

Bringing Up Baby Artichoke

IN Italy, artichokes are almost as common as onions, so normal and necessary are they considered. Every little vegetable shop has a crate of artichokes sitting casually by the front door, and entire stalls are devoted to them at the market. A pile of violettinged freshly picked beauties with their silvery leaves is quite an enticing sight. And the stalls come complete with little old ladies who will trim and prepare them for you if you want to pay a little extra.

So it's not unusual in city kitchens there to have artichokes several times a week in one way or another. Here, it's a vegetable still relatively underappreciated, and many folks eat them only from jars. More's the pity.

The Italian way with artichokes is worth emulating. It nearly always has something to do with olive oil, garlic and herbs, it's always a simple preparation, and it's always delicious. Using the so-called baby artichokes from foggy coastal California, which are small and exceedingly user-friendly, you can make garlicky Roman-style artichokes quite effortlessly at home. California had a cool wet late spring this year, so artichokes are still plentiful. Why not set aside your locavore leanings and en-



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joy the bumper crop?

Back to babies. Fear not — I'm not a fan of those pricey prepackaged boutique infant specimens grown for looks. But certain vegetables really are at their best picked on the small side — peas, green beans and corn come to mind immediately. Tenderness and sweetness are the reason, period. Baby artichokes are really the low-sprouting buds of ordinary globe artichoke plants.

Technically mature, they are nonetheless quite tender, and they have no hairy choke.

It takes no time to peel off the outer petals and trim a couple of pounds of these diminutive artichokes, perhaps with a cool glass of pinot grigio for encouragement. I suspect that, once you learn how to cook them, you'll make them a regular part of your vegetable repertory. The only other ingredients

you need for this Roman favorite are olive oil, salt, pepper, red pepper flakes, garlic and parsley. When the prep work is done — it can be finished well in advance — the artichokes need less than 10 minutes in the pan.

Eat them warm as a snack with drinks, or as a part of an antipasto with slices of prosciutto and fresh mozzarella, or spoon them over roasted halibut or spaghetti.

PAN-ROASTED BABY ARTICHOKE

Time: 30 minutes

24 baby artichokes, about 3 pounds
Juice of 1 lemon
Olive oil
Salt and pepper
Red pepper flakes
4 garlic cloves, chopped fine
3 tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley
Coarse sea salt
Lemon wedges or red wine vinegar, for serving.

1. Peel off and discard a few outer petals of the artichokes until you reach the pale, tender center. Trim the top and stem end, then quarter each artichoke. There should be no discernible choke, but if there is, remove it with a paring knife. Put the artichokes in a bowl of cold water to which the lemon juice has been added.

2. In a wide, heavy, nonaluminum skillet heat a 1/2 inch of olive oil over medium heat. Drain and blot the artichokes and, when the oil is nearly smoking, carefully add them to the skillet. Season well with salt and pepper, stirring to coat with oil. Let the artichokes brown slightly, stirring occasionally, for 5 to 7 minutes, until they are tender when probed with a paring knife.

3. Add the red pepper, garlic and parsley. Stir well and let sizzle for a minute or so. Transfer the artichokes to a platter, sprinkle with coarse salt and serve with lemon wedges, or sprinkle sparingly with red wine vinegar. Eat hot, or at room temperature.

Yield: 4 to 6 servings.

