**“E is for Eggplant”**

1. **What is eggplant?**
2. Eggplants belong to the nightshade family of vegetables, which also includes tomatoes, bell peppers and potatoes. They grow in a manner much like tomatoes, hanging from the vines of a plant that grows several feet in height. While the different varieties do range slightly in taste and texture, one can generally describe the eggplant as having a pleasantly bitter taste and spongy texture.
3. One of the most popular varieties of eggplant in North America looks like a pear-shaped egg, a characteristic from which its name is derived. The skin is glossy and deep purple in color, while the flesh is cream colored and spongy in consistency. Contained within the flesh are seeds.
4. In addition to this variety, eggplant is also available in a cornucopia of other colors including lavender, jade green, orange, and yellow-white, as well as in sizes and shapes that range from that of a small tomato to a large zucchini.
5. The purple or black glossy fruit can grow more than a foot in length in wild varieties, though they are considerably smaller in normal agriculture.
6. 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.
7. Eggplants are available in markets throughout the year, but they are at their very best from August through October when they are in season.
8. From baba ghanoush to ratatouille, there are various vessels of indulgence for this vibrant veggie! But these “garden eggs” must be baked or grilled to cultivate the most nutrients possible, and should not be eaten raw. They contain the toxin solamine which can cause gastro problems among other things.
9. **History of Eggplant**
10. The ancient ancestors of eggplant grew wild in India and were first cultivated in China in the 5th century B.C. Eggplant was introduced to Africa before the Middle Ages and then into Italy, the country with which it has long been associated, in the 14th century. It subsequently spread throughout Europe and the Middle East and, centuries later, was brought to the Western Hemisphere by European explorers. Today, Italy, Turkey, Egypt, China and Japan are the leading growers of eggplant.
11. Although it has a long and rich history, eggplant did not always hold the revered place in food culture that it does today, especially in European cuisines because of its overly bitter taste.
12. 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 and bitter reputation, and take its now esteemed place in the cuisines of many European countries, including Italy, Greece, Turkey and France.
13. **Health Benefits**
    1. Eggplant is a very good source of dietary fiber and B vitamins.
    2. It is a good source of manganese, copper, niacin, potassium, folate and vitamin K.
    3. Eggplant also contains phytonutrients.
14. **Growing, Selection, Storage, and Preparation**
    1. **Growing**
       1. Eggplant can be grown in the warm months in Wisconsin. It grows as a bush that reaches 2-4 feet tall when fully grown. They have an extensive root system. Fruit may be oval, oblong or round.
    2. **Selection & Storage**
       1. Choose eggplants that are firm and heavy for their size. Bigger is not better, choose medium sizes. Their skin should be smooth and shiny, and their color, whether it be purple, white or green, should be vivid. They should be free of discoloration, scars, and bruises, which usually indicate that the flesh beneath has become damaged and possibly decayed.
       2. The stem and cap, on either end of the eggplant, should be bright green in color. As you would with other fruits and vegetables, avoid purchasing eggplant that has been waxed. To test for the ripeness of an eggplant, gently press the skin with the pad of your thumb. If it springs back, the eggplant is ripe, while if an indentation remains, it is not.
       3. Although they look hardy, eggplants are actually very perishable and care should be taken in their storage. Eggplants are sensitive to both heat and cold and should ideally be stored at around 50 degrees Fahrenheit (10 degrees Celsius). Just like tomatoes, it is best to store at room temperature. Do not cut eggplant before you store it as it perishes quickly once its skin has been punctured or its inner flesh exposed.
       4. If you purchase eggplant that is wrapped in plastic film, remove it as soon as possible since it will inhibit the eggplant from breathing and degrade its freshness.
       5. It is best to use within days of purchase.
    3. **Preparation**
       1. Eggplant grilled without oil, is an entirely different to the same vegetable fried in olive oil. The grilled version never develops the wonderful silky texture that only olive oil can bring. So if you are going to cook eggplant, be generous with the olive oil!
       2. When cutting an eggplant, use a stainless steel knife as carbon steel will react with its phytonutrients and cause it to turn black. Wash the eggplant first and then cut off the ends.
       3. Most eggplants can be eaten either with or without their skin. However, the larger ones and those that are white in color generally have tough skins that may not be palatable. To remove skin, you can peel it before cutting or if you are baking it, you can scoop out the flesh once it is cooked.
       4. To tenderize the flesh's texture and reduce some of its naturally occurring bitter taste, you can sweat the eggplant by salting it. After cutting the eggplant into the desired size and shape, sprinkle it with salt and allow it to rest for about 30 minutes. This process will pull out some of its water content and make it less permeable to absorbing any oil used in cooking.
       5. Rinsing the eggplant after "sweating" will remove most of the salt.
       6. Eggplant can be baked, roasted in the oven, or steamed. If baking it whole, pierce the eggplant several times with a fork to make small holes for the steam to escape. Bake at 350 degrees Fahrenheit (about 177 degrees Celsius) for 15 to 25 minutes, depending upon size. You can test for its readiness by gently inserting a knife or fork to see if it passes through easily.
       7. There are a number of varieties used throughout the world, and they are included in cuisines in many different ways. It is commonly called the “king of vegetables”, at least in [India](https://www.organicfacts.net/organic-products/organic-stores/india.html?utm_source=internal&utm_medium=link&utm_campaign=smartlinks), as it is one of the most versatile and functional [foods](https://www.organicfacts.net/organic-products/organic-food/health-benefits-of-food.html?utm_source=internal&utm_medium=link&utm_campaign=smartlinks) in the cultural gamut. It has the consistency of tomato, in terms of texture and density, and it is a perfect addition to soups, stews, sauces, as well as a stand-alone item in many dishes.
       8. Baba Ganoush is a silky flavor-packed eggplant dip that makes a wonderful addition to your appetizer table. It’s also great as a spread on sandwiches or as a side to your meal!
15. **Fun Facts**
    1. Eggplants aren’t really vegetables; they’re actually botanically classified as a berry!
    2. A study published in 1993 in the New England Journal of Medicine showed that eggplant has by far the highest level of nicotine of any fruit. But it’s such a small amount that there’s really no need for concern. You would have to eat between 20 and 40 pounds of eggplant to consume the amount of nicotine you’d get smoking one cigarette.
    3. People in the U.K. called them aubergines. The word “aubergine” goes all the way back to the ancient Indian language Sanskrit. The eggplant is believed to have originated in India, where it is considered to be the King of Vegetables.
    4. The word “eggplant” that we use in North America comes from British-colonized India, where at the time, a small, white, egg-like variety of the vegetable was all the rage.
    5. In Renaissance Italy, it was called a *mala insana* or “crazy apple”.
    6. Japan even has a proverb about eggplant: “The happiest omen for a New Year is first Mount Fuji, then the falcon, and lastly eggplant.”

We hope you enjoyed learning more about eggplant! This is the perfect time of year to add fresh, nutritious beets to your diet.