

Aubergine soup with garlic cream

Serves: 2 as a meal in itself or 4 as a starter

Total cooking time: 1 hr 15 mins

Ingredients:

2 large or 3 medium aubergines

2 onions, diced

olive oil

one head of garlic, whole + 2 extra cloves

2 heaped tbsps minced fresh thyme (or oregano, or sage)

1 tsp toasted and ground cumin seeds

approx 1 (UK) pint (2½ cups) good chicken or vegetable stock

salt & pepper

juice of a lemon

3 medium-sized ripe tomatoes

approx 120ml (½ cup) whipping/double (heavy) cream



Method:

1. Heat oven to 200 C (400 F). Slice aubergines in half lengthways. Rub exposed flesh with oil, salt and pepper. Place them, cut-side down, on a baking sheet. Cut bottom quarter off head of garlic. Rub cut surface with oil and a little salt. Wrap in foil. Put garlic (upside-down) and aubergines in oven and leave for approx 30 mins, or until very soft but not burnt.
2. Meanwhile, dice onions, mince the 2 remaining cloves garlic, mince the thyme and toast and grind the cumin seeds. To do this, place seeds in a dry frying pan over a medium heat and cook for a few mins, tossing occasionally, until they give off a great aroma and just start to colour. Then grind them finely in a coffee grinder or with a pestle and mortar.
3. In a large saucepan gently fry the onions in approx 3 tbsps olive oil until soft. Add the minced garlic and cook for another couple mins. Add the thyme and cumin and cook another minute.
4. When the aubergines are very soft to the touch remove them from the oven and scoop the flesh out into a sieve over a bowl. Discard the juices if they taste bitter. Add the pulp to the saucepan. Stir it in and cook for a few mins. Add a little salt at this stage. (It's good to keep adding a little salt each time you add an ingredient to a pot, so that everything is well seasoned and all the flavours shine through.)

5. Add around half your stock to the pot. Stir in and then blend. Use a hand-held immersion blender, or let the soup cool a little and blend in batches in a blender or food processor. You want a thick, smooth sludge.
6. Return to the pan and add more stock until you reach the desired consistency. It should not be watery, but also not so thick that it forms a heap in a bowl.
7. Heat the soup up to a simmer and add salt, pepper and lemon juice to taste. The soup should not taste lemony; the lemon is just to 'lift' and enhance the spicy aubergine flavour. Don't adjust the flavour when the soup is cold or you will end up adding too much salt and pepper.
8. If you can be bothered, peel and seed the tomatoes before dicing them into small cubes. To peel a tomato, cut a little cross in its bottom, dunk it into boiling or just-boiled water for around half a minute, then peel off the skin. Stir most of the tomato dice into the soup, and reserve a little for garnish.
9. To make the garlic cream, squeeze the pulp out of the roasted garlic head and mash it up well. Lightly whip the cream and combine with garlic paste.
10. Serve the soup with crusty bread and garnished with a dollop of garlic cream and a sprinkling of diced tomato.

This recipe is one I have learnt at Tante Marie's Cooking School and adapted slightly. It's great for a cold autumn night. Don't omit the garlic cream – it's essential. Roasting the bulb first makes the garlic flavour sweet and smooth.

Aubergine facts:

- With its taught, glossy skin and regal, deep purple colour, this is surely one of the most beautiful vegetables around. (Although, to be pedantic, it's a fruit, which puts it in competition with figs...)
- It is a member of the Nightshade family, as in Deadly, along with potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, chillies and tobacco. It is the only major vegetable in the Nightshade family to come from the Old World. (The tomato was slow to catch on in Europe when it was introduced from South America due to its resemblance to Deadly Nightshade.)
- It is thought to have been first cultivated in India, and was brought to Europe, via Spain, and North Africa by Arab traders. It was appearing on Italian dinner plates by the 15th century, and French ones 300 years later.
- Its name gives away its history: the French 'aubergine' is derived from the Catalan 'albergínia', which comes from the Arabic 'al-bādhinjān', which is directly from the Persian, 'bādinjān'. 'Eggplant' is a silly name used in America and elsewhere, deriving from the fact that some varieties look like white hen eggs, so of far lesser interest to etymologists.
- The original wild aubergines were pea-sized and extremely bitter. Like its fellow Nightshades it stores up bitter alkaloids to deter animals from eating its fruit and digesting the life out of its seeds. Over the years aubergines have been bred to be larger and less bitter. Salting your chopped

aubergine in advance of cooking it is usually no longer necessary. In any case, the salt does not draw out much bitter moisture but rather reduces your perception of bitterness (as salt always does).

- Due to its tropical origins, the aubergine finds the fridge too cold and is happier being stored in a cool room.
- These days it is cooked all over the world in many different ways. If you haven't yet, make sure you try Moussaka (from the Balkans, Turkey and Greece), Melanzane alla Parmigiana (from Italy) and Caponata (from Sicily). The flesh is full of air pockets which collapse on cooking and absorb whatever juices and flavours are around. The result is something delicious, rich and either meaty or creamy in consistency. Yum. If you know other great aubergine recipes, please send them to me.
- Aubergine is a source of potassium, an essential mineral for our bodies which apparently many of us don't get enough of. So make some soup...

