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It's spring which means it's Artichoke Season. Part of the thistle and sunflower family, this flower is a delicious sign of spring. With their origins in the Mediterranean, artichokes have been around for centuries. In spite of all the many changing food fashions and trends, some things never go out of style.

Artichokes came to the United States in the 1600's with Spanish and French settlers. The Spanish brought them to California and the French to Louisiana. Today virtually all fresh artichokes in the United States come from California. Most of them are grown in and around the little town of Castroville, about 100 miles south of San Francisco. Castroville claims to be "The Artichoke Center of the World", which is a bit odd since the world's top producers are Italy, Spain, and France. The United States ranks only sixth. I guess it's all in the marketing. Having Marilyn Monroe as the first California Artichoke Queen couldn't hurt either.

I think my sister, Brenda, introduced me to artichokes. Fresh artichokes that is, not the soggy ones that come in a can, soaked in water and preservatives. Brenda went off to college and discovered all sorts of interesting things. When she returned east for vacation after a year away from New England, she brought a fancy French bicycle and a fondness for what then seemed like terribly exotic, new foods. I think she might have come back a vegetarian, but that could have happened later. In any case, she brought brown rice, gorgonzola and fresh artichokes into our suburban kitchen.

She taught me how to steam an artichoke and serve it with a lemony sauce. From that first introduction, I was hooked. Every year I look forward to spring when fresh, bright green artichokes are back in the market. I stay away from the tired looking ones that you sometimes see in the winter or mid-summer. I figure they have been on the road way too long to be tasty.

But I really learned about artichokes over a long weekend in Italy. Forget, Castroville, Italy is king when it comes to artichokes. Italian farmers grow more than one billion pounds of artichokes every year and almost all of them are consumed locally. Many people think of pizza and spaghetti or lasagna when they think of Italy and Italian food. Italian cooking is so much more and its key to greatness is its simplicity. Simple preparation with wonderful fresh ingredients.

When artichokes are in season, Italians take every advantage of these flowery treats. We spent four or five glorious, spring days in and around Rome and ate artichokes at least once, sometimes twice a day. Not just steamed with a little lemon and olive oil, we ate them pureed in soups and sliced in salads. We nibbled on roasted artichokes with a glass of wine before dinner. We enjoyed them tossed with pasta, braised with lamb and stuffed with delicious sausage and cheese. It was the height of the season and artichokes were the shining star of every meal.

Once back home, I decided to broaden my artichoke repertoire. I'll admit I was a little intimidated at first. All that dissecting, slicing, dicing, stuffing and braising; I was sure I was over my head. The truth could not have been further from my silly misconception. I took a deep breath, dove in and soon had my first artichoke trimmed, de-choked, sliced and ready for braising. Within minutes, I went from timid steamer to self-proclaimed expert.

Food in Italy is special. Italians hold a steadfast belief that dining should be leisurely, the food and wine should be savored and the company enjoyed. Whether eating at home or in a restaurant, it is practically sacrilege to rush through a meal. Now, what could be better for a leisurely spring feast than artichokes? Whether you stuff or braise, slice or dice; enjoy a special spring treat with family and friends around the table.

Bon appétit! - Susan

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Linguine with Lemon Braised Artichokes

The perfect spring dish, it will be a delicious and impressive addition to your next dinner party. Great for an appetizer, a side dish or add shrimp and make it the main course. Enjoy!

Serves 6-8 as an appetizer or side dish or 4 as a main course

8 ounces linguine
2 cloves garlic minced
Juice of 1/2 lemon
1/4 cup dry white wine
1/4 cup chicken or vegetable broth
1 teaspoon finely chopped fresh oregano leaves
Lemon Braised Artichoke Hearts, recipe follows
2 tablespoons chopped Italian parsley leaves
1 tablespoon butter, cut in pieces
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
Grated lemon zest
Grated Parmesan cheese
Olive oil

1. Cook the linguine in salted boiling water according to package directions.
2. While pasta is cooking, heat a little olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add garlic and cook for 1-2 minutes. Add the lemon juice, white wine, broth and oregano. Bring to a boil and reduce by half. Reduce heat to low and whisk in the butter.
3. Drain the pasta, reserving a little pasta water. Add the linguine and artichokes to the skillet; toss to combine. If the pasta seems dry, add a little of the reserved pasta water. Sprinkle with parsley, grated lemon zest and Parmesan cheese. Serve immediately.

Lemon-Braised Artichokes

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Juice of 1 lemon
1/4 cup chicken or vegetable broth
1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves
1/2 teaspoon finely chopped rosemary
1 clove garlic minced
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
Pinch freshly ground pepper
2-3 medium to large artichokes

1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.
2. Combine the olive oil, lemon juice, broth, herbs, garlic, salt, and pepper in a medium non-reactive, ovenproof saucepan. Mix well and set aside while preparing the artichokes.
3. Snap off the outer leaves* of the artichokes. Cut off all but an inch or two of the stem. Cut the top 2 inches off the artichoke leaves. Trim the bottom and stem, removing the tough exterior with a peeler or paring knife. Cut the artichoke in half and scrape out the choke with a spoon or melon baller.
4. Cut the artichokes in eighths. Immediately put the artichoke pieces in the olive oil and lemon marinade; toss to coat completely. Put the pan over high heat and bring to a boil. Cover the pan, place in the oven and cook until the artichokes are tender when pierced with a fork, about 20 minutes. Reserve until ready to use.

** Save the outer leaves and steam them for lunch the next day! Serve them with a simple dipping sauce of lemon juice, olive oil and melted butter.*