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MARY's secret ingredients

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Eggplant Tarts Make a Great Tuscan Starter Dish

October 13, 2017 by [Mary](#) — [12 Comments](#)

Hello again.

I am trying to be back after my husband's passing in June. It is so very hard. Three things are helping – cooking and Tuscany, plus of course, ALL of my close friends.

I decided to move to Tuscany, San Fabiano, near Arezzo, in particular, to be in a different place all together and to be with dear friends. I will be here for nearly 3 months to test it out.

I am renting a Count's home on their vineyard, overlooking a small lake. I'm hoping that a new view may give me a new outlook on my life going forward. It is very hard when you've had the same partner you've loved for literally 2/3's of your life.

My friends here in Tuscany encouraged me to do it, helped to set it up and have been so incredibly warm and welcoming and what they say in Italian about me and the passing of Steve to others, I can't hear (just yet) so I don't cry as much.



Franco's dish at the cooking class at Tuscookany.

I am going to take Italian language classes. I started with 2 lessons while still in New York with a lovely young man, Giancarlo. I know the days of the week, counting, some key phrases and a few other things. It's really very little, but it's a start.

All of this was put into place during my last trip to Tuscany in late July, after Zachary's wedding in Poland. And during that last trip, I had the most fortunate opportunity to cook with Franco and Paolo at [Tuscookany](#).

[Tuscookany](#) is a most marvelous place, lined with lavender, overlooking three mountain ranges high on a mountain itself, where you can stay and learn to cook Italian classics, like pizza, tiramisu, gnocchi and some brilliantly revised dishes like Franco's Eggplant Parmigiano, revisited, that I will share with you here. He calls it Eggplant Pudding. I prefer to call it Eggplant Tarts – I think this name is more appropriate for the sophistication of this dish.



Franco and his partner, Paola (they said they are not married but nearly, as they have a mortgage together) run the amazing cooking school. If you recall, when we all visited Tuscany last year for [Bianca's wedding](#), Cristina had given me this [book](#) that I had talked to you about where I made the most [marvelous pasta bean soup](#). Well, Franco was one of the authors of that cookbook!!

In this recent class, we cooked from about 3 pm until 6:30 or 7, then had time to freshen up or have a glass of wine and enjoy the view (me) and eat the dinner we all made starting at 8 and lasting until 11 or so with wine flowing throughout and the after-dinner drinks – oh my word – so many of them!! And of course I had to sample a few and arrived home to Tiziana very drunk. She was sweet and said I was “just a bit tipsy.”



This eggplant dish is not difficult to make at all, a real surprise to serve your guests, light, flavorful and so, so delicious. But, it does take time. However you can make the tarts and the sauce the day before and warm both up in the microwave,

assemble, and serve, so that makes it super easy.

I have taken numerous cooking classes but only Franco's and another one I'll tell you about later, in Spain, really taught me new tricks and methods. Franco is quite knowledgeable and also down to earth. He teaches you things you can easily use as a home cook to pump up your skills. You can put his techniques to use right away, as I made these just as soon as I got home in August.

For instance, if your tomato sauce is a bit too acidic, instead of adding sugar, add a tiny bit of baking soda, watch it bubble, just like in chemistry class, and voila! The acidity will be gone through and through, not just in your mouth but in your tummy too!

Another great tip from Chef Franco – leave hard eggplants out with your fruit for 2 days to soften and ripen and they will be much more flavorful.

Here are the recipes:

EGGPLANT TARTS – adapted from Chef Franco Palandra – serves 12

3 large eggplants
3 eggs
8 large basil leaves, chopped
Mint leaves from 4 stems, chopped
1 3/4oz. of capers, drained and finely chopped
3 anchovy fillets, patted dry of oil and chopped
1 clove of garlic, finely minced
Olive oil in spray format
Salt to taste
Pepper to taste
Mozzarella cheese or Buffalo Mozzarella cheese, sliced in 1/4" thick slices while cold.
Tomato sauce – recipe follows

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F.

Wash and dry the eggplants. Pierce the eggplants in several places with a fork, place on a parchment paper-lined, rimmed baking sheet and roast for 45 – 55 minutes. When the eggplants are soft and the skin looks wrinkled, remove from the oven and let them cool down.

Cut each eggplant in half, lengthwise, and scrape the insides out, leaving the skin intact as much as you can. Chop the inside membranes of the eggplants and place in a fine mesh colander to drain. Squeeze as much liquid out of the eggplant membrane as you can, before adding the rest of the ingredients below.

Combine the capers, anchovies, garlic, basil and mint and add to the drained eggplant. Lightly beat the eggs separately and add to the eggplant mixture along with salt and pepper to taste. Combine everything in the mixture thoroughly.

Spray the insides of the cups of a 12 cup muffin pan with olive oil spray. Line each cup with some skin from the eggplant, so that the cooked purple side will be on the outside when the cup is turned over. Fill the eggplant skinned lined cups with the eggplant mixture and place the muffin tray on a rimmed baking sheet and bake the eggplant tarts for 20 – 27 minutes in a 350 degree F oven. The tarts should be firm and not wet looking when done.



My version of this dish!

Allow the tarts to cool slightly, then invert the muffin tin pan on a large flat cutting board. Tarts should be served warm and they can be easily microwaved to a warm temperature before serving.

TOMATO SAUCE – serves 12

- 2 lbs. of whole plum tomatoes, washed, cored and chopped
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 2 cloves of garlic, chopped
- 5 Tbs. olive oil
- 1 bunch of fresh basil
- Salt
- Pepper



Warm the oil in a stainless steel or enameled Le Creuset pot. Add the onions and garlic, cover and cook on low heat to



sweat and sweeten the onions, for 12 – 15 minutes, stirring often. Add the chopped tomatoes and simmer for 45 – 60



The Eggplant Tarts before going into the oven.

minutes, until the tomatoes are soft and lovely. Season with salt and fresh ground pepper to taste.

Pass the mixture through a fine sieve or food mill to remove all skin and seeds.

If the sauce is too sour, add ¼ tsp. baking soda.

You can make this sauce ahead of time, refrigerate and warm in the microwave to serve.

TO PLATE EACH DISH:

Slice the mozzarella cheese in ¼" thick slices while still cold, then cover with plastic wrap and leave to attain room temperature and more flavor.

Cover the bottom of each small serving plate with a thin layer of warm tomato sauce. Cut each slice of mozzarella into quarter pieces to open up the serving circle a bit and place in the center of your pool of tomato sauce. Or alternatively, grate the buffalo mozzarella in a circle in the center of the tomato sauce. Place a warm eggplant tart on top of the cheese. Garnish the plate with 2 – 3 basil leaves and serve with a smile and LOVE!

Your guests will LOVE you for this!!