

PREPARING CARDONE

I) WHAT IS A CARDONE (CARDOON)-

A cardone is a vegetable that resembles an artichoke plant. It is also related to the artichoke plant, minus the choke. You eat the stalk. When the stalks are cleaned, they resemble a celery plant. It is versatile in its preparation. It is also high in trace elements and vitamins and low in calories, minus some of the rich cooking techniques (true with many vegetables)!

Among Italian Americans it is traditionally associated with the Christmas holidays, and even the Festa di San Giuseppe on March 19th depending on availability. The Cardone come out around November and by the end of March they are out of season. Not all green grocers carry the vegetable, so that becomes an issue and part of the reason why it is little appreciated. It is also the reason why we added the special class in Jan. so you can try to search out for the plant at your grocery store.

They are labor intensive to grow, like celery, in cultivation, there has to be some banking of soil so the core bunch remains white and upright since you are eating the stalk minus the leafy part. There are usually 5 or 6 stalks per bunch and are about about a tapered 2-3 inches width base, and a foot long. A major part of preparing cardone is cleaning them!

II) CLEANING AND PREPARING THE CARDONE-

As noted, a major part of preparation is cleaning the cardone. Begin by taking the stalks apart from the bunch. Each stalk will have fringe leafy sides. That part needs to be trimmed off, so what you are left with is a stalk that now resembles a celery stalk (cut tips of both ends of stalk) then with a peeler of choice or fine knife remove the stringy part of the stalk. By scraping the length of the stalk with a peeler you are able to remove the stringy parts. Once that is done then slice the stalks into desired size, and put into a bowl of cold water with salt, lemon juice, and a splash of white wine vinegar. Let the cut stalks stay in the water for about 20 minutes or until you are ready to boil them (some people let stay in water for an hour, I don't).

The size you cut the cardone stalks depend on what you want to do with them. They are usually fried, so two inch pieces are desirable, however after cooking you may want to cool and dice into a salad or use as a vegetable for Bagna Caoda, or lightly braise or marinate.

III) BOILING THEM 25 MINUTES OR SO, they are done when they are fork tender. Cardone must be slow boiled for about 25 minutes, or until a fork can go through the pieces. I boil my cardone in salted water, with another juiced lemon and a couple of tablespoons of white wine vinegar. Once done simply drain, cool and decide your next step. They now have the color of a blanched celery. They are perfectly edible as is, and can be diced for a salad, or ready to use for Bagna Caoda or other vegetable dips. Some options are noted below:

IV) ALLA TAVOLA:

A) AS A PART OF A BAGNA CAODA TRAY, or with an assortment of vegetables for a dip tray.

B) FRIED IN A BATTER-

1) after the cardone pieces have cooled and drain, place in a flour and egg batter, and fry in a pan of hot olive oil until browned on both sides. It takes about 2 minutes on each side, take out, drain on a paper towel, add salt, pepper and grating cheese to taste and serve warm.

2) in like fashion, you can fry by placing in flour, then put each piece into a beaten egg mixture, and then remove and coat with an herbed breadcrumb and Romano cheese blend. Once they are all coated, they can be fried as noted above. About two minutes on each side.

C) BAKED:

1) breaded as noted above, then, place in a an oiled and buttered baking pan, and bake at 350 degrees, for about 20- 25 minutes to golden brown. When serving from the baking dish can also sprinkle with salt, pepper and cheese.

2) béchamel, or "besciamella" sauce*. Once the sauce is made add to a baking pan, spoon a layer of sauce in an oiled pan, and place the pieces in the pan and cover with the remaining sauce and bake in the 350-degree oven for 25 minutes. Do not cover.

D) MARINATED, & SALADS,

I like to also marinate the cardone pieces, and toss with olive oil, half a lemon, touch of balsamic vinegar, minced onion, parsley, and salt and pepper to taste. I let them stay in the marinade about an hour before serving. I serve it at room temperature as an appetizer. Once cooked, they can also be diced or cut celery style in a special green salad or salad nicoise.

*For this presentation I made a special béchamel sauce, that included nutmeg, marsala wine, and peas. So, to a standard sauce , quarter cup of diced onions braised in 3 tablespoons of butter, about 5 minutes; adding about a quarter cup of flour, little salt , pepper, and nutmeg, stirring for 5 minutes (called a roux in Louisiana), then add two cups of regular milk, and stir, until begins to boil, when the blend starts to boil add two more cups of milk, and keep stirring until the mixture is blended. that takes about 10 in a low boil. I then add about half cup of marsala wine, and a cup of peas, stir and simmer gently for another five minutes, , until peas are al dente, you can add a spoon or so of water if the mixture starts to become too thick. Then I layer onto the baking pan put the cardone in the pan, and then cover with the sauce and bake accordingly as noted above. Sprinkle with cheese and serve hot. Observation: this is not a low-calorie dish but that's not the fault of the cardone, its the fault of the béchamel sauce, and the chef but it taste very good. "mi dispiace", allora!. Hint, I am thankful I have a gas stove to make the sauce. Also once you start making the sauce it needs constant attention and heat control.