and leave it at that.

EGGPLANT PARMESAN

Yield: 4 servings

- 1 1/2 eggplants, cut lengthwise into 1/4-inch slices
- 4 tomatoes, peeled, seeded and diced
- 1/2 bunch basil
- Pinch of granulated sugar
- 2/3 cup olive oil
- 2/3 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 3 1/2 ounces mozzarella cheese, sliced thin
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 2 tablespoons butter
- Salt and pepper

- Place the eggplant slices in a colander, sprinkle with salt and let drain about 1 hour. Meanwhile, put the tomatoes and 4 to 5 basil leaves in a pan, season with salt and pepper and a pinch of sugar to taste, and cook over high heat, stirring frequently, for 15 to 20 minutes. This will yield 1 cup of tomato sauce.
- Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
- Rinse the eggplant slices and pat dry. Heat 1/3 of the oil in a skillet, add 1/3 of the eggplant slices and fry until golden on both sides. Remove with a slotted spatula and drain on paper towels. Repeat twice again with the remaining oil and eggplant slices.
- Spoon 1/4 cup of the tomato sauce into an 8-by-8-inch ovenproof dish and arrange a layer of slightly overlapping eggplant slices on top. Sprinkle with a little of the Parmesan, cover with a few slices of the mozzarella; sprinkle a few basil leaves and 2 tablespoons of the beaten eggs on top. Season lightly with salt and pepper.
- Continue making layers until all the ingredients are used, ending with a layer of sliced eggplant, sprinkled Parmesan and tomato sauce. Dot with the butter and bake 30 minutes. This dish is also good served cold.

Per serving: 614 calories; 55 g fat; 15 g saturated fat; 138 mg cholesterol; 17 g protein; 19 g carbohydrate; 12 g sugar; 8 g fiber; 1,018 mg sodium; 340 mg calcium

Recipe from “The Silver Spoon”

EGGPLANT WITH PEANUT BUTTER

Yield: 3 to 4 servings

- 1 (1-pound) eggplant
- 2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 slice ginger root, minced
- 1 tablespoon peanut butter or sesame-seed paste
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup water
- 1/2 teaspoon toasted sesame oil

Peel eggplant, cut in 1-inch chunks and set aside. Heat oil in a wok or skillet and stir-fry garlic and ginger 20 seconds. Add eggplant and stir-fry another 20 seconds. Blend in peanut butter, salt and water.

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The psychology of pumpkin spice

Researchers explain the appeal of fall’s favorite flavor

By CHRISTINA TKACIK
Baltimore Sun

BALTIMORE — Here’s an experiment to try. Order a pumpkin spice-flavored drink from your local coffee shop. Without telling them what it is, ask a friend to try it while holding their nose. Do they know what it is? How about when they can smell it?

If your research subject is anything like mine, they won’t know what they’re drinking until after you’ve said the magic words: pumpkin spice.

That’s understandable, according to researchers with Johns Hopkins University, who explain the appeal behind the flavoring that dominates fall.

It’s not the taste of pumpkin spice we love so much as the smell and its associations, says Sarah Cormiea, a Johns Hop-

kins doctoral candidate studying human olfactory perception, and Jason Fischer, a professor of psychological and brain sciences.

Of all the senses, smell is uniquely tied to memory. “There’s a kind of special access to the memory system in the brain that odor perception has,” says Fischer. The part of the brain that processes odors sits “right up against memories in the brain,” he said.

In fact, just reading the phrase “pumpkin spice” can summon scents and memories of fall. The phrase can be particularly enticing when reinforced by things like leaves changing colors and kids going back to school.

There’s a whole world of pumpkin spice-flavored items in stores, from Cheerios to hummus. Hunt Valley’s own McCormick & Company first released their pumpkin pie spice blend in 1934. Two years ago, it was the company’s fourth best-selling retail spice during the fall.

But coffee giant Star-

bucks claims credit for the phenomenon, which they trace back to their 2003 launch of the pumpkin spice latte. The drink is topped with pumpkin spice, a blend of cinnamon, nutmeg, clove and ginger.

“For nearly two decades, the return of pumpkin at Starbucks has signaled the start of the fall season and inspired a cultural phenomenon around fall flavors and products,” reads a news release on their website. This year, Starbucks stores began selling pumpkin spice lattes and other autumnal beverages and snacks on Aug. 24.

“There’s a reason they don’t have [the pumpkin spice latte] available all year round, right?” says Cormiea. “It’s because people get excited and buy it.”

Despite the linkage between scents and memories, Cormiea says people typically have a hard time naming smells — as if trying to name an acquaintance whose face they recognize at a party. That



Christina Tkacik/Baltimore Sun-TNS

A reporter’s pumpkin spice latte, purchased at a Starbucks in Baltimore. Researchers say the appeal of pumpkin spice-flavored items is less about the taste than the smell and its associations.

changes once they hear what something is.

In tests with research subjects, she finds that

introducing labels to smells “changes how people experience it. Something like snaps

into place once you get the label.”

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