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# Go Purple!

by lola akinmade

**T**here are a handful of vegetables I find intimidating, and the odd-looking, purple-skinned eggplant tops my list. From its glossy otherworldly exterior and spongy texture to pondering how to prepare it, eggplant (or aubergine) remains a misunderstood vegetable for many. Ironically, it also happens to be one of the most versatile vegetables to cook, as it can be stir-fried, sautéed, steamed, grilled or baked.

Native to Asia and Africa, eggplant is part of the nightshade family of vegetables, which includes potatoes, bell peppers and tomatoes. In addition to purple, it comes in shades of white, green and lavender.

Low in calories, fat-free and full of fiber at 2 grams per cup, eggplant is widely used in various Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and Indian dishes. From Arab baba ghanoush and Italian baked eggplant parmigiana to French ratatouille and Greek moussaka, eggplant remains a versatile cooking element in many cultures.

"Eggplant is not only beautiful in dishes, it is high in fiber to help digestion and heart disease," says nutrition and fitness expert Angela Martindale, whose clientele includes celebrities such as Annette Bening and the Osmonds. Martindale runs an organic healthy meal delivery program called Meals That Transform, and eggplant is one of the superfoods she uses.

Like most organic vegetables, eggplant teems with dietary fiber, vitamins,

and minerals such as folic acid, vitamin B, calcium and beta-carotenes, just to name a few. "Eggplant contains a good amount of potassium, magnesium, folate, copper (important in keeping our skin young looking for longer), manganese and thiamine (vitamin B1)," adds Martindale, noting that the vegetable

also contains substances that can help lower blood pressure.

Ranked by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a top 10 vegetable in terms of antioxidant properties, eggplant's rich deep purple color means it is chock-full of antioxidants, which help boost your immune system, fight dangerous radicals and prevent cell damage. "The predominant antioxidant compound found in eggplant is chlorogenic acid, which is one of the most potent free radical scavengers found in all plant tissues," says nutritionist Chrissy Wellington of the Canyon Ranch wellness and spa resort chain.

"Benefits attributed to chlorogenic acid include antimutagenic (anticancer), antimicrobial, anti-LDL (bad cholesterol) and antiviral activities," Wellington adds. "Research shows that when laboratory animals with high cholesterol were given eggplant juice, their blood cholesterol significantly reduced, while the walls of their blood vessels relaxed, improving blood flow, which is an added benefit to support brain health and prevention of stroke."

The numerous health benefits of eggplant can be broken down into four key areas: cancer prevention, brain health, cholesterol control and diabetes management.

Need more encouragement to join team purple? The American Diabetes Association recommends eggplant as one natural way of controlling type 2 diabetes because its high-fiber and low-soluble carbohydrate extracts help moderate glucose absorption and insulin levels.

Eggplant certainly may be an acquired taste, but with its proven heart and body-healthy benefits, it's a taste I'm willing to acquire. ♥

*Sweden-based avid traveler Lola Akinmade is willing to try almost anything once—even eggplant.*

