

— AMERICA'S —
TEST KITCHEN

Crispy Thai Eggplant Salad

SERVES Serves 2-3



WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS

by Sasha Marx

While we love crispy, crunchy fried things just as much as anyone, there are some equally delicious dishes that deliberately add supersavory liquids to fried foods to partially sog them out while flavoring them deeply (Mexican braised *chicharrónes* and even classic Buffalo wings are good examples). We wanted to give eggplant the same treatment. For this recipe, we took elements from Sicilian caponata—eggplant, tomatoes, herbs, and a vinegar bite—and married them with intense Thai flavors. We use the same microwave dehydrating method from our Charred Sichuan-Style Eggplant and then shallow-fry the eggplant before marinating it in *nam prik*—a bright Thai condiment made with lime juice, fish sauce, rice vinegar, ginger, garlic, and chiles. We toss in juicy cherry tomatoes, a healthy amount of fresh

herbs, and crispy fried shallots for a dish that delivers all of the five tastes and as many different textures. Pescatarians will love this salad served with a side of sticky rice, while meatier folks might want to serve it with a grilled rib eye to make an awesome steak salad.

INGREDIENTS

- ☐ ¼ cup fish sauce
- ☐ ¼ cup unseasoned rice vinegar
- ☐ ¼ cup lime juice
- ☐ ¼ cup (1¾ ounces) palm sugar, cut into 1-inch pieces
- ☐ 1 (2-inch piece) ginger, peeled and chopped coarse
- ☐ 4 garlic cloves, chopped coarse
- ☐ 1 red Thai chile, seeded and sliced thin
- ☐ 1 cup cherry tomatoes, halved

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

✱ Seasoned rice wine vinegar contains added sugar, salt, and often MSG. Because seasonings can vary considerably from product to product, we opt for the unseasoned stuff so we have full control. Palm sugar is made from the sap of the Asian sugar palm, which is boiled down to a crystallized mass. It is often formed into hockey puck-size disks. You can find it online here. Palm sugar yields the best results for this recipe, but an equal amount of light brown sugar can be substituted. Japanese eggplant was our unanimous favorite when we tested this recipe, but globe eggplant can be substituted if necessary. Traditional Genovese basil is a fine substitute for the Thai basil. Chopped roasted peanuts make for a crunchy, on-theme substitute for the fried shallots. Depending on the size of your microwave, the process described in step 2 may need to be split into 2 rounds. If the eggplant is piled up,

- ☐ 2 large Japanese eggplants, sliced in half lengthwise, then cut crosswise into 1½-inch pieces
- ☐ 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ☐ 2 cups vegetable oil
- ☐ ½ cup fresh cilantro leaves
- ☐ ½ cup fresh mint leaves
- ☐ ½ cup fresh Thai basil leaves
- ☐ ½ cup fried shallots

dehydrate. Serve this salad with sticky rice, a nice grilled rib eye, or both.

INSTRUCTIONS

1 Process fish sauce, vinegar, lime juice, palm sugar, ginger, garlic, and chiles in blender on high until ginger, garlic, and palm sugar are broken down and dressing is mostly smooth, about 1 minute. Transfer to medium serving bowl and stir in tomatoes. Set aside while preparing eggplant.

2 Toss eggplant and salt together in medium bowl. Line entire surface of large microwave-safe dish with double layer of coffee filters and lightly spray with nonstick cooking spray. Spread eggplant in even layer over coffee filters. Microwave on high power until eggplant feels dry and pieces shrink to about 1 inch, about 10 minutes, flipping halfway through to dry sides evenly. Remove eggplant from microwave and immediately transfer to paper towel-lined plate.

3 Heat oil in large Dutch oven over high heat to 375 degrees F/190 degrees C. Fry eggplant, stirring occasionally, until flesh is deep golden brown and edges are crispy, 5 to 7 minutes.

Transfer to paper towel-lined baking sheet or plate and blot to remove excess oil. Transfer to bowl with tomatoes and toss to evenly dress.

4 Toss cilantro, mint, and basil together in small bowl. Thoroughly fold half of herb mixture into eggplant. Top eggplant mixture with remaining herb mixture and sprinkle with fried shallots. Serve.