

Braised Artichokes, Roman Style
Recipe by Amber Share of www.eatlikeathena.com

In French it's artichaut. In Italian it's carciofo. In Spanish it's alcachofa. In English it is, of course, artichoke.

Spring is coming and with it artichokes. I grew up with them in my neighborhood in Los Angeles but I know not everyone was lucky enough to enjoy these tasty treats as often as I did. A foreign friend once ate an entire leaf, prickly tip and all. As he was chewing vigorously the entire table of Southern Californians stared at him, eyes wide. Not surprisingly he didn't enjoy his first taste of an artichoke.

The artichoke is a member of the thistle family which, if left to mature, would bloom into a large, prickly, purple flower. Once open it would reveal filaments on which pollen would form. The immature filaments constitute what is known as the "choke" and as the name implies, it should be avoided.

Artichokes are native to the Mediterranean. They are well-loved in Italy and it is said that an Italian, Catherine de Medici, brought them to France. It is thought that the artichoke as we know it today was first cultivated in Naples and Rome although it was known much earlier in Egypt in a similar form as a hybrid of the wild cardoon. Today major producers of artichokes include France, Italy, Spain, Egypt, Israel, Algeria, Morocco, and Turkey.

My recipe was adapted from one written by one of my teachers, Roberta Dowling. The cleaning takes some time but it's worth it since they will be nearly entirely edible afterward. Be careful not to overcook as they can fall apart.

4 large artichokes
2 large cloves garlic
1/4 cup loosely packed oregano leaves
1/4 cup loosely packed mint leaves
1/2 cup loosely packed flat leaf parsley leaves
leaves from 2-3 sprigs of thyme
juice of 1 lemon
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon pepper

1 cup chicken stock
1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil

For this recipe you will need a heavy bottom pan with a tight fitting lid large enough for all 4 artichokes to sit side by side and stay upright. It shouldn't be too roomy or the artichokes will fall or the liquid will not come up high enough.

Prepare acidulated water to prevent artichokes from browning by squeezing the juice of 1 lemon into a bowl of water large enough for all 4 artichokes.

First clean the artichokes:

Using a serrated knife, trim stem of artichoke leaving about 1" in tact. Snap off small and hard outer leaves until thinner, lighter colored leaves are revealed. Cut off the top end. Open the artichoke with your fingers being careful not to poke yourself on the tips of the inner leaves. Scrape out the hairy choke using a teaspoon, or grapefruit spoon if you have one. Peel outer part of stem with a vegetable peeler. Place in acidulated water bowl. Do the same to the remaining 3 artichokes.

Mince garlic. Roughly chop all herbs. Mix garlic, salt, pepper, herbs, and 1/8 cup of the olive oil together. Divide into 4 portions.

For each artichoke: drain by holding upside down over a towel. Fan open and separate the leaves with your fingers then, taking one portion of the herb mixture, stuff the center with some of the mixture and in between the leaves with the rest. Close the artichoke back up with your hands. Repeat for each artichoke.

Place all 4 in a snug pot, as mentioned earlier. Carefully add chicken stock, drizzle with olive oil, and season with salt & pepper. First bring to a boil then reduce heat, cover and simmer for about 40 minutes or until the leaves pull away easily. Check that the liquid hasn't completely evaporated once in a while. If it has you can add a bit of hot water.

Serve in a large shallow bowl with some of the braising liquid and bread on the side.