

SICILIAN CAPONATA

A recipe by **FoodNouveau**

If you can find small Italian eggplants to make this dish, by all means, choose these over the regular, larger ones, which taste more bitter (you should degorge larger eggplants, if using). Smaller eggplants also have a thinner skin, which makes it indiscernible in the caponata, something I was truly happy about because I really don't like the feeling of tough, leathery eggplant skin in my mouth.

In Catania, chopped octopus was added to the caponata I tasted and it was delicious. It is a traditional way to garnish the dish in Palermo, Sicily's capital, so if you can find fresh, small octopus, try it to get a true taste of the region. It is said that hundreds of years ago, the dish was served to royalty and was primarily made with a fish called the "capone" (hence the name). The dish was later adopted by the people, who replaced the expensive fish with more affordable eggplant. You can also top caponata with chopped hard-boiled eggs, sardines, grilled shrimp and even lobster, or serve it with grilled fish, although it is more typically served cold as an antipasto (appetizer) on grilled bread.

Caponata is best made one day in advance and stored in the refrigerator to allow deeper flavors to develop overnight. The finished texture should be thick, rich and creamy like chutney.

INGREDIENTS

Serves 4-5

2 lb	small eggplants, cut into 1-inch cubes
½ cup + 2 tbsp	olive oil
1	large yellow onion, roughly chopped
1	celery rib, roughly chopped
2	cloves garlic, finely chopped
3 tbsp	tomato paste, thinned with ¼ cup water
5	medium vine tomatoes, peeled, seeded and diced
½ cup	(packed) pitted and chopped green olives
½ cup	golden raisins
¼ cup	salt-packed capers, rinsed and drained
1/3 cup	white wine vinegar
2 tbsp	sugar
2 tsp	best-quality cocoa powder, sifted
¼ cup	shredded fresh basil
2 tbsp	toasted pine nut



To serve as a classic antipasto:

Toasted pine nuts

Chopped Italian parsley

Grilled croutons

Best-quality extra-virgin olive oil

METHOD

Heat ¼ cup olive oil in a large non-stick skillet over high heat. When the oil is very hot and glistening, fry half the eggplant cubes, tossing occasionally, until browned (about 5 minutes). Transfer to a large plate. Heat the remaining olive oil and fry

Recipe Credit: Based on recipes from the books "Les trésors de la cuisine sicilienne", "La cuisine du Sud de l'Italie" and Saveur Magazine.

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the remaining eggplant cubes. Transfer to the plate with the first batch and reserve.

Lower the heat to medium, and heat 2 tbsp olive oil in the same skillet. Add the onion and celery, season with freshly ground black pepper and sea salt and cook, stirring often, until beginning to brown, about 7 minutes. Add the finely chopped garlic and cook 3 minutes more. Add the thinned tomato paste and cook, stirring, until caramelized and almost evaporated, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the diced tomatoes and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup water and simmer over low heat for 10 minutes.

Stir in the olives, vinegar, raisins, capers, sugar and cocoa powder and continue cooking, stirring occasionally, for 10 minutes (add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup water if the mixture seems too dry). Incorporate the reserved fried eggplant and cook 5 minutes more, until thickened. Transfer to a large bowl, add the basil and pine nuts and mix well. Taste for seasoning and add more salt and pepper, if needed. Let cool to room temperature then store in an airtight container in the fridge overnight.

To serve, bring back to room temperature. Serve on warm croutons, topped with more pine nuts, chopped parsley and extra-virgin olive oil. I like to sprinkle with a little fleur de sel as a finishing touch, but that's a matter of taste.