

Secrets of deep-frying

IN most Mediterranean countries it is a tradition to serve titbits at the beginning of social occasions. Many of these delicious morsels are deep-fried and may be as simple as fresh or blanched vegetables in season dipped in a yeast batter and deep-fried.

Rarely do I deep-fry but when I do, it's olive oil I choose as the most suitable oil. Tempura and stuffed zucchini flowers are probably the main dishes that I deep-fry.

One would usually choose an inexpensive, light in flavour olive oil but a sound one. If there is any hint of rancidity, it will taint the flavour of the cooked food.

From a health viewpoint, deep-frying is not the most desirable of cooking methods, so it's good to know how best to do it.

Olive oil is an excellent choice for this kind of cooking because it contains no cholesterol and it develops a film, or protection, around the food and much less oil penetrates the food being cooked than when other oils are used. Also, experts say it is safe to reheat the oil up to 10 times.

If you are cooking fish or seafood, though, be sure to strain and keep it separate from other oils. If the oil smells rancid or fishy, discard it.

After cooking with olive oil be sure to filter it, either through a paper coffee filter or a very fine strainer lined with kitchen paper, to remove any food particles. Store it in an airtight container away from the light.

When deep-frying be sure you concentrate on the task at hand and don't get distracted. A fire blanket in an accessible spot is a good idea if deep-frying is your frequent method of cooking — and NEVER put water on an oil fire. Starve it of oxygen with either a fire blanket or lid or salt.

To eliminate any risk, the safest way to cook using a large volume of oil is in a temperature-controlled electric deep-fryer. Water will cause hot oil to froth and bubble, so avoid adding "wet" ingredients — for example, pat fish dry with a kitchen towel and the same goes for chips and vegetables.

Have a slotted scoop or tool handy to retrieve cooked items and plenty of draining paper. Scrunching up paper, rather than leaving it as a flat surface, is a more effective way to absorb any residue oil.

When oil begins to smoke it means it is too



Eating in

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hot and its structure is damaged. Olive oil smokes at 225C, so it should not be allowed to reach that temperature.

Dense items, such as uncooked large pieces of fish or chicken or raw vegetables, require a temperature of about 150C so they will cook through without becoming too brown; smaller items and pre-cooked food in batter or breadcrumbs need a temperature of about 165C and tiny pieces, such as whitebait, would be best cooked at 180C.

If you are using a saucepan, you will need to allow room for at least 4cm of oil as well as additional room for the level to rise when food is added.

Heat the oil slowly, keep the temperature constant throughout the cooking and don't put in too many pieces of food all at once as this will lower the temperature of the oil and the result may be soggy food into which the oil has penetrated. Slice the food gently into the oil to prevent splashes.

Serve deep-fried food immediately if possible. The next best thing is to have the oven preheated to about 95C and place batches of cooked food on a paper-lined baking tray to keep them warm.

Yeast fritters with pizza flavouring (*Pettole alla pizzaiola*)

These morsels I first tasted in Puglia, Italy where I was attending a cookery class with Diane Seed. This is based on her recipe. They are typical of the tempters one gets before a meal. The "downer" is that someone has to be in the kitchen cooking while everyone else is eating and drinking.

Tiny salted capers, well washed and dried, are best. You can buy them loose in most good delis. Use any regular olive oil for these.

The recipe makes about 18 tablespoon-size pieces. I like them a little smaller than Diane suggests.

2½ tsp dry yeast

½ cup lukewarm water (not hot)

3 cups plain flour

½ tsp salt

about 1¼ cups water

300g plum tomatoes, skinned, seeded and finely chopped

1 small onion, finely chopped

¼ cup black olives, pitted and chopped

4 anchovies, rinsed, wiped and chopped

1 tbsp capers, rinsed and patted dry

pinch crushed chilli flakes

olive oil for deep frying

paper for draining

In a small bowl sprinkle the yeast over the warm water and leave for about five minutes until it becomes foamy. Stir to dissolve the yeast.

In a larger bowl, combine the flour and salt. Add the yeast mixture, then stir in enough water to make a loose sticky dough — almost a batter. Stir in the tomatoes, capers, anchovies, olives and chilli flakes, cover with plastic wrap and leave in a warm place for about one hour.

Preheat the oven to 95C (to keep the cooked fritters warm). Use an electric cooker or put 6cm oil in a large heavy-based saucepan. Bring the oil to 180C over medium-high heat. Carefully drop a spoonful of the batter into the hot oil, without crowding, and fry until golden brown, about five minutes.

Using a slotted spoon, transfer to a paper towel-lined baking tray and then keep warm in the oven while the remaining fritters are cooked. Serve immediately.

Balik Koftesi

These fish balls are of Turkish origin and this recipe is based on one by Tess Mallos, an

authority on Middle Eastern foods. They are great as an appetiser and make enough for eight to 10 people. Serve them hot with lemon wedges. The oil will need to be at 180C.

750g white fish fillets

½ cup chopped spring onions

¼ cup chopped parsley

1 tsp chopped fresh dill

1½ cups soft white breadcrumbs

1 egg, lightly whisked with a fork

1 tsp salt

freshly ground black pepper

oil for deep frying

draining paper

½ cup seasoned plain flour for coating the balls

2 lemons cut into wedges, for serving

Remove the skin and bones from the fish fillets, chop roughly and combine with the onion, parsley and dill. Process the mixture in a food processor until it is paste-like. You will need to do this in two batches.

Put the mixture into a bowl and combine with the egg, breadcrumbs, salt and pepper. Mix to a firm paste; add more breadcrumbs if necessary. With cold, wet hands form the mixture into balls the size of a walnut, chill, then roll in the seasoned flour and deep fry in batches for six to eight minutes, turning them to brown evenly.

Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on scrunched kitchen paper. Serve hot with lemon wedges.

Crossing the dots . . .

LAST week there was a mistake in the olive oil column — a tiny dot was missing!

The International Olive Oil Council has recently changed the accepted acidity level for extra virgin olive oil. It has been reduced from 1 per cent to 0.8 per cent (not 8 per cent as stated last week).

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