



Many Mediterranean cultures believed the eggplant to be an aphrodisiac.
[PHOTO/CHRISTINE PETERSON]

A MOST INSPIRING DELICACY

Historic, legendary, versatile – eggplant the almost-perfect food

BY CAROL GOODMAN KAUFMAN

*In this warm spring rain/tiny leaves are sprouting/from the eggplant seed
– Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), from Haiku*

For poetry to have been written in homage to it, the eggplant must truly be special. Whether the familiar pear-shaped giant, long and narrow, or grape-sized, and whether purple, white, orange-red, or green, the eggplant is delicious and versatile. Even better, it is low in saturated fat, sodium and cholesterol, while high in vitamins and minerals. In other words, an almost-perfect food.

The eggplant is a fruit of unsure origin. And it is indeed a fruit – specifically a berry. Some experts believe the eggplant

originated in China in the fifth century B.C., and then was cultivated only for the rich beauty of its lavender flowers and full foliage against the shiny fruit. These same sources say that it wasn't grown for food until the fifth century A.D. Other historians assert that the eggplant was probably cultivated in India 4,000 to 5,000 years ago, and still others maintain that the eggplant has been grown and eaten in Persia since 1500 B.C.

Regardless of its origin, the fruit's name probably refers to the fact that the first cultivated eggplants were white and, well, egg-shaped. Unfortunately, the eggplant, just like its cousins the tomato and potato, faced quite a challenge in gaining acceptance because of its botanical relationship to “deadly nightshade” or belladonna.

One of the oldest written references to the eggplant is found in a fifth-century Chinese manuscript, where it was recorded that ladies of fashion made a black dye from eggplant to stain their teeth, which, after polishing, shone like silver. Today, we buy tooth whiteners!

The eggplant was relatively unknown outside the Far East and Asia until Arab and Persian traders introduced it to the Middle East in the seventh century, and to Spain and North Africa in the early eighth century.

The 10th-century poet Kushajam, variously described as being either Syrian or Persian, wrote: “The doctor makes ignorant fun of me for loving eggplant, but I will not give it up. Its flavor is like the saliva generously exchanged by lovers in kissing.”

Yuck. Had I read that description, I probably would never have taken a first taste of baba ghanouj, one of my all-time favorite dishes.

Many Mediterranean cultures believed the eggplant to be an aphrodisiac, and the chefs of the Ottoman Empire purportedly prepared many eggplant recipes to keep things amorous in the harem. Some of these cooks are said to have boasted up to 50 recipes each. And, a popular Arabic saying holds that a proper bride should know 100 ways to prepare an eggplant. Turkey's love affair with the fruit helped spread its popularity throughout the Middle East.

Eggplant plays a role in several stories that feature Mullah Nasrudin, a popular 13th-century Sufi fictional character known for his humorous anecdotes – sort of a funny Asian Aesop. Among his escapades:

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Moroccan Vegetable Stew [PHOTO/RICK CINCLAIR]

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Nasrudin and a friend went to a restaurant and decided that, to save money, they would share a plate of eggplants. They argued for several minutes as to whether the fruits should be stuffed or fried, Nasrudin preferring his fruit fried. They went back and forth for quite some time, arguing the merits of their respective choices. Finally, tired and hungry, Nasrudin gave up, and the men ordered their eggplants to be stuffed. As they were waiting to be served, the friend collapsed to the floor, obviously quite ill. Nasrudin jumped up from the table.

“Are you going to fetch a doctor?” asked the man at the next table. “No, you fool,” shouted Nasrudin, “I’m going to see if it’s too late to change the order.”

While we can’t imagine an Italian menu today without pasta alla Norma or eggplant caponata, the berry was unknown in Italy until Arab traders introduced it in the 13th century. In fact, the first published reference to a dish resembling eggplant parmigiana isn’t found until the 15th century, in writings by poet Simone Prudenzi.

Nor can we fathom a meal in Madrid without berenjenas fritas con miel (fried eggplant with honey) among the tapas offerings, but written recipes for almôdrote, a Sephardic dish of cheese, garlic and eggplant, didn’t appear until the 14th century.

Despite its popularity in the East, Northern Europeans weren’t so convinced of the eggplant’s virtues. Medieval doctors warned that consuming it could cause problems ranging from freckles to cancer to insanity, leading the 13th-century Dominican friar Albert of Cologne to describe the eggplant as “mala insana,” or “mad apple.” The term stuck. In fact, etymologists believe that the Italian word for eggplant, melanzana, comes from mala insana.

When he first saw the fruit, 16th-century British botanist John Gerard warned people against it. He wrote, “Doubtlesse these Apples have a mischevous qualitie ... It is therefore better to esteem this plant and have it in the garden for your pleasure and the rarenesse thereof, than for any virtue or good

Moroccan Vegetable Stew

Serves 6

From northern Africa, this recipe combines sweet and savory flavors in a rich, satisfying stew.

Choose eggplants that are heavy, with tight, shiny skins. Salt the cut-up eggplant and place it in a colander under a heavy weight. This operation will both remove excess water and reduce bitterness. Eggplant will oxidize somewhat quickly after it is cut, but you can delay the browning by chilling the eggplant in ice water.

Ingredients:

- 1 medium eggplant, cut into 1-in. cubes with a stainless steel knife
- 2 medium sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 6 small onions, quartered
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 T. olive oil
- 1 t. ground cinnamon
- ¾ t. ground cumin
- ¼ t. ground turmeric
- ¼ t. ground cloves
- ¼ t. black pepper
- ½ t. cayenne pepper
- ¾ c. raisins or currants
- 1 red bell pepper, cut into 1-in. pieces
- 1 28-oz. can diced tomatoes
- 3 medium zucchini, sliced
- 1 c. celery, sliced
- 15-oz. can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 15 oz. can red kidney beans, drained and rinsed
- 4 c. vegetable broth
- 2 T. fresh parsley, minced fine
- 1 c. sliced and toasted almonds

Directions:

In a Dutch oven, sauté eggplant, sweet potato, onion and garlic in oil 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in spices, raisins, and pepper. Cook 2 minutes longer. Add remaining ingredients, except parsley. Bring to boil, reduce heat and simmer, covered, until vegetables are tender, about 20 minutes. Stir in parsley and serve on a bed of couscous or rice, garnished with toasted almonds. Scoop it up with khoubz or pita bread or, if you are particularly fastidious, a fork.

qualities yet knowne.” In other words, pretty to look at but no good to eat.

But, at the same time that Gerard was cautioning against it, 16th-century Spaniards had named the eggplant “apple of love.” They’re not the only ones. The Jews became so enamored of the fruit that they became forever associated with it, bringing the eggplant with them when they fled persecution by the Almohades and Almoravides in southern Spain, and the Inquisition in Italy. Scholars David Gitlitz and Linda Davidson write in their classic book, “A Drizzle of Honey,” that the eggplant was known as the “Jewish fruit.”

They report that when agents of the Inquisition interrogated maids working in converso households, among the questions they would ask was whether their employers frequently requested eggplant. If they did, they were judged to be crypto-Jews.

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The eggplant was introduced to the United States in the early 1800s by Thomas Jefferson, an enthusiastic collector of new plants. [PHOTO/CHRISTINE PETERSON]

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A half century after Gerard, English herbalist John Parkinson warned that eggplants were suitable only "... for Italy and other hot countries," although he conceded, "They (the people) doe eat them with more desire and pleasure than we do cowcubers." He suggested, "People should only eat the vegetables after boiling them with vinegar for by their bitterness and acrimony ... they engender Melancholly, the Leprosie, Cancers, the Piles ... the Headache, and a stinking breath, breed obstructions in the Liver and Spleene, and change the complexion into a foule blacke and yellow colour." To add to its perils, Parkinson writes, the eggplant "invites to venery."

I guess one man's "apple of love" is another's vehicle of unsavory sex.

The eggplant didn't get to Latin America, via Mexico and the Caribbean, until Spanish explorers brought it in the 16th century. Curiously, the fruit didn't arrive in France until the 17th century, when King Louis XIV introduced eggplant from the potager du roi (the king's kitchen garden) to his dinner table.

(The garden, one of France's Notable Gardens, is still in existence, tended by the École Nationale Supérieure du Paysage, France's state school of landscape architecture.)

But Louis' guests were suspicious of it, believing, as did many of their European neighbors, that eating eggplant would cause both physical and mental disease. The French attitude gradually evolved, however. By the late 18th century, after the Revolution, grilled eggplant became enormously popular among the fashionable set.

The eggplant ultimately arrived in the United States in the early 1800s, when Thomas Jefferson, renowned as an enthusiastic collector of new plants, was the first to introduce it to his gardens at Monticello. However, despite Jefferson's efforts, many Americans resisted trying the fruit until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But, when Chinese and Italian immigrants arrived on our shores along with their culinary traditions incorporating eggplant, the dam finally broke. As Americans have become increasingly exposed to the great variety of ethnic cuisines our immigrant culture offers, the big purple berry has come to enjoy a special place on the dinner table. 🍆



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