

**PENNY SAVER NEWS**

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So, which way have you heard the recommendations - choose eggplants with round flower scars, or with oval scars, or the ones with the smallest scar? Look for the male eggplants, or the females? Apparently the food gurus are convinced, and trying to convince us, that some eggplants are boys, others are girls, and that there's a big difference in how they taste.

Please, don't waste any sleep over trying to remember which one is which. There are not 'male' or 'female' eggplants. They all come from the female organs of the flower, but eggplant flowers have both male and female organs. The seeds they contain will grow into plants that make flowers with both male and female parts. There are no such things as male or female eggplants. The shape of the scar where the flower fell off doesn't tell you whether the fruit is a boy or a girl.

But - there certainly can be difference in the flavor and texture of different fruits! Most of the male/female discussion seems to center around which ones taste better, which ones are bitter, which ones have the most seeds, etc. And there are differences. But they don't depend on the shape of the scar, or the supposed sex of the fruit. So, how can you choose the best ones?

The best place to start is what you can see, the skin. There should be a little bit of the stem still attached to one end. A ripe eggplant will have a smooth, bright, shiny skin. It should be firm, not hard but not soft and soggy either. Whether it is purple,

green, white or striped, if the skin is dull the fruit has been picked for too long. When you press on the skin it should spring right back at you. If it's too hard to press in, then the fruit is too green and underripe. If it goes in and stays in, the fruit is too old. The texture is getting soft and it is more likely to be bitter.

In general the smaller ones are usually better. Probably the best way to decide which ones to buy is to weigh them. Pick two that are close to the same size. Weigh them in the grocery scales. The heavier one will be the better one. Some people say they can tell by knocking on an eggplant as they do a watermelon. In this case though, you do *not* want to buy one that sounds hollow. These will be dry and punky inside.

Once you have the fruit home, refrigerate it right away in a plastic bag unless you're going to cook it today. They will keep for a few days in the crisper drawer, but the quality will slowly go downhill. The longer they are stored the more likely they are to become bitter. If you start finding soft soggy spots on the skin it is starting to decompose.

When you cut open your eggplant, take a look at the seeds. Fruit with bigger seeds and brown seeds is more likely to be bitter. If the fruit is very large you probably want to peel it, as the skin will be tougher. Again, smaller fruit is usually better quality.

Some people like to salt eggplant slices and let them stand before using. This draws out moisture and makes the slices firmer. Slices that have been salted first will absorb less oil when they are fried. But there's no guarantee that salting will reduce any bitterness. That mostly depends on the seeds. Rinse off the salt and pat the slices dry before you go on with your recipe.

Here's a way to use eggplant that does not involve a lot of frying or breading.

Use minced Canadian bacon instead of regular bacon to reduce the fat even more.

### Eggplant Casserole

5 slices turkey bacon	1 onion, chopped
1 medium eggplant, about 1 1/2 pounds	2 Tbsp chopped fresh parsley
3 large ripe tomatoes	1 tsp sugar
1 tsp dried basil leaves	3/4 C shredded low-fat sharp cheese
salt, pepper to taste	1 Tbsp oil

Saute the bacon until crisp. Drain on paper towels and crumble. Pour off bacon grease and discard. Peel if necessary, then chop the eggplant into small cubes. Chop tomatoes. Heat oil in skillet, saute onion until tender. Stir in tomatoes, eggplant, sugar, salt and pepper. Cover and simmer 10 min, stirring once or twice. Preheat oven to 350° F. Spray 1 quart baking dish with cooking spray. Add parsley and basil to mixture, pour into prepared dish. Sprinkle with cheese. Bake 10 minutes, or until cheese melts. Do not over-bake or cheese will be tough. Serves 6.

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