

EGGPLANT, OYSTER, AND TASSO GRATIN A NEW SORT OF TRINITY

by Susan Spicer

YOU ARE, NO DOUBT, FAMILIAR WITH the so-called trinity of Louisiana cookery: onions, celery, and bell pepper. Susan Spicer of New Orleans, a self-described eggplant freak who cooks in an internationally inflected Creole style, has honed a new sort of trinity: eggplant, oysters, and tasso.

Here, tasso, an intensely flavored smoked pork of Cajun origin, serves as a seasoning, in the same way that a smoked pig trotter flavors a pot of greens. Although Spicer recommends that you serve scoops of this gratin as an appetizer, consider yourself warned: We have done the same. And no matter what we served to follow, it paled in comparison. Your guests might be happier with a large helping of this Creolized casserole and a salad.

Makes 4 to 6 servings

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| 1 pint shucked oysters with their liquor | 2 ounces finely chopped tasso (about 3 tablespoons) |
| 2 tablespoons butter | 1 garlic clove, minced |
| 2 tablespoons flour | 1 teaspoon chopped fresh sage |
| 1/2 cup chicken stock or milk | 1 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary |
| 1/2 cup cream | 1/2 cup dry bread crumbs |
| Salt and ground black pepper | 2 tablespoons chopped parsley |
| Hot sauce | 1 tablespoon butter, melted |
| Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg | 2 tablespoons olive oil |
| 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil | 2 ounces Grana Padano or Parmesan cheese, grated (1/4 cup) |
| 1 small eggplant, peeled and diced (about 2 cups) | |
| 1 medium onion, chopped | |



1. Preheat the oven to 400°F. Butter a two-quart baking dish and set aside.
2. Pour the oysters into a bowl and check for bits of shell. Strain the liquor through a fine sieve into a small bowl and set aside. Set drained oysters aside in a small bowl.
3. Melt the butter in a small saucepan over low heat and whisk in the flour. Whisk in the reserved oyster liquor and stock. Increase the heat to medium-high and bring the mixture to a boil, whisking constantly. Whisk in the cream. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer gently, stirring from time to time, until the sauce thickens, about 10 minutes. Season the sauce with salt, pepper, hot sauce, and nutmeg. Remove the pan from the heat and cover to keep the sauce warm.
4. Heat the extra-virgin olive oil in a medium skillet over medium-high heat. Add the eggplant and cook, stirring often, until lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Stir in the onion, tasso, garlic, sage, and rosemary. Cook until the eggplant is tender, 5 to 7 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Transfer the eggplant mixture into a colander to drain for 5 minutes.
5. Stir together the crumbs, parsley, melted butter, oil, and cheese in a small bowl and set aside.
6. To assemble the gratin, spread about one-third of the oyster liquor sauce in the bottom of the prepared baking dish. Spoon the eggplant mixture into the dish. Arrange the oysters in a single layer over the eggplant mixture and drizzle with the remaining sauce. Sprinkle the crumb topping over the entire dish. Bake until golden brown and bubbly, 10 to 15 minutes. Serve hot. 🍷

Originally published in *Crescent City Cooking*, by Susan Spicer and Paula Disbrowe. Featured in *The Southern Foodways Alliance Community Cookbook*, edited by Sara Roahen and John T Edge.