

FOOD52

Feta-Brined Grilled Eggplant Salad

By EmilyC

If chicken can be feta brined, why not eggplant?! As I've learned from J. Kenji López-Alt and others, brined eggplant browns better (and faster), more readily absorbs flavor, and better retains its texture and shape. So I turned to Melissa Clark's "Genius" Feta-Brined Chicken and adapted the brine for eggplant. Rather than roasting or frying the eggplant, I headed to the grill to impart some smokiness (and to keep the kitchen cool). The result was really, really good. The feta brine imparts a complex earthiness to the eggplant, and the little bits of feta in the brine promote a gorgeous char on the grill. (To be sure, I tested feta-brined and regular salt water-brined eggplant side by side on the grill, and the flavor of the feta version was definitely the winner.) Here, I've built a salad around the grilled eggplant that includes juicy peaches, tomatoes, and more feta, as well as a preserved lemon salsa verde that ties all of the flavors together. So go forth and feta brine your eggplant this summer, make this salad (or let it inspire your own), and never worry about mushy or flavorless eggplant again.

Serves 4 For the feta-brined eggplant and salad:

- 4 ounces feta, divided
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt, plus more to taste
- 1 1/2 to 2 pound eggplant (any variety), cut into 1/2-inch thick rounds or slices
- olive oil
- 2 cups cherry tomatoes, halved
- 2 large peaches, thinly sliced
- 1/4 cup roasted pistachios, shelled
- Large handful of basil leaves
- freshly squeezed lemon juice, to taste
- freshly ground black pepper
- Preserved lemon salsa verde, to serve (recipe below)

1. Blend 2 ounces feta, 2 tablespoons kosher salt, and 4 cups water together until smooth using a blender or stick blender. Put the eggplant in a large bowl and cover with the feta brine, using a plate to weight down the eggplant and keep it fully submerged. Brine for about 1 hour at room temperature. Before grilling, strain the eggplant from the brine (discarding the brine) and gently pat dry with paper towels, leaving any feta bits on the eggplant. Toss with enough olive oil to generously coat both sides. (Tip: use the same bowl you used for brining for coating your eggplant in olive oil, and then again when removing the eggplant from the grill. Any leftover feta bits in the bowl can be added to the salad, and you'll save yourself some dirty dishes!)
2. Heat the grill to medium-high and brush your grates clean, then brush with olive oil. Meanwhile, sprinkle the halved cherry tomatoes with kosher salt and set aside.
3. Arrange the eggplant in a single, even layer. I like to use a perforated grill tray (brushed with a little oil), but you can grill the eggplant directly over the grates. Grill the eggplant on the first side until nicely charred (lift up a piece or two to check), then flip and continue grilling until tender and nicely charred. (Back down the heat if the eggplant is browning too much before it cooks through.) Remember, char equals flavor so don't hesitate to get some color on the eggplant!
4. Arrange the eggplant on a large serving platter. Toss in the tomatoes, peaches, pistachios and basil, and

crumble the remaining feta. Season with salt, pepper, and lemon juice, to taste. Drizzle the preserved lemon salsa verde over the salad (serving extra at the table). Serve slightly warm or at room temperature.

For the preserved lemon salsa verde:

- 1 1/2 cup mixed herbs (I like mostly basil, with a small handful of Italian parsley and oregano)
- 1 tablespoon capers
- 1 small garlic clove
- 3/4 cups extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped rind from a small preserved lemon
- pinch of chile flakes
- Freshly squeezed lemon juice, to taste
- kosher salt, to taste

1. Pulse the capers and garlic together a few times using a food processor, then add the 1/2 cup of olive oil. Pulse briefly, then add the herbs, followed by the remaining 1/4 cup of olive oil. (It's important to cover the herbs with the olive oil before processing so they don't discolor.) Pulse several more times until well mixed, but leave some texture in the herbs. Stir in the preserved lemon rind and season to taste with lemon juice, chile flakes, and kosher salt.