



George Chen, far left, looks over teapots at a wholesale mall on the outskirts of Shanghai, while at left, Jean Alberti buys a stash of pu-er — a dark, complex, fermented tea — at one of his favorite shops in town

Photos by OLIVIA WU / The Chronicle

Eggplant with Basil

The eggplant most commonly used in China is a fingerling variety that measures about 10 inches long. Think of a long fava bean that's bright purple. Delicate in texture and flavor, it is also easy to cook evenly because it lacks big seeds and tough skin. Choose only young, small Japanese eggplant for the closest thing.

INGREDIENTS:

- 3/4 pound Japanese eggplant
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/3 cup vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup Thai basil leaves, minced
- 2 tablespoons brewed soy sauce (Kikkoman will do)
- 2 teaspoons rice wine or sake
- 1 1/2 teaspoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon cornstarch, stirred into 2 tablespoons water (optional)
- Extra basil for garnish

INSTRUCTIONS: Cut the eggplant lengthwise into halves; if necessary, split the wide section again lengthwise, so all the pieces are the size of carrot sticks. Place eggplant in a bowl, sprinkle with the salt and add water to cover. Stir a few times to dissolve the salt. Leave at room temperature for about 1 hour.

Drain the eggplant and press

dry with a dish towel.

Pour oil into a heated dry wok or saute pan. Allow oil to heat. Add the eggplant and fry until all the pieces are wilted, about 8 minutes.

Remove the eggplant with a slotted spoon. Pour off the residual oil, leaving about 1 teaspoon in the wok. You may pat off excess oil from the eggplant.

Add the basil to the oil and stir until just wilted, about 15 seconds. Return the eggplant to the pan, add the soy sauce, wine and sugar. Bring to a boil. If using, stir the cornstarch-water mixture, pour in and stir until the pan juices thicken.

Garnish and serve immediately.

Serves 2-4

PER SERVING: 95 calories, 1 g protein, 8 g carbohydrate, 7 g fat (1 g saturated), 0 cholesterol, 517 mg sodium, 2 g fiber.