

Eggplant Involtini

The classic approach to these cheese-filled eggplant rolls—breading and frying—is tedious, and it obscures the signature ingredient. We ditched both steps for a lighter, less fussy dish.

BY ANDREA GEARY

The first recipe I made for eggplant *involtini* (“little bundles” in Italian) was so complicated and messy that I wondered if it was the malicious invention of someone who wanted cooks to suffer.

It started innocently enough with a homemade tomato sauce. While that simmered, I cut two eggplants lengthwise into ½-inch-thick planks and fried them. Frying sounds like one step, but in this case it was actually several: Before frying, I had to salt the planks for 45 minutes to remove excess moisture, pat them dry, and coat them in flour, eggs, and bread crumbs. After doing that with four batches, I was still only halfway done.

I mixed up a ricotta filling, spread a dollop of it on each slice, rolled up the slices, and arranged them in a baking dish. I poured the sauce over the bundles, topped the assembly with mozzarella and Parmesan, and baked it for 30 minutes—barely enough time to clear up the devastation my project had left in its wake.

The resulting dish was rich and hefty, similar to classic eggplant Parmesan, though the process had been slightly more arduous, thanks to that rolling-rather-than-layering step. While eggplant Parmesan is justifiably popular, both the making and the eating are a bit heavy going for the height of summer.

But I was charmed by those tidy little involtini, and the combination of eggplant, tomato sauce, and cheese has timeless appeal. My goal: Come up with a version of involtini that would emphasize the eggplant and minimize the fuss.

The (Not So) Bitter Truth

Many eggplant recipes begin by treating the cut fruit with a heavy dose of salt to draw out excess moisture. It supposedly pulls out bitterness, too.

Let’s start with the second claim: It’s true that unsalted eggplant can taste a tad bitter from compounds called alkaloids that are found under the skin and in the seeds, but salt doesn’t really draw



To save on cleanup, we simmer the eggplant rolls in the skillet used to make the sauce and then slide the skillet under the broiler to brown the cheese.

many of those compounds out. As we’ve found with other bitter-tasting foods, like coffee and grapefruit, salt merely masks bitter flavors; it doesn’t eliminate them. And though eggplants were once very bitter indeed, as food scientist Harold McGee points out in *On Food and Cooking*, this trait has been significantly reduced through selective breeding methods. In short, bitterness is less of an issue than it once was. But the excess water problem? That’s real.

The flesh of an eggplant is made up of millions of tiny air-filled compartments enclosed by water-fortified walls. If you fry eggplant without removing some of that water beforehand, two things happen: First, those air sacs flood with oil, turning the eggplant greasy. Second, when heat turns the water to steam, some of it will become trapped in the eggplant’s flesh. And as the steam forcibly tries to escape, it will damage the structure of the fruit. The result? Mushy, oily, and entirely unappetizing eggplant.

When you salt eggplant, some of that potentially destructive water is removed, so the walls of the air sacs weaken and collapse. That sounds bad, but it’s

actually good: The end result is eggplant with a more compact, meatier consistency. And a denser texture means that there are fewer places for oil to get trapped.

But I didn’t want to devote 45 minutes to drying out the eggplant if I didn’t have to. Instead, I tried a test kitchen shortcut: microwaving the planks in a single layer for about 6 minutes. Unfortunately, the microwave’s limited capacity meant that I could work with only one-quarter of the eggplant at a time, so 12 slices of eggplant required almost half an hour of intermittent engagement. It wasn’t ideal.

Bake It Better

By this time there was a rebellious thought lurking in the back of my mind: Maybe I wouldn’t fry the eggplant. True, most recipes I found required frying the planks, either breaded or plain, but I was after a simpler, lighter, cleaner-tasting dish. And if I didn’t fry, maybe I wouldn’t have to salt.

Recipes for grilled eggplant rarely call for preliminary salting. That’s because there’s little oil on the grill for the flesh to soak up, and the eggplant’s excess water quickly evaporates. I wasn’t about to fire up the grill, but I wondered if other dry-heat cooking methods might offer the same benefits.

I peeled two eggplants and cut them into ½-inch-thick planks. Broiling the plain slices (I skipped the breading to lighten the dish and its workload) on a wire rack set in a rimmed baking sheet worked pretty well but demanded near-constant vigilance and flipping halfway through to prevent burning. It also required working in two batches. Hoping for a hands-off method, I tried baking instead.

I brushed the planks with oil, seasoned them with salt and pepper, and then baked them on two greased parchment-lined baking sheets in a 375-degree oven for about 30 minutes. Happily, they emerged light brown and tender, with a compact texture that was neither mushy nor sodden. Though the tops and sides of the slices had dried out nicely, there was still a bit of residual moisture on the undersides, so I let the planks cool and firm up on the baking sheet for 5 minutes and then flipped them to allow the remaining steam to escape. These slices were meaty and tender, but not at all squishy, and I didn’t miss frying. It was time to move on to the filling.



Watch the Streamlining

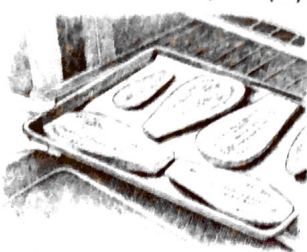
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TECHNIQUE | BAKE, DON'T FRY

We trade the salting, breading, and frying steps that classic recipes employ for a lighter, no-fuss approach.



1. SLICE Lay each peeled eggplant on its side and slice it lengthwise into 1/2-inch-thick planks (you should have 12 planks).



2. BAKE Brush both sides of slices with oil, season with salt and pepper, and bake until tender and lightly browned, about 30 minutes.



3. STUFF AND ROLL With widest end facing you, place portion of ricotta mixture on bottom third of slice. Roll into cylinder.

More Cheese, More Flavor

ricotta, which forms the base for most involtini fillings, is subtle, so you have to use a lot of it if you want to go, and up to the tomato sauce. But for these lighter involtini, I wanted to decrease the overall amount of cheese. Swapping some of the ricotta for a lesser amount of a more assertive cheese seemed like the way to go.

I limited myself to 1 cup of ricotta, which was half the amount required by that initial recipe. Adding 1/2 cup of grated Parmesan and a handful of chopped basil to bump up its flavor didn't cut it, though, and the texture of the filling was unexpectedly tight and bouncy. In my next batch, I used bolder Pecorino Romano instead of the Parmesan, and I stirred in a tablespoon of lemon juice. Things started looking (and tasting) brighter—but that resilient texture remained.

It was clear that the dry, aged cheese—whether Parmesan or Pecorino—was the source of that tight, granular texture. Just a small handful was fine, but when I added a full 1/2 cup to 1 cup of ricotta, the texture of the filling deteriorated from creamy to firm. In fact, it reminded me of ground meat that had been overcooked, and I wondered if it was indeed the same problem: an excessive linking of proteins. And that thought led me to the solution: bread crumbs.

When you add a paste of bread crumbs and milk (called a panade) to ground meat, it interferes with the linking of the meat proteins so that the cooked meat stays loose and soft. Bingo. When I incorporated just one slice of bread, whizzed to crumbs in the food processor, into the ricotta-Pecorino combo (no milk required), the filling remained creamy.

Streamlining the Sauce

It was time to circle back to the beginning: the tomato sauce. The placeholder recipe I had been working with called for sautéing onions and garlic, adding canned diced tomatoes and seasonings, and simmering the sauce for at least an hour. It wasn't all

that onerous, but my success with the eggplant and the filling had raised the bar, and now I demanded a sauce that could be made from start to finish while the eggplant had its 30-minute stint in the oven.

Diced tomatoes don't break down easily because they're treated with calcium chloride during processing to help them keep their chunky shape, hence the lengthy cooking time. I briefly flirted with the idea of going with fresh summer tomatoes, but blanching, peeling, and cooking them down wasn't

Bread Crumbs: Outside to Inside

In most involtini recipes bread crumbs are used to coat the eggplant, but in our version we put them in the cheese. The bread crumbs keep the filling creamy by preventing the Pecorino Romano proteins from linking tightly.

consistent with my goals of speed and simplicity. Instead I swapped the diced tomatoes for more-tender canned whole tomatoes (where the calcium chloride works only on the exterior of the tomato) that I chopped roughly, and the sauce came together in about half the time. To trim a few more minutes, I stripped the sauce down to the bare bones: just garlic, oregano, tomatoes, and a pinch of red pepper flakes. This simpler sauce fit perfectly into my more streamlined dish.

Between ditching the salting, traditional frying for baking, and making a quick—rather than long-simmered sauce, I had saved loads of time on prep, but it occurred to me that I could save a bit more time on cleanup, too. I made the sauce in a 12-inch skillet instead of a saucepan, and I nestled the filled eggplant rolls directly in the simmering sauce. When the rolls had begun to warm through, I moved the whole skillet to the broiler instead of the oven.

After about 5 minutes, the eggplant was nicely browned and the sauce was bubbly and hot. I let my creation cool slightly and then crowned it with an additional dusting of Pecorino and a sprinkling of basil before serving directly from the skillet.

No one would mistake this light, fresh skillet supper for rich and heavy eggplant Parmesan. The eggplant truly shines, and the cheese and sauce complement it rather than weigh it down. And the best part might just be how easy it is to make—no one will ever blame me for taking advantage of a cook's precious time.

EGGPLANT INVOLTINI

SERVES 4 TO 6

Select shorter, wider eggplants for this recipe. Part-skim ricotta may be used, but do not use fat-free ricotta. Serve the eggplant with crusty bread and a salad.

- 2 large eggplants (1 1/2 pounds each), peeled
- 6 tablespoons vegetable oil
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1/4 teaspoon dried oregano
- Pinch red pepper flakes
- 1 (28-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes, drained with juice reserved, chopped coarse
- 1 slice hearty white sandwich bread, torn into 1-inch pieces
- 8 ounces (1 cup) whole-milk ricotta cheese
- 1/2 ounces grated Pecorino Romano cheese (3/4 cup)
- 1/4 cup plus 1 tablespoon chopped fresh basil
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice

1. Slice each eggplant lengthwise into 1/2-inch-thick planks (you should have 12 planks). Trim rounded surface from each end piece so it lies flat.

2. Adjust 1 oven rack to lower-middle position and second rack 8 inches from broiler element. Heat oven to 375 degrees. Line 2 rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper and spray generously with vegetable oil spray. Arrange eggplant slices in single layer on prepared sheets. Brush 1 side of eggplant slices with 2 1/2 tablespoons oil and sprinkle with 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon pepper. Flip eggplant slices and brush with 2 1/2 tablespoons oil and sprinkle with 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon pepper. Bake until tender and lightly browned, 30 to 35 minutes, switching and rotating sheets halfway through baking. Let cool for 5 minutes. Using thin spatula, flip each slice over. Heat broiler.

3. While eggplant cooks, heat remaining 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch broiler-safe skillet over medium-low heat until just shimmering. Add garlic, oregano, pepper flakes, and 1/2 teaspoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in tomatoes and their juice. Increase heat to high and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer until thickened, about 15 minutes. Cover and set aside.

4. Pulse bread in food processor until finely ground, 10 to 15 pulses. Combine bread crumbs, ricotta, 1/2 cup Pecorino, 1/4 cup basil, lemon juice, and 1/2 teaspoon salt in medium bowl.

5. With widest ends of eggplant slices facing you, evenly distribute ricotta mixture on bottom third of each slice. Gently roll up each eggplant slice and place seam side down in tomato sauce.

6. Bring sauce to simmer over medium heat. Simmer for 5 minutes. Transfer skillet to oven and broil until eggplant is well browned and cheese is heated through, 5 to 10 minutes. Sprinkle with remaining 1/4 cup Pecorino and let stand for 5 minutes. Sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon basil and serve.