

LENTIL AND RICE-STUFFED BABY EGGPLANTS

SERVES 6

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½ cup uncooked black or French lentils (or 1 ½ cups COOKED)
6 (6- to 7-inch long) small Italian eggplants (about 7-8 ounces each)
¼ cup unrefined cold pressed extra-virgin olive oil
3 Tablespoons pine nuts
1 large onion, finely chopped
3 garlic cloves, finely chopped
1 pound fresh tomatoes, peeled, seeded and diced or boxed/canned with juice
2 cups chicken stock or vegetable stock
2 ¼ teaspoons sea salt, divided
freshly ground black pepper to taste
½ cup uncooked long-grain white rice (I like basmati)
3 Tablespoons golden raisins
1 teaspoon ground cumin
¾ teaspoon ground allspice
a few tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley for garnish (optional, but pretty)
½ lemon

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1. Bring a medium saucepan of water to a boil and add the uncooked lentils and a healthy pinch of salt. Simmer 20 minutes and drain. Skip this step if you use cooked lentils.
2. Slice a sliver off the bottom of each eggplant and discard. Using a melon baller, a mini ice cream scooper or a small metal measuring spoon, hollow out each eggplant while keeping the skin intact. Reserve scooped out eggplant flesh, if desired.
3. In a large 12-inch skillet, heat the oil over medium heat. Fry the pine nuts until golden, about 1 minute. Do not walk away from the pan! Transfer with a slotted spoon to a bowl.
4. Sauté onion and garlic in the skillet until tender, about 6-8 minutes. Transfer ½ cup of onion mixture to the bowl with the pine nuts. To the skillet add the tomatoes, a little of the reserved eggplant flesh if you want, stock, 1 teaspoon sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste. Bring to a simmer while you stuff the eggplants.
5. Add cooked lentils, rice, raisins, cumin, allspice, 1 ¼ teaspoon salt and black pepper to taste to the bowl with the onions and pine nuts. Combine well. Stuff the mixture into the eggplants and transfer the stuffed eggplants to the skillet (along with any unstuffed filling). You don't have to fill the eggplants to the top since the stuffing will expand a bit. Simmer, covered, carefully turning once (if you remember), until everything is cooked through, 50 – 60 minutes.
6. Squeeze lemon over everything and sprinkle with parsley. **-OVER-**

Notes: you can substitute $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. ground beef or lamb for the lentils. If using grass-fed beef, add a few tablespoons of olive oil to the meat mixture, otherwise it will be too dry.

You can also stuff sweet bell peppers instead of the eggplant – delicious!