

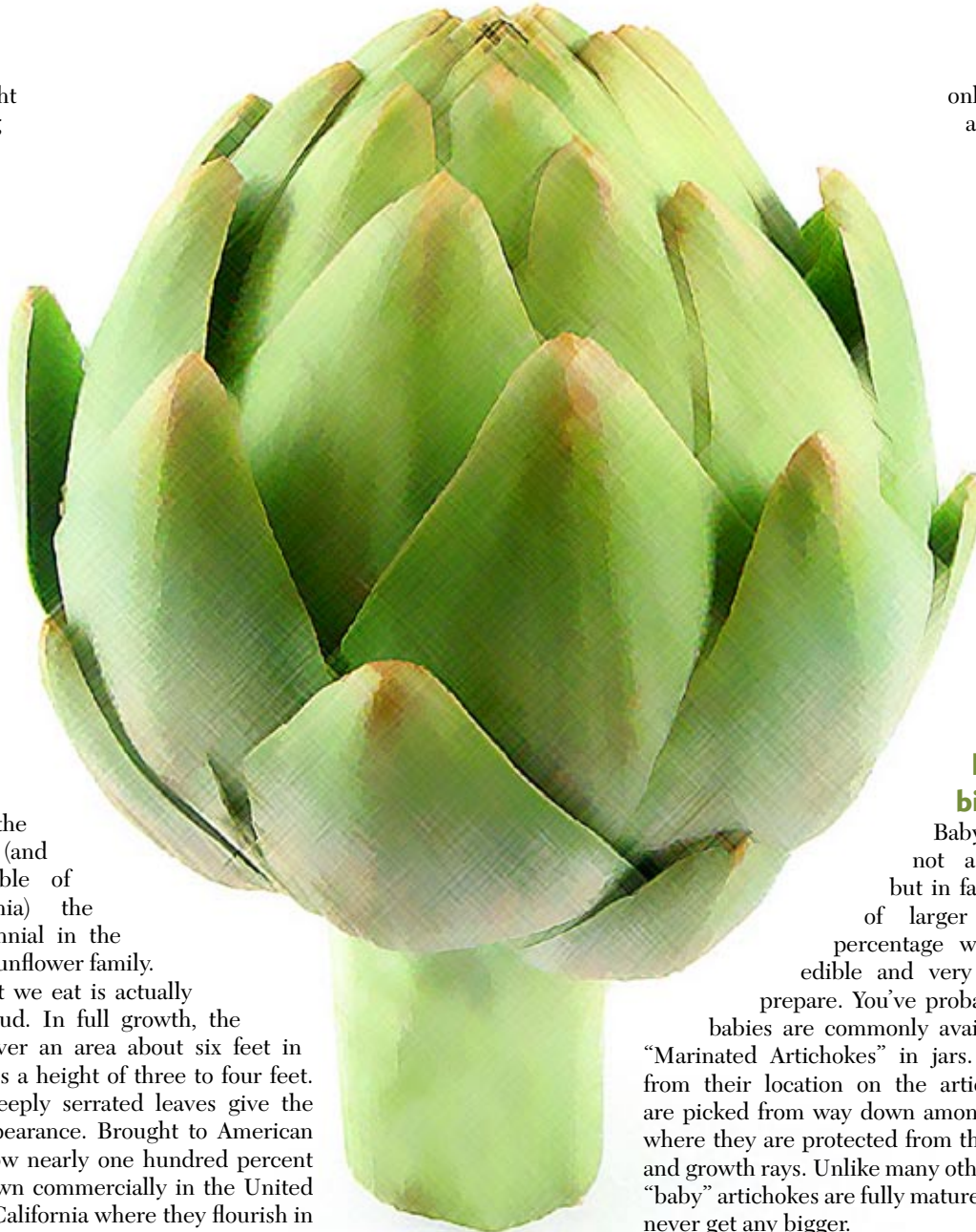
SENSUOUS THISTLES

BY LYNETTE LA MERE

Just the thought of celebrating spring and all its delicacies intoxicates me. I can't help it. Right when I've accepted being cold most of the time and settled for the dull squashes and veggies of winter, nothing sounds more enticing than spring's abundance. Like me, globe artichokes, those sensuous, locally grown thistles, are at their finest in the spring.

A native of the Mediterranean (and the official vegetable of Monterey, California) the artichoke is a perennial in the thistle group of the sunflower family. The "vegetable" that we eat is actually the plant's flower bud. In full growth, the plant spreads to cover an area about six feet in diameter and reaches a height of three to four feet. Its long, arching, deeply serrated leaves give the plant a fern-like appearance. Brought to American soil in the 1800s, now nearly one hundred percent of all artichokes grown commercially in the United States are grown in California where they flourish in the Mediterranean climate of our central coast.

In Ancient Greece, the artichoke was attributed to being effective in securing the birth of a son. They are often considered an aphrodisiac—and darn fun to eat and a good source of vitamin C and potassium. They're low in sodium, fat-free, average



only 25 calories and act as a diuretic. An artichoke also contains cynarin which stimulates bile secretion in the liver and acts as a liver tonic, protecting the liver against toxins and is reputed to stimulate the regeneration of liver cells. Cynarin is said to have a moderating effect on blood cholesterol levels also.

Little guys have big hearts!

Baby artichokes are not a separate variety but in fact smaller versions of larger artichokes that, percentage wise, are far more edible and very quick & easy to prepare. You've probably had them; the babies are commonly available processed as "Marinated Artichokes" in jars. Their size comes from their location on the artichoke plant. They are picked from way down among the shady fronds where they are protected from the sun's toughening and growth rays. Unlike many other baby vegetables, "baby" artichokes are fully mature when picked, they never get any bigger.

Most baby artichokes have no developed fuzz and you can eat their delicious pale tender leaves. Peel off eight to twelve of the outer leaves until they start looking half yellow, cut off the greener tip portion and hold them in lemon water until you're ready to cook. What's left is completely edible. You can steam

or gently boil them until tender, about ten minutes. I like them halved, blanched 3-4 minutes then sautéed in a nice garlicky olive oil with a bit of fresh herbs and some flaky finishing salt.

Their larger counterparts make no concessions to those who want a quick meal. It's been said that eating an artichoke is like getting to know someone really well. This makes the globe artichokes great date or dinner party fare and big proponents for the slow food movement. Most people boil the whole artichoke for about twenty-five minutes or more, and slip each leaf petal, one by one, through their teeth until they reach the delectable heart. I like to boil them with two halved lemons (squeeze out their juice and then toss in the peels) in the boiling pot with several smashed cloves of garlic, a tablespoon of salt and two tablespoons of olive oil.

Artichokes of all sizes are gorgeous additions to floral centerpieces too: just extend the stem with a wooden skewer. I also hollow out the centers of raw large artichokes, level off the bottoms and sink in votive candles for buffets or grilled veggie platters. Here are a few other ideas if you've got a hankering for a sensuous thistle.

Baby Artichokes

(4 servings)

- 12 to 18 baby artichokes,
trimmed to edible stage
- 1 lemon
- 1 small onion, coarsely chopped
- 3 clove garlic, chopped
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 1 Tb. each sweet basil and marjoram
- Salt and pepper

To trim the babies, bend back the outer green leaves and snap them off at the base. Continue doing this until you reach a point where the leaves are half green (at the top) and half yellow. Cut the top cone of leaves at the point where the yellow color meets the green. (Green will be fibrous.)

Remove or peel the stem. Halve artichokes and let stand in cold water and juice of a lemon about 10 minutes. Drain well.

In a heavy frying pan sauté artichokes, onion and garlic in olive oil until golden. Add broth, basil and marjoram. Cover and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce to low and simmer, covered, 10 to 15 minutes or until tender. Salt and pepper to taste.

(continued)



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COOKING AT HOME

(continued)

Artichokes Benedict

For four lucky folks, what could be better?
(Oh, I know! Blood Orange Mimosas too!)

- 4 large artichokes
- 4 thick slices Canadian bacon
- 4 Lily's Farm Fresh eggs

BLENDER HOLLANDAISE SAUCE:

Blend 3 egg yolks, 2 tablespoons lemon juice and 1/4 t. salt in electric blender. Using low speed, slowly add 1/2 cup hot melted butter. To keep warm, pour into heat-proof dish and cover. Then place in saucepan of hot water. Stir occasionally. If sauce thickens too much, add 1 or 2 teaspoons water; beat until smooth. Makes about 1 cup.

Cut the artichoke stems off at the base and remove the small bottom leaves. Stand artichokes upright in deep saucepan large enough to hold snugly. Add 1 teaspoon salt to 2 to 3 inches boiling water. Cover and boil gently 35 to 45 minutes or until base can be pierced easily with fork. (Add a little more boiling water if needed.) Turn artichokes upside down to drain.

Spread leaves open like flower petals. Carefully remove center petals and fuzzy centers from artichoke bottoms with a spoon and discard; keep artichokes warm. Brown Canadian bacon slices in skillet. Poach eggs in boiling, salted water. Place bacon slices into artichoke centers, covering bottom, and top with poached eggs. Spoon on Hollandaise Sauce and serve immediately.

Artichokes with Olives and Parmesan

Hands down, this is an all time favorite of mine; it's one of those recipes that define culinary art that goes straight to the heart. Promise you'll only make it for people you genuinely love, no one else deserves it.

This is for four, but leftovers are almost better the next day for picnic or lunch food.

- 4 large artichokes, stems removed flush
- 2 lemons, halved
- 4 cloves garlic
- 1 Tb. salt
- 2 Tb. olive oil

Cover the trimmed artichokes with water in a large pot, squeeze in and add the peel of 3 of the lemon halves, toss in the garlic, salt and oil. Boil until an outer leaf will come off when pulled with tongs, 35 minutes to an hour. Drain upside down while whisking together the dressing ingredients. Plate the warm artichokes upright and fan open the leaves a bit. Pour over the dressing evenly and top with the reserved Parmesan.

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DRESSING:

- Juice of half of one of the lemons
- 1 t. sherry vinegar
- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 1 t. Dijon mustard
- 1/4 t. pepper
- 2 shallots, minced
- 1/4 cup oil cured olives,
pitted & chopped
- 1/2 cup fresh grated **Parmesan-Reggiano**
(2 Tb. in dressing, use the rest to
sprinkle on top)

**Lemon Parmesan
Artichoke Bottoms**

Pure Joy Catering's most popular appetizer. On this one I've got to say canned artichoke bottoms are the way to go or you'll be in the kitchen cursing me all day. That said, you must get Maria's brand artichoke bottoms, the others are too tough. These are great with cocktails and you can make them a day ahead and pop them in the oven when you like. (Makes 30 pieces)

- 5 cans Maria's brand **artichoke bottoms**
(not hearts)
- 3 cloves **garlic**, minced fine
- 1/4 pound (1.5 cups) grated **Parmesan**
(not the salty powdered kind)
- 1/2 cup **mayonnaise**
- 1-1/2 t. **lemon juice**
- 1 packed t. of **lemon zest**
- 1/4 t. **pepper**

GARNISH:

- 1/4 cup toasted **pine nuts**
& minced fresh **parsley**

Drain the artichoke bottoms, pat dry and trim the bottoms of them so they sit level & are tender. Spray a cookie sheet or baking pan with vegetable oil. Blend the ingredients together in a bowl. Sit the bottoms on the cookie sheet and season them with salt & pepper then fill them, top each one with 3 toasted pine nuts. You can cover and hold them at this point or bake at 375 degrees for about 30 minutes, till golden on top. Sprinkle with minced parsley.

LYNETTE LA MERE is the proprietor of PURE JOY CATERING INC (805) 963-5766 (www.PureJoyCatering.com) and a freelance writer who lives in Santa Barbara.

Shopping hints: All ingredients appear in bold-faced type and can be found at Farmer's Market, Santa Barbara Fish Market, Tri County Produce and Lazy Acres.



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