

# Summer Vegetables With Ricotta

Summer vegetables with ricotta bring a freshness and lightness to meals during the hot months of the year. There are many ways to combine them to provide simple, interesting and healthy dishes. The important thing is to buy the freshest ricotta you can, preferably cut as a wedge from a large ricotta cake at a supermarket deli or cheese store. Italian specialist delicatessens will always have a fresh ricotta cake or little individual baskets of ricotta for sale. If you are using ricotta in a pasta dish the freshness will matter most but with a baked dish such as stuffed zucchini a supermarket tub of ricotta will be fine. A lovely combination is pasta tossed with ribbons of sautéed pale green Lebanese zucchini, fresh mint, lemon zest and finished with a very gentle crumbling through of ricotta. If you want to jazz it up, garnish with toasted pine nuts. This is a really lovely summer meal. The caponata recipe from my previous post is delicious spooned cold onto a layer of ricotta on toast. This combination is great for breakfast, lunch or a light dinner. Ricotta with slow roasted Roma tomatoes and fresh basil is another wonderful start to the day. One of my favorite ricotta-vegetable combinations is a variation on Corsican stuffed zucchini; the variation being the use of ricotta rather than the traditional Corsican goat or sheep soft whey cheese. These stuffed zucchini are very simple to make and delicate in flavour. They are best eaten at room temperature or cold, which makes them handy to serve as a snack with drinks or as part of buffet. Toscano's in Kew always have lovely little pale green zuchinis which are just perfect for this dish.

Fresh ricotta is available from Carlton, still the home of Italian foods:

[DOC Delicatessen, Carlton](#)

[La Latteria, Carlton](#)

[King and Godfree, Carlton](#)

also

[Mediterranean Wholesalers, Brunswick](#)

[Alba Cheese Factory, Tullamarine](#) – go Sun- Fri mornings for still warm freshly made ricotta

[Alimentari, Collingwood](#)

## **Corsican Style Stuffed Zucchini**

- 8 pale green Lebanese zucchini
- 1 shallot, finely diced
- pinch salt
- olive oil
- handful currants
- 1 clove garlic finely minced
- 1 thick slice white bread, crust removed
- 200 g ricotta cheese
- handful finely chopped fresh mint
- handful pine nuts (optional)

Halve the zucchini lengthwise and blanch in boiling water for a minute. Drain and cool the zucchini. Using a teaspoon remove the flesh inside the zucchini, leaving most of the stem and enough of a rim at the rounded end to maintain a stable little boat for the filling. Chop the flesh finely. Heat the oil in a frypan and gently fry the shallots with the salt until translucent. Add the currants and garlic and heat gently until

the currents puff up. Blitz the bread into crumbs in a food processor. Add the onion mixture, half the pine nuts and mint to the breadcrumbs and mix for a few seconds. Add the ricotta and pulse until just mixed through. Using a teaspoon fill the zucchini and top each with a few of the remaining pine nuts. Place on a baking sheet, drizzle lightly with olive oil and bake for 30 minutes at 170°C.

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## 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.



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# Small Bites Make A Big Impression

I like serving interesting small bites with drinks. I guess I have been influenced by my Austrian mother who always made little open sandwiches with pretty garnishes no matter what the occasion and for whoever dropped in unexpectedly. Somehow she always managed to rustle up something that looked appetizing and that's what an appetizer should be after all. While there are a myriad of good quality dips and pates available at the supermarket there is something special about expressing a little style and individuality by making appetizers yourself. You can take inspiration from the tapas bars of Spain, the aperitivi hour offerings of Italy or the open sandwich bars that are so much a part of Vienna and middle Europe. And if dips are more your thing, try making them from scratch; a baba ganoush is simply a matter of grilling a whole eggplant on the Weber at high heat for 30 minutes, removing the softened centre and blitzing it with lemon juice, tahini, salt and garlic. For extra smokiness hold the whole eggplant over the open gas flame of your cooker for a few seconds after grilling. It will taste amazing. Make stunning guacamole with ripe avocados mashed with one chipolte pepper from a can of La Morena peppers in adobo sauce for some real Mexican flavour.



Other ways to make wonderful flavoursome small bites is to take advantage of seasonal produce like really ripe tomatoes. You can make bruschetta with toasted slices of sourdough baguette rubbed with a piece of garlic and topped with chopped tomatoes and generously drizzled with extra virgin olive oil or top bread with crushed broad beans and mint in springtime. Take advantage of our wonderful local cheeses, like Meredith marinated goats cheese or the silky goat cheeses or fromage frais from Holy Goat. The latter goes so well with a little lemon zest, extra virgin olive oil and fresh herbs sprinkled on top.



A small bite can be a meal in miniature when you top a slice of dark rye bread with a smokey ham or poached tongue and tiny diced potato or Russian salad. Essentially meat and potatoes in a couple of mouthfuls. For fishy bites you can't go past Tassie smoked salmon or trout fillets and, when in season, a handful of school prawns are just the right size for a small bite. Adding a little creamed horseradish to sour cream is a quick and tasty glue for your fishy bites.



A few condiments such as capers, cornichons and horse radish that kept for ages are worth stocking in the fridge and a little pot of chives on the porch is very handy for a few snips of green to highlight your gems. Failing that, a bit of lemon zest also works wonders. None of these little open sandwiches I mentioned need baking and any cooking of components, such as potato salad, can easily be done the day before, just leave 20 to 30 minutes for plating before the first doorbell rings.

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## **Forgotten Zucchini Cake**

There are many recipes on the internet for zucchini cake as these vegetables tend to get out of hand in the garden and

sometimes a real bruiser emerges that is either destined for the compost heap or a relative who lives in an apartment. Presented last week with one the size of a small baseball bat, as well as a large bag of delicious blood plums by way of consolation, I took the challenge and found that I was able to transform the forgotten zucchini into a rich, fluffy chocolate zucchini cake. I devised a recipe and halved and altered the standard sugar content without compromising the structure of the cake. The cake itself is easy to mix by hand in a bowl. The only bit requiring a bit of work is peeling and grating the zucchini. If you have a mechanized vegetable grater then that should make preparation a breeze. The fat content comes from extra virgin olive oil and some dark couverture chocolate buttons but you can omit the extra chocolate extravagance if you wish.

### **Elizabeth's Chocolate Zucchini Cake**

Line base of a 23 cm springform tin. Preheat oven 160°C (fan forced).

- 350 g S.R. flour
- 50 g unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 tsp mixed spice
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 175 ml extra virgin olive oil
- 160 g light brown sugar
- 40 g caster sugar
- 2 eggs
- 600 g grated zucchini
- 2/3 cup dark couverture buttons (optional)

### **Chocolate Ganache**

- 100 g crème fraîche
- 100 g 70% cocoa chocolate or buttons

Prepare the zucchini. If using a large oversize one forgotten in the garden peel it and using the tip of a teaspoon remove

the seeds. Grate the flesh with a course grater and measure the wet weight. Put the flour, salt, spice and cocoa in a bowl and mix well to combine. In another bowl stir the eggs, sugars and oil well with a whisk, making sure you break up the lumps of brown sugar. Add the zucchini to the wet ingredients and then fold through the dry ingredients and the chocolate buttons. Pour into the prepared tin and bake for approximately 40 minutes or until a skewer inserted in the centre comes out cleanly. Leave the baked cake in the tin to cool for 5-10 minutes. Remove the sides and cool for another 10 minutes before inverting onto a wire rack to remove the base and baking paper. The cake is very soft when warm, so minimise handling while it is still warm.

Prepare the ganache when the cake is completely cold. If using block chocolate chop it into small pieces and place pieces in a bowl. Heat the cream in a small saucepan and when it starts to boil remove from the heat and pour over the chocolate, stirring with a rubber spatula until the chocolate is smooth and completely melted. Leave to cool and thicken slightly and then pour and quickly spread over the cake. This cake stays light and moist for a few days. Enjoy.

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## **Creamy Skordalia**

If you want to give your grilled meat or fish a flavour and textural contrast, serve it with a creamy skordalia. With cauliflowers in season now you can make a cauliflower skordalia or one with a mix of potato and cauliflower. Skordalia hails from Greece and at its most basic is the thick puree of potatoes with a heady dose of garlic, emulsified to a

creamy sauce with lots of olive oil. Variations include ground walnuts or almonds, chopped parsley, cauliflower or any other starchy vegetable. The velvety consistency is what is lovely and can easily be achieved by using a stick blender. A creamy skordalia can substitute extremely well for a gravy with a roast dinner, serve as a dip with flat breads or team up with tinned tuna for a scrumptious toasted sandwich. Skordalia is very versatile and easy to make.

### **For Four**

- 250 g peeled and sliced potato
- 250 g sliced cauliflower
- approximately 600 ml milk
- salt
- 4 cloves garlic (a couple more if you like it strong)
- 250 ml extra virgin olive oil
- zest and juice of a small lemon
- pepper

Cover the potato and cauliflower with milk in a saucepan and cook until tender. Drain off most of the milk and discard. Roughly crush the garlic with some salt and add to the vegetables and then blend well with a stick blender. Gradually pour in the olive oil and blend between additions to emulsify well. Add the lemon zest and juice and pepper to taste and blend to a smooth velvety consistency.