

RECIPE 3: Aubergine Parmigiana (Melanzane alla Parmigiana)

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Ingredients

- 3 large aubergines
- olive oil
- 1 onion , peeled and finely chopped
- ½ bulb spring garlic , or 1 clove of regular garlic, peeled and finely sliced
- 1 heaped teaspoon dried oregano
- 2x400 g good-quality tinned plum tomatoes , or 1kg fresh ripe tomatoes
- sea salt
- freshly ground black pepper
- a little wine vinegar
- 1 large handful fresh basil
- 3 large handfuls Parmesan cheese , freshly grated
- 2 handfuls dried breadcrumbs
- a little fresh oregano , leaves chopped
- 150 g buffalo mozzarella , optional

Method

This classic northern Italian recipe is a great way to serve aubergines. By layering them with Parmesan and tomatoes and then baking them you get an absolutely moreish, scrumptious vegetable dish. Great served with all sorts of roasted meats and with roasted fish as well.

First things first: remove the stalks from the aubergines, slice them up into 1cm thick slices, and put to one side. Whether you're using a griddle pan or a barbecue, get it really hot. Meanwhile, put 2 or 3 lugs of olive oil into a large pan on a medium heat. Add the onion, garlic and dried oregano and cook for 10 minutes, until the onion is soft and the garlic has a tiny bit of colour. If you're using tinned tomatoes, break them up, and if you're using fresh tomatoes (which will obviously taste sweeter and more delicious, if they're in season), very quickly prick each one and put them into a big pan of boiling water for 40 seconds. Remove from the pan with a slotted spoon and put them into a bowl of cold water for 30 seconds, then remove the skins, carefully squeeze out the pips and cut up the flesh. Add the tomato flesh or tinned tomatoes to the onion, garlic and oregano. Give the mixture a good stir, then put a lid on the pan and simmer slowly for 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, grill the aubergines on both sides until lightly charred – you may have to do them in batches, as they probably won't all fit into your griddle pan in one go. As each batch is finished, remove them to a tray and carry on grilling the rest until they're all nicely done. When the tomato sauce is reduced and sweet, season it carefully with salt, pepper and a tiny swig of wine vinegar, and add the basil. You can leave the sauce chunky or you can purée it.

Get yourself an earthenware type dish (25 x 12–15cm). Put in a small layer of tomato sauce, then a thin scattering of Parmesan, followed by a single layer of aubergines. Repeat these layers until you've used all the ingredients up, finishing with a little sauce and another good sprinkling of Parmesan. I like to toss the breadcrumbs in olive oil with a little freshly chopped oregano and sprinkle them on top of the Parmesan. Sometimes the dish is served with torn-up mozzarella on top, which is nice too.

Place the dish in the oven and bake at 190°C/375°F/gas 5 for half an hour until golden, crisp and bubbly. It's best eaten straight away, but it can also be served cold. You can use the same method substituting courgettes or fennel for the aubergines – both are delicious. But do try making it with aubergines – you'll love it!