

Caponata

2 firm small eggplants	Parsley, thyme, oregano sprigs
8 celery ribs	⅓ cup red wine vinegar
2 onions	2½ tablespoons sugar
2 red bell peppers	1 cup pitted green olives
1 cup virgin olive oil	¼ cup drained capers
4 garlic cloves	3 tablespoons tomato paste
28-oz. can plum tomatoes	Salt and black pepper to taste
2 teaspoons fresh thyme leaves	

Wash, dry, and cut the eggplants (unpeeled) into small cubes. In a large heavy pot, heat ¼ cup of the olive oil over moderately high heat and fry the eggplant cubes until lightly browned. You will have to do this in batches because you don't want to crowd the cubes or they won't brown. You will have to add extra olive oil between batches. Remove the eggplant cubes to a large bowl.

Dice the celery ribs and cook them in more oil in the same pot as you cooked the eggplant. Fry the celery for about 5-6 minutes just until lightly browned. Remove the celery to the bowl with the eggplant. Add the thyme leaves and season lightly with salt.

Cut the onions into very thin slices. Cook them in the same pot over low heat, adding extra olive oil as needed, until translucent and softened. Cut the red peppers into small dice and add them to the cooking onions. Add a pinch of salt, cover the pot and cook for about 5 minutes. You want the celery and the red peppers to have a bit of crunch to them. Mince the garlic cloves, uncover the pot, add the garlic stirring for about 2 minutes, being careful not to let the garlic burn.

In a separate bowl, break up the tomatoes with your hands, a knife, or a potato masher. Return the eggplant and the celery to the cooking pot, and add the broken tomatoes, plus all the tomato juice from the can.

Make an herb bouquet of several parsley, thyme, fresh oregano sprigs and any available celery leaves, tied together with kitchen twine. Add the herb bouquet and any remaining olive oil to the cooking pot, cover, and simmer the mixture for about 20 minutes or longer, stirring frequently until the mixture becomes rather soft.

In a small bowl, beat together the vinegar and the sugar until it's dissolved. Add this, along with the tomato paste, the olives, and the drained rinsed capers to the vegetable mixture. Stir to be sure the tomato paste is well distributed, and continue to cook for a few minutes until the flavors are well blended. Remove the herb bouquet, and taste for salt and pepper. You may wish to adjust the amount of vinegar and sugar to your taste.

Serve the caponata warm or at room temperature, but never chilled. Any remaining caponata can be refrigerated and gently rewarmed for future serving.