



CUISINE CONTINENTAL

Artichoke and Grilled Eggplant Soup with Lemon and Thyme

Serves 4 to 6

Combining many ingredients reminiscent of Provence, this silky smooth soup has a refreshingly sharp taste of lemon. It is great as the centerpiece of a summer luncheon or just a starter course. The soup can be prepared up to 8 hours in advance and kept refrigerated until needed.

6 large artichokes
Juice of 2 lemons and zest of 1 lemon, finely grated
5 tablespoons olive oil
Salt, freshly ground black pepper to taste
2 small eggplants (about 1/3 pound each), trimmed, peeled, and sliced 1/4-inch thick
2 quarts chicken stock
1 cup onions, thinly sliced
2 cups white mushrooms, caps only, sliced 1/4-inch thick, tossed with the juice of 1/2 lemon
2 sprigs thyme: 1 leave only, finely chopped, 1 whole, for garnish
1/4 cup heavy cream
2 tablespoons chives, minced
1/2 cup tomato, peeled, seeded, and cut into small strips
1/4 cup small black olives (Niçoise), split in half and pitted

Preparation:

Peel off two outer layers of leaves from each artichoke and cut off the stem just below the bottom. Shape each bottom with a small paring knife until smooth and round. Cut off the remaining leaves 1/2 inch above the heart. Split the bottoms and scoop out the chokes with a spoon, discarding chokes and trimmings. Slice into 1/4-inch thick slices and set aside in 2 cups of water with the juice of 1/2 lemon.

Preheat broiler. Brush a broiler pan with 1 tablespoon of the olive oil, season with salt and pepper, and cover with the eggplant slices. Brush the top of the slices with 2 tablespoons of the olive oil, season with salt and pepper, and broil for 6 to 8 minutes or until lightly browned. Turn the slices over and broil for 6 to 8 more minutes. Remove from pan and set aside to cool.



Bring the chicken stock to a boil in a pot over medium heat and set to the side. Heat the remaining 2 tablespoons of olive oil in another heavy bottom pot over medium heat. Add the onions and cook covered for 2 to 3 minutes while stirring. Add the mushrooms, the drained artichokes, and the chopped thyme and cook covered for 10 to 15 minutes while stirring often. Next, add the juice of 1/2 lemon, the boiling chicken stock, and salt and pepper to taste, and bring the vegetable and stock mixture to a boil for 15 to 20 minutes. When done, remove from heat and let cool for 20 to 30 minutes.

While the soup is cooling, bring 1 cup of water to a boil in a small saucepan, add the grated lemon zest and boil for 2 minutes. Strain out the zest with a fine-mesh strainer and set aside.

When the soup is cool, add half of the broiled eggplant, reserving six of the nicest slices to garnish the top, the heavy cream, blanched lemon zest, and the juice of 1 lemon. Pour the soup into a blender and blend until smooth; taste for seasoning. Strain the soup into a bowl and refrigerate until cold.

In a small bowl sprinkle the chives, salt, and pepper, and the juice of 1/2 lemon over the peeled & seeded tomato strips a few minutes before serving the soup.

Presentation:

Serve the soup in a large chilled bowl or in individual soup bowls. Garnish each portion with the reserved slices of broiled eggplant, a few marinated tomato strips, and Niçoise olives pitted & cut in half. Place a sprig of thyme in the center. A good accompaniment would be a few wedges of fresh pita bread.