

Eggplant Angst

Eggplant is the vegetable people seem to love to hate and yet it is so versatile and delicious. I suspect the hate aspect is often not knowing how best to cook it coupled with a fear of having to use too much oil. Olive oil is the good oil, so relax; you'll probably consume more oil with a bag of crisps, mayonnaise or fish and chips and I don't hear too many complaints about the oil absorbed by those foods. There is also a good dose of the good oil in a simple salad dressing (3: 1 ratio of extra virgin olive oil to vinegar) which is a delight on fresh summer salad greens and tomatoes and enjoyed by many, not to mention its liberal use in skordalia and baba ganoush. What's too much olive oil if you are eating lots of healthy vegetables? Summer is the best time to buy eggplants, so give them a chance next time you shop. Firstly, make sure you buy eggplants that are shiny and firm to the touch. Dull, soft ones are old, will probably be seedy inside and likely taste unpleasantly bitter. To the sceptics who are oil shy try the barbecue approach and cut thick slices lengthwise, lightly brushing them with olive oil and grill them on medium heat until soft on the inside and golden on the outside. Grill marks add a smokey, Mediterranean touch. Place the cooked slices on a platter and sprinkle (flamboyantly, like an Italian) with extra virgin olive oil, a pinch of sea salt and chopped herbs and serve with barbecued meats. Alternatively place a grilled round in a burger or used grilled slices in a vegetarian lasagna. For lasagna, eggplant goes particularly well with sautéed mushrooms and onion or tomato and ricotta.



eggplant and mushroom lasagna

To reduce the amount of oil that eggplant absorbs during cooking, salting the eggplant for 30 minutes will help. Salting draws out the water and tightens the structure before frying. Counterintuitively, after salting the eggplant, you need to wash out the salt under the tap and then pat dry with paper towel. If I've lost you at this point, just stick to the BBQ method. For the crumbed eggplant shown, I salted the slices for 30 minutes first and as a result I needed little olive oil to fry them. Just dust the dried slices in flour, dip into egg and then panko crumbs, pressing the crumbs firmly onto the slices. The crumbed eggplant was crispy outside and soft, like melted cheese, on the inside. Putting a handful of grated Parmesan cheese in with the eggs added to that illusion. I made this dish a feature of a vegetarian meal, topping it with a fresh tomato salsa with sides of grilled asparagus and a spiced potato and pea warm salad with Greek yoghurt from Greg and Lucy Malouf's book, *New Feasts*. Eggplant

can take centre stage and really shine. You just have to show it some love.