

# ARTICHOKES FOUR WAYS

BY KIMBER SIMPKINS



## THE HAIRY TRUTH

A baby artichoke is literally just that—an artichoke picked when it’s still small enough that it has no choke, the hairy unformed center of the flower. That center turns purple, just like a wild thistle, when it blooms and then white and fluffy when its seeds emerge to be spread by the wind. An artichoke seed drifting by when seen out of the corner of your eye is easily mistaken for a fairy. On your dinner plate, the choke is far less romantic and can taste like a small amount of soggy fur. Once you have pulled all the leaves off an artichoke, you can avoid this unpleasantness by cutting the soft surface leaves and fuzzy choke center off the top of the heart using the edge of a spoon or a knife.

Last year, the two artichoke plants towering in our back yard produced so many artichokes I gave up and let them bloom. Of course, I didn’t admit this to my friends. What kind of lunatic lets perfectly good artichokes go to waste? Well, they weren’t wasted, exactly. When those big thistles bloom into purple space pods, the garden looks like Martians visited and left a delightful alien bouquet for our enjoyment. When the plants shrivel and blacken in time for Hallowe’en, they make a fabulous backdrop for our backyard cemetery. I run out of excuses for not cutting them down in the first week of November and they meet their end on the compost heap. But their roots are already preparing for next spring.

Even in their early spring stage, artichoke plants don’t embody the ideal of tender new growth. Long, silvery-green, sharply lobed leaves gather at a central point and fan out as they get longer and heavier, making them look less like edible plants and more like medieval weapons caches. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, artichokes are my son’s favorite vegetable. Yet the long wait between artichoke harvests from one May to the next has meant he can’t always remember what to call them. One spring, I pulled the center leaves apart to show him a tiny two-inch diameter bud growing, the first artichoke of the season, asking him, “What is it?” He shrieked with joy, “It’s an ARTI-CADO!” I’m not sure what an artocado is, but it sounds delicious.

I think of our backyard plants as a duo, since I bought them as a pair in the early fall a few years back. I planted them four feet apart in the center of our main bed, where they look out over the rest of the garden like ancient guardians. During their first blooming season, I discovered that one of the plants was actually two, and that between the three plants, we had three distinctly different artichoke varieties: Green Globe, with its round-bodied bud, indented leaf tips, and large heart, which perhaps accounts for its high status among commercial growers; Provençal, which has a lovely, slimmer bud with a light purple tint near the stem; and a third type that I have not yet identified, but which differentiates itself by producing a bud that is longer, narrower, and smaller than the other two, and it is blessed with a nice wide heart. The buds borne on these three plants were more than I could harvest, with each plant showing off at least 30 edible artichokes the first year, and even more the second.

Last year, I vowed not to let quite as many artichokes go “wasted” and decided to prepare and eat all those artichokes with the help of some friends. Invitations went out announcing a party called “Artichokes Four Ways.” However, I neglected to mention the “garden” aspect of the party, and when the guests arrived dressed in evening attire, I had to offer the option of changing into old work shirts before I herded everyone out

When those big thistles bloom into purple space pods, the garden looks like Martians visited and left a delightful alien bouquet for our enjoyment.

Photo by Cheryl Koehler

into the garden armed with gloves, scissors, and colanders.

The heavily laden plants were towering well over our heads. As I was the tallest one among us, I took the job of clipping off the highest thistles while one of the guests artfully caught each falling bud in a colander, all the while balancing a wine glass in the other hand.

Once inside, we set about cleaning and trimming this bumper crop of artichokes into manageable condition. Cutting off the thorny, finger-puncturing spikes from artichoke petals and trimming away loose leaves, hard leaf bases, and woody stem coverings can be hard work, so it was good to have friends to help and stories to tell as we made our way through piles of spiny produce.

Here are the recipes we prepared at our "Artichokes Four Ways" party. I hope that if you happen to be lucky enough to find yourself with a glut of artichokes, you will take an evening to invite some guests over to explore their delights. Sharing the work and the abundance of artichokes transforms them from backyard "monstrosities" (as Pliny was known to call them), into delectable morsels for your palate and your spirit.

### RAW ARTICHOKE APPETIZER

*Raw artichokes have a delicious crunchy texture and a nutty, sweetly astringent flavor that is so difficult to pin down, you keep having to take just one more bite, all the while thinking, "This time, I'll figure out why it's so good." But you never do.*



- 4 large cleaned and peeled artichoke hearts
- ½ lemon
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup Parmesan cheese, thinly flaked
- 2 tablespoons pine nuts, lightly toasted

With a mandoline or vegetable peeler, slice the artichoke hearts into very thin slices. The hearts are not evenly shaped, so don't expect the slices to be uniform in shape or size. Place slices on a serving dish and squeeze the lemon over them. Drizzle with olive oil, and sprinkle with the cheese and pine nuts. Serve with chunks of bread.

### BAKED STUFFED ARTICHOKEs

*Before the Renaissance, artichokes were a delicacy forbidden to women, as they were said to be a powerful aphrodisiac. But here we were, several women, tucking into a whole meal of them. All we could say was, "Let the Bacchanalia begin!"*

- 6 medium artichokes
- 1 lemon

- ½ teaspoon lemon zest
- 2 cups soft breadcrumbs (I used sourdough Pugliese)
- ¾ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- ½ cup fresh herbs, chopped (I like to use parsley, thyme, rosemary, and oregano, but feel free to use whatever herbs you have on hand)
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- ½ teaspoon salt
- Pepper to taste
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil


After washing the artichokes, remove the tough outer leaves at the base and cut about ⅓ inch off the tips of the remaining leaves. With a sharp knife, slice the tops of the artichokes straight across, taking off about 1 inch. Stand the artichokes upside down and cut in half lengthwise. Use a sharp knife to cut out the choke. Rub each halved artichoke generously with half a lemon and place cut side up in the bottom of a greased casserole dish.



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Squeeze any leftover lemon juice into the artichoke halves. Combine the zest, breadcrumbs, cheese, herbs, garlic, salt, and pepper. Distribute the filling among the 12 halves, placing some in the center and tucking some between the spread leaves. Pour 1 teaspoon oil over each half. Cover tightly with aluminum foil and bake for 45–50 minutes in a 400° oven, or until the leaves pull out easily. If you're using a pan that tends to stick, pour ½ cup water into bottom of pan before placing in oven, more if necessary. Serves 6.

### MARINATED ARTICHOKES

*I made these ahead so they would be sufficiently chilled and ready to serve over a bed of baby greens drizzled with some of the extra marinade. My friend Didi contributed a luscious 2006 Bink Pinot Noir from Napa Valley that made our eyes roll back into our heads. Its smooth berry tones complemented the subtle earthiness of the artichokes perfectly. Goethe is said to have disdained artichokes, mocking them as peasant food as he traveled through the Italian countryside. He had no idea . . .*

- 12 baby artichokes
- ⅓ cup balsamic vinegar
- ⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 2 teaspoons whole peppercorns
- 5 cloves garlic, peeled

Place all ingredients in a medium saucepot with enough water to barely cover artichokes. Bring to a boil. Turn heat down and let simmer for 35 to 40 minutes. Remove from heat, let cool, then refrigerate for at least 1 hour. Serve over fresh baby greens, sprinkle with chopped parsley, and drizzle some of the marinade over



Photo by Dan Bruggemeyer

the greens as a dressing. Will keep in their liquid for a week in the refrigerator, but they probably won't be neglected for that long!

### FRIED ARTICHOKE HEARTS

*While fried artichokes are the most labor intensive of these recipes, they are also the most delicious. As they disappeared amidst much sighing and moaning, someone murmured, "French fries of the gods."*

- Vegetable oil for frying (choose one rated for high heat)
- 20 baby artichokes, cleaned, peeled, and quartered
- ½ cup unbleached all-purpose flour (can use half whole wheat for nuttier flavor)
- 1 lemon
- Sea salt
- Mayonnaise or aioli

Fill a deep, heavy-bottomed pot with vegetable oil to a depth of 2 to 3 inches. Heat to 350° (Check temperature with a thermometer

or by dropping a wad of flour paste into the oil: If the flour turns golden brown within 20 seconds, the oil is hot enough, if it turns brown too quickly, it's too hot.) Place the peeled, quartered artichokes into a bowl and toss them with the flour until lightly covered. Fry in small batches and remove with a slotted spoon when they turn golden brown. Allow to drain on paper towels. Retest the temperature of the oil if necessary. Sprinkle the fried artichokes with sea salt and lemon juice and serve with mayonnaise or aioli to dip.

*Kimber Simpkin's garden nurtures not only artichokes, but marvelous inspiration for her writing and her yoga teaching. A happy transplant from the Midwest, her roots grow a little deeper every year. kimber@kimberyoga.com*

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