

Marinating Vegetables Mediterranean Style

Building up layers of flavor

BY JEANNE QUAN

The countries of the Mediterranean have long been known for simple, home-style cooking. The best of these dishes are deeply flavored and make abundant use of fresh vegetables. Mediterranean cooks are also known for marinating vegetables, and for good reason. Marinating enables the cook to work in an easy and convenient way, varying vegetable types and amounts according to what's available. Marinating results in food with layers and layers of flavors, yet it allows each of the individual ingredients to have its voice. Marinated vegetable dishes also usually improve over time, a real boon to me because I'm inclined to make large quantities, a result of my years as a caterer.

I work with a company that imports high-quality foods and wines from Greece. At home, I stock a pantry of good oils and vinegars, brine-cured olives and capers, along with favorite condiments like olive paste, herbs packed in olive oil, and preserved lemons. These form the base and flavoring of many marinades. With these provisions on hand and armed with the most basic of cooking skills, it's possible to prepare vegetable dishes that are both nutritious and satisfyingly flavorful.

WHY MARINATE?

There are several benefits to marinating vegetables. First and foremost, a marinade *infuses* its host with flavor. There is time for separate elements to mellow and balance one another. Rather than having any one ingredient dominate, sharp flavors meld with shy. The ideal in marinating is to honor and emphasize the individual character of each ingredient while developing undertones as a result of the blending.

Marinated vegetables offer several advantages. Bread salad, shown with the author at right, combines vegetables and stale bread in a vinaigrette, and illustrates many of Quan's ideas—the layering of many flavors, using seasonal produce, good nutrition, and advance preparation.



Marinating is an excellent way of tying “this to that,” making the most of what I have on hand and thus avoiding waste. It isn’t an accident that the healthiest diets are also frugal—using every bit of what is fresh, and then marinating to tenderize, flavor, or preserve food for lean times.

Convenience is a third benefit. Because most preparation is done well in advance, I can dictate the time schedule. Marinated foods allow me to serve a number of small dishes at room temperature,



Mediterranean bounty at hand. Jars of preserved lemons flank one of pickled vegetables in Jeanne Quan’s kitchen. These deeply flavorful concoctions are ready to add to recipes or to eat as is. (Recipes on p. 27.)

the way to truly appreciate their deepened flavors. These marinated dishes are central to Mediterranean dining—and are included in *antipasto* in Italy, *meze* in Greece, and *tapas* in Spain.

PREPARING VEGETABLES FOR MARINATING

Some vegetables benefit from advance preparation, especially those that have a raw, green, or somewhat bitter taste, like green pepper, asparagus, wild greens, and broccoli; or dense ones like beets, potatoes, and artichokes. Zucchini and eggplant lie somewhere between dense and porous. Most of the time I precook them.

Blanching green vegetables brightens their colors, makes them tender, and helps them lose their raw taste. Dense vegetables can be boiled, roasted, or grilled. Roasting brings out natural sugars and makes vegetables tender. Try roasted beets, carrots, parsnips, and onions—you may be surprised at the amount of natural sweetness they contain. One of my favorite salads is freshly roasted beets marinated in orange juice, sweet vinegar, garlic, and herbs.

Grilling also brings out sweetness and adds a smoky flavor. Piquant and smoky *melitzanosalata* (eggplant salad) is made of grilled eggplant that has been chopped and seasoned with herbs and vinegar. No matter how I cook them, I like to marinate dense vegetables while they’re still warm. They seem to accept the marinade in a greedy fashion.

I marinate tender or juicy vegetables, such as tomatoes and cucumbers, raw and usually at room temperatures so as not to spoil their texture. For these vegetables, I find myself choosing tender herbs like fresh dill, basil, and chervil. Nothing matches their fresh-cut fragrance when added to the dish at the last minute.

I don’t let tender vegetables linger too long in a marinade. If they do, water is extracted from them, which dilutes the marinade. Greens, even sturdy wild ones, should not sit too long either. When preparing dandelion, purslane, kale, and chard, I blanch them until tender but still bright green and quickly dress them with a good squeeze of lemon, a touch of herbs, and a sprinkling of sheep’s milk feta cheese. This dish is everything I crave: tart, slightly bitter, salty, and herbaceous.

MARINATING INGREDIENTS

Lemons, vinegar, olive oil, and sea salt are age-old preserving agents, helping to create conditions that inhibit the growth of bacteria. Acidic ingredients like lemon and vinegar lower the pH, salt extracts water, and olive oil seals out air. Because marinades permeate what sits in them, the flavor and quality of every ingredient is very important. It pays to be choosy when selecting them.

Fresh lemons not only provide acidity but are also aromatic. I love to use them in marinades. In addition to their fresh juice, lemons yield highly flavorful oil from the skin. I often add thin strips of zest to marinades as a flavor reinforcement and a colorful accent. Whenever possible I use Meyer lemons for their soft, sweet taste. When buying lemons I look not for the cosmetically perfect but for those that feel heavy for their size and that yield ever so slightly to the touch. These have the most juice. Before using a lemon, I roll it back and forth under my hand on the countertop with moderate downward pressure. This massage helps the lemon yield every drop.

Preserved lemons, made by soaking salted lemons in olive oil, are a wonderfully mellow condiment for Mediterranean recipes (see recipe, p. 27). They’re easy to prepare and cost effective, because you eat the whole lemon, not just its juice, and a little bit goes a long way. The oil also takes on a heavenly flavor that’s appropriate for many uses.

Good vinegar gives both an aroma and an edge to all preparations. I stock several kinds: aged red-

wine, *glykadi* (an aged sweet Greek vinegar similar to balsamic), rice, and sherry vinegars. Vinegar is only as good and as delicious as the wine from which it's made. A high-quality vinegar will not smell or taste harsh. You can sip it from a spoon without making a face.

While most cooks are familiar with lemon, lime, or vinegar as acid ingredients, consider their more gentle but equally interesting cousins like bittersweet Seville oranges, blood oranges, even pomegranate juice and well-seasoned yogurt. They're all excellent vehicles for seasonings that permeate and perfume.

Extra-virgin olive oil is expensive but essential in marinades. Extra-virgin oil comes from the first cold pressing of the olives, and it has much more flavor than later pressings. For that reason, I can use less of it.

Pure salt is an important ingredient in marinades. Choose sea salt or kosher salt, both of which are one-hundred-percent pure, with no added elements or impurities.

ARTICHOKES WITH FENNEL BULB AND PRESERVED LEMONS

This is one of my favorite recipes—I consider it Mediterranean soul food. It's an adaptation of a recipe my employer and friend, Sotiris Kitrilakis, developed. For best flavor, prepare one day in advance. *Serves six.*

- 2 lemons, halved
- 6 medium artichokes
- 1 yellow onion, sliced thin
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup lemon-infused oil (preferably the packing oil from preserved lemons, but extra-virgin olive oil is a fine substitute)
- 8 oz. fresh fennel (feathery tops included), sliced thin
- 8 Tbs. chopped fresh dill (6 for cooking, 2 for garnish)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. dried thyme
- 4 carrots, chopped medium coarse
- Salt and pepper
- 1 cup water
- 4 to 6 Tbs. chopped preserved lemons (see recipe on opposite page)
- 4 to 6 Tbs. chopped flat-leaf parsley

Squeeze the juice of one lemon into a large bowl of cold water. Use the other to rub the artichokes as you trim them to prevent discoloration. Cut off all but 1 in. of the artichoke stem. Starting from the base, bend each leaf back and snap off. Trim top to 1 in. Use a teaspoon to remove the choke. Trim and shape the base with a knife until no dark areas remain. Drop the artichoke into the prepared water. Repeat with the remaining artichokes.

In a heavy Dutch oven over medium heat, cook the onion in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup oil until light brown, stirring frequently. Add the remaining oil, fennel, dill, thyme, and carrots. Season with salt and pepper, reduce heat to medium low and cook 3 min., stirring frequently. Add the artichokes (stem end up) and the water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, cover, and simmer gently until the artichoke stems are tender, about 30 min. Cool and refrigerate.

To serve, spread the vegetables out on a platter with the artichokes on top, stem end up. Garnish with preserved lemon, parsley, and dill.



Artichokes, fennel, and carrots make up one of the author's favorite dishes (see the recipe at left). She calls it "Mediterranean soul food."

Bread salad is versatile, accepting many different kinds of vegetables. The author's version includes stale bread, ripe tomatoes, onion, cucumber, capers, olives, and feta cheese. (Recipe at right.)



Photos: Faith Echtermeyer

Preserved lemons are a delicious condiment. Chop them up and strew them over feta cheese or salads, serve them alongside seafood, or stuff them into the cavity of a chicken before roasting.



BREAD SALAD FROM CRETE

This salad illustrates many ideas I've talked about: the layering of flavors, using the best of what's in season, making it go a long way, and finally, good nutrition. Bread salad stands as a meal on its own or accompanies grilled or roasted poultry, seafood, and meat. Feel free to change the ratios of the vegetables, but I find the cool crunch of cucumbers and the sweetness of tomatoes or roasted peppers essential. *Serves four.*

4 cups good-quality, densely textured, whole-wheat or mixed-grain bread, cut into 1-in. cubes
¾ cup extra-virgin olive oil
¼ cup red-wine vinegar or freshly squeezed lemon juice
1 Tbs. dried Greek oregano
3 cups ripe tomatoes (in winter substitute roasted red peppers), seeded and cut into ½-in. pieces
2 cups cucumber, seeded and cut into ½-in. pieces
3 Tbs. capers
½ cup brine-cured olives, pitted and chopped
½ cup red onion, chopped fine
2 Tbs. fresh mint, cut into thin strips
2 Tbs. fresh basil, cut into thin strips
4 Tbs. flat-leaf parsley, chopped
2 tsp. or more black pepper
8 oz. sheep's milk feta cheese (optional)

Allow the bread to dry several hours or overnight. Combine the oil, vinegar, and oregano and set aside.

Approximately 30 min. before serving, combine all the ingredients in a large bowl and toss well. Garnish with additional basil or mint leaves and crumbled feta if you like. The salad will get soggy after a time, but quite honestly, I like it even better that way.

GIARDINERA

(Marinated and preserved garden vegetables)

After some experimentation, I came up with this updated version of the traditional Italian pickled vegetables. It's colorful, spicy, easy, and it can be made up in small batches. *Giardinera* is perfect as an hors d'oeuvre with ales and stouts. You can vary the selection and proportions of vegetables and adjust the amount to the size of the container you're filling. *Makes about 3 quarts.*

1 small head cauliflower
2 medium red peppers
1 medium yellow pepper
2 ribs celery
3 small pickling cucumbers
1 lb. carrots (baby carrots are especially nice)
2 to 3 small Japanese eggplant
3 cups white-wine or rice vinegar
2½ cups water
4 Tbs. sea salt or kosher salt
4 cloves garlic
2 to 3 small dried chili pods
12 peppercorns
8 large sprigs fresh dill
Olive oil to top off

Thoroughly clean and trim the vegetables, removing all blemishes, seeds, ribs from inside the peppers, and tough cauliflower stems. Cut the vegetables to uniform sizes; I prefer them in 2-in. pieces. (Baby carrots can be left whole.) Blanch the eggplant for 1 min. in boiling salted water. Pack all vegetables snugly into a clean glass jar with a clamp lid.

In a glass or ceramic bowl, mix the vinegar, water, salt, and seasonings. Pour the mixture over the vegetables to completely submerge them. Make more pickling liquid if necessary. Top off with a ½-in. layer of olive oil. Store in a cool pantry for two weeks before eating.

PRESERVED LEMONS

Preserved lemons were a revelation to me—they're versatile, delicious, and easy to prepare. Experiment with different combinations. For Mediterranean cooking, I prepare lemons with extra-virgin olive oil, oregano, bay leaves, and peppercorns. For Indian recipes, I blend limes and key limes with canola oil, paprika, cayenne, and black mustard seed. *Makes about 3 quarts.*

12 medium to large lemons, unsprayed, if possible
2 Tbs. (approximately) sea salt or kosher salt
Herbs and spices of your choice—dried chili pods, oregano, bay leaves, peppercorns
3 to 4 cups (approximately) extra-virgin olive oil, canola oil, or a combination

Wash the lemons thoroughly. Slice each into eight wedges or crosswise into ¼-in. sections. Arrange the lemons in a single layer on a tray or dish, sprinkle with salt, cover with plastic wrap, and repeat until all the lemons are laid out and salted. Let stand 24 hours. (Refrigerate in hot climates.)

Layer the lemons into a glass clamp-lid jar with herbs and spices. Discard the salty juice that has seeped from them. Cover with oil, submerging the fruit by at least ½ in. Give the jar a gentle rap to dislodge any air bubbles lurking among the lemons. Keep the jar on the counter or in a cool pantry. After two weeks, the lemons should be soft-textured, with a mellow-tart flavor. Once you've dipped into them, refrigerate or store in a cool pantry. Always maintain a ½-in. layer of oil on top.

Jeanne Quan has been a San Francisco Bay Area retailer, caterer, and cooking teacher for more than seventeen years. Her special focus is on Mediterranean foods and wines. As Director of Market Development for Peloponnese, a Greek food importing company, she talks to food producers, retailers, and customers throughout the United States and Europe. ♦