

# heart of the matter

WHILE QUITE FORBIDDING IN APPEARANCE AND HARDLY EASY TO PREPARE IN ITS FRESH FORM, THE ARTICHOKE IS ANALOGOUS TO LIFE ITSELF—PEEL THE LAYERS OF ANY SITUATION AND YOU'RE BOUND TO FIND THE ALL-IMPORTANT CENTRE.

**T**he artichoke (*cynara scolymus*), also called globe artichoke, is a member of the thistle family and is related to the cardoon (*cynara cardunculus*).

The edible part is the young flower bud (or choke), which has numerous large protective leaves (also called scales or bracts) with a fleshy base (also called heart, fond, bottom or receptacle).

Artichokes, with their larger and fleshier flower heads, were cultivated thousands of years ago from the wild cardoon. They are native to the Mediterranean region, where cardoons still grow wild today, and were known

as a food plant to Ancient Romans and Greeks. They became fashionable in European courts in the Middle Ages and were thought to be an aphrodisiac (wasn't everything?).

## BY NAME

The word artichoke comes from the Arabic al'qarshuf or al-kharshof, literally 'the artichoke'. This became alcarchofa in Old Spanish and entered Italian as arcicchio, replacing the Latin *cynara*, and becoming articiocco, which entered English in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as artechock. The name artichoke is commonly applied to two other plants, unrelated to the globe artichoke. The Jerusalem artichoke (*helianthus tuberosus*) is related to the sunflower. Its name is a corruption of the Spanish name for sunflower: girasol (literally 'turning with the sun'). The flavour and texture of these tubers was thought to be similar to artichokes, thus the confusing name. Chinese artichoke

(*stachys affinis*) is an Asian tuber also called chorogi, Japanese artichoke and, in French, crosnes. It gains its name from a perceived resemblance in flavour to globe artichokes, or perhaps its stronger resemblance in appearance to Jerusalem artichokes.

### CULTIVATION

The artichoke is a tall and dramatic perennial plant (up to 180cm high), with large greyish green leaves. The young flower buds are cut each year while they are still closed and tender. Large buds, growing at the top of the plant, may weigh 500g or more. Lateral buds, which grow lower on the main stem, are often picked while small, to allow better development of remaining buds; these small, immature buds can be eaten whole.

Artichokes grow throughout southern Europe, where they thrive in winter and spring. Italian immigrants introduced them to the west coast of the USA, where they are grown today. Green artichokes are the first to appear, ready in mid-winter, with purple varieties arriving a little later. They are harvested from mid-winter to early summer, but are at their peak in spring.

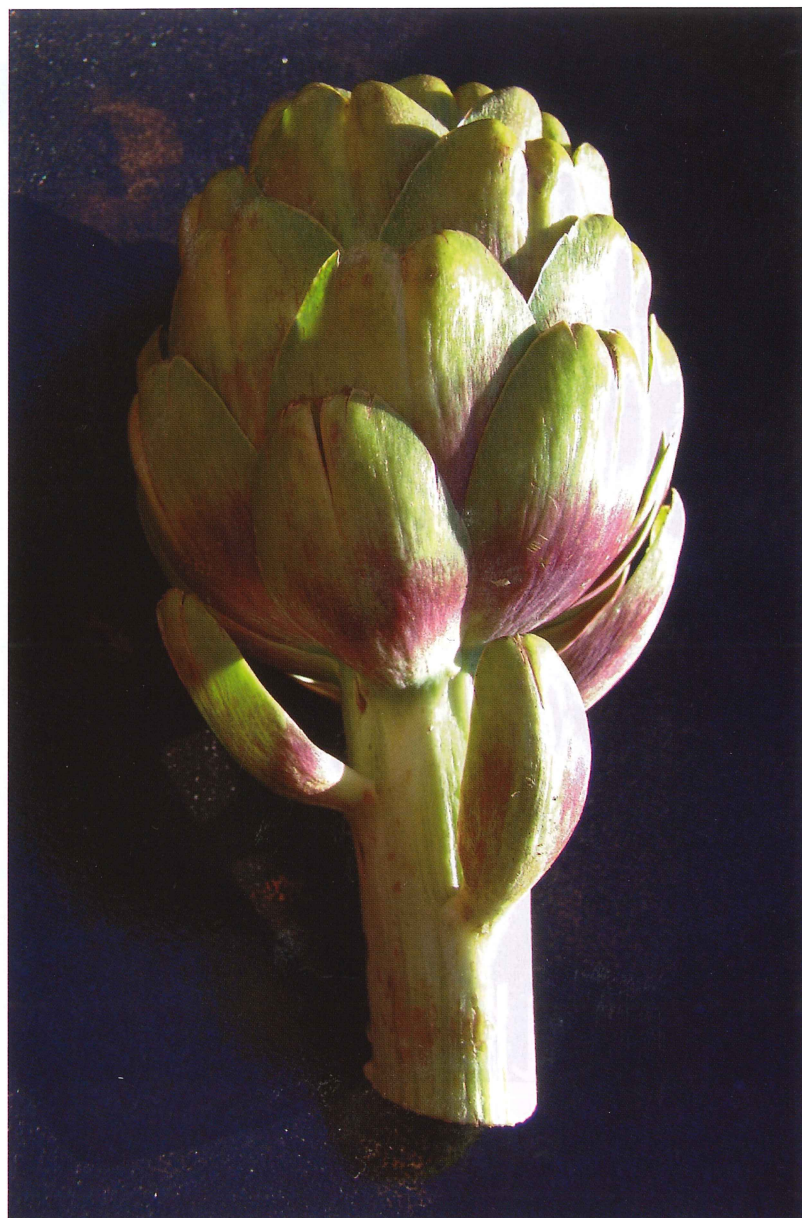
### BUYING & STORING

Choose plump artichokes that are heavy for their size with firm heads and stems (not wilting) and leaves that are tightly overlapped. Tiny artichokes may have less tightly packed leaves, but should still be firm. Store them sealed in a plastic bag in the vegetable crisper for up to a week, or put the stems into a container of water (like flowers in a vase), cover with a plastic bag (to create a green house effect) and, if room permits, store in the refrigerator.

The trimming of stalks and standing them in fresh water (like cut flowers) can revive wilting artichokes, but the flavour won't be as good as when fresh. Hearts can be blanched in acidulated water (water to which the juice of one or two lemons or limes has been added) and frozen for up to four months, while whole buds can be simmered in seasoned vinegar, drained and stored in olive oil for up to three months.

### USES

When the flower head is an immature bud, the whole head is edible; they are often pickled, or cooked and preserved in olive oil or acidulated brine, and sold bottled or canned. The larger unopened bud is the form in which artichokes are normally bought fresh—at this stage, the petal-like leaves are tougher and only their fleshy base and



tender heart are edible. They can be baked, fried, boiled, steamed or stuffed.

Except in southern Europe, artichokes are more commonly seen preserved than fresh. Those stored in oil can develop a 'off' flavour as the oil deteriorates, so it is important to check that you are buying fresh stock well within its use-by date. Preserved artichokes make a great addition to an antipasto plate and can be used in some recipes (such as the following artichoke and white bean purée).

Cynar is an Italian digestif produced from an infusion of alcohol and fresh artichokes. With its strength of just 16.5 per cent alcohol and a bitter taste, it makes a great aperitif, either on the rocks or mixed with fresh orange juice. Artichoke's bitter element, cynarin, which makes this aperitif so appealing, can have the opposite effect on wines. It seems to stimulate the tongue's sweetness receptors in most people, causing whatever is tasted next to taste sweet (even water). This causes many wines to taste unpleasant (even metallic) when tasted immediately after artichokes, although the effect is less pronounced if the artichoke has been crumbed and fried. Due to their bitter



element, artichokes have been considered a liver tonic, as well as being said to lower blood cholesterol and blood sugar levels and act as a diuretic.

### PREPARING & EATING

Artichokes will discolour quickly once they are cut. Regardless of the preparation, it is therefore important to rub all cut surfaces with lemon juice or to store the cut artichoke in acidulated water. Artichokes should always be cut with a stainless steel knife and cooked in stainless steel, glass or enamel pots, as they will react with other metals (such as aluminium), discolour and acquire a metallic taste.

In Italy and Spain, very young artichokes are often sliced finely and eaten raw in salads (with other crisp salad vegetables such as tender young celery, fennel, witlof and radish) or as part of a mixed appetiser. In Italy, they are also often deep-fried. Larger, more mature artichokes, where the bracts have started to toughen, are best trimmed as described in the following recipe for stuffed artichokes, and eaten with the hands. Trimmed artichokes can be steamed or boiled in salted water for 15 - 30 minutes (depending on size) and served hot or cold with a sauce, such as melted butter mixed with chopped fresh herbs, vinaigrette, bagna cauda (a hot garlic and anchovy butter sauce), mayonnaise, or hollandaise.

If served cold, they can be plunged into iced water for a minute to arrest the

cooking process. Drain upside down on a clean tea towel for a minute or two, turn right way up, spread the bracts a little and pour some sauce over the leaves. The bracts are picked off one by one

#### ARTICHOKEs COMBINE WELL WITH

Basil	Pine nuts
Bay	Parmesan
Garlic	Olive oil
Parsley	Butter
Egg	Breadcrumbs
Lemon	Anchovies
Onion	Scallops
Tomato	Chicken
Witlof	Veal
Currants	Ham

#### OTHER NAMES

Chinese - chao xian ji	Portuguese - alcachofra
Danish - artiskok	Russian - artishok
Dutch - artisjok	koliuchii
Finnish - artisokka	Spanish - alcachofa
French - artichaut	Swedish - kronärtskocka
German - artichoke	Turkish - enginar
Greek - agginara	Vietnamese - atisô
Italian - carciofo	
Japanese - chousen azami	



stuffed artichokes

and dipped in the sauce. The flesh is removed from the base by holding the outer thistly point of the bract and pulling the base through the front teeth. When all leaves are removed, the heart, which many consider to be the best part, is revealed: this, along with the top of the stalk, is the most tender and 'meatiest' part of the plant. You'll need to provide fingerbowls as well as bowls for discarded leaves when serving artichokes this way.

For a more refined dish, the French often remove all tough outer bracts and cut away the tough ends of the remaining bracts, leaving only the edible portion behind. The artichokes are then boiled in acidulated water for 15 - 30 minutes (or until the outer bract pulls away easily from the base). They can also be sliced vertically, dipped in flour, egg and breadcrumbs, deep-fried and served with a wedge of lemon. As artichokes prepared this way are eaten with a knife and fork, not fingers, it is important to remove all of the tough fibrous sections of the bracts. **WD**



## STUFFED ARTICHOKEs

serves 2

These need to be eaten with the fingers, removing one leaf at a time and scraping the tender base of the leaf off between the teeth. Serve with finger bowls and a large bowl for discarded leaves. They are a little messy, but well worth it!

6 globe artichokes  
1 bunch parsley  
4 cloves garlic, peeled  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  -  $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp chilli powder  
120ml extra virgin olive oil  
2 tbsp lemon juice  
55g fresh breadcrumbs (see notes)  
6 anchovies, chopped  
2 tbsp tiny salted capers, rinsed well and drained  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  lemon  
pinch salt  
extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling

1. Combine parsley leaves, garlic, chilli powder, olive oil, lemon juice and salt in a food processor and blend until a coarse paste forms. 2. Remove to a large bowl and stir in breadcrumbs, anchovies and capers. Mix well. 3. Trim stem of artichoke, leaving about 3cm attached. Remove outer leaves from one artichoke until leaves with a green-yellow base appear. Cut off top of the artichoke. Gently ease the leaves apart and, using a teaspoon, scoop out and discard the hairy choke from the centre. Place prepared artichoke in acidulated water (see notes) and repeat with remaining artichokes. 4. Remove artichokes from the water and place upside down on a clean tea towel to drain. 5. Stuff the centre of each artichoke with some of the breadcrumb mixture, packing extra mixture between the leaves. 6. Stand artichokes upright in a tight fitting saucepan (if necessary a small upturned bowl can be placed in the centre to ensure that artichokes remain upright). 7. Fill a saucepan with 2 - 3cm of water and add juice of 1 lemon. Drizzle olive oil over the artichokes and cover. 8. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer for approximately 25 minutes, until the base of the artichokes are tender when pierced with a thin skewer or toothpick.

**NOTES:** Make fresh breadcrumbs by slicing a loaf of good white bread and leaving it to dry overnight (alternatively dry in a very slow oven) then processing in a food processor until finely crumbed. Excess breadcrumbs will keep in an airtight container for a later use.

Acidulated water is water to which the juice of 1 or 2 lemons has been added — the acid prevents the artichokes from discolouring.

## ARTICHOKE & WHITE BEAN PURÉE

serves 8 - 10 as part of an antipasto

This is a simple way to enjoy artichokes for those who don't want to go to all the fuss of trimming, removing leaves and scraping out chokes. Good quality bottled artichokes can be used for this recipe, preferably those stored in acidulated water (although those stored in olive oil or vinegar can also be used;

if they taste quite acidic they can be soaked in fresh water for an hour or so before using).

400g cooked artichokes, drained well  
240g white beans (cannellini beans), rinsed and drained  
1 tbsp lemon juice  
1 clove garlic, peeled  
1 tsp sea salt  
120ml extra virgin olive oil

1. Process artichokes, beans, lemon juice, garlic and salt in a food processor until well blended. 2. With the motor running, gradually add olive oil. 3. Process until a smooth white paste forms. 4. Taste and adjust seasoning if necessary. 5. Serve on small crostini (toast slices) as part of an antipasto.

