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Eggplant

Lord of Vegetables

Botanically a fruit, but widely accepted as a vegetable, the aubergine (otherwise known as eggplant or brinjal) is widely used in foods ranging from pickles to soufflés. *Shaheen Perveen* traces the eggplant's exotic origins.



Above: **A variety of brinjals ready for cooking**

The aubergine is a member of the nightshade family, Solanaceae, which includes tomatoes, peppers and potatoes. Its mild flavour and spongy texture go well with mutton and chicken and it can be used in barbecued kebabs. At one time it was discounted as poisonous, being dubbed *mala insana*, the noxious apple, because it was believed to cause insanity. It was from this erroneous belief that the custom arose of soaking the sliced or cubed eggplant in cold, salted water before cooking. However salting limits the bitterness of some of the eggplants and impedes the amount of frying oil used.

Known as the 'lord of vegetables' in the Middle East, this relative newcomer to the world's cuisine featured at a fabulous ninth century wedding. It happened in the year 825 when the Caliph of Baghdad married a shy 18-year-old named Buran. It was a gala affair that had a continuous stream of banquets and musicals for more than two weeks. The royal party organisers were consulted to make Buran's wedding a celebration of unparalleled extravagance.

It was the best of times in Baghdad-something akin to the age of Arabian Nights, when the land was at its height of glory, wealth and splendour but never before had there been a wedding that cost 50 million silver dirhams. It was an ancient affair, yet the effects are still with us, because this was the event

that effectively marked the debut of a new vegetable – the eggplant. Legendary Turkish Sultan, Mustaph Mehre, who lived for 123 years, believed that the eggplant was responsible for his longevity. He had 170 wives and countless concubines. He bade them goodbye once they reached the age of 20. However, he retained one wife who had a flair for cooking his precious eggplants!

From Arabia, it spread to Europe. Despite its Middle Eastern legacy, the eggplant actually originated in Southeast Asia. The first surviving mention is found in the fifth century Chinese work on agriculture 'Ts' I Min Yao Shu'. Today, it is eaten throughout the Far East, the Near East, Europe and in the Americas. It has a number of strange varieties. The first one that the English saw was a species bearing small white fruit that appeared remarkably like eggs. For this reason, a brinjal is referred to as an eggplant in Europe. Initially it was greeted with insults: Bulgarians call it *Kiopoolu* – a rather impolite word corresponding to a scoundrel; Italians refer to it as *melanzana* and the Greeks call it *malitzana* from *mala insana* and it was not until the 15th century that it gained acceptance. The Spaniards introduced it to America where it became a big hit.

In its homeland, the natural trace of bitterness is highly favoured though crossbreeding and cultivation has greatly

improved its flavour. Back to Buran's day, however, this bitterness was disliked. Cooks apparently had not yet discovered that if you sprinkle sliced eggplant with salt, after half an hour a bitter brownish liquor will be drawn out and you can wipe the slices dry and fry them without concentrating the bitterness. They'll also fry better.

Probably helped by the glamorous association of the wedding, *buraniyya* – which was simply fried eggplant slices that had first been soaked in brine, the Baghdad style of drying salt – became a smash success and even now, more than a thousand years after Buran's death, its descendants are known everywhere. They aren't simply fried eggplants anymore, of course as no dish survives so long without swinging with the fashion of times. In Iran, cooks started adding yoghurt to fried eggplant as a sort of dip. In the rest of the Islamic world, stewed lamb was added. In Spain, *alboronia* is meatless, but pumpkin and peppers are usually included. In some places *buraniyya* became so popular it gave rise to whole categories of dish bearing Buran's name.

People in the Middle East give eggplant dishes such picturesque names like *hunkar begendi* meaning 'as the prince approved' or *imam bayildi* – 'the Imam swooned'. Apparently the Imam fainted because of the delicious dish or

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perhaps the consumption of oil, sent shockwaves as egg plants are well known guzzlers of oil. Any housewife from Egypt to Bulgaria can name you a dozen or more heart-warming eggplant stews – Greek moussaka is one such example.

Highly versatile, the vegetable can be stuffed, barbecued on a kebab skewer, baked, or pureed. An interesting modern technique is to skip the salting of fried eggplant by slicing it rather thin. Some of the bitter juices run out in the pan during cooking and the eggplant gets a nice toasty flavour, a little like roast corn. With this technique the eggplant doesn't have to be fried with oil; frying eggplant can soak up a large quantity of oil. Long slender eggplants are less moist and are best suited for frying while the fat, round ones are much juicier and ideal for baking.

In India, no traditional Bengali cuisine is complete without the famous *begun bhaja*, and the eggplant is very popular with Gujarati cuisine as well, where it is combined with potatoes, beans and Chinese mustard or *chaulai*. In Arab nations, cold eggplant puree is flavoured with sesame and lemon juice. In the Balkans it is usually spiced with roasted pepper and savoured much like caviar.

The eggplant has various medicinal uses. It reduces swellings and is a known remedy for whitlow (when it is burned and cooked in hot ashes, cut in the middle and tied on the ailing finger). The eggplant is low in calories but high in potassium with a good dose of vitamin K and sufficient fibre. The juice of eggplant is useful to those who find their hands and feet sweating. The use of uncooked green brinjals by healthy persons sharpens their appetite. The China brinjals are specifically recommended to those with high blood pressure as they are believed to cool the blood.

The white brinjal absorbs all seven colours from the sun and is believed to stimulate liver functions of glucose transformation

and bile production. Its use is said to regulate defective liver function in children. Moreover the white eggplant is believed to be more mild and meatier than the purple kind. The second choice should be the greenish variety and finally the blue one, which extracts more iron elements from the earth. The blue variety can cause a stomach upset at times, while the white variety is believed to tone up the digestive system. Blues were much in demand by the affluent Chinese ladies during the fifth century who used the dark skins to prepare a dye for polishing their teeth. Clarified butter is recommended in case of indigestion caused by excessive intake of this vegetable.

Eggplants deserve careful handling as they bruise easily. They are equally sensitive to temperature change. Fresh eggplants should not be wrapped in plastic as this hastens deterioration. 🍆

Baba Ganoush



Ingredients

- 1 1/2 lb Eggplant
- 3 tb Lemon juice
- 1 ts Salt
- 2 ts Minced fresh garlic
- 3 tb Sesame tahini
(optional: substitute yogurt or sour cream)
- 1/4 cup Chopped parsley
- 1/2 cup Toasted pine nuts
- 2 tb Olive oil

Directions

- Preheat the oven to 400 degrees fahrenheit.
- Prick the eggplant all over with a fork.
- Bake whole for about 30 minutes until tender.
- Remove from the oven, halve and scoop out the flesh.
- Blend in a food processor with the lemon juice until smooth.
- Mash the salt and garlic together and combine with the eggplant, along with the tahini.
- Cool and stir in the parsley and pine nuts.
- Before serving, drizzle with olive oil.
- Serve as a dip with tortilla chips or triangles of flat (pita) bread.

Yield: 1 batch

Categories: Appetizers, Dips, Vegetarian/Vegan.