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"The Heart of the Matter" by Chef Nia

Legend has it that in the 16th century, women were denied the pleasure of eating artichokes because they were believed to be aphrodisiac that had the power to arouse and enhance sexual desire. If the legend is true, the benefits don't stop there. Artichokes provide 16 essential nutrients including folic acid, potassium, phosphorous, iron, and calcium. They are also an excellent source of fiber and vitamin C, and can help to reduce the risk of certain types of heart disease and birth defects. To top it all off, Californians can enjoy artichokes all year long because most of the artichokes grown commercially in the United States are grown in California. For a food that is so readily available and offers so many terrific health benefits, it's a wonder why people don't enjoy these distinctive delicacies more often.

Artichokes are one of the oldest foods known to man. These green globe vegetables are said to have originated in the Mediterranean and Canary Islands. But they actually made their first appearance in a city near Naples, Italy in the 15th century. From there, they spread to Florence and Venice where they became a true delicacy.

Before you rush out to purchase your artichokes, remember to select ones that are a deep green color and feel heavy relative to their size. Avoid those that have browning tips and look for tender petals. To store artichokes, lightly sprinkle the vegetables with water and refrigerate in an airtight container or plastic bag. When stored properly, they can last up to a week.

The recipe I would like to share with you was developed in Florence, Italy with one of my mentor Chefs who called this dish "Mamme." Variations of this recipe can be found throughout Italy. "Carciofini Ripieni", or "Stuffed Artichokes", is one of my favorite ways of enjoying these exotic vegetables.

This recipe really brings out the true flavors of the artichoke, accenting its tangy and sweet

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Ingredients:

1 cup water

1 cup wine

2 Tablespoon Olive Oil

Ingredients for Stuffing the Artichokes

4 medium artichokes

1 cup crumbled country bread soaked in milk and squeezed dry

1/4 cup finely grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese

1/4 cup finely grated Pecorino Romano cheese

1 large egg

1 1/2 tablespoons chopped garlic

1 1/2 tablespoons chopped shallots

1/3 cup finely chopped Italian parsley

1/4 cup finely chopped capers

1/2 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest

1/2 cup chopped pancetta (optional)

salt & pepper to taste

Juice of 1/2 a lemon

I hope you enjoy my interpretation of this classic Tuscan delight. I promise you - this dish is sure to be a crowd pleaser...

Begin by washing the artichokes under cold, running water. Cut the artichoke stems and discard. Trim off the leaf tips with kitchen sheers. Separate the leaves with your hands and pull out the purple leaves from the center. Then, with a melon baller, scoop out the fuzzy choke.

Next, prepare the stuffing by combining all the ingredients for the stuffing in a small bowl. Fill the center cavities of the artichoke with the mouthwatering concoction.

Arrange the artichokes standing upright in a flameproof casserole dish. Combine the water, wine and olive oil and pour the mixture over the artichokes. Cover and bake for about 30 - 40 minutes in a 350° oven until leaves are tender.

To serve, arrange the artichokes on a platter and spoon the cooking liquid around them. Savor each tasty leaf redolent with the subtle flavors of wine and garlic, until you reach the "crème de la crème" - the tender, creamy heart.

Bon Apetito!

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