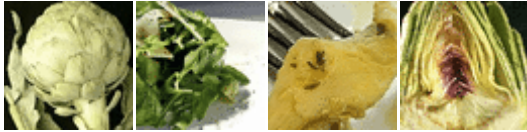


[The artful artichoke](#)
[Bay Area chefs cook this big-hearted California favorite every which way](#)

- [Janet Fletcher, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)
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This winter's brisk weather paid at least one dividend: a bumper crop of meaty artichokes. Although the plants can't tolerate an East Coast winter, they need a chill to set plentiful flower buds (the part we eat), and this year they got it. Ocean Mist, the state's dominant grower, expects a hefty spring harvest, which is already underway. Get your steamer ready.

Although most of us take the easy route -- serving whole steamed chokes with melted butter or aioli -- many Northern California chefs have more imagination. Their spring menus showcase artichokes every which way: fried, steamed, baked, braised, grilled, griddled and raw. Their creative ideas take the edible thistle in directions you may not have known it could go. And they give us more reasons to celebrate this California commodity, which is currently undergoing some change.

Since the late 1800s, when Italian immigrants planted the state's first artichoke farm near Half Moon Bay, the silvery-leaved plants have been grown as perennials. They stay in the ground year-round, producing a heavy spring crop and a lighter fall crop for five to 10 years. Each May, after the spring harvest, giant tractors roll into the fields to mow the plants to the ground, grind up the leaves and till them into the soil.

Artichokes love this rough treatment. They respond with more leafy growth and more flower buds by fall, although the second harvest is modest because of the lack of chill. After a few years, when the field starts to decline, workers dig up some of the healthier plants, divide the crowns (the root systems) and replant them in a new field.

Costly crop

Compared to other row crops, growing artichokes is costly and inefficient because the plants tie up the ground all year. Rodents and other pests take refuge in the leafy fields, and diseases can establish themselves in the soil.

But what if you grew artichokes like an annual crop? What if you developed a variety that grew fast enough from seed that you could plant it, harvest it and pull it out in time to plant other crops that year? You could move your artichoke production from one field to another and stay one step ahead of pests and diseases. And you could harvest artichokes almost year-round, with a winter crop from the desert and spring and fall crops from the coast.

In the early 1990s, University of California researchers introduced the Imperial Star artichoke, a thornless, fast-maturing variety grown from seed. Produce managers and consumers loved the idea of a thornless artichoke, and growers liked the higher yields and lower farming costs the seed varieties promised. But the Imperial Star and other thornless types have failed to impress at the table. Consumers, produce buyers and even growers complain that the artichokes don't have enough heart and are often tough.

"I quit buying them years ago," says Glenn Yasuda, owner and produce buyer for the Berkeley Bowl

market. "They're not very good eating. There's just not enough meat to them."

With 6,000 acres of artichokes in the state, Ocean Mist undertook its own efforts to develop thornless varieties but now steers clear of them. Worried that shoppers will abandon artichokes after a bad experience with the thorn-free types, the company has campaigned against them with slogans like, "No Thorns=No Heart."

Although Ocean Mist now grows about 1,000 acres of seed artichokes, most are a proprietary thorned variety called Globe. (Confusingly, Green Globe is the common thorned perennial variety.) "We do not grow any thornless," says Maggie Bezart, the company's vice president of marketing.

Serious contender

Seed artichokes like the Globe, grown in the Coachella Valley in winter, may be the industry's future. Because of their cost advantage, they threaten the supremacy of the perennial Green Globe, but for now the Green Globe remains unsurpassed in taste. Its coastal harvest begins in March and continues through May, with most of the fields in the area around Castroville. Workers harvest by hand with a knife, leaving about a 2-inch stem and tossing the chokes into a sack on their back as they walk the rows. A full sack weighs about 80 pounds. Leaving longer stems, like those one sees in the markets in Europe, would be too costly, says Bezart, because you couldn't fit as many artichokes in a shipping container.

In fact, at least one California specialty grower -- Steve Jordan at Baroda Farms in Lompoc -- has begun harvesting two of his artichoke varieties with extra-long stems, ranging from 8 to 16 inches, and shipping them in the larger boxes used for cauliflower. Developed recently in France, the two varieties are perennial types that Jordan characterizes as semi-thornless. Andronico's, who is the exclusive Northern California retailer, markets these specialties as Euro Chokes and encourages customers to peel, cook and eat the stem. In the kitchen, treat Euro Chokes as you would other artichokes.

The more conventional short-stemmed artichokes are sorted and packed in cartons by size, from the 18-count jumbos (a reference to the number in each box) to the 1- or 2-ounce "babies." The plant produces its biggest artichokes first, at the top. As the season progresses, smaller artichokes develop lower on the plant. Baby artichokes, which are fully mature, are more prevalent at season's end.

Abundance of babies

This year, Ocean Mist expects an abundance of baby artichokes. In the past, the company sold the babies to the Cara Mia plant in Castroville, which packed marinated artichoke hearts. But after a Spanish company bought the brand, it closed the plant and moved operations to Spain.

"Spain subsidizes its growers and pays people nothing, and we could not compete," says Bezart.

Bay Area home cooks can make their own marinated artichokes with TV chef Michael Chiarello's recipe, an adaptation of the Italian method of preserving vegetables sott'olio, or under oil. At Cetrella in Half Moon Bay, chef Erik Cosselmon sears halved artichokes on a hot griddle until crisp and serves them as a side dish for fish. Like Pond, he first poaches them in a mixture of wine, olive oil, garlic, chopped mint, marjoram and lemon juice. "An artichoke is just an artichoke," says Cosselmon. "You've got to get these other flavors into it." The poached artichokes are stored in the cooking liquid, then seared to order or used in salads.

Bizou's signature

Loretta Keller, chef at San Francisco's Bizou, says her warm artichoke and fava bean salad is virtually a signature dish, returning to the menu every spring. She parboils baby artichokes, then slices and browns them in olive oil with shallots, adding peeled fava beans and a little chicken stock when the artichokes are almost done. Extra virgin olive oil, lemon juice and shavings of pecorino complete the dish, which is just juicy enough to need some bread.

One fashionable artichoke preparation involves no cooking at all. Raw artichokes shaved with a vegetable slicer are turning up in contemporary salads, usually at restaurants with an Italian bent. At Incanto in San Francisco, chef Chris Cosentino tosses the shaved-to-order artichokes with arugula, ribbons of Parmesan and a lemon-olive oil dressing. Those of us who didn't grow up in California can remember spring without artichokes. But it's not a pleasant thought. When life gives you fresh artichokes, use them.

Artichokes around the bay

Here's how a few local restaurants will be serving artichokes this spring:

Bizou, 598 Fourth St. (at Brannan), San Francisco; (415) 543-2222

-- Warm fava bean and artichoke salad with Pecorino Toscano

-- Sea bass with artichokes barigoule and olive oil sabayon

Incanto, 1550 Church St. (at Duncan), San Francisco; (415) 641-4500

-- Baked globe artichokes stuffed with pine nuts, herbs and breadcrumbs

A Côté, 5478 College Ave. (near Taft), Oakland; (510) 655-6469

-- Flatbread with baby artichokes, pancetta and Crescenza cheese

-- Fried artichokes with saffron aioli

César, 1515 Shattuck Ave. (near Vine Street), Berkeley; (510) 883-0222

-- Sherried chicken with artichokes and piquillo peppers

-- Fried artichokes with Meyer lemon aioli

Le Theatre, 1919 Addison (near Martin Luther King Jr. Way), Berkeley; (510) 644-1707

-- Warm mushroom and artichoke salad with truffle oil vinaigrette

Cetrella Bistro and Cafe, 845 Main St. (at Monte Vista), Half Moon Bay; (650) 726-4090

-- Artichoke ravioli

-- Fritto misto with artichokes, mushrooms and lemon

-- Janet Fletcher

Michael Chiarello's Preserved Artichokes

Serve these marinated artichoke wedges as part of an antipasto platter with cured meats. If you prefer not to process the jars, keep them refrigerated and use the artichokes within two weeks. When you finish a jar of artichokes, save any remaining marinade for use on salads, vegetables or fish.

INGREDIENTS:

1 1/2 cups extra virgin olive oil + more to fill the jars

3/4 cup fresh lemon juice

1/4 cup quartered garlic cloves

1 tablespoon coarsely chopped fresh thyme leaves

3 bay leaves, torn in half

1 tablespoon sea salt

2 dozen medium artichokes

INSTRUCTIONS: Combine the 1 1/2 cups olive oil, lemon juice, garlic, thyme, bay leaves and salt in a large bowl.

Pull back the outer leaves of each artichoke until they break at the base. Continue until you reach the tender inner leaves that are at least half yellow-green. (Reserve the meaty outer leaves for steaming the next day, if desired.)

Using a serrated knife, cut across the leaves at the point where the color changes from yellow-green to dark green. Remove all but 1 inch of the stem. Using a paring knife, trim the stem of its outer layer, then trim the base, removing any dark green bits. Halve the artichokes and scoop out the hairy choke with a melon baller or spoon, then cut each half into two wedges. As the artichokes are trimmed, put them in the bowl with the olive oil and toss to coat.

Put the artichokes and their seasonings in one 14-inch or two smaller skillet and cook, covered, over moderate heat for about 5 minutes, until they soften slightly -- just enough so that you can pack them in the jars a little more tightly.

Fill a canning kettle with hot water and bring to a boil. Sterilize eight wide-mouth pint canning jars. Keep jar lids covered in hot water. Using stainless tongs, pack the artichokes tightly into the jars. Put the first ones in stem up, then fill in the gaps with artichokes stem down. (You may not need all the jars.) Divide the cooking liquid and bay leaves evenly among the jars. Add additional olive oil to come three-fourths of the way up the side of the jars. Wipe the rims with a damp cloth. Dry the lids and place them on top, then screw on the rings.

Place the jars in a canning basket, submerge in the boiling water bath and simmer for 30 minutes. Remove jars from the water.

After you hear the pops that indicate the jars have sealed, tighten the rings and turn jars upside down to finish cooling. Any unsealed jars should be refrigerated and used within a couple of weeks.

Yields 6 to 8 pints

The calories and other nutrients absorbed from marinades vary and are difficult to estimate. Variables include the marinating time and amount of surface area. Therefore, this recipe contains no analysis.

Incanto's Shaved Artichoke, Arugula & Parmesan Salad

Note that you need a mandoline, V-slicer or other manual slicing device to shave the raw artichokes thinly enough for this salad.

INGREDIENTS:

Juice of 1/2 lemon

2 large artichokes

1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

1 small garlic clove, minced to a paste with salt

3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

Freshly ground pepper

1/3 pound baby arugula

Chunk of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese

INSTRUCTIONS: Fill a large bowl with cold water and add the juice of the 1/2 lemon. Pull back the outer leaves of each artichoke until they break at the base. Continue removing leaves until you reach the innermost yellow leaves with prickly tips. (Reserve the meaty outer leaves for steaming the next day.) Cut across the artichoke just above the base and cut off all but 1 inch of the stem. Using a melon baller or spoon, scoop out the fibrous choke. Using a paring knife, trim the stem of its outer layer, then trim the base, removing any dark green bits. Halve the artichoke bottoms and place in the lemon water.

Combine the lemon juice and garlic in a large bowl. Gradually whisk in the olive oil. Add several grinds of black pepper and more salt to taste.

Remove the artichokes from the lemon water and, using a mandoline or other slicer, shave them thinly. Add the shaved artichokes to the dressing immediately and toss to coat. Add the arugula to the bowl.

Using a vegetable peeler, shave curls of cheese directly into the salad, using as much cheese as you like, then toss again gently. Taste and adjust the seasoning. Serve immediately.

Serves 4

PER SERVING: 145 calories, 4 g protein, 10 g carbohydrate, 11 g fat (2 g saturated), 0 cholesterol, 86 mg sodium, 5 g fiber.

Baked Stuffed Artichokes

Inspired by a recipe in "Chez Panisse Cooking," by Paul Bertolli with Alice Waters (Random House, 1988).

INGREDIENTS:

1 1/2 cups fresh breadcrumbs

1/4 cup + 1 1/2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

4 garlic cloves (1 whole and 3 sliced)

3 meaty anchovy fillets

Sea salt

2 tablespoons chopped Italian parsley

1/2 lemon

4 medium artichokes, about 1/2 pound each

1 large onion, halved and thinly sliced

4 large leeks, halved and thinly sliced

1/4 bunch of fresh thyme

1 to 2 bay leaves, halved

1 1/2 tablespoons red wine vinegar

Freshly ground black pepper

1/4 cup nicoise olives

Aioli:

1 large egg yolk

3/4 cup olive oil (part plain, part extra virgin)

2 garlic cloves, minced or pounded to a paste with salt

Lemon juice

INSTRUCTIONS: Preheat oven to 350°. Toss the breadcrumbs with the 1 1/2 tablespoons olive oil, spread on a baking sheet and bake until crisp and golden brown, about 15 minutes. Put the whole garlic clove in a mortar; add the anchovy fillets and a pinch of salt, and pound to a paste. Alternatively, mince to a paste with a knife.

Transfer to a bowl and add the breadcrumbs and 1 tablespoon parsley, stirring until blended.

Squeeze the juice of the half lemon into a large bowl of cold water.

Pull back the outer leaves of each artichoke until they break at the base. Continue until you reach the tender inner leaves that are at least half yellow-green. (Reserve the meaty outer leaves for steaming the next day, if desired.) Using a serrated knife, cut across the leaves at the point where the color changes from yellow-green to dark green. Remove all but 1 inch of the stem. Using a paring knife, trim the stem of its outer layer, then trim the base, removing any dark green bits. Use your fingers to gently pry open the tight center of the artichoke, just enough to provide access to the choke. Using a melon baller or spoon, scoop out the fibrous choke. Immediately add the trimmed artichokes to the lemon water, using a plate to keep them submerged.

Heat the remaining 1/4 cup oil in a large skillet over moderately low heat. Add the onions, leeks, thyme, bay leaves, sliced garlic and vinegar. Season with salt and pepper. Cook until the vegetables are soft and just starting to color, about 15 minutes. Transfer the mixture to a baking dish that is large enough to hold the artichokes stem-up without crowding and deep enough to allow for the stems.

Drain the artichokes and pack the centers with the breadcrumb mixture. Place the artichokes stem-up in the baking dish. Salt and pepper them and pour 1/4 cup water around them. Cover with parchment paper, then cover the baking dish tightly with aluminum foil or a lid. Bake until the artichokes are tender when pierced, 1 to 1 1/2 hours, depending on size. Check once or twice and add a tablespoon or two of water if necessary. Let the artichokes cool until just warm.

Make the Aioli: Whisk the egg yolk in a small bowl with a few drops of warm water. Gradually whisk in the olive oil, drop by drop at first, then a little faster once you have achieved an emulsion. Whisk in as

much of the garlic paste as you like, and add lemon juice to taste.

Transfer the artichokes to a serving platter or individual plates and surround with the vegetable mixture, removing the bay leaves and thyme sprigs. Garnish with the olives and the remaining parsley. Pass the Aioli separately.

Serves 4

PER SERVING: 805 calories, 11 g protein, 48 g carbohydrate, 67 g fat (10 g saturated), 56 mg cholesterol, 629 mg sodium, 10 g fiber.

Braised Artichokes With Peas & Serrano Ham

Use your best extra virgin olive oil for the final addition, just before serving.

INGREDIENTS:

1/2 lemon

6 large artichokes

6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

1/4 cup minced shallots

2 teaspoons lemon juice

1 large sprig fresh thyme

Sea salt and freshly ground pepper

1 pound frozen petite peas

2 ounces thinly sliced Serrano ham or prosciutto

INSTRUCTIONS: Squeeze the juice of the lemon half into a large bowl of cold water.

Pull back the outer leaves of each artichoke until they break at the base. Continue until you reach the tender inner leaves that are at least half yellow-green. (Reserve the meaty outer leaves for steaming the next day, if desired.) Using a serrated knife, cut across the leaves at the point where the color changes from yellow-green to dark green. Remove all but 1 inch of the stem. Using a paring knife, trim the stem of its outer layer, then trim the base, removing any dark green bits. Halve the artichokes and scoop out the hairy choke with a melon baller or spoon. Cut each half into 4 wedges and place immediately in the lemon water.

Heat 3 tablespoons of the olive oil in a large skillet over moderate heat. Add the shallots and saute until soft. Drain the artichokes and add them to the skillet along with the lemon juice and thyme sprig. Season with salt and pepper. Stir to coat with the oil and seasonings. Add 1/2 cup water, bring to a simmer, then cover and adjust the heat to maintain a gentle simmer. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the artichokes are tender when pierced, 25 to 30 minutes.

Add the frozen peas, cover and continue cooking, stirring occasionally, until the peas are hot. Remove from the heat and discard the thyme sprig. Tear the ham into large shreds and stir it into the vegetables along with the remaining 3 tablespoons olive oil. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

Serves 6 as a first course; 8 as a side dish

PER SIDE-DISH SERVING: 210 calories, 9 g protein, 21 g carbohydrate, 11 g fat (2 g saturated), 5 mg cholesterol, 352 mg sodium, 9 g fiber.

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