

Eggplant or Aubergine?: Margaret Hardy

I don't like eggplant, or aubergine as the Europeans call it. Aubergine is a French word for a brownish purple colour hence the name.

Childhood memories of cooking eggplant with my grandmother were memorable. Having to cover the sliced eggplant with salt and leave it to sweat always annoyed me. Eating the cooked eggplant was not pleasant either because I always found the skin tough, I blamed the salt. I always ate it not wanting to upset Nana. By the time I got to have my own kitchen, eggplant didn't feature in my cooking.

Fast forward some forty years and I had a change of heart. It took a trip to Italy and cooking lessons in a Florentine kitchen for me to develop a love of eggplant. I enjoy Italian food however, the day I walked into the lesson to find we would be cooking eggplant my heart sank. Especially since I knew we would have to eat what we cooked.

'Oh no', I said softly under my breath. But then smiled sweetly and took my place around the large table with the other students.

The cooking lessons were in Italian, so we helped each other out as we wrote down the dictated recipe. When we were unsure of an Italian word, we would find out the translation and put the English word in brackets.

Unfortunately, I soon learnt there was no getting away from having to salt the slices of eggplant, it is to reduce the bitterness. While we waited for the salting to finish, we made the tomato sauce and cooked the pasta.

At the end of the thirty minutes the eggplant was placed in a colander and rinsed under cold running water, then dried thoroughly. We fried the eggplant in olive oil, when cooked rested it on absorbent paper to remove oil, then cut it into small pieces and added it to the simmering tomato sauce. The eggplant and tomato sauce was combined with the pasta; topped with grated ricotta stagionata.

I had to admit it looked and smelt good. With trepidation I had my first taste of Maccheroni alla Norma, it was heavenly, the eggplant so tender.

I owe my eggplant conversion to an Italian cooking class in Florence so I should call it eggplant melanzane. But I think saying I cook with aubergine will do for now, after all Italy is part of Europe.