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August Uncommon Report

Understanding Eggplant

Just so you know: eggplant is a fruit. The seeds within the glossy, usually purple skin and creamy flesh are proof. It's a testament to eggplant's versatility and long culinary history that it makes appearances in every course from appetizers to desserts.

Eggplant, also known as melongene or aubergine, was first cultivated in India 4000 years ago and is a member of the nightshade family. A botanical cousin of tomatoes and potatoes, eggplant most likely first appeared as the large, dark purple, elongated specimens that are familiar today. Cultivation of eggplant spread east to Asia in the 4th century, becoming popular in China, Burma, Mongolia and Thailand. As trade between the Far East and Europe grew, Moors and Turks brought the fruit with them to the Mideast and Mediterranean and incorporated it into their cuisines. A small, oval creamy white variety was introduced in England in the 17th century, which is most likely how the fruit came to be known as 'eggplant.'

Many eggplant varieties are grown in the Southern U.S. and Mexico, in both open fields and shade houses, making it available year round. Most heirloom varieties are available in late spring and summer. Here are brief descriptions of just a few of the varieties available:



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Common Italian- This is the familiar large version. Pear-shaped or almost cylindrical. Glossy dark purple skin. Heavy to moderate seeds. Flavor from mild to bitter, depending on time from harvest. The skin can be tough and is frequently peeled. Though available year round, its peak season is August and September.

Baby Purple- AKA Indian. Egg-shaped and sized with purple skin. Very sweet and tender. Available in late spring

Fairy Tale- One to four inches long with violet and purple striped skin. Less seedy than large Italian eggplant and lacking their bitterness. Available mid-July through October

Hansel Mini- This purple fingerling variety is the perfect size for cutting into little rounds for sautéing. These slender eggplants do not get bitter even if harvested a bit after maturity. Available in late spring/early summer

Gretel Mini- Nearly seedless, with tender white skin. Available in late spring/early summer

Dancer- Semi-cylindrical, about 7-8" inches long with light purple skin. Mild, creamy taste and texture.

Calliope- A beautiful, small, oval, white and purple variegated Asian-style eggplant.

Orient Express- Long and slender with a glossy dark purple color. Tender and delicately flavored. One of the earlier varieties available

Clara- Large, white Italian type about 5-6" long by 4-5" in diameter. It's creamy, nutty flavor is best brought out by grilling. Available in mid-summer

Rosa Bianco- This purple tinted eggplant is native to Southeast Asia and favorite with West coast chefs. It has a delicate,

creamy flavor. Available during summer months

Orient Charm- 8-10" long by 1 ½ -2 ½ " diameter.

Same shape as Orient Express, but with attractive shades of pink, pastel purple and white. Sweet flavor but they can become bitter as they age, so use within a day or two.

Tiburón - Shape of common purple eggplant, but the skin is purple with ivory stripes. Despite the beautiful skin, this is often peeled. Flavor similar to common Italian eggplant. Available during the summer months

Japanese- Short and slender with dark purple skin. Very lightly seeded. Firm, mild and slightly sweet. Thin skin can remain unpeeled. Holds its shape well when cooked.



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Thai- Usually apple green with lighter green striations. Slightly larger than a golf ball. Sweet and dense with a slight taste of artichoke. Usually cooked and eaten unpeeled. Available year round

Selection and Handling- There is a myth that seeds cause the bitterness sometime associated with eggplants. The reality is that age causes bitterness; eggplant is very perishable and becomes bitter with over-maturity. The fruit should have firm, smooth and shiny skins. Once the skin starts to wrinkle or develop soft brown spots, the quality of the eggplant has diminished. Eggplants can be stored at room temperature for a couple of days. After that, refrigerate them, but not for too long. With its origins in warm climates, eggplant can suffer chill damage very quickly.

As a vehicle for flavor, eggplant is unrivaled. It can be roasted until the flesh becomes a soft pulp, then made into a delicious spread or dip by adding olive oil, lemon, garlic and spices. Caponata is a Sicilian snack made with sweet and sour roasted eggplant with onions and tomatoes. A Turkish *meze* is made with a spicy pureed eggplant salad with lemon and parsley that elevates crusty new level. Roast eggplant with other squash and onions. Grill it on an outdoor barbeque for a smoky, rustic flavor. Deep-fry paper-thin slices till they do at *Vino* very crisp and drizzle with honey as a method yields a delicious. Before frying eggplant, cut it into cubes or slices, salt it on both sides and arrange it on a rack or in a colander. After at least an hour, rinse and pat dry. The salting helps prevent the eggplant from sponging up too much oil and the cooked texture will be almost silky. With today's interest in Mediterranean diet and cuisine, eggplant plays a key role in vegetable stews, entrees and side dishes. Persian cuisine makes use of eggplant in everything from creamy *baba ganoush* dip to eggplant frittatas called *kookoo e bademjan*. Michael Anthony of the Gramercy Tavern in New York City serves eggplant two ways in his summer recipe for [Grilled Mackerel with Fairytale Eggplants, Corn & Calamari](#). He roasts the petite, purple striated eggplant and purees the flesh with garlic, shallots and lemon juice which forms the base for grilled mackerel, calimari, corn, jalapenos and more sliced/grilled fairytale eggplants.



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