

from the source

from the heart

For Ross Mazza, running an artichoke farm is more than a business. It's about getting shoulder deep among the leaves to pick his crop – just like he did when his dad ran the farm.

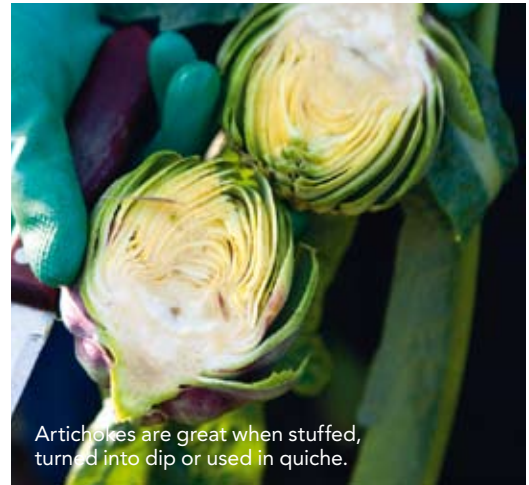


“ I love getting out there picking.
It brings me back to how I grew up. ”

Ross Mazza, farmer



Fully grown artichoke plants reach up to 1.2 metres tall.



Artichokes are great when stuffed, turned into dip or used in quiche.



Ross harvests up to 25,000 artichokes each year.

Globe artichoke farmer Giovanni Mazza thanked his lucky stars when his wife Maria gave birth to their fourth child on New Year's Day in 1959 – a baby brother for the farmer's three daughters. They named him Ross and from the moment the boy could walk, Giovanni started imparting his artichoke knowledge.

When Ross was just 16, Giovanni handed over the reins of the family's 14-hectare Werribee South artichoke farm – a 30-minute drive south-west of Melbourne – and sat back to watch his son flourish. "The bugger didn't like working that much after I took over!" says Ross, now 52. He and his wife Josephine built a home next to his parents' place, where they raised their own children – three daughters, Vanessa, Sarah and Stephanie.


harvest time

Trialling new plant varieties and experimenting with growing methods has helped Ross establish himself as the "go-to" man of Australian artichokes. And while he might be the head of a large artichoke operation, he still likes to get his hands dirty. "I love getting out there picking with the workers," he says. "Plus, it brings me back to how I grew up and used to do it with my dad. If you're out there physically working, you lose weight and get a better appetite."

Every December Ross plants about 110,000 seeds – each plant grows about five artichokes, so he needs plenty on the go to keep up with demand. They're planted close together so by the time harvesting starts in April, the four-person picking

team has to push their way through a dense forest of 1.2-metre-high plants to uncover the artichokes. "If you have enough experience, you know what to look for," explains Ross. "When you see the plants with their leaves standing up tall, you know there are going to be loads of good artichokes."

Artichokes are hardy plants, but Ross says frost can cost him valuable harvesting time. "You can't pick them until the frost has thawed, otherwise they go black," he explains. "Rather than risking anything like that, we don't harvest them until about 10am when they've thawed out." That's three hours later than he'd prefer, but Ross knows it's crucial to deliver quality produce to give people a good artichoke experience. →



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prosciutto-stuffed artichokes

Serves 2

Prep 10 mins Cooking 25 mins

2 globe artichokes
1 lemon, juiced
2 tbs fresh breadcrumbs
2 tbs finely grated parmesan
1 tbs chopped fresh oregano
2 slices prosciutto, chopped
80ml (1/3 cup) white wine
1 tbs olive oil
Lemon zest, to serve
Fresh oregano leaves, to serve
Extra virgin olive oil, to serve

1 Trim artichoke stems to 3cm. Cut 2cm from top of the leaves. Peel 2 layers of outer leaves or until pale leaves are exposed. Discard outer leaves. Scoop out and discard choke from the centre. Place in a bowl of water and add lemon juice.

2 Preheat oven to 180°C. Combine breadcrumbs, parmesan, oregano and prosciutto in a bowl. Separate artichoke leaves and fill with crumb mixture. Transfer to a baking dish. Pour over wine and olive oil. Cover with foil. Bake for 20-25 minutes or until tender. Top with lemon zest and oregano. Drizzle with extra virgin olive oil.

Per serve 10g protein • 17g fat (4g saturated fat)
8g carb • 1.5g dietary fibre • 1040kJ (250 Cals)



For tips on how to prepare artichokes, go to www.australiangoodtaste.com.au/goodknow

“We open the leaves and fill them with a mix of breadcrumbs, egg, garlic and parsley.”

Josephine Mazza, Ross's wife

“The biggest test is when you slice through the centre – the inside should be nice and crisp,” he says.

During peak season Ross and his team pick up to 25,000 artichokes. Artichokes that are sold fresh need to be as big as a “good-sized orange”; smaller ones can be preserved as artichoke hearts, which are delicious in antipasto or tossed through pasta. Once the crop is harvested, Ross starts preparing for the next season. “While we’re picking, the strategy for the next year has already begun,” says Ross.

produce to plate

With their tough outer leaves and stems, artichokes can be fiddly to prepare but Ross swears you’ll never taste anything as good as his wife Josephine’s stuffed artichokes.

“We open the leaves and fill them with a mix of breadcrumbs, egg, garlic and parsley,” says Josephine. And once it’s cooked? The Mazzas devour the stuffing straight off the leaves, then enjoy the artichoke.

Ross and Josephine recently hosted an artichoke day, where friends came

to watch AFL and enjoy Josephine’s stuffed artichokes, along with artichoke dip and quiche. “Most of our guests had never tasted an artichoke – they were blown away,” says Josephine.

While Ross is proud of his wife’s stuffed artichokes, it’s nothing like the pride she has for him growing them. “He’s done it for so many years. Other people wouldn’t be able to grow them – they’d do a season then stop,” says Josephine. “He’s well known across Australia now for his artichokes.”



For Josephine’s artichoke recipe, go to www.australiangoodtaste.com.au/goodknow