

# ***Florida Food Fare***

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## **Eggplant**

**Description:** A member of the nightshade family, eggplant is related to the tomato and potato. Though commonly thought of as a vegetable, it is actually a fruit, specifically a berry. There are many varieties of this delicious food, ranging in color from deep purple to white, in length from 2 to 12 inches and in shape from oblong to round. In the United States, the most common is the large, pear-shaped variety with a smooth glossy dark purple skin. Other varieties include: White eggplants, which are firmer and less moist. They are also closer grained, creamier and less bitter, with tougher skins than the purple variety. Italian eggplants are similar to the large purple ones but are smaller, with a more delicate skin and finer flesh. Oriental eggplants are slender and elongated with thinner skins and fewer seeds. They range in color from solid purple to striated shades. They are usually sweeter and smoother than the larger varieties.

**Availability:** Florida is the nation's leading producer of eggplant. In 2000, 1,800 acres of eggplant were planted and harvested in Florida. It is grown throughout the state but most production is in Martin, Palm Beach and Broward counties. Florida's harvest begins in late October and continues until June. Heaviest production is from December until May.

**Nutritional Value:** Eggplant contains small amounts of several important minerals and vitamins needed daily. Approximately 1 cup of raw eggplant is 82 g, contains 21 calories, a trace of fat and no cholesterol. It also yields 2 g dietary fiber, 5.7 mg calcium, 177.9 mg potassium, 15.5 mcg folate and 68.8 IU vitamin A.

**Selection and care:** When buying eggplant, look for firm, smooth deep purple skin. Avoid those with brown or blue streaks. Shriveled, dented and flabby eggplant is often bitter and has poor flavor. Choose product that is heavy for its size. When you press the surface, it should feel firm and the flesh should bounce back (although the Oriental varieties are a bit more tender than others.) The fuzzy green caps should be tightly intact and mold-free. Store eggplant as quickly as possible in the vegetable compartment of your refrigerator or wrapped loosely in plastic wrap. It requires high humidity. Try not to purchase more than a day or two in advance for best quality

**Preparation and Use:** Eggplant can be prepared with the skin off or intact. It is becoming more popular as a meatless, main dish adding bulk and fiber to meals with fewer calories and fat. It is also a popular side dish and can be baked, broiled, grilled, fried, stuffed, sautéed or boiled. It does, however have the sponge-like capacities to soak up oil so it should be well coated with a batter or crumb mixture if you are frying. Whichever method you choose to prepare an eggplant, cook it thoroughly. Since the flesh discolors rapidly, an eggplant should be cut just before using. The brown coloration will not affect the flavor when cooked.

### **Recipes:**

#### **Stuffed Eggplant**

1 cup uncooked rice	1 small onion, chopped
1 medium eggplant	1 garlic clove, minced
2 tablespoons oil	Salt and pepper to taste
1 tomato, diced	1/4 teaspoon basil
1 green pepper, diced	2 tablespoons butter

Cook rice according to package directions. Cut eggplant in half lengthwise and scoop out the center from each half, leaving a 1/2-inch shell. Dice the eggplant meat. Place shells outside down in a large skillet with about 1/2-inch boiling salted water. Cover and steam 3 minutes. Drain and set aside. Heat oil and cook diced eggplant, tomatoes, green pepper, onion and garlic until tender. Add cooked rice and seasonings and stir to combine. Stuff eggplant shells with mixture. Dot with butter. Bake in preheated 350° oven about 35 minutes or until shells are tender. Makes 2 main dish servings.

#### **Ratatouille**

1 1/2 pounds eggplant, peeled, sliced	4 large tomatoes, peeled, seeded, sliced
1 pound zucchini, sliced	1/4 cup parmesan cheese
1 large green pepper sliced	1 teaspoon basil

1 1/2 cups onion sliced	Salt and pepper to taste
3 cloves garlic minced	2 tablespoons bread crumbs
2 tablespoons olive oil	1 teaspoon olive oil

Combine eggplant, zucchini and green pepper slices. In a large skillet, cook the onions and garlic cloves in oil until softened. Spread onion mixture on the bottom of an oiled shallow 2 quart baking dish. Arrange half the eggplant mixture on top and spread it with half the tomato slices. Sprinkle the tomatoes with 2 tablespoons parmesan cheese, 1/2 teaspoon basil and salt and pepper. Arrange the remaining vegetables and tomatoes in layers in the baking dish. Season them with the remaining cheese, basil, salt and pepper. Sprinkle with bread crumbs and olive oil. Bake at 400 degrees F for 45 minutes. Serves 8.

### **Grilled Green Bean and Eggplant Salad**

2 Oriental eggplants	2 tablespoons minced red onion
1/2 pound fresh green beans, whole	1 tablespoon olive oil
1/4 cup Balsamic vinegar	2 tablespoons lemon juice
2 large red bell peppers, julienne	2 tablespoons Balsamic vinegar
2 cups mixed greens	Salt and pepper to taste

Slice eggplant into 1/4" rounds. Toss with green beans in 1/4 C balsamic vinegar. Grill 8 to 10 minutes, turning frequently until tender. In large salad bowl, toss together peppers, greens and onions with olive oil, lemon juice and 2 Tablespoons balsamic vinegar. Salt and pepper to taste. Arrange grilled vegetables on top and serve immediately. Yields 4 servings.

### **Penne With Eggplant**

12 ounces penne pasta	1 teaspoon dried basil
1 medium eggplant	1 dried bay leaf
3 tablespoons olive oil	1 teaspoon dried oregano
1/2 cup sliced mushrooms	1/4 cup dry red wine(optional)
1 small onion, coarsely chopped	1/2 cup shredded mozzarella cheese,
1 1/2 cups tomato sauce	part skim

Cook penne according to package directions until al dente. Drain, reserving half cup of the cooking water. Set aside. Peel eggplant and cut into 1/3" cubes. In a large, nonstick pan over medium heat, heat 2 tablespoons olive oil. Add eggplant and saute 5 minutes or until browned and tender. Transfer to a bowl. In the same pan, add remaining olive oil and saute mushrooms and onions for 3 minutes, or until tender. Stir in cooked eggplant, tomato sauce, basil, bay leaf, oregano and wine. Cook 10 minutes longer, reducing heat if mixture begins to boil. If sauce is

too thick, pour in a little of the reserved water. Remove bay leaf, stir in penne and cheese. Cook stirring, until cheese is melted. Season with salt and pepper. Serve hot. Yields 4 servings.