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New Italian Restaurant Owners Share a Traditional Family Favorite: Eggplant Parmesan!

By Susie Iventosch



Piccolo Napoli's Melanzane Napoli (Eggplant Parmesan) Photos Susie Iventosch

sauce, cheese and all of the other pizza toppings. They also offer a gluten-free pizza crust made by Mariposa Bakery in Oakland.

"We use fairly simple ingredients, but we select organic, locally-sourced products," Eberle said. "We use a pepperoni made right in Oakland."

That all sounds fantastic, but I am here to tell you, Peter and Maria shared Maria's Eggplant Parmesan recipe with me and it is to die for! They plan to put this dish on the menu soon. Maria says the recipe has been a family favorite for many generations. She was taught how to make it by her father, Frank Napoli, who in turn learned from his mother, Caroline Cappuccio Napoli. Maria's family hails from Naples, Italy by way of New Jersey.

"The trick to any great eggplant dish is to prep eggplants in advance, by sweating and draining their extra water content," Maria Eberle instructs. "Eggplants contain a lot of moisture, which can ruin any dish. This simple sweating and draining procedure does take time and requires some cooking patience, but its impact on the taste and texture of the eggplant is truly profound."

One simple method that Eberle suggests is to peel the eggplants, or keep the eggplant skin intact for extra nutrients, and simply sweat them by thinly slicing them into rounds, salting them heavily and letting them rest for one to two hours. Afterward, pat off the excess water that the salt helped remove. I used her approach and it worked very well. The texture of the eggplant in the finished dish was firm, not soggy at all.

My family really enjoyed this recipe, which easily filled a 9x13 baking dish. I have to admit, though I have a fairly small appetite, I went back for thirds ... a rare occasion for me!

Piccolo Napoli
2 Theatre Square # 144
Orinda, CA
(925) 253-1225
www.piccolo-napoli.com

Piccolo Napoli is a brand new, family-run, Italian restaurant and pizzeria located in Orinda's Theatre Square. The restaurant is owned by Peter and Maria Eberle, who employ the services of their high school and college-aged children - when they are not busy with their many competitive sports. Eberle, a local fellow who graduated from Miramonte and UC Berkeley, says the family is very active in the local sports scene.

This is Eberle's first solo venture in the restaurant business and he is pleased with the busy evenings and the community response. The restaurant offers table service both inside and outdoors, as well as take-out, and excellent-value lunch specials "to go" or "dine in." In addition to several pasta dishes, there a variety of specialty, thin-crust Neopolitan style pizzas that can satisfy those who prefer traditional pizza sauce, pesto as sauce, or no sauce at all!

The menu also includes bruschetta, Caesar, house and spinach salads, a great selection of wines both by the glass and bottle, Angry Orchard Hard Apple Cider, six beers on tap and gelato made right on the premises.

According to Eberle, they use doppio zero (00) flour, a high-protein flour, which holds up well under the weight of

Melanzane Napoli

INGREDIENTS

3 large eggplants, skin intact, sliced into thin rounds (1/4-1/2 inch thick) and "sweated" as in method above
1-2 cups excellent quality extra virgin olive oil (added to pan as needed)

Flour mixture:

1 1/2 cups flour

Salt & pepper to taste

Egg mixture:

4 eggs, whisked in a bowl

1/4 cup milk mixed into eggs

Breading mixture:

2 cups Italian flavored bread crumbs

1 cup grated parmesan

Garlic powder to taste

Fresh parsley, chopped

Salt & pepper to taste

For layering:

2 lbs. sliced fresh mozzarella

1 cup grated Parmesan or other favorite Italian grating cheese, such as Pecorino Romano or Asiago

(Note* I used closer to 2 cups for good coverage)

4-6 cups warmed Marinara sauce, homemade is best but a good prepared sauce will work wonders at home

DIRECTIONS

Heat olive oil over medium heat in a large frying pan, 1/3 cup at a time (do not burn the oil!) Dip eggplant slices into flour mixture, then into egg mixture, then breading mixture. Place side by side in pan and cook for 5-7 minutes, or until a delightful golden brown, then flip and cook the other side for only a few more minutes. Repeat process until all the eggplant slices are fried, and use all the various sized pieces. Add oil after each batch of eggplant is removed.

Remove the fried eggplant slices as they cook and drain on paper-towel covered platter.

When ready to layer, pour a few large spoonfuls of sauce on the bottom of a deep baking pan, such as a lasagna pan or roasting pan.

Place the fried eggplant side by side in rows covering the bottom of the pan.

Cover the eggplant with sliced Mozzarella, sprinkle with grated cheese and cover with more sauce.

Repeat the layers until you reach the top of the pan, three layers deep, with the final topping being the mozzarella and grated cheese, and just a small amount of sauce.

Bake at 350 degrees for about 40 minutes, covered with aluminum foil, and 5-10 more minutes uncovered to be sure the cheese has melted beautifully. (Note* My baking dish was quite full, so I tented the aluminum foil, giving the cheese some space, so as not to stick to the foil.)

Reach the reporter at: suziven@gmail.com

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