

Caponata—Summer's Bounty

From my perspective, some of the most interesting regional Mediterranean cuisine can be found on the island of Sicily. What makes the cuisine interesting for me, either in traditional or modern interpretations, are all of the diverse cultural heritages that have left their imprint on what has evolved into Sicilian cuisine today. Sicilian cuisine, it could be argued is the original “fusion cuisine”—a layering of many ingredients and flavors as they were discovered and later introduced into the culinary tradition.

Any discussion about Sicilian cuisine should begin with caponata and its more refined variation, *caponatina*. It is one dish that strongly reflects a melding of several of the culinary influences that have shaped Sicilian cuisine as it has evolved over the last 2,500 years. By way of a few examples: the Greeks introduced, among other ingredients, olives and honey, which both found their way into the base *caponata* recipe. The ancient Romans and later the Arabs shaped the Sicilian traditional style of cooking, *agrodolce* (sweet and sour), which uses olive oil, vinegar, and sugar or honey to add personality to *caponata*, and is a perfect example of that *agrodolce* style. Under the Spanish influence both the tomato and cocoa found their place in Sicilian cooking and a spot on the *caponata* ingredients list. Finally, the two key ingredients in the dish, eggplant and capers, owe much to the Arab influence on Sicilian cuisine and Sicilian culture in general. Eggplants, native to southern India, and capers, native to central and western Asia, found their way into Sicily as the Arab influence moved westward into the Mediterranean region.

Caponata has also been one of those foundation dishes for me because the recipe I will share with you in this post has kept me connected to my family, starting with my Sicilian grandmother who passed it along to my aunt, who in turn passed it along to my cousin from whom I received it initially. My recipe is now an interpretation of theirs, having evolved over time as I became a more experienced cook and discovered better ingredients.

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The main ingredient of caponata is eggplant, which at this time of the summer season is at its peak, so it is best to take advantage of that bounty now. It can be argued that Sicilian eggplants are the best in Italy overall, although using the fruit—generally considered a vegetable, eggplant is actually a fruit—at its seasonal best will provide for a more delicious *caponata* outcome.

Caponata . . . My Way. Some quick thoughts before we begin:

- There are many regional *caponata* recipes and optional ingredients to choose from, so find one with the ingredient combinations you like and begin to explore from there.
- All the ingredients should be cut into uniform size, whether it's all chunky or all in a smaller dice as with the *caponatina*, which allows all the ingredients to cook evenly.
- The eggplant(s) you choose should be firm, not soft, with smooth unblemished skin. Select small to medium in size since the larger eggplants generally have more seeds. Peeling or not is a matter of personal taste. I prefer not to peel because the skin adds a depth of color, additional flavor and texture, along with simply making the finished dish look more interesting. Finally, eggplants are sponges when it comes to cooking with oil and can become soggy. Cook with less oil, over higher heat while stirring often to avoid having a soggy finish or the eggplant sticking to the pan. It is worth noting that I have read white eggplants will absorb less oil, although I have not used that variety in this recipe yet.
- The variety and color of the olives used can influence the outcome of the dish by adding flavor, color, salinity, and texture. In the past I have used green Castelvetrano olives, Kalamata olives, Gaeta olives, and various other oil-cured olives. In this recipe I incorporated rich oil-cured olives from Morocco.
- Capers, whether brined or salted can be used interchangeably, although with either they should be rinsed well to reduce the salt before adding to the mix.
- Along with the required celery I also add fennel to this dish because I like the flavor and I find it is a good way to use both the stalks and the fronds.
- Both sugar and honey can be used to add that touch of sweetness to the dish. Honey, the original sweetening ingredient before sugar cane was introduced on the island, is just more interesting to use because there are so many varieties, each bringing a different personality to the sweet component in the recipe. This time I used a wild-flower honey variety from Tuscany.
- In this recipe two vinegars are used: Red wine vinegar, and for an added depth of flavor a drizzle or two of balsamic syrup, made by slowly cooking down a bottle of a lesser-aged balsamic.
- If during the cooking process some additional liquid might be required, dry red vermouth or Marsala wine are on hand.

- Along with the tomato paste I also add several chopped, slow-roasted plum tomatoes that are always on hand during this peak summer tomato season.
- Herbs and spices: celery leaf, fennel fronds, fennel pollen, and occasionally minced parsley and basil leaf, along with a pinch of pepperoncino (red chili flakes).
- Some recipes also include nuts, which if I were to include, would be either lightly toasted pine nuts or chopped pistachio nuts.

Ingredients

- 1 to 2 medium eggplants
- 2 medium red onions
- 3 to 4 large garlic cloves
- 2 to 3 celery stalks + leaves
- 2 to 3 fennel stalks + fronds
- 2/3 cup pitted olives
- 2 tablespoons capers
- 2 to 3 tablespoons raisins (yellow or red)
- 3 tablespoons tomato paste
- 3 to 4 roasted plum tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons honey, or to taste
- 1 tablespoon cocoa powder
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar, or to taste
- 2 tablespoons balsamic syrup
- Dry red vermouth or Marsala
- Fennel pollen (optional)
- Basil leaves (optional)
- Pine nuts or pistachio (optional)
- Salt, pepper, pepperoncino to taste



Mise en place

Method

Prepare all the ingredients as described in my opening thoughts. Using a large heavy-bottom stockpot with high sides, heat 1/4 cup of olive oil over medium to high heat. When the oil is hot but not smoking, add the onion, garlic, celery (without leaves), and fennel (without fronds), stirring frequently until vegetable mix begins to soften, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

Add the prepared eggplant, stirring to thoroughly combine with the aromatic vegetable sauté adding a pinch more of salt and pepper. Cook for an additional 5 to 7 minutes.

Add the olives, capers, and raisins, again mixing to thoroughly combine into the sauté. If the mix seems a little dry add a splash of the vermouth or Marsala.

Add the tomato paste, chopped roasted tomatoes, honey, vinegars, and sprinkle the cocoa over. Stir the mixture again to thoroughly combine as the dish will take on a deeper color. Lower the heat to a gentle simmer and continue cooking for 7 to 10 minutes more stirring frequently to prevent any sticking to the bottom of the pan.

Add the reserved celery leaves and minced fennel fronds, along with 1/2 teaspoon of fennel pollen (if using) and the shredded basil leaves (if using). The nuts can be added at this time (if using) along with the pepperoncino (if using). Stir once again to combine all the ingredients while checking and correcting the seasoning, of the honey, the vinegar, the herbs and the spices.

Continue to slowly cook, stirring frequently until the eggplant is cooked through but is not soggy and continues to hold its shape—this is best determined by tasting as you go along.

When done, remove the pot from the heat and allow the *caponata* to cool. Transfer to a bowl and allow to set at room temperature. Cover and refrigerate, allowing the flavors to develop further over night as the dish is best served beginning on the second day. Allow it to return to room temperature before serving.

Caponata is best served as part of an antipasto course and makes a fine topping spread on crostini. It pairs well with egg dishes and works nicely as an appetizer or side salad. I have also used it as a flavorful underlay with grilled fish and sautéed cutlets made with either chicken or turkey. It keeps in the refrigerator for up to a week and also freezes well.



Plated

So whether you choose to serve this sweet-and-sour eggplant specialty as part of your next antipasti, as a side dish, or as an accompaniment to a frittata, you should consider adding *caponata* to your summertime cooking.

Eat well. Be well.



We all live in a small place, between the future we anticipate and the past we try and relive. . . . Food is one way of staying connected to the people who surround us.