



Excellent Italian Eggplant Parmesan Cups

By Erin Fletter

Prep Time 20 / **Cook Time** 15 / **Serves** 4 - 6

Fun-Da-Mentals Kitchen Skills

bake: to cook food with dry heat, as in an oven.

knife skills: Bear Claw (growl), Pinch, Plank, and Bridge (look out for trolls).

chop: to cut something into small, rough pieces using a blade.

grate: to reduce food, like a carrot, to very small shreds or pieces of the same size by rubbing it on a tool with an outside surface that has holes with cutting edges (a grater).

tear: to pull or rip apart a food, like basil leaves, into pieces instead of cutting with a knife; cutting breaks cell walls more, so herbs can discolor faster.

layer: to arrange foods in layers, such as sliced fruit in a pie or tart, or sliced potatoes in a potato gratin; or to build flavors by adding seasonings or foods that may be dissimilar but complement the overall dish.

shape: to form food into a specific shape by hand or with a cutting tool—examples are cutting cookie dough into shapes with cookie cutters, forming bread dough into a roll or crescent shape, and rolling ground meat into a meatball.

Equipment

- ☐ Oven
- ☐ Muffin pan
- ☐ Small mixing bowl
- ☐ Medium mixing bowl
- ☐ Grater
- ☐ Cutting board
- ☐ Kid-safe knife

- ☐ Measuring spoons
- ☐ Liquid measuring cup
- ☐ Dry measuring cups
- ☐ Wooden spoon

Ingredients

Excellent Italian Eggplant Parmesan Cups

- ☐ 24 wonton wrappers ******(for EGG ALLERGY use vegan wrappers, like Nasoya brand; for GLUTEN ALLERGY sub rice paper wrappers—more info below)******
- ☐ 2 to 3 oz mozzarella cheese ******(for DAIRY ALLERGY sub dairy-free/nut-free mozzarella)******
- ☐ 2 to 3 oz Parmesan cheese ******(for DAIRY ALLERGY sub dairy-free/nut-free Parmesan)******
- ☐ 2 to 3 oz ricotta cheese ******(for DAIRY ALLERGY sub dairy-free/nut-free ricotta OR silken tofu)******
- ☐ 6 to 10 fresh basil leaves
- ☐ 1/2 small eggplant ******(for NIGHTSHADE ALLERGY sub 1 small zucchini)******
- ☐ 3 T olive oil
- ☐ 1 tsp salt
- ☐ 1/2 C of Italian bread crumbs + more for topping ******(Omit for GLUTEN ALLERGY or sub gluten-free/nut-free bread crumbs)******
- ☐ 1 C marinara sauce, organic preferred ******(for NIGHTSHADE ALLERGY sub sweet potato or pumpkin purée)******

Food Allergen Substitutions

Excellent Italian Eggplant Parmesan Cups

Egg: Use vegan wonton wrappers, like Nasoya brand.

Gluten/Wheat: Substitute rice paper wrappers for wonton wrappers, soaked in warm water for 20 seconds.

Dairy: Substitute dairy-free/nut-free mozzarella cheese. Substitute dairy-free/nut-free Parmesan cheese. Substitute dairy-free/nut-free ricotta cheese OR silken tofu.

Nightshade: For 1/2 small eggplant, substitute 1 small zucchini. Substitute sweet potato or pumpkin purée for marinara sauce.

Instructions

Excellent Italian Eggplant Parmesan Cups

preheat + grease + shape

Preheat your oven to 375 F. Spray or wipe the wells of a muffin pan with olive oil. Have kids cut **12 of the 24 wonton wrappers** into shapes using a kid-safe knife, a small cookie cutter, or the top of a glass.

grate + tear

Grate **2 to 3 ounces mozzarella cheese** and **2 to 3 ounces Parmesan cheese** into a small bowl (reserve some of these two grated cheeses for the top of your Eggplant Parmesan Cups in another bowl). Measure and mix in **2 to 3 ounces of ricotta cheese** to the other cheese in the first bowl. Have kids tear **3 to 4 basil leaves** and set them to the side.

chop + sauté + mix

Chop **1/2 eggplant** into tiny bits and sauté them in your skillet with **1 tablespoon olive oil** and **1 teaspoon salt**. Sauté until the eggplant is soft, about 5 minutes, and stir in **1/2 cup Italian bread crumbs**. Pour **1 cup marinara sauce** into a medium bowl. Add the sautéed eggplant and bread crumbs to the sauce. Mix well and set to the side.

layer + bake

Layer a whole wonton wrapper into each well of the muffin pan, followed by a spoonful of the cheese mixture, a spoonful of the eggplant sauce, a smaller, shaped wonton wrapper, more cheese, and then more sauce on the top. Cook the eggplant cups for 10 minutes or until bubbly and the edges are browned.

tear + top

While the cupcakes bake, kids can tear the remaining basil leaves into little pieces for garnish. Take the Eggplant Parmesan Cups out of the oven and let cool for 2 to 3 minutes. Top them with the reserved grated cheeses, extra bread crumbs, and the torn basil. "Mangia bene, vivi felice" or "Eat well, live happy" in Italian!

Featured Ingredient: Eggplant!

Hi! I'm Eggplant!

"I'm the star of this dish, the exciting Eggplant! You might think of me as a vegetable, but I'm actually a berry! Not only that, but I'm large and oblong (that's a long oval shape), and I'm purple! Some of my eggplant cousins are short and plump, and have white streaks, but we all wear the same perky green cap, and we're all good to eat!"

History

The eggplant was called the Mad Apple for hundreds of years before people were actually brave enough to try eating it. People worldwide thought it was poisonous, so it took a long time before someone was brave enough to take a bite.

Eggplant is widely believed to be native to India. In fact, it is known as the King of Vegetables in India. Eggplant still grows wild in India!

Chinese emperors enjoyed eggplant way back to as early as 600 BC. How's this for an interesting fact: Ladies of China found it fashionable to stain their teeth black way back in 600 BC, and they would use eggplant skins to make a black dye for their teeth!

Eggplant eventually made their way around the world with global explorers, but people used them more for table decoration than food for hundreds of years because they were afraid they'd be poisoned if they ate them!

One story tells that when eggplant was brand new to France, King Louis XIV wanted to impress guests at his royal table, so he had his gardeners plant eggplant in his garden. Do you think his diners were impressed? They were not! They described the eggplant as "fruits as large as pears, but with bad qualities."

King Louis XIV cooked them and served them to his guests anyway, without them knowing. And they didn't get sick! This is because he had done his research first and found out that once eggplant mature, they are safe to eat and are actually quite delicious!

Anatomy & Etymology

Eggplants are technically berries, not vegetables! Are you surprised? What are some other fruits commonly mistaken for vegetables? How about cucumbers and tomatoes?

Did you know that eggplant and tomatoes are related? That's right—they both belong to the Nightshade family, along with potatoes and peppers.

The standard eggplant is oval or pear-shaped, glossy-skinned, or purple. However, there are many different varieties of eggplant around the world. For example, eggplant can be white, green, round, small, long, purple-and-white speckled, cream-colored, or deep purple.

With eggplant, bigger isn't necessarily better. The smaller the eggplant, the sweeter it tends to taste.

Eggplant does have seeds, but once they've developed seeds, their flesh becomes pretty bitter. That's why it's best to harvest eggplant before their seeds become too big.

Europeans gave these berries the name "Eggplant" in the middle of the 18th century because the variety they knew looked exactly like Goose Eggs!

Another name for eggplant is "aubergine" (ober-zheen), adapted from the original Arabic name al-badinjan.

How to Pick, Buy, & Eat

When buying eggplant, look for smooth skin, even color, heavy-in-the-hand, and no bruises. Squeeze the eggplant gently with a finger and then let go. If the eggplant is fresh, it will bounce back again. The stems should be bright and green.

Store eggplant overnight at room temperature and plan to use it soon after bringing it home. If you are storing it for longer than a day, wrap it in a plastic bag and place it on a shelf in the fridge.

The skin of the eggplant is edible, but many recipes advise peeling the skin before cooking because the flesh is sweeter and more tender, while the skin can be tough.

Eggplant is a very watery vegetable, and this is why many people like to salt their sliced eggplant before frying them to remove some of the excess moisture. They also used to be much more bitter, so people would add salt to them to cut the bitterness. Eventually, growers bred the bitterness out of the plants.

Eggplant can be roasted, baked, fried, sauteed, grilled, braised, stir-fried, and stuffed. The only way we wouldn't suggest eating eggplant is raw. While it is not harmful in small doses, eggplant is so much more delicious when cooked.

Eggplant is in peak season from August to March—they love hot weather!

Nutrition

The color of a fruit or vegetable tells us what nutrient it contains (nature is amazing!). Orange vegetables and fruits have special nutrients. So do green vegetables. Purple eggplant also contain a nutrient that gives them their color: anthocyanin. It's an antioxidant also found in red or purple grapes, blackberries, blueberries, plums, red cabbage, red onions, and prunes.

Brains! Did you know that the brain is made up primarily of fat? Eggplant has a unique nutrient that's been shown to protect the fats in our brain. When we safeguard the fats in our brain, we make it possible for brain cells to send signals back and forth to each other—which is a very good thing! We need our brain cells to talk to each other!

Fiber! We often talk about fiber when we reveal our Surprise Ingredient, and that's because vegetables and fruits contain a lot of fiber. Eggplant are no exception. What does fiber help with? Digestion! And which body parts are responsible for digestion? Many, but namely our stomach and intestines. We definitely want to keep those running in tip-top shape!