

- 2 medium yellow onions, chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, crushed
- 3-4 medium zucchini, diced
- 3-4 bell peppers, any colors, seeds removed, chopped into 1/2 inch square pieces:
- 2 small or 1 large eggplant
- 1 ½ lbs fresh ripe tomatoes
- Olive oil, as needed
- Salt to taste
- Herbes de provence, up to 1 tablespoon
- 1 can (about 15 oz) vegetable broth, or seeded juice from tomatoes
- Pepper to taste
- 1 lb rigatoni, or other sturdy pasta

It helps to have all of the vegetables prepped and ready to go before you begin cooking.

First, prepare the tomatoes. Bring a pot of water to a boil, and have a bowl filled with ice water ready on the side. Cut an x in the bottom of each tomato with the tip of a paring knife, just enough to puncture the skin. Place the tomatoes into the boiling water for about a minute, or until you see large cracks in the skin. The boiling water will loosen the skin from the flesh, and the x that you cut will lengthen and give you something to grab onto. With a slotted spoon, remove the tomatoes from the boiling water and slip them into the ice water. Within a minute or so, they will be cool enough to handle. The skins will slip right off. Now just remove the core, slice the tomatoes in half, and use your finger to scoop out the seeds into a small strainer. Push the juices through, while letting the strainer catch the seeds. Add the juice to the vegetable broth later. If you don't mind the seeds, feel free to skip straining, and just add the seeds and gel-like juice to the vegetable broth. Slice the tomato flesh and set aside.

Prepare the eggplant by peeling, if desired, then salting.

I find the skin to be rubbery and distracting from the comforting softness of the rest of the dish, so I peel it, but that is a matter of preference.

The reason for salting is to draw some of the bitter moisture from the eggplant, making it more pleasant to eat. If you enjoy eggplant that has not been salted, feel free to skip this step. I find it much more palatable when the bitterness has been removed.

To peel, first cut the top and bottom off, then use a vegetable peeler to slice long strips of the skin off.

After peeling, slice the eggplant into approximately 1/2" slices, and lay out on a metal cooling rack set over a sheet pan. Sprinkle liberally with coarse Kosher salt and allow to rest for about 30 minutes. Turn the slices over and repeat sprinkling. Allow to rest for another 30 minutes.

Dice the zucchini and peppers, into approximately 1/2" cubes. Chop the onion into medium dice and mince the garlic. Finally, it's time to start cooking.

Once the eggplant is done resting, you will see beads of moisture on the surface, and probably some liquid in the pan below. Pat the slices with paper towel to remove moisture and excess salt.

Heat a skillet over high heat and add a bit of olive oil. Toss the chopped onions in and sprinkle with a bit of salt. Stir them around a bit, and cook until they are just beginning to brown. Move them to a Dutch oven set over low heat and add the garlic.

Place the pan over high heat again and add a little more olive oil. Once the pan is very hot, add in half of the peppers, and let them cook until they are browned in several spots (don't be too fussy here), then move them to the pot with the onions and garlic. Keep an eye on the onions. They should be cooking very slowly, and will caramelize a bit if you let them stay on the bottom, but if they are burning and you are using the lowest heat possible on your stove, go ahead and stir. It is better to give up a bit of caramelization than to end up with burnt onions.

Saute the rest of the peppers, the zucchini, and the eggplant (which you can dice while the other veggies are cooking) until they are all lightly browned, adding olive oil between batches as necessary, and deglazing the pan as necessary, saving the deglazing liquid. Make sure not to try to cook too much at a time, or you won't get good browning. Cook only enough vegetables to cover the bottom of the pan at a time. Continue to add each batch to the pan with the onions, stirring only if necessary to keep from burning, and adding salt to each batch once it is in the Dutch oven.

Once all the sauteed vegetables have been added to the Dutch oven, add the tomato flesh, the herbes de Provence, pepper to taste, and salt, if necessary. I usually don't find that I need any more salt, since I have added small amounts to each batch of veggies. To the deglazing liquids that you have accumulated, add tomato juice and/or vegetable broth until you have 3 cups of liquid. Add the liquid to the Dutch oven, give the whole mixture a stir to combine, cover, and turn the heat up to medium high until the mixture comes to a simmer. Turn the heat down to medium-low, and allow it to cook at a very slow simmer for an hour. Alternatively, you can place the pot into a 375 degree oven, if you are using an oven-safe pot.

After the vegetables have cooked for an hour, bring a large pot of water to a boil. Then set a colander over a bowl, and pour all of the cooked vegetables into the colander. After a few

minutes, a lot of liquid will have drained into the bowl. Put the Dutch oven back on the stove over high heat, and pour the drained liquid into the skillet. Bring to a boil, and occasionally add more drained juices to the pan. The vegetables will continue to drain for a while, so keep that colander over the bowl, and occasionally give the vegetables a little stir to help them out. Continue to boil the juices until they are reduced and thickened a bit, about 8-10 minutes. Meanwhile, once the water is boiling, add at least a tablespoon of salt and the pasta. I like rigatoni here, but any pasta you have around is fine. Cook for the one minute short of the least amount of time that the package instructs for al dente pasta. So if it says to cook for 10-11 minutes, cook it for 9 minutes. Carefully scoop out a cup of the pasta cooking water and set it aside (pyrex measuring cups work well for this), then drain the pasta.

Once the vegetable liquid is reduced and slightly thickened, add the vegetables back to the Dutch oven. Give it a good stir to coat the vegetables. Turn the heat off, and add the pasta. Stir again, and if it seems dry, add a little of the reserved pasta water to the mix to loosen it. It should seem like a moist, chunky sauce, but not overly wet. Let the pasta set for a few minutes to absorb the flavors. Check seasoning and adjust, if necessary.