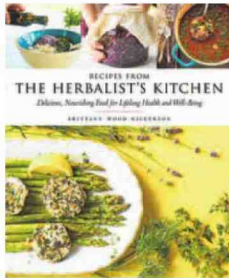


RECIPE OF THE WEEK

FRESH HERBS FOR BAKED RICOTTA

BY CHRIS ROSS

You can find many fresh herbs in the grocery store year-round these days, but if you are growing them yourself, summer is the time when many herbs are at their peak. Plus, we're blessed with a climate that allows some herbs to grow as perennials in our gardens. Rosemary can develop into tall shrubs; thyme is used as a ground cover; oregano grows into large mounds that have to be pruned back.



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So, what to do with this bounty from nature? Brittany Wood Nickerson has lots of good ideas in her new book, "Recipes From the Herbalist's Kitchen." She also includes profiles of each herb, with details on the plant's healing properties and health benefits.

Among the recipes in her book is this baked ricotta appetizer with fresh oregano, thyme and rosemary. However, Nickerson, who calls herself an improvisational cook, suggests using whatever herbs you have on hand to flavor the dish.

She also suggests making the ricotta from scratch, saying it's one of the easiest cheese to make. There are many recipes online, including this one by Ina Garten on the Food Network website: www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/ina-garten/home-made-ricotta-recipe-1923290.

chris.ross@suniontribune.com
(619) 293-1295

Baked Ricotta

Makes 4-6 servings as an appetizer

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| Olive oil | 1-2 tablespoons chopped garlic (2-4 cloves) |
| 1 pound (about 2 cups) whole-milk ricotta cheese | Zest of 1 lemon, finely grated |
| 1 tablespoon chopped fresh oregano or 1 teaspoon dried | ¼ cup thinly sliced sun-dried tomatoes (optional) |
| 1 tablespoon fresh thyme or 1½ teaspoons dried | Salt and freshly ground black pepper |
| 2 teaspoons chopped fresh rosemary or 1 teaspoon dried | 1 egg, lightly beaten |
| | Ground paprika, for garnish |

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Use a drizzle of oil to grease a 2-cup baking dish.

Combine the ricotta with the oregano, thyme, rosemary, garlic, lemon zest, sun-dried tomatoes (if using), and a few grinds of pepper. Mix well and season generously with salt. Add the egg and mix thoroughly.

Transfer the mixture to the prepared baking dish. Sprinkle the top with paprika and a drizzle of oil. Bake for 20 to 30 minutes, or until the top puffs up slightly and the mixture is hot and bubbling. Let cool for 10 minutes before serving.

Serve with toasted bread or crackers.

Note: The ricotta has to be well drained; if it is too liquidy, the finished product will be soupy. Most ricotta comes strained, but if the ricotta you have has any liquid on top, pour it off rather than mixing it in.

Excerpted from "Recipes From the Herbalist's Kitchen" by Brittany Wood Nickerson, used with permission from Storey Publishing.

