

# How to Handle Artichokes

A natural partner for  
Mediterranean flavors,  
these tender-hearted buds  
are delicious year-round

BY GEORGEANNE BRENNAN



*Author Georganne Brennan harvests several varieties of artichokes at her farm in northern California.*

*Round, green globe artichokes are the most common variety grown in the United States. Almost the entire U.S. crop is grown in California.*



**A**n artichoke's appeal isn't immediately apparent to everyone. Its tough, sometimes prickly exterior doesn't exactly invite one to dine, yet beneath that armor lies a heart that's sweet and tender.

#### **A VEGETABLE WITH YEAR-ROUND APPEAL**

Artichokes are often thought of as a harbinger of spring, but they're actually grown year-round and have different qualities depending on when they're harvested. Spring artichokes are slightly rounded rather than pointy, with leaves that are tightly folded. In summer, artichokes tend to be cone-shaped and have slightly splaying outer leaves. Throughout spring and summer, artichokes should be a clear, bright green with no signs of browning or scarring.

**Winter artichokes are kissed by the frost.** Fall- and winter-grown artichokes may be either round or conical, and their leaves may splay slightly, but above all, they will exhibit the "kiss of frost"—brown striations and scarring where frost has broken down the outer layers or cells. Don't be put off by the brown spots; the quality of these artichokes has not suffered. Winter artichokes have a delectable, somewhat nutty taste to which many artichoke aficionados are addicted. Where I live in northern California, the frost-kissed artichokes appear in late November and are the perfect match for the first Dungeness crabs of the season.

#### **THE BEST WAY TO EAT AN ARTICHOKE DEPENDS ON ITS AGE AND SIZE**

Young, garden-fresh, baby-sized artichokes are the most tender. Virtually the entire bud can be eaten; only the outermost leaves need be discarded. Sliced very thin and seasoned with good olive oil and salt, they're delicious even raw. They're also delectable cooked and are the perfect size for adding, whole or halved, to stews and braises.

Artichokes at midseason are quite versatile and can be eaten any way except raw. Mature, end-of-season artichokes, with large, well-developed chokes, tend to have plump, meaty bottoms; they're the best choice for stuffing.

**The size of an artichoke is not an indication of its age;** rather, it's a matter of where the artichoke grew on the plant. The largest ones top the stem in the center of the plant; small and medium-sized ones sprout between the angle of a leaf and the stalk. Though they are small, these artichokes can be fully mature buds and may be tough, with chokes as well developed as their larger siblings.

Artichokes are thistles. The part we eat is the flower's bud. As an artichoke matures, hairlike fibers called the choke (actually the petals of the flower) develop in the center of the bud. These must be scraped away before the artichoke heart can be eaten. Late in their development, the choke is surrounded by sharp, purple-tinged leaves that must also be discarded. As an artichoke grows older, the outer leaves become more fibrous, but there's usually a meaty bit to be savored at the base of the outer leaves, and some innermost leaves remain that are tender enough to eat whole.

#### **To select a tender artichoke, listen carefully.**

When choosing an artichoke, rub it with your fingertips. Tender artichokes—those with less-developed chokes—will squeak when the leaves are rubbed together; tough ones with well-developed chokes will sound dry and hollow. Tender artichokes feel heavy and solid in the hand, almost moist; those with maturing chokes

feel lighter and less substantial.

Store artichokes in the coldest part of the refrigerator in a plastic bag. Stored properly, they'll easily keep for a week.

#### **KEEP ARTICHOKE GREEN**

Cut into a raw artichoke and it will almost instantly turn brown. Although there are ways to slow the process, in my experience, no matter what you do or how quickly you do it, there's always a bit of discoloration. You can minimize browning by using only stainless-steel knives and scissors to cut artichokes, by immediately rubbing the cut surfaces

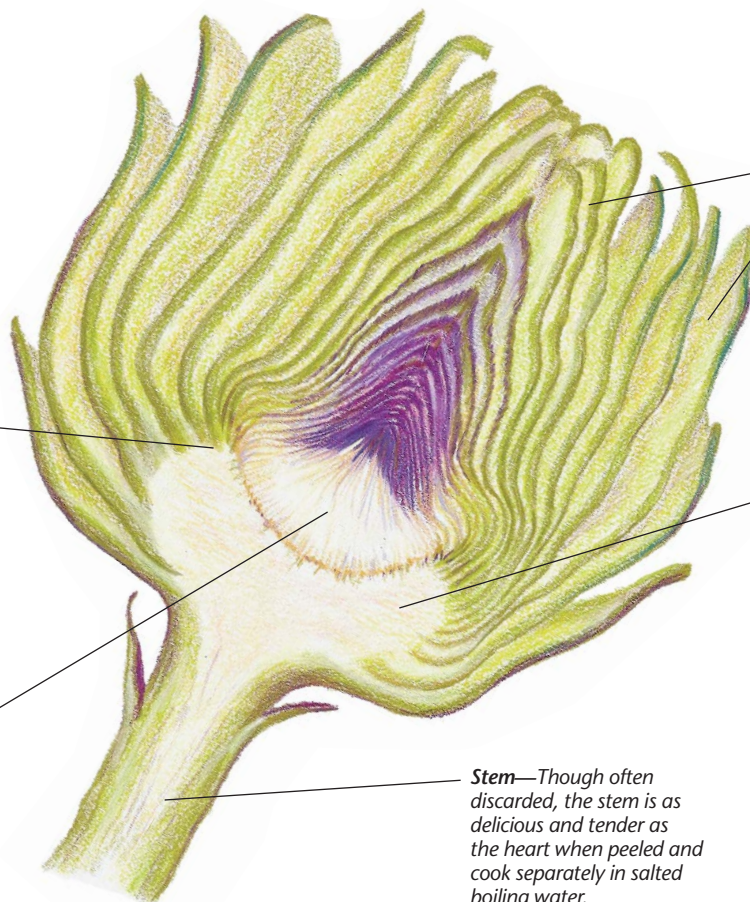
**A tip for choosing artichokes: tender ones will squeak when their leaves are rubbed together.**

*Young artichokes and the first fava beans of the season are combined in this traditional Provençal stew. Seasoned with just garlic and fresh herbs, the flavor of the vegetables stands forth as the main attraction.*



# Anatomy of an artichoke

An artichoke is the sum of many parts, each with its own special characteristics. If you've never cooked one before, this diagram can help you find what you're looking for and decide how to prepare it.



**Leaves**—The outermost leaves are always tough, but at the base of even the toughest leaves, there is usually a tender bit of meat. Inside every artichoke are tender, ivory-colored leaves that are entirely edible.

**Heart**—Artichoke hearts are the bottoms with the tender part of their covering cone of leaves. The tender hearts can be braised, added to stews and salads, grilled, roasted, or poached.

**Bottom**—After the leaves and choke are removed, what's left is the bottom. Fill large ones with a savory stuffing; small ones can be cut up and simmered in a sauce.

**Choke**—There isn't much of a choke in very young artichokes, but for older artichokes, you'll need to remove these coarse, hairlike leaves.

**Stem**—Though often discarded, the stem is as delicious and tender as the heart when peeled and cook separately in salted boiling water.

## Preparing artichokes for cooking

Before you can eat an artichoke, you need to remove the inedible parts to make the edible portions easier to get to.



**Cut off the stem at the base of the artichoke.** Peel back and snap off the first layers of leaves, which are often tough. Slice through the upper third of the artichoke with a sharp, stainless-steel knife. Immediately rub the cut surfaces with lemon.



**To prepare artichokes for serving whole,** use stainless-steel scissors to cut off the spiny tips of the remaining leaves. Rub each cut surface with lemon. Drop the artichoke into acidulated water and leave it there until you're ready to cook it.



**To prepare artichoke hearts,** follow the steps described in the first caption, and then slice through the artichoke about an inch above where the leaves are attached to the base. Rub the cut surface with a lemon.

Photos: Carl Dunnein. Illustration: Rosalie Vaccaro

with a piece of lemon, and by keeping the artichoke in water acidulated with lemon juice or vinegar until you're ready to use it. Don't use aluminum or cast-iron pots for cooking, as these will discolor artichokes as well. Also, don't cover raw artichokes with foil; use kitchen parchment or plastic wrap instead. Finally, whenever possible, cook artichokes in acidulated water. But as unpleasant as it may look, browning doesn't affect the flavor of the artichokes, and I've always felt that fretting too much over appearances interferes with the pleasures of eating.

### ARTICHOKES LIKE MEDITERRANEAN FLAVORS

Although I love to eat my way through a simply steamed artichoke leaf by leaf, I confess to be at more risk of eating until I pop when artichokes have been prepared in one of the rustic ways of their native Mediterranean. Not surprisingly, artichokes are well matched with many of the seasonings we associate with that part of the world. They have an affinity for garlic, tarragon, thyme, and winter savory; for butter, olive oil, cream, and for Parmesan cheese. Artichokes go well with seafood—especially shrimp, crab, scallops, and salmon—and with light meats, such as chicken and pheasant, and also with lamb.

### Artichoke Pesto

Use this fluffy purée as a dip for raw vegetables, spread it across grilled toast, or toss it with your favorite pasta.

*Yields about 1½ cups.*

**3 medium artichokes (7 oz. each), steamed whole (or use 6 small or 2 large artichokes)**

**½ cup freshly grated Parmesan or other dry cheese**

**3 Tbs. olive oil**

**1 tsp. minced garlic**

**¼ tsp. salt**

**½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper**

Cut off the stem of each artichoke at its base. If your artichokes have little or no choke development, scoop out the bottom and all the tender leaves. Alternatively, if your artichokes are more mature, cut them in half lengthwise, remove and discard the choke, and scoop out the bottom and tender leaves. You should have about 1 cup combined artichoke bottom and tender leaves.

In a food processor or blender, purée the artichoke pieces, cheese, and 2 Tbs. of the oil to a thick paste. Add the remaining 1 Tbs. oil, the garlic, salt, and pepper and purée until just combined.

### Artichoke & Sausage Cakes

These can be served on their own as a main course or as an appetizer accompanied with a roasted tomato sauce, just a dose of garlic and lemon, or tucked between slices of focaccia to make a sandwich. *Yields six cakes.*

**½ lb. fresh pork sausage meat**

**1 egg, well beaten**

**¾ cup coarse fresh breadcrumbs**

**1 Tbs. milk**

**¼ tsp. salt**

**½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper**

**1 Tbs. chopped fresh thyme**

**3 medium artichokes (7 oz. each)**

In a large mixing bowl, combine the sausage, egg, breadcrumbs, milk, salt, pepper, and thyme. Trim the



*Snap off the remaining leaves until you reach the inner layer of the palest yellow leaves. If the choke is developed, scoop it out with a sharp-edged stainless-steel spoon. Drizzle the cavity with lemon juice. Trim all the dark-green remains of the snapped leaves away from the base. Rub all cut surfaces with one of the lemon halves and keep the heart in acidulated water until ready to use.*



*If a recipe calls for halved or quartered artichokes, prepare as for hearts, cut as directed, and keep in acidulated water until ready to use.*



*To prepare artichoke bottoms, follow the steps for preparing artichoke hearts, but trim the leaves off completely and scoop out all of the choke.*

*Artichoke and sausage patties make a wonderful sandwich filling. Serve them between slices of focaccia with leaves of tender lettuce.*



artichokes down to the hearts following the directions on pp. 38–39 and chop them fine. Stir the chopped artichokes into the sausage mixture until well combined. Shape the mixture into six cakes about 1½ inches thick. Cover with plastic wrap until ready to cook.

In a large nonstick frying pan, cook the cakes over medium heat until golden brown, 7 to 8 min. on each side. Put the cooked cakes on a rack set over paper towels to drain. Serve warm.

*This simple purée of steamed artichokes and Parmesan cheese makes an unusual dip for fresh vegetables.*

### **Artichokes & Fava Beans Braised in Olive Oil**

I like to serve this simple vegetable stew alongside herb-grilled pork chops and a fluffy mound of buttery mashed

potatoes—all the tastes seem made for each other. Serves four to six.

**2 to 2½ lb. fresh fava beans (about 2 cups shelled beans)**  
**16 very small artichokes (about 2 oz. each)**  
*or 6 medium artichokes*  
**⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil**  
**6 cloves garlic, minced**  
**2 Tbs. chopped fresh winter savory**  
**2 Tbs. chopped fresh thyme**  
**½ tsp. salt**  
**½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper**  
**Freshly squeezed lemon juice to taste**

Remove the skins from the fava beans by splitting them with your fingernail or a small knife. Trim the artichokes down to the hearts following the directions on pp. 38–39. Cut the artichokes in half (cut larger artichokes into quarters or sixths). Keep the cut artichokes in acidulated water until you're ready to cook them.

In a sauté pan, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Remove the artichokes from the water, pat dry, and cook them in the hot oil with the garlic, stirring frequently, 4 to 5 min. Add the fava beans and continue to cook until the artichokes turn a deep olive green, about 5 min. longer. Stir in the savory, thyme, salt, and pepper. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer until the artichokes are very tender, 15 to 20 min. depending on their size. Just before serving, add the lemon juice to taste.

*Georgianne Brennan grows artichokes on her ten-acre farm in Winters, California. She has written several cookbooks, including Potager: Fresh Cooking in the French Style and The Vegetarian Table: France (Chronicle Books, 1992 and 1995, respectively.) ♦*



## **Wine Choices**

### **Artichokes have a sweet effect on wine**

Why do some purists say that the best wine for artichokes is no wine at all? Because of cynarin. Found only in artichokes, this substance makes everything else, even water, taste sweet. Though not everyone experiences this strange effect, it's quite dramatic—and it can wreak havoc on an unsuspecting glass of fine dry wine.

Do a taste test. First sip some water, nibble on a cooked artichoke, and then try the water again. If it seems sweet, just imagine what a glass of Chardonnay would taste like.

Fortunately, there are a few tricks that can help you avoid the “artichoke assault.” First, use some wine in the cooking process to build its flavors into the artichokes from the start. As Georgianne Brennan has done with the recipes in this article, you can surround the artichoke with wine-friendly flavors: citrus, olive oil, breadcrumbs—even seafood, meat, or poultry.

You can also skip the wine altogether—and get back to it with the next course—and wash those 'chokes down with some iced tea or mineral water instead.

—*Rosina Tinari Wilson is a food and wine writer and teacher based in the San Francisco area. She is a contributing editor for Fine Cooking.*