

eggplant-tomato salad on mint rice with warm mozzarella

This warm and/or cool salad begins with sautéed eggplant, onions, and tomatoes—seasoned with garlic and lemon rind— that are then spooned into the middle of a ring of rice that has been stirred together with chopped fresh mint, parsley, and spinach. Half-moons of fresh mozzarella are quickly warmed in oil with a bit of crushed red pepper and then scattered on top of the ring of rice. Fresh lemon juice and extra virgin olive oil are drizzled at the last second for an instant vinaigrette. If you have both run-of-the-mill (cooking) and salad (or garnish) extra virgin olive oil, use the better (salad or garnish) oil for the end of the salad vinaigrette.

Makes 6 servings Read through recipe before making.

- 7 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, divided
- Crushed red pepper
- 2 cups (approximately) eggplant, peeled, trimmed, and cut into 1-inch dice
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- Kosher salt, fresh ground black pepper
- 2 medium tomatoes, cut into 1-inch dice
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon rind
- 2 cups cooked jasmine (or other) rice at cold or at room temperature
- 1/4 cup each chopped fresh parsley and mint
- 1 cup fresh spinach, shredded
- 8 ounces fresh mozzarella (1/2 pound), sliced in half-inch rounds and cut again into 1/2 moons, cold
- Juice of one lemon (2-3 tablespoons)

1. In a large skillet, heat 2 tablespoons olive oil over medium heat for 30 seconds with a pinch of crushed red pepper. Add eggplant and onions, sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cook about 10 minutes, stirring regularly until quite softened and tender. Add tomato and garlic, let cook another 2 minutes or so, and remove from heat. Stir in lemon rind. Taste and adjust for seasonings.

2. Meanwhile, in a large shallow bowl or on a large platter, using your hands, mix together the rice, herbs, and spinach. Sprinkle with just a bit of salt and pepper and mix again. Pushing the rice mixture out from the center, form a ring to allow room for the eggplant mixture in the middle. Spoon eggplant mixture into the open space, mounding as needed.

3. Wipe out skillet with towels, add 2 more tablespoons olive oil and heat over medium flame. **All attention as you begin this step:** Leaving room between each piece, place the mozzarella slices in the skillet, sprinkle with crushed red pepper, and heat briefly until warm and just beginning to ooze. Quickly turn, using tongs or spatula, and repeat on the other side. Remove from heat and remove the cheese from the skillet and onto the rice, spreading evenly around the ring. Waste no time or you'll have a skillet full of melted cheese.

4. Drizzle entire salad with lemon juice and then with remaining 3 tablespoons (best quality, if you have it) extra virgin olive oil. Taste and adjust seasonings if needed. Serve at room temperature or cold. Store leftovers well covered for up to one day.

COOK'S NOTES:

* If you prefer, and it's too warm, grill the eggplant in slices, cut it up afterward, and stir in fresh chopped tomatoes with just a tablespoon or so of minced onion—perhaps scallions—along with only half the garlic. Continue with rest of recipe. I'm a good guesser and guess it'd work. Let me know if you try it.

*You can certainly make this recipe with different vegetables (bell peppers? zucchini? yellow squash?) and/or different herbs (basil? thyme? oregano?)
Quinoa makes a good substitute for the rice.

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