

# Sicilian Caponata

I am reading *In Sicily* by Normal Lewis at the moment; a wonderful evocation of a tragically beautiful and complex Italian region. Greek, Norman, Spanish, German, French and Arab rule have left a mark not just on art and architecture but invariably on the cuisine of Sicily. A substantial Arab influence, where dried fruit, nuts and spices, like saffron infuse dishes with a particular exotic style, is coupled with the less extravagant, a legacy of periods of extreme poverty when much is made of a few gathered herbs and sun-kissed vegetables. Perhaps no dish says Sicily more than caponata. It is a Sicilian summer of vegetables all bright with colour and ripeness but with the brooding darkness of eggplant playing the major role. The many variations of this amalgam of eggplant, zucchini, peppers, onion, celery and tomato with its spine of piquancy from red wine vinegar, sugar, sultanas, green olives and capers is as mysterious and multi-layered as Sicily itself. Some variations even include pieces of chocolate or a sprinkling of unsweetened cocoa. A garnish of toasted pine nuts and basil leaves leaves you in no doubt that this dish has a history. Caponata is perfect for summer as a side to grilled meat and fish, tossed with pasta or as a dish on its own to be enjoyed at room temperature or direct from the fridge, draped with a few white anchovies to help down a chilled white wine or beer at the end of a hot day. Whatever way you choose to enjoy it I am sure once you start to make it you will return to caponata every summer and perhaps make it your own in some way. This is my favorite version, where each vegetable is fried separately and the chopped fresh tomatoes are gently folded through at the very end once the heat is turned off. I like the individual flavors and textures to remain whilst enveloped in the sweet and sour sauce. The flavours only improve after a couple of days in the fridge.

# Caponata

- 1 large eggplant
- 2 celery stalks, thickly sliced
- 4 -6 purple pickling onions, cut into wedges
- 2 zucchini (green or yellow), cut into 2 cm dice
- 2 long red peppers or capsicum, cut into 2 cm squares
- olive oil
- handful sultanas
- 2 large tomatoes cut into 2 cm dice
- handful pitted green olives
- 3 tsp salted capers, washed
- 1 tbs sugar
- 2 tbs red wine vinegar
- pinch salt
- handful toasted pinenuts
- torn basil leaves

Cut the the eggplant into 2 cm dice, sprinkle with cooking salt and leave to drain in a colander for 30 minutes while you prepare the other vegetables. rinse the eggplant under running water and then squeeze it dry with a few sheets of paper towel. Heat a generous glug of olive oil in a large, deep stovetop casserole dish and fry the eggplant pieces, turning them until a golden brown. Remove to large bowl next to the stove. Add more olive oil and now fry the zucchini until golden and remove to the bowl. Next fry the peppers, tossing them cook evenly. Remove to the bowl of cooked vegetables. Add the celery and onions together with a pinch of salt and fry until the onions become translucent. Add the sultanas and stir until they plump up in the heat. Add the sugar and stir well to dissolve and slightly caramelize, then add the vinegar and stir. Add all the vegetables, olives and capers except the tomatoes and mix well. Cook for 3 or 4 minutes until well

heated. Turn the stove off and fold through the tomatoes. Garnish with basil and pinenuts.

