

MONDAY, AUGUST 7, 1995

TASTE

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TASTE BUDS



Ancient eggplant is gaining in popularity

You'll find an eggplant bush in the Janes family garden hidden between the monstrous tomato plants (which grow to record heights) and the back fence. Although eggplant has long been unappreciated in the United States, it has slowly, but steadily, gained popularity as a result of the proliferation of Greek, Italian and Middle Eastern restaurants, which serve it in a variety of ways.

The eggplant, which resembles a large egg, is a member of the nightshade family - kin to chili peppers, Irish potatoes, sweet peppers and tomato. It is believed that the modern eggplant hails from a strain grown in the fifth century B.C. somewhere in China. The plant was introduced into Africa by Arabs and Persians before the Middle Ages. From Africa, the plant was transported to Italy, and its spread throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East was inevitable.

World of choices

China, Japan, Turkey and Italy are the leading eggplant producers. In the United States, eggplant is mainly grown in Florida because the plant does best when night temperatures are about 70 degrees F. I was paging through an international cookbook last week and followed a few recipes that were indigenous to specific countries. It was as if the book was written around an eggplant.

In the French section, there was a recipe for ratatouille, which is a basic stew containing eggplant, zucchini, sweet peppers, onions, garlic and tomatoes.

Next I flicked the page to Greek recipes and stumbled on moussaka, which is a baked dish consisting of layers of lamb or veal interspersed with slices of fried eggplant in addition to eggs and cheese.

There was a recipe for Middle Eastern Baba Ganoosh, that tasty eggplant dip that is served with pita bread, and a multitude of Italian recipes for Eggplant Parmesan.

A Saturday morning excursion to any farmers market will find eggplant as petite as a plum to homey sized; antique ivory to striped violet and cream colored to a glossy raven purple; narrow and sleek to full and blemishy - an entire gorgeous gamut of varieties. But what's the difference, you ask?

Well to begin, if you come across white eggplant, it will be firmer, less moist and hold its shape better than any of the purple varieties. White eggplants are also closer-grained, creamier and much less bitter. Unfortunately, the flesh is usually more heavily seeded, and the skins are generally tougher and thicker. The white eggplants make for great grilling and are preferred in Italian Eggplant Parmesan.

Your best bet for all seasons availability will be the smaller, deep colored purple eggplants, usually called Italian or baby eggplants. They have a more delicate skin, fewer seeds, and a finer flesh. These eggplants are best in stews, dips or chunked and grilled on skewers.

Large deep purple and violet eggplants, probably the kind you and I have growing in our backyard gardens, are very versatile. A little more bitter and seedier than their smaller cousins, they can be used in any recipe.

Venture into an Asian or Japanese market and you might stumble on a rock hard, round, green or white eggplant as small as a cherry. Can or pickle these babies.

The best eggplants look heavy for their size. High solid content indicates the fruit has been cultivated in a stress-free environment. Look for smooth, taut-skinned, shiny eggplants. Once they begin getting flabby, bronzed, dented or pitted, they become even more bitter as all eggplants tend to be highly perishable.

To store, keep them away from hot and cold. Make sure they stay out of a plastic bag and use them within three days of purchase for optimum freshness.

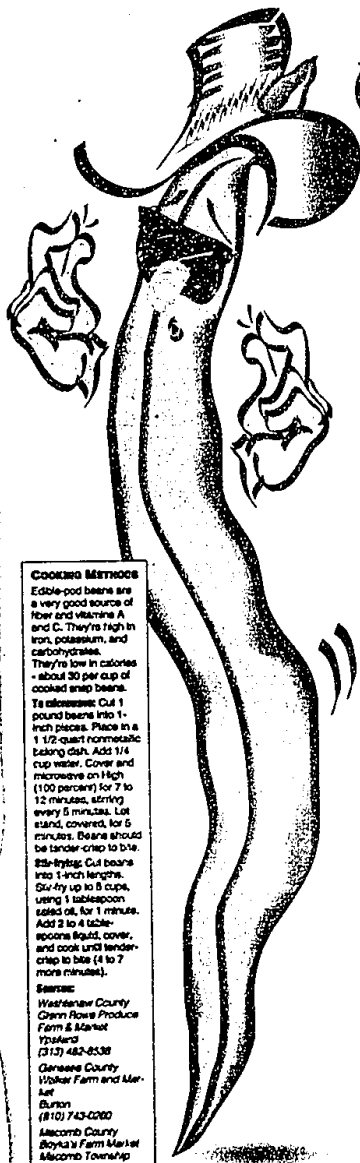
Eggplant is traditionally salted to help rid it of its bitterness. In addition, salt is used to help rid the eggplant of its excessive moisture. If you plan on grilling, frying, baking or making eggplant into a dip, it is best sprinkled with salt and placed in a colander, covered with a plate and then topped with a real heavy book or brick.

See Larry Janes' family-tested recipes inside. Chef Larry is a free-lance writer for the Observer and a frequent contributor. To leave a voice mail message for him dial (513) 853-2047 on a touch-tone phone, then mail box number 1895.

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Chef Larry Janes answers reader requests.
- Spend less time in the kitchen and more on your porch.



Green beans are a snap!

BY JOAN BORAM
STAFF WRITER

At a time when a visit to the produce department offers us an infinite variety of salad greens, mushrooms with names like "chanterelles" and "truffles," and chiles that challenge the most asbestos-mouthed, green beans may seem kind of unadventurous.

But '90s beans aren't your grandmother's vegetable. For one thing, hybridizers have pretty well eliminated the "string" in string bean. (Some of you may not know that there was a time when you peeled off the string along with the stem end of the bean.)

A fresh string bean is a delicacy if picked (and eaten) when barely mature and cooked properly. Most of us stop short of growing our own beans, but many produce stores buy Michigan-grown beans when they're in season, from July through September. And a great number of people don't think it's summer if they haven't driven to a rural area either to pick their own beans or to buy them from the grower at a farm stand.

Michigan, incidentally, is a major source of snap beans. According to Bryan Carpenter of the Michigan Vegetable Council, "The 1994 production of snap (green and yellow) beans placed Michigan third in the nation for production of beans for processing, and ninth in the U.S. for fresh market production."

At Boyka's Farms in Macomb Township, Larry DeCock and his dad grow three acres of green, yellow and pole beans. The remaining 97 acres are planted in other fruits and vegetables.

"We sell the entire crop at the farm stand," DeCock said. "We plant beans once a week through the season; our last planting is around the end of July. We always have a fresh crop of beans coming along."

"There's a lot of difference in the varieties of beans. Many people, especially if they buy during the off season when beans are imported from other states, think that the 'hipper' bean is the norm. But that bean has been developed to have a long shelf life so it can survive shipping. It holds up because it's tougher."

The DeCocks are constantly experimenting to find the perfect green bean. "We haven't found a better one than 'Derby,'" says DeCock. "It's a low-fiber bean, so it doesn't get tough as it matures. We pick every

day, so our customers always get a fresh product. Derby has excellent flavor and texture; it's great both for canning and for eating."

According to DeCock, canners are most likely to buy in mid-August, when beans are at their most plentiful and prices are most favorable. "They buy them by the bushel or half-bushel and then can them when the kids have gone back to school."

DeCock, a man who knows his beans, says the best way to cook fresh beans is the simplest. "Look for beans that are young, fresh and bright green or yellow. The thinner they are the better, for then they can be cooked whole. Break one in two; it should have a firm snap."

"Wash beans, and snip off the tips. If they seem too large to cook whole, cut them diagonally into 1-inch pieces. Plunge the beans into boiling salted water - just enough to cover them - and cook without a lid until they are barely tender. They should still have some crispness left. This should take no more than 10 to 12 minutes - at the most, 15. Drain at once and dress with melted butter or vinaigrette."

For added flavor, crumble crisp bacon over the beans, or add sautéed mushrooms or grated Romano or Swiss cheese.

Betty Walker and her son, Kelly, plant 20 acres of green beans on their 300-acre farm in Burton, Mich. The Walker Farm and Market has been in operation for 40 years, so Walker has seen a lot of changes.

"Because of labor problems, most commercially grown green beans are harvested by machine. So hybridizers (those same folks who bred away the string) have developed a type of bean plant that bears all at one time to accommodate the harvester. The problem is, they also bred out the flavor. Breeders are trying desperately to develop a bean that lends itself to mechanical harvesting and has flavor, as well."

The Walker farm provides U-pick opportunities for those whose idea of fun is picking beans, or you can buy them at the farm stand. "Our type of green bean, called 'Blue Lake Stringless,' ripens around the third week in July. Luckily, they weren't ready during the heat wave the second week of July. Nobody would have been here to pick them."

Like the DeCocks, the Walkers plant beans at least once a week, from early April until the second week in July.

Dry Creek makes award-winning cabernet

Wine maker Larry Levin of Sonoma County's Dry Creek Vineyard makes at least a dozen different wines, but his 1991 Dry Creek Cabernet Sauvignon is killer Cab. This wine has already garnered six gold medals from prestigious national wine competitions and kudos from three national wine magazines.

We had the opportunity to talk to Levin about cabernet sauvignon and its evolution in California and more particularly Dry Creek Vineyard.

"The cabernet boom began in the mid-60s," Levin explained. "There were no more than 100 acres planted in California's North Coast (then), while today there are 2,100 acres of cabernet in Dry Creek Valley alone."

As we tasted Dry Creek Cabernets from 1977 to present, Levin noted that one significant change has been his fruit source. "In 1981 we were still using a large percentage of Alexander Valley fruit," he recalled. "Cabernet grown in the valley floor is soft and supple but without the intensity we are trying to achieve. Today, most of our cabernet grapes come from Dry Creek Valley benchlands and hillsides where the fruit intensity is reminiscent of mountain vineyards." Mountain vineyards provide a drier, lighter, less fertile soil-type that produces less vine vigor with greater extract and concentration.

Improvements in the way cabernet vines are trained and trellised has had a big effect on wine quality. The old method of growing cabernet allowed the leaves to shade the fruit from the sun. New training and trellising methods lift the vines so the grapes benefit from direct sunlight, producing a fruitier wine with less herbal and

vegetative qualities.

Levin noted that most cabernets made in the '70s were 100-percent varietal. "Over the past two decades, our winemaking strategy has been to place more emphasis on blending with other Bordeaux varieties," he said. "This technique adds complexity and rounds out flavors."

Levin originally used merlot to soften cabernet's structure and produce an immediately attractive wine. "Recently, we have included cabernet franc for its spice component and petit verdot for its deep color and firm structure," he said.

Levin refers to petit verdot as his "PV insurance policy." Petit verdot grows well in the warmth of northern Sonoma County; it gives an inky-black juice and contributes a black pepper and jammy-plum quality that Levin finds attractive.

Phylloxera, the root louse that devastated the great European wine regions in the 19th century and is now chewing up California vineyards, represents a tremendous opportunity for quality advancement, according to Levin. "Today, we are actively replanting 80 percent of our vineyards with clonal selection, trellises and advanced viticultural techniques on an accelerated schedule," he said. "I believe we will be rewarded with wines of even better quality."

The 1997 Dry Creek Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon is holding well, even after 18 years. Its charm is found in its supple, velvety mouth feel.

(The continued on next page)



WINE SELECTIONS

Tuscan winners

- 1980 Villa Antinori Chianti Classico Riserva (\$11.50)
- 1990 Marchese Antinori Chianti Classico Riserva (\$22)

Other selections

- 1991 Napa Ridge North Coast Reserve Cabernet (\$13)
- 1992 Clos Pegase Cabernet Sauvignon (\$18.50)
- 1992 Kenwood Jack London Vineyard Cabernet (\$20)
- 1992 Gundlach-Bundschu Rhinefarm Cabernet (\$15)

Best buys under \$10

- 1992 Santa Rita Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve (\$8)
- 1994 Banders Chardonnay (\$8)
- 1994 Fortani de France Chardonnay (\$8)
- 1994 Fetzer Sundial Chardonnay (\$8)
- 1994 McDowell Mendocino Chardonnay (\$10)
- 1994 Claiborne & Churchill Dry Gewurztraminer (\$10)