

Seasonal Eating
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Incredible Edible Eggplant
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Eggplant is an often overlooked vegetable in the produce section. It is beautiful with its glossy purple/black skin and little green cap, but what do you do with it when you get it home? Actually, eggplant is very versatile and often used in European, Middle Eastern and Asian cuisines. It loves to absorb other flavors and has a texture that makes it a good meat substitute in dishes such as eggplant parmesan.

To salt or not to salt? While sometimes bitter, fresh, small to medium eggplants that are not overgrown are usually not as bitter. Take a small taste and if it tastes bitter, salt the slices and let the bitter liquids draw to the surface. Blot the slices with a paper towel and rinse the salt off

and you are ready to use the eggplant in your recipe. While on a culinary tour of the Italian neighborhood of North Boston, we were told to look for the eggplants that have a line on the bottom (blossom end) instead of a dimple dot. These were “male” and had less seeds and were less bitter. There is much debate about whether this is true or not, but I do find myself checking to see if mine has a line! I have found that if I use my eggplant within a day or two of purchase it is fine and doesn’t need any salting. Make sure that your eggplant springs back when lightly pressed and doesn’t have any dark brownish or shriveled looking places. Handle it with care as it will bruise.

Eggplant can be eaten with the skin on or off, it’s your choice. Because it absorbs flavors from sauces well, it is great for adding to stir fries or sautéed and mixed with a curry sauce. While some recipes call for coating and frying eggplant, especially for eggplant parmesan, I find that it is just as good baked in the oven. Because it absorbs like a sponge, fried eggplant can get greasy and soggy. Dip your slices in egg wash and then into seasoned breadcrumbs (I prefer the crunchier Japanese panko crumbs) and parmesan cheese. Place on a parchment lined baking sheet and bake for about 25 minutes at 375 degrees, turning over once. Roasting diced eggplant tossed with a little olive oil and salt brings out its flavor and is great roasted with peppers, onions or tomatoes for a simple side dish. If you want to dress it up a little more, add roasted vegetables to cooked orzo (rice shaped pasta) along with green onions, pine nuts, feta cheese and basil and toss with a lemon juice vinaigrette for a great side dish in the Greek Orzo with Roasted Vegetables recipe below. You can serve this warm or at room temperature.

For more ideas on using eggplant, lima beans and pears for the fall, visit the Bedford County Extension website Seasonal Eating page. The Seasonal Eating Cooking Demonstration will be held on Wednesday, September 21 at 12:00 noon at the UT Extension Office. Call the office at 684-5971 for more information or to sign up by September 19th and bring \$5.00 to class to cover the samples.

Greek Orzo with Roasted Vegetables

- 1/2 eggplant, cut into 1/2" cubes
- 1/2 red bell pepper, cut into 1/2" dice
- 1/2 yellow pepper, cut into 1/2" dice
- 1/2 small red onions, cut into 1/2" dice
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 1/4 pound orzo (rice shaped pasta)
- 2 green onions, chopped
- 1/4 cup pine nuts, toasted
- 1/2 cup feta cheese, cubed or lightly crumbled
- 4-5 leaves fresh basil, thinly sliced

Dressing:

- 1 1/2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 1 1/2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/8 teaspoon black pepper

In a large bowl, toss together the eggplant, red and yellow peppers, onion, garlic, olive oil, salt and pepper. Place on a baking sheet and roast at 425 degrees for about 30-40 minutes, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned and tender. Meanwhile, bring a saucepan of salted water to a boil and add orzo. Cook until just tender, about 7-9 minutes. Drain. Place in a large bowl and add roasted vegetables including any juices on the pan. In a small bowl, whisk together the lemon juice, olive oil, salt and pepper. Toss with the pasta and vegetables and let cool to room temperature. Add the green onions, pine nuts, cheese and basil. Toss and serve.