

Eggplant

Eggplant is also known as eggfruit, brinjal, aubergine, melongene, guinea squash, etc. Is eggplant a fruit or a vegetable?

There are two definitions for the word 'fruit': one is scientific and the other is generic. To a botanist, a fruit is a ripened ovary. Since the ovary always contains seeds, therefore any plant food that contains seeds is a fruit. To a chef, a fruit is a sweet, edible structure from a plant while a vegetable is any part of a plant that is not the ripened ovary, such as stems and leaves. Pumpkin and rhubarb are considered both fruit and vegetables in the kitchen. This is because they are used in both desserts and savory dishes. Tomatoes are never used in sweet dishes, so they are considered to be vegetables, even though they are botanical fruits. Were you to ask the regular Joe on the street if eggplant is a fruit or a 'veggie', he'd most probably say it's a 'veggie' because it's used in savory dishes, and not used as a dessert. Thus, for a chef, an eggplant is a vegetable, for a botanist, an eggplant is a fruit. We have some 'unexpected fruits' around us - from eggfruits, commonly seasoned and served as vegetables, to olives, with their oily texture and salty flavor!



Eggplant is a member of the nightshade family as are tomatoes, peppers and potatoes. They grow in a manner much like tomatoes, hanging from the vines of a plant that grows several feet in height. One of the most popular varieties looks like a large egg, a characteristic from which the name 'eggplant' is derived. The typical skin is glossy and deep purple in color, while the flesh is cream colored and spongy in consistency. Contained within the

flesh are seeds arranged in a conical pattern. The stem and the star-like leafy calyx are covered in short spines and are attached at the narrowest end. Eggplants also come in white, mauve, mauve-and-white striped, jade green, as well as in many sizes and shapes ranging from that of a small tomato to a large zucchini. Segmented fruits are also found. While the different varieties do vary slightly in taste and texture, one can generally describe the eggplant as having a pleasantly bitter taste and spongy texture. In many



recipes, eggplant fulfills the role of being a complementary ingredient that balances the surrounding flavors of the other more pronounced ingredients.



The ancient ancestors of eggplant grew wild in India and were first cultivated in China in the 5th century BC.

From India, eggplant spread to the Middle East and became a popular Arab food. When the Arabs conquered Spain they took the fruit with them and it subsequently spread throughout Europe and the Middle East. Today, Italy, Turkey, Egypt, China and Japan are the leading growers of eggplant.

Although it has a long history, eggplant did not always hold the revered place in food culture that it does today, especially in European cuisines. As a result of the overly bitter taste of the early varieties, it seems that people also felt that it had a bitter disposition - eggplant held the undeserved and inauspicious reputation of being able to cause insanity (hence the Latin name *mala insane* meaning 'apple of madness'), leprosy, cancer, etc. For centuries after its introduction into Europe, eggplant was used more as a decorative garden plant than as a food. Not until new varieties were developed in the 18th century, did eggplant lose its bitter taste and bitter reputation, and take its now esteemed place in the cuisines of many European and Middle Eastern countries. Eggplants have the ability to absorb other flavors and are often cooked with a selection of aromatic spices and onions. They are a particularly popular ingredient in Asian, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cuisines. It appears that eggplants were unknown in Australia until after 1850, when a nurseryman reportedly obtained some seed from a gentleman who had lived in India; but eggplants didn't become popular until the arrival of European migrants in the 1950's.

When buying eggplants, select those with smooth, firm and glossy skin. They should feel heavy for their size. The large dark purple pear-shaped is the most common. The smaller version is often called Italian or baby eggplant. The straight thin ones are known as Japanese or Asian eggplant. The tiny version is known as Thai eggplant. Raw eggplant can have a somewhat bitter taste, but develops a rich, complex flavor when cooked. Some recipes suggest salting, rinsing and draining the sliced or cubed fruit to soften it and to draw out the bitter juice it may contain. However, most modern varieties do not have a bitter taste and do not need this treatment. Salting also helps to collapse the cells, thus reducing the amount of fat or oil absorbed during cooking, as the ability of eggplants to soak up large amounts of oil is legendary.

Eggplants can be fried, battered, layered in gratin, grilled, stuffed, stewed, baked or puréed. In Asia, eggplants are quite popular pickled. Famous eggplant dishes include Greece's moussaka, Middle East's baba ghanoush, France's ratatouille, Italian's eggplant parmigiana, to name just a few, but a most famous one, eaten all over the Arab world, is Imam bayildi (meaning 'the priest fainted'). This consists of eggplants stuffed with onions, tomatoes, garlic, herbs and spice, and cooked with olive oil. There are two stories about the origin of the name. One is that the priest fainted because it tasted so delicious; one is that he fainted because he heard how much oil his wife had used in making the dish!