

Eggplant, peppers natural stuffers

Those big beautiful Florida eggplants and green peppers at the produce counters these days are "natural" for stuffing. They're two of the vegetables which escaped the worst of the winter freeze, according to the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association.

Our first recipe for Oriental Stuffed Peppers is easy to make, and you don't have to brown the ground beef or precook the rice ahead of time. The mixture is seasoned with soy, garlic and ginger.

Greek Stuffed Eggplant — an adaptation of a dish using beef instead of lamb — is spiced with oregano, onion and garlic. The eggplants are halved and hollowed out and the chopped pulp sautéed with ground beef, then an egg and seasonings are stirred in. It bakes covered for about an hour. Serve with a bowl of yogurt on the side and a salad of sliced tomatoes.

At the supermarket look for eggplants that are shiny, dark purple and heavy for their size. Green peppers should be firm and shiny with heavy walls... they're an excellent source of vitamin C.

ORIENTAL STUFFED PEPPERS
4 large Florida green peppers (1 1/2 lb.)
1 cup vegetable oil
1 cup sliced mushrooms
1/2 cup sliced scallions (green onions)
1 lb. ground beef
2 tsp regular cooking rice (raw)
1/2 cup garlic powder, divided
1/2 cup ground ginger, divided
1/4 cup water
Soy Sauce
2 cups chicken broth or bouillon

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Cut a 1/4-inch slice from the stem end of each pepper. Discard stems; dice and reserve green portion (makes 1/2 cup). Remove and discard pepper seeds and fiber. Simmer whole peppers in water to cover until crisp-tender, about 5 minutes. Drain and turn upside down to drain and cool. In a medium skillet heat oil until hot. Add mushrooms, scallions and reserved diced green pepper. Sauté for 5 minutes; set aside to cool. In a medium bowl combine beef, rice, 1/2 teaspoon of the garlic powder, 1/2 teaspoon of the ginger, water and 2 tablespoons soy sauce. Stir in cooled vegetable mixture. Spoon into reserved peppers. Place peppers in an ungreased shallow 1-quart baking

pan. Combine chicken broth, 1 teaspoon soy sauce, and remaining 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder and 1/2 teaspoon ginger. Pour over peppers. Bake covered until peppers are tender and the rice in the filling is cooked, about 45 minutes, basting occasionally with pan liquid. Garnish with sliced scallions, if desired. YIELD: 4 to 6 portions.

GREEK STUFFED EGGPLANT
3 small (12 oz. each) or 2 large (1 lb. 2 oz. each) eggplants
1 1/4 tsp. salt, divided
1 1/2 tsp. lemon juice
1 lb. ground chuck*
1 cup chopped onion
1 garlic clove, crushed
1 1/2 tsp. oregano leaves, crushed
2 tsp. paprika
1/16 tsp. ground black pepper
1 egg, beaten
Vegetable oil

Cut eggplants in halves lengthwise. Score cut side 1/4-inch deep in a crisscross pattern; sprinkle with 1 teaspoon of the salt. Set aside for 1 hour. Scoop out pulp leaving 1/4-inch thick shell. Brush cavities of eggplant shells with lemon juice; set aside. Squeeze as much liquid as possible from pulp. Chop pulp (makes about 2 cups). Heat a large skillet until hot. Add beef, onion and stir until partially cooked, about 2 minutes. Add onion, garlic, oregano and reserved eggplant pulp. Cook and stir until onion is transparent, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat; set aside until cooled. Stir in paprika, black pepper and egg. Preheat oven to 375°. Fill eggplant shells with meat mixture. Place on a greased shallow pan. Brush edges of eggplant with oil. Cover and bake until tender, about 1 hour.

*Note: If using lean ground beef use 2 tablespoons oil for sautéing. YIELD: 4 to 6 portions.



Stuffed vegetables make an attractive presentation at the supper table.

Strawberry muffins for breakfast

You're sitting by a window on an early spring morning about to breakfast on a fresh strawberry muffin spread with strawberry butter. Thanks to Florida's crop of early spring strawberries you can have your strawberry breakfast fantasy as soon as tomorrow morning. Though strawberries were one of the hardest hit crops in last December's Florida freeze, a brand new crop has been harvested since then and is available at your local supermarket.

Start your strawberry muffins an hour ahead — at the night before — by combining sliced fresh strawberries with sugar to make a syrup. The syrup is drained and mixed with the batter, seasoned with a bit of vanilla and nutmeg, then the reserved strawberries gently folded in so you'll both see them and taste them. The muffins are served warm with butter, softened cream cheese, apricot preserves... or with the strawberry-apple butter below.

It's not complicated to make a fruit butter when you have an electric blender or a food processor. The strawberry-apple puree is touched with grated orange peel and a bit of spice then processed or spooned into jars, tightly covered and refrigerated... it will keep for 4 weeks (if it stays around that long).

FLORIDA STRAWBERRY MUFFINS
1 1/2 cups coarsely chopped Florida strawberries
1/2 cup sugar, divided
1/2 cup all-purpose flour (unsifted)
1/2 tsp. baking soda
1/2 tsp. ground nutmeg
1/2 tsp. salt
2 eggs, beaten
1/2 cup butter or margarine, melted
1 tsp. pure vanilla extract

In a bowl combine strawberries and 1/4 cup of the sugar. Set aside for 1 hour. Drain and reserve liquid and strawberries separately. Preheat oven to 425°. Combine flour, baking soda, nutmeg and salt; set aside. In a medium bowl mix eggs, butter, vanilla extract, remaining 1/4 cup sugar and liquid from strawberries. Add flour mixture; stir just until combined. Fold in reserved strawberries. Spoon into 12 greased muffin pans. Bake until a cake tester inserted into center comes out clean, about 20 minutes. Serve warm. YIELD: 12 muffins.

STRAWBERRY-APPLE BUTTER
1 pint Florida strawberries
5 cups peeled and sliced tart cooking apples (about 1 1/2 lb.)
1 cup sugar
Water
1 tsp. grated orange peel
1/2 tsp. ground nutmeg

Hull strawberries. Place in the container of an electric blender or food processor fitted with a metal wing blade. Whirl at high speed until pureed, scraping down sides of container if needed (makes about 1 1/2 cups). Remove and set aside. In a medium-sized enameled or stainless steel saucepan, combine apples, sugar, and just enough water (about 1/4 cup) to keep apples from sticking to pan. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer covered stirring occasionally until softened, about 15 minutes. Blend half of apples at a time until pureed. Return apples to saucepan along with orange peel, nutmeg, and reserved strawberry puree. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer covered stirring frequently until thickened, about 1 hour. (Mixture is thick when a spoonful placed on a cold saucer has no moisture seeping from the edges.) Immediately pour into hot 1/2-pint canning jars leaving 1/4-inch head space. Adjust caps. Process in boiling water bath according to manufacturer's directions for 10 minutes. Cool. Check seal. Remove rings before storing. Or refrigerate without processing in a tightly covered container for about 3 weeks. YIELD: 2 (1/2-pint) jars.

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