



Cardoni On Bakersfield Tables

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Sixty years have passed since the families Actis, Antongiovanni, Banducci, Barsotti, Battini, Belluomini, Ceccarelli, Fabbri, Fanucchi, Francesconi, Ghilarducci, Gia, Giannelli, Grassotti, Lorenzetti, Matteucci, Pannelli, Pasquini, Pecchia, Pettrini, Perucci, and Riccomini kept vegetable gardens on Kentucky Street.¹ Their plants were the same as today's, but they also had cardoni. In 2003 Ray and Julia Fanucchi gave me a cardoni pod, and every October since, cardoni has come up in my garden.

Ray's parents settled in Buttonwillow, and in 1918 they moved to Bakersfield. From the Thirties to the Fifties, Ray Fanucchi ranched on 100 acres just south of Wilson Road. The farm eventually became city lots, but Ray kept a small garden and continued to grow cardoni for Dante feeds. One of his specialties was *bagna cauda e cardoni*.

¹ This "Little Italy" settlement was not a large. Between 1915 and 1930, few families stayed put, but almost all of them lived in the three blocks along Kentucky and Monterey Streets between Gage and Brown.



The small print says it's *cynara cardunculus*, but to cardoni-lovers the plant's an artichoke-look-a-like with toothed leaves. Ray's plant had straight stalks, but another type is curved and nicknamed *gobbo*, which means hunchback in Italian.

Think of cardoni as celery on steroids: The stalks are about two feet long, and in the summer the plant develops striking, purple flower heads that turn into spikey, tennis-ball-size seedpods.

Cardoni (also called cardone, cardoon, carduna, and cardi) is a relative of the artichoke and both are in the thistle family. Unlike artichoke, cardoni has a pod that's loaded with fuzzy duff. The edible parts are cardoni's pale green stalks that resemble robust, chunky celery--but with sharper edges. Fanucchi remembered

visitors from Italy who wanted cardoni leaves for cooking, but he didn't endorse it.

Plant cardoni's diminutive seeds in spring in an inch of soil with enough space so the cardoni can grow into a 3 x 3-ft plot. First little leaves look like watermelon seedlings, but hidden below ground is a taproot that will carry the plant through Bakersfield's hot summers year after year. Fanucchi told me to watch for stickiness on the leaves. It comes from aphids, but he said a little soapy water will send the bugs on their way. Beyond that, cardoni doesn't require much care.



Kentucky Street image courtesy of Ronald Womack

As the plant grows tie heavy paper around the base to support the stalks and leaves and keep the sun off. Harvest from November to January, then cut the plant to the ground. In spring its taproot will push new growth. You only plant cardoni once.

Try Seeds from Italy, www.growitalian.com. They're distributors for a company that's been selling Italian seeds since 1783. "Bianco Avorio" and "Gobbo di Nizza" are about \$2.50 per seed pack. When cardoni's in season your grocery store might be able to get it for you. Sometimes it's available from Ocean Mist Farms at www.oceanmist.com. Click on "cardone" for recipes, history, and lore.

Cardoni is brawny, interesting, crispy with a hint of artichoke, and grows in Bakersfield. But it isn't widely planted here because it takes time to prepare. To have more tender cardoni, the string-like fibers that run lengthwise along the stalk have to be stripped off before cooking.

Cut the stalks into two or three-inch lengths and drop them into a lemon juice/salt water bath-- otherwise cardoni darkens fast. Parboil in the same lemon and salt water bath until tender.

Fry in butter or olive oil, or bread them, or dip them in dough and make fritters. You can also add cardoni to quiches, stews, or serve it cold in salads. Top-off a dish of boiled cardoni with generous shavings of Parmesan cheese, dashes of balsamic vinegar, or lemon-buttered breadcrumbs.

Here's a recipe for *bagna cauda*, a favorite dish from the Piedmont region of Italy. *Bagna cauda* means hot bath, but in this case it is a hot dipping sauce for raw and parboiled vegetables

cut into bite-size pieces. Spear them on long, prong-like forks and hold them in the hot bath for a few seconds before eating. In Italy common vegetables used for *bagna cauda* are cardoni, fennel, cauliflower, cabbage and sweet peppers.

BAGNA CAUDA

24 anchovy fillets packed in oil

1 cup olive oil

3 tablespoons butter

5 or more cloves garlic, peeled, diced

1. Heat 1/4-c. olive oil in 1-qt. saucepan over medium heat. Add garlic and cook, stirring, until garlic is slightly softened but not browned.

2. Remove from heat and add remaining 1- 1/4-c. olive oil, butter, and finely chopped anchovies. (

3. Return pan to medium heat, stir while cooking to mix thoroughly for a well-blended sauce.

4. Remove from stove, serve. (Sauce may be made ahead of time, refrigerated in covered jar, and heated for use later.)

Bagna cauda can be kept hot over a flame at the table, but it's okay to serve it in the pot at the table. Remember to

include a basket of bread sticks or crusty Pyrenees French bread.

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