

DOMENICA COOKS

MELANZANE E ZUCCHINE alla PARMIGIANA

Eggplant and Zucchini Parmigiana

I stopped frying the eggplant for parmigiana a long time ago, not just for health reasons or because I decided frying wasn't worth the effort, but because parmigiana—the iconic baked dish of layered eggplant, mozzarella, and tomato sauce—is just better when the vegetables are grilled or baked. Lighter, obviously, but also more about the vegetables, which is how I like vegetable dishes to be. No hiding under a heavy coat of breadcrumbs or flour.

Over the years, I've tweaked my parmigiana recipe a few times—the one in “The Glorious Vegetables of Italy” is a colorful summer vegetable parmigiana, with a layer each of grilled eggplant, zucchini, and peppers. There's a simpler version here, posted some years ago, with just eggplant and zucchini.

This latest parmigiana is like that one, only better, because—yes—I've gone and tweaked it again. It has two layers of grilled eggplant with a layer of grilled zucchini sandwiched in between. But it's the changes to technique that really make the difference. First, a couple of beaten eggs are poured over the layered vegetables before baking, which helps to set the parmigiana. I learned this trick from Giulia Scarpaleggia's parmigiana recipe, which is her grandmother's recipe and which she linked to in a recent newsletter.

And second, the parmigiana is baked, left to cool, and then reheated before serving, another great trick courtesy of Giulia and her grandmother. These two steps together solve a common problem (especially when you forgo breadcrumbs or flour): soupy parmigiana. The eggs add body but not too much heft, so that it remains light. The double baking further sets it, as well as takes care of any excess of liquid and concentrates the parmigiana's flavors. The layers—vegetables, cheese, sauce—fuse together to create a whole that rich and satisfying without being stodgy.

Makes 6 servings

INGREDIENTS

2 medium firm eggplants, ends trimmed, cut lengthwise or crosswise into 1/3-inch-thick slices (see NOTES)

4 medium zucchini, ends trimmed, cut lengthwise into 1/3-inch-thick slices

Extra-virgin olive oil

Fine sea salt

Freshly ground black pepper

About 3 cups (650 ml) Simple Tomato Sauce

2 eggs, lightly beaten

1 (8-ounce /227 g) ball fresh mozzarella, not too milky, cut into thin slices

1 (8-ounce /227 g) ball smoked mozzarella, cut into thin slices

Freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Prepare a medium-hot charcoal grill or heat a gas grill to high.
2. Brush the prepared vegetables lightly on both sides with good olive oil and sprinkle both sides with salt and pepper. Arrange them on the grate (in batches if necessary) and grill for 2 to 4 minutes per side, depending on how hot your flame is. You want grill marks and a few blackened spots, but you want to give the vegetables time to soften a bit as well. Transfer them to a plate as they finish.
3. Heat the oven to 375° F (190° C). Lightly coat an 8-inch by 11-inch oven-proof baking dish with olive oil. Spread a few tablespoons of tomato sauce into the bottom of the dish. Arrange half the eggplant slices in the dish in one layer, snuggling them up against each other. Pour in half the beaten egg, drizzling it over the eggplant. Lay slices of mozzarella on top (fresh or smoked or a mix of both) and sprinkle with a handful of Parmigiano cheese. Spoon on enough sauce to just cover the vegetables and cheese. Arrange a layer of zucchini on top of the sauce, followed by the rest of the beaten egg, and more mozzarella and Parmigiano cheese. Spoon more sauce on top. Make a final layer of eggplant, mozzarella, and Parmigiano cheese. Top with sauce, a few pieces of mozzarella, and a generous handful of Parmigiano cheese to finish.
4. Bake for 30 to 35 minutes, until bubbly throughout and browned on top. Let the parmigiana cool for at least 20 minutes. You can serve it warm after the first bake, but it's better if you let it cool completely and then reheat it in the oven until just warmed through.

NOTES: Many eggplant recipes call for salting the eggplant to release bitter juices. You can skip this step if the eggplant is young and not too seedy. If you prefer to add this step, slice the eggplant, and layer the slices in a colander, sprinkling each layer with coarse salt. Set a plate over the top layer and weigh it down (I put my mortar on top of it). Let the eggplant rest for 30 to 60 minutes; then wipe the slices dry with paper towels or a clean cloth. Proceed with the recipe.

This is a good dish to make a day in advance; once it has baked and cooled, cover it tightly and refrigerate overnight. To serve, rewarm it in a moderate-low oven (about 300° F / 150° C) until just warmed through.