

Eggplant Parmesan

Serves 6 to 8

Use kosher salt when salting the eggplant. The coarse grains don't dissolve as readily as the fine grains of regular table salt, so any excess can be easily wiped away. It's necessary to divide the eggplant into two batches when tossing it with the salt. To be time-efficient, use the 30 to 45 minutes during which the salted eggplant sits to prepare the breading.

EGGPLANT

2 pounds globe eggplant (2 medium eggplant), cut crosswise into 1/4 inch thick rounds
1 tablespoon kosher salt
8 slices high quality white sandwich bread, torn into quarters
2 ounces Parmesan cheese, grated (about 1 cup)
Table salt and ground black pepper
1 cup unbleached all purpose flour
4 large eggs
6 tablespoons vegetable oil

TOMATO SAUCE

3 (14.5 ounce) cans diced tomatoes
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
4 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 4 teaspoons)
1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
1/2 cup coarsely chopped fresh basil leaves
Table salt and ground black pepper
8 ounces whole milk or part skim mozzarella cheese, shredded (about 2 cups)
1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (about 1/2 cup)
10 fresh basil leaves, torn, for garnish

1. FOR THE EGGPLANT: Toss half of the eggplant slices and 1 1/2 teaspoons of the kosher salt in a large bowl until combined; transfer the salted eggplant to a large colander set over a bowl. Repeat with the remaining eggplant and kosher salt, placing the second batch on top of the first. Let stand until the eggplant releases about 2 tablespoons liquid, 30 to 45 minutes. Spread the eggplant slices on a triple thickness of paper towels; cover with another triple thickness of paper towels. Press firmly on each slice to remove as much liquid as possible, then wipe off the excess salt.

2. While the eggplant is draining, adjust the oven racks to the upper middle and lower middle positions, place a rimmed baking sheet on each rack, and heat the oven to 425 degrees. Process the bread in a food processor to fine, even crumbs, about 20 to 30 seconds. Transfer the crumbs to a pie plate and stir in the Parmesan, 1/4 teaspoon table salt, and 1/2 teaspoon pepper; set aside. Wipe out the workbowl (do not wash) and set aside.

3. Combine the flour and 1 teaspoon pepper in a large zipper lock bag; shake to combine. Beat the eggs in a second pie plate. Place 8 to 10 eggplant slices in the bag with the flour; seal the bag and shake to coat the slices. Remove the slices, shaking off the excess flour, dip into the eggs, let the excess egg run off, then coat evenly with the bread crumb mixture; set the breaded slices on a wire rack set over a baking sheet. Repeat with the remaining eggplant.

4. Remove the preheated baking sheets from the oven; add 3 tablespoons of the vegetable oil to each sheet, tilting to coat evenly with the oil. Place half of the breaded eggplant slices on each sheet in a single layer; bake until the eggplant is well browned and crisp, about 30 minutes, switching and rotating the baking sheets after 10 minutes, and flipping the eggplant slices with a wide spatula after 20 minutes. Do not turn off the oven.

5. FOR THE SAUCE: While the eggplant bakes, process 2 cans of the diced tomatoes in the food processor, until almost smooth, about 5 seconds. Heat the olive oil, garlic and red pepper flakes in a large heavy bottomed saucepan over medium high heat, stirring occasionally, until fragrant and the garlic is light golden, about 3 minutes; stir in the processed tomatoes and remaining can of diced tomatoes. Bring the sauce to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until slightly thickened and reduced, about 15 minutes (you should have about 4 cups). Stir in the basil and season with table salt and pepper to taste.

6. TO ASSEMBLE: Spread 1 cup of the tomato sauce in the bottom of a 13 by 9 inch baking dish. Layer in half of the eggplant slices, overlapping the slices to fit; distribute 1 cup more of the sauce over the eggplant; sprinkle with half of the mozzarella. Layer in the remaining eggplant and dot with 1 cup more of the sauce, leaving the majority of the eggplant exposed so it will remain crisp; sprinkle with the Parmesan and the remaining mozzarella. Bake until bubbling and the cheese is browned, 13 to 15 minutes. Cool for 10 minutes, scatter the basil over the top, and serve, passing the remaining tomato sauce separately.