

ROASTED EGGPLANT WITH CUMIN AND PIMENTÓN

I have to pace myself whenever I make this, because I can quickly eat much more than my share—and sometimes even before dinner is served. There's just something irresistible about the combination of the browned exterior and tender, almost creamy insides of roasted eggplant. Cutting the eggplant into cubes maximizes the cut surfaces so you get even more deliciously browned edges. The cubes shrink considerably when roasted at high temperatures, so make more than you think you'll need. For best results, I encourage you to line the baking sheet with parchment before roasting. This will help prevent the tender eggplant from sticking to the baking sheet and collapsing as you attempt to stir the cubes during roasting.

The cumin and pimentón lend a certain Mediterranean flair, amplifying the eggplant flavor without dominating. The dish is best in the summer and early fall, when eggplants are at their peak. Serve this, warm or at room temperature, as a side dish alongside steak, grilled seafood, and roasted chicken. You can also turn it into a salad with the simple addition of balsamic vinegar and fresh basil (see the option that follows).

SERVES 4

METHOD: High heat

ROASTING TIME: 25 to 30 minutes

1 ½ pounds eggplant, preferably small Italian eggplants (see *Selecting and Handling Eggplant*, page 478)
¾ cup extra-virgin olive oil
1 ½ teaspoons cumin seeds, toasted and ground

½ teaspoon pimentón (smoked Spanish paprika)
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 HEAT THE OVEN. Position a rack in the center of the oven and heat to 450 degrees (425 degrees convection). Line a large heavy-duty rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper.

2 CUBE AND SEASON THE EGGPLANT. Trim the stem end off the eggplants and cut each into ¾- to 1-inch cubes. (Leave the skin intact to add textural interest.) Put the eggplant in a large bowl. Drizzle the olive oil and sprinkle the cumin and

pimentón over it, season with a generous amount of salt and pepper, and toss well to coat. Don't worry if every cube doesn't look coated; eggplant soaks up such a prodigious amount of oil that you'd have to add too much to fully coat every bit. Spread the eggplant out on the baking sheet in an even layer. The pan will be crowded, but the eggplant will shrink as it roasts.

3 ROAST, turning the eggplant with a spatula after about 10 minutes and every 5 minutes after that, until shrunken in size, tender throughout, and browned on the outside, 25 to 30 minutes.

4 SERVE. Transfer to a serving bowl and serve hot, warm, or at room temperature.

OPTION: ROASTED EGGPLANT SALAD WITH FRESH BASIL

Serve this salad with anything from the grill. It's also fine picnic fare, as it's just as good at room temperature as it is warm. Roast the eggplant as directed above. After roasting (step 3), transfer the eggplant to a shallow serving bowl and sprinkle with $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar. Slice $\frac{1}{4}$ cup fresh basil leaves into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick ribbons (see below) and add to the bowl. Toss. Taste for salt and pepper and serve warm or at room temperature. If you're making this ahead, wait to add the basil until just before serving.

Slicing Fresh Basil

FRESH BASIL BRUISES EASILY, AND WHEN THIS HAPPENS, THE TENDER GREEN LEAVES WILT AND DISCOLOR. FORTUNATELY, WITH A LITTLE CARE YOU CAN slice basil without bruising so that it stays fresh and verdant. Start by removing the leaves from the stems by pinching them off at their base. Stack several leaves on the cutting board (4 or 5 leaves is a good number to start with; with practice, you can stack more). Now, with the center rib of the leaves running parallel with the edge of the counter, roll the stack of leaves up as if you were rolling a cigar. Roll snugly but without squeezing or crushing. Using a large knife with a sharp blade, slice the roll of basil leaves, cutting strips as thin or as thick as you like. After cutting, fluff the sliced basil; you'll see that you've made a neat little heap of ribbon shapes. The French refer to this cut as a *chiffonade*, from the word for shreds or rags. You can use the same technique for shredding any leafy green, particularly tender ones such as lettuce.