

ARTICHOKES

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Now firmly entrenched in eating artichokes only from their pre-cooked forms, I rediscovered how much I love them and how wonderful they are. But like crab and oysters, artichokes rest in a sort of alien realm where their distinct flavor and form defy neat categorization. Instead of treating them as a “vegetable” — they possess neither the virtuousness of the dark leafy greens nor the fiber-wellness cachet of brassicas — I serve them only as an appetizer, hors d'oeuvre or starter course, where they can show off their individuality.

For a great way to start a summer picnic, I lean on those aforementioned tea sandwiches my mom made, except I make them with more fresh herbs and a lot less mayonnaise. I cut them into finger-size blocks, as intended, and pass them around to guests in the cold Tupperware container I brought them in.

If I'm entertaining at home, I pull out the simplest appetizer of all time, an idea I got from my friend Helen Rosner. She pours a jar of oil-marinated artichoke quarters onto a baking sheet and bakes them in a high-heat oven until the artichokes sizzle and crisp in the oil. Like Italian fritti but without the mess of deep-frying, they're a one-product hors d'oeuvre that only needs a sprinkling of flaky salt and a squeeze of lemon while still piping hot from the oven before serving with cocktails.

In the dip world, spinach and artichoke reign supreme. As wonderful as that pairing is, there are plenty of recipes out there for great versions, from bubbling hot dishes loaded with cheese and cream to easy vegan iterations stuffed in bread bowls. I like artichokes in a simpler, less dairy-dependent mode. Taking inspiration from another Mediterranean world staple, I use grilled, smoky artichokes as a base for a baba ghanouj-like dip.

I blend char-speckled grilled and marinated artichoke quarters — easily found in grocery stores or you can use Helen's “oven-fried” version — with lemon juice, garlic, cumin, tahini and olive oil until silky smooth. Slightly more tangy in taste than the eggplant version, the dip is simpler than the traditional since you're not having to blacken and peel eggplants.

While I am bound to the convenience of canned/jarred artichokes, on the rare, once-every-two-or-three-years



Ben Mims/Los Angeles Times-TNS

Like fried Italian artichokes you'd serve with cocktails, these are easier and involve only a quick stint in a hot oven.

occasion I willingly deal with fresh ones, I'm making one thing: Roman-style artichokes, or carciofi alla Romana. Stuffed with parsley, mint and garlic, pared artichokes are arranged upside down in a pot then braised low-and-slow in wine and olive oil, their stems jutting up like pier posts from the water at low tide. Tender at the heart and deeply caramelized and crisp on the edges of their petals, it's an elegant, simple preparation that I find to be the only artichoke dish worth the trouble.

But for my appetizer-ready version of the dish, I transform the same ingredients into an elegant tart. I lop off the bottoms from canned artichoke hearts and puree them with herbs, garlic and wine, then add an egg to bind everything together. This is spread over a rectangle of puff pastry then topped with the artichokes' petal clusters arranged in a striking pattern. Once baked on a puffed and crunchy golden brown, the tart delivers the same elegant appearance for even less effort.

You can use your freshly prepared artichokes for these recipes, but why bother? Save that work for showing off the artichoke in all its gothic glory. These recipes, using convenient canned or jarred versions, return proper balance to the work-to-reward ratio of cooking with them while highlighting their idiosyncratic flavor. They're artichoke recipes for those of us that love them but also want to maintain our sanity.

COLD ARTICHOKE TEA SANDWICHES

Time: 30 minutes, plus 2 hours chilling
Yields: Serves 8

The key to these sandwiches is serving them ice cold from the fridge, so store them there until just ready to serve. And while squishy sandwich

bread works best here because it stays moist under refrigeration, you can use any type you like, or even serve the sandwich filling open-faced on toast. If you want to make the sandwiches vegan, simply use vegan mayonnaise.

3/4 cup mayonnaise
1/4 cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
2 tablespoons finely chopped dill
2 tablespoons finely chopped chives
1 teaspoon Diamond Crystal kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1/2 teaspoon sweet paprika
1 small or 1/2 large shallot, minced (1/4 cup)
1 almond-sized garlic clove
8 ounces (drained weight) canned or jarred artichoke hearts, rinsed and well-drained
16 slices whole-wheat or white soft sandwich bread or pain de mie
Salty potato chips, for serving

1. In a large bowl, combine the mayonnaise, parsley, dill, chives, salt, pepper, paprika and shallot. Using a microplane grater, grate the garlic into the mayonnaise mixture. Using a food processor or a knife, pulse to finely chop the artichoke hearts. Add the artichokes to the mayonnaise mixture and stir to combine.

2. Arrange 8 slices of bread on a work surface and divide the artichoke filling among them, about 3 to 4 tablespoons each. Spread the filling to within 1/4-inch of the edges of the bread. Top each with another slice of bread, then transfer to a baking sheet and cover with plastic wrap or foil. Refrigerate for at least two hours or up to two days.

3. Use a serrated knife to remove the crusts from the sandwiches, then halve, either diagonally to make two triangles or into neat rectangles. Serve the sandwiches

chilled, with potato chips.

Make Ahead

Wrapped in plastic wrap, the sandwiches will keep in the refrigerator for up to 3 days.

'OVEN-FRIED' ARTICHOKE

Time: 35 minutes
Yields: Serves 6 to 8

This recipe, given to me by my friend Helen Rosner, is a much simpler version of Italian fritti that doesn't require making a batter or deep-frying. Make sure to buy artichokes marinated in oil only; if there is water or brine, it will affect their roasting and make them less crisp. If you have to use water- or brine-packed artichoke quarters, drain them in a sieve, then press gently with paper towels. Scatter them on additional paper towels and let air dry for at least 30 minutes. Toss the artichokes with 2 tablespoons olive oil in a bowl, then transfer to the prepared baking sheet to roast.

2 jars (12 ounces each) oil-marinated artichoke quarters
Everyday olive oil, if needed (see note above)
Flaky sea salt
Lemon wedges, for serving

1. Heat the oven to 425 degrees. Line a baking sheet with foil.
2. Place a colander or sieve over a bowl and add the artichoke quarters, letting their oil drain into the bowl. Transfer the artichokes to the prepared baking sheet. Drizzle with 2 tablespoons of the oil from the bowl.
3. Bake the artichokes, flipping each with tongs halfway through cooking, until golden brown and crisp all over, 20 to 25 minutes.
4. Transfer the artichokes to a platter while hot and sprinkle with flaky sea salt. Serve immediately with lemon wedges.

ARTICHOKES À LA BABA GHANOUJ

Time: 10 minutes
Yields: Makes 2 cups

Though not typically found in traditional baba ghanouj, I add a little yogurt here to add more tang and give the spread a creamier texture; leave it out, though, if you'd like to keep the dip vegan. If you can't find pre-grilled artichokes, use the roasted artichokes from “Oven-Fried” Artichokes, or make your own by grilling halved whole artichokes until tender and blackened, then scooping out the tender hearts.

1/4 cup fresh lemon juice
1 teaspoon ground cumin
2 large garlic cloves
8 ounces store-bought grilled

marinated artichoke hearts or quarters, drained, or homemade roasted (see note above)
1/4 cup everyday olive oil, plus more for drizzling
1/4 cup plain, full-fat Greek yogurt or vegan cashew yogurt (optional)
3 tablespoons well-mixed tahini
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
Finely chopped flat-leaf parsley, to garnish (optional)
Pita chips, for serving

1. In the bowl of a food processor, combine the lemon juice, cumin and garlic and pulse to break up the garlic; let stand for 5 minutes. Add three-quarters (or 6 ounces) of the artichokes, the olive oil, yogurt, if using, and tahini, and puree until smooth. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
2. Scrape the dip into a shallow bowl and use the back of a spoon to spread the puree over the bottom, creating a raised edge at the perimeter. Scatter the reserved artichoke quarters over the dip then drizzle everything with olive oil and sprinkle with parsley. Serve warm or at room temperature with pita chips.

Make Ahead

Store the dip in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 3 days.

CARCIOFI ALLA ROMANA TART

Time: 1 hour 15 minutes
Yields: Serves 8 to 12

The flavors of Roman-style stuffed artichokes come together in this elegant tart perfect for slicing warm and serving with cocktails. The artichokes are used two ways: the bottoms as a puree for the filling and the petal clusters arranged over the top for a beautiful presentation. Though the filling is intentionally dairy-free since the puff pastry provides plenty of richness, if you want to add cheese you can scatter 2 ounces of crumbly feta or goat cheese or thin slices of mozzarella on top before baking.

1 1/2 pounds (drained weight) canned or jarred artichoke hearts (about 18 total)
1 package (14 ounces) all-butter puff pastry, such as Dufour, thawed if frozen
1/4 cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
1/4 cup finely chopped mint
3 almond-size garlic cloves
1/4 cup everyday olive oil
2 tablespoons dry white wine
1 teaspoon Diamond Crystal kosher salt
1 large egg
Freshly cracked black pepper
1 small lemon or 1/2 large lemon

1. Rinse the canned artichoke

GARDEN

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• *M. Nervosa* — longleaf mahonia. Creates the impression of a stiff, leathery fern. Yellow flowers, blue berries. Spreads by underground stems to make a good cover best in shade as a woodland groundcover.
• *M. nervinii* (Nevin mahonia) and *M. pinnata* (California holly grape) do better farther south.
• *M. repens* — creeping mahonia, zones 1-21. Native from Northern California eastward to the Rocky Mountains. It creeps by underground stems, to three feet tall. Full bluish-green leaves turn bronzy in winter. Good ground cover in sun and partial shade.
The blue berries are not poisonous and some people think they make a suitable jam. Since mahonia is not deciduous they make a great landscape shrub for low-maintenance gardens.

Garden Chores

- Study your landscape gaps that could be nicely filled with bulbs. Mark these spots carefully and make a note to order bulbs in August.
- Enjoy, but do not disturb the many wildflowers.
- When buying bedding plants choose compact, bushy plants that have not begun to flower.
- Plant butterfly bush, dogwood, rose of Sharon, black gum (Nyssa), redbud, magnolia, tulip poplar, birch, ginkgo, hawthorn, and most oaks. These plants do better if planted in spring rather than fall.
- Examine shrubs for winter injury. Prune all dead or weakened wood.
- When crabapples are in bloom, hardy annuals may be planted outdoors.
- When forsythia is in bloom, winter mulches can be removed.

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