

Ratatouille Niçoise

A Classic Dish from the South of France

Ratatouille is a beloved vegetable stew originating from Nice in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region of southeastern France. The name comes from the Occitan word “ratatolha” and the French verb “touiller,” meaning to stir or toss food¹⁾.

Historical Background

While ratatouille is now considered a quintessential French dish, its origins trace back to the 18th century when tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers—all New World vegetables—became integrated into Provençal cuisine²⁾. Originally a humble peasant dish, ratatouille was made by farmers to use up the summer harvest. Each family had its own variation, with vegetables cooked together in olive oil from local groves.

The dish gained international recognition in the 20th century, particularly after appearing in Elizabeth David's influential 1950 book “A Book of Mediterranean Food”³⁾. More recently, Pixar's 2007 animated film *Ratatouille* introduced the dish to a new generation worldwide, though the film's elegant presentation departed from the traditional rustic preparation.

Cultural Significance

In Provence, ratatouille is more than just a recipe—it's a celebration of the Mediterranean sun and the bounty of summer. The dish embodies the French concept of *terroir*, showcasing vegetables grown in the region's warm climate and prepared with local olive oil and herbs de Provence.

Traditional debates persist about the “proper” way to make ratatouille: some cooks insist on cooking each vegetable separately before combining them (the method preferred by purists), while others cook everything together for simplicity. The separate cooking method, championed by culinary authorities, preserves each vegetable's distinct texture and flavor⁴⁾.

Traditional Recipe

Ingredients

- 2 medium eggplants (aubergines), cut into 2cm cubes
- 3 medium zucchini (courgettes), cut into 2cm cubes
- 2 red bell peppers, cut into 2cm pieces
- 2 yellow bell peppers, cut into 2cm pieces
- 4 large ripe tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and chopped
- 1 large onion, thinly sliced
- 4-5 garlic cloves, minced

- 100-125ml extra virgin olive oil (preferably from Provence)
- Fresh thyme sprigs (3-4)
- 2 bay leaves
- Fresh basil leaves, torn
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Optional: 1 tablespoon tomato paste for depth

Equipment

- Large heavy-bottomed pan or Dutch oven
- Colander
- Sharp knife
- Cutting board
- Wooden spoon

Preparation Method

Step 1: Prepare the Eggplant

1. Place the cubed eggplant in a colander, sprinkle generously with salt
2. Let stand for 30 minutes to draw out bitter juices
3. Rinse thoroughly and pat dry with kitchen towels
4. This step is crucial for preventing the eggplant from becoming mushy

Step 2: Cook the Vegetables Separately



The traditional Niçoise method calls for cooking each vegetable separately to preserve its individual character.

1. **Eggplant:** Heat 3 tablespoons olive oil in a large pan over medium-high heat. Cook eggplant until golden, about 8-10 minutes. Remove and set aside.
2. **Zucchini:** Add 2 tablespoons olive oil to the pan. Cook zucchini until lightly browned, about 6-8 minutes. Remove and set aside.
3. **Peppers:** Add 2 tablespoons olive oil. Cook peppers until softened and slightly charred, about 8 minutes. Remove and set aside.

Step 3: Build the Base

1. In the same pan, heat 2 tablespoons olive oil over medium heat
2. Add sliced onions and cook until soft and translucent, about 8 minutes
3. Add minced garlic and cook for 1-2 minutes until fragrant (do not brown)
4. Add chopped tomatoes, thyme, and bay leaves
5. Season with salt and pepper
6. Cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until tomatoes break down

Step 4: Combine and Simmer

1. Return all cooked vegetables to the pan
2. Stir gently to combine
3. Reduce heat to low and simmer, uncovered, for 15-20 minutes
4. The vegetables should be tender but not mushy
5. Taste and adjust seasoning
6. Remove thyme sprigs and bay leaves

Step 5: Finish

1. Remove from heat
2. Stir in torn fresh basil leaves
3. Drizzle with a little extra virgin olive oil
4. Let rest for 10-15 minutes before serving (ratatouille is often better at room temperature)

Serving Suggestions

Ratatouille is incredibly versatile:

- Serve warm or at room temperature as a main dish
- Use as a side dish with grilled fish, chicken, or lamb
- Spread on toasted bread (*tartine*) for an appetizer
- Serve with crusty bread and goat cheese
- Use as a filling for omelets or crepes
- Toss with pasta for a quick meal
- Pair with a chilled rosé from Provence or a light red from Côtes du Rhône



Ratatouille tastes even better the next day when flavors have melded. Store in the refrigerator for up to 5 days.

Regional Variations

- **Ratatouille Confit Byaldi:** A refined presentation where vegetables are thinly sliced and arranged in concentric circles, popularized by chef Michel Guérard
- **Bohémienne:** An Occitan version that includes cod
- **Quick Version:** All vegetables cooked together in one pot (*ratatouille rapide*)

External Resources

- [Nice Tourism Official Website](#) - Learn more about the culinary heritage of Nice
- [Provence Web - Traditional Ratatouille](#) - Regional variations and tips
- [The Guardian: How to Cook Perfect Ratatouille](#) - Modern interpretations
- [Encyclopaedia Britannica - Ratatouille](#) - Historical context

See Also

- [Cuisine of Provence](#)
- [Mediterranean Diet](#)
- [French Vegetable Dishes](#)

Recipe adapted from traditional Niçoise methods

[French cuisine](#), [Provençal cuisine](#), [Mediterranean](#), [Vegetarian](#), [Summer recipes](#)

¹⁾

The Oxford Companion to Food, 3rd Edition, Oxford University Press, 2014

²⁾

Davidson, Alan. "The Penguin Companion to Food." Penguin Books, 2002.

³⁾

David, Elizabeth. "A Book of Mediterranean Food." Penguin Books, 1950.

⁴⁾

Child, Julia, Louisette Bertholle, and Simone Beck. "Mastering the Art of French Cooking." Knopf, 1961.

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