



Joe inspired this sandwich innovation. He developed a gluten allergy which resulted in a cut-back in panini because we weren't happy with the quality of gluten free bread. Who needs bread when you have crispy eggplant? Eggplant to the rescue! Twice! I'm including a bonus recipe for eggplant croutons.

Joe's Eggplant Reuben

In the time since my husband learned that he has a gluten allergy, the biggest challenge in managing his meals has been to find the perfect sandwich bread. This led me to experiment recently with one of my favorite vegetables – eggplant. I had used cubed eggplant, breaded-and-fried (or baked) in gluten free panko, as a substitute for croutons. It occurred to me that slices of eggplant could be prepared in the same way and could act as the crusty crunchy bread of a toasted sandwich. And there appeared Joe's Eggplant Reuben.

Usually I buy small eggplants because they are less bitter. For this recipe, especially on sandwich night, you want to have an eggplant with good girth, because the sliced round of eggplant is what will hold your sandwich fixings. For salad night, any eggplant will work, because you're going to cut crouton-sized cubes. Often, I buy a big eggplant and use the center-most pieces for sandwiches one night, and use the smaller ends for croutons the next day.

Please Note! I am a home cook, and make no claims to be more. When I make this sandwich (or the croutons) for my family, I am very careful to check every ingredient for gluten. It is your responsibility to check all of your ingredients for gluten if you maintain a gluten free diet.

These two recipes, the Reuben sandwich and the croutons, may be made with "regular" i.e. gluten-containing ingredients, but this is how I make them at my house, so that all may enjoy.

Ingredients

1 large eggplant

¼ cup gluten-free all purpose flour

2 eggs, whisked until smooth

1 and ½ cups gluten-free panko breadcrumbs (will make 2 - 3 sandwiches depending on size of eggplant)

Salt and pepper

A dash of your favorite hot sauce (check to make sure it's gluten free)

Canola oil (about a cup)

Sandwich ingredients of your choice - the Reuben includes corned beef, swiss cheese, sauerkraut & Thousand Island dressing

Salad ingredients of your choice

For sandwiches, cut the eggplant in half across its biggest place, and then cut rounds that are the thickness of normal sandwich bread. You'll need two rounds per sandwich, and they should be the same size. Next, set up a standard dredging station – flour, egg, breadcrumbs, and in this case, use gluten free flour and GF panko. Season each station with salt and pepper, and I like to add a shake of hot sauce to the beaten eggs.

Bread the eggplant. Put it into the GF flour first, get a light coating, and brush off any excess. Dip into the egg mixture (all sides) and let any excess egg drip off. Then press into the gluten free panko and get a good coating all around. Lay the eggplant slices on wax paper on a sheet tray. After you have breaded all of your sandwich rounds, put the eggplant into the fridge (on the tray) for at least an hour. This helps the panko stick to the eggplant during the frying process.

When you are ready to eat, heat an inch of canola oil in a skillet. Use medium high heat to begin. Test the oil with a random piece of panko. When it starts to bubble, you know the oil is hot enough. Drop the temperature to medium, and carefully place the eggplant into the pan. Let it cook for two minutes. You can peek underneath to see whether the crust is forming and the panko is getting golden brown. I have noticed that gluten free panko darkens more quickly than regular panko, which is why I fry on medium heat. It allows a little extra time for the eggplant to cook before the breading becomes too dark.

When the bottom is golden brown, flip and fry the other side (takes the same amount of time). Next, remove the eggplant and let it sit on a paper towel so that excess oil is absorbed. You can keep slices warm in a 200 F oven if you are preparing multiple sandwiches.

Last and best of all, build your sandwich however you wish. For the Eggplant Reuben, we use GF Thousand Island dressing, a thick stack of thinly sliced corned beef, sauerkraut and Swiss cheese. I warm the meat, topped with cheese, in the microwave so that the Swiss melts. I also warm the sauerkraut separately. You will have all of your favorite Reuben flavors, the same satisfying crunch that you get from a grilled sandwich, plus the eggplant! An extra vegetable!

On salad nights, use the exact same dredging process. The only change in the recipe is to cut your eggplant into crouton-sized cubes. They can be as big or small as you like. When you fry the croutons, move them around in the oil so that all sides become golden brown and crispy.

This is what I call "eggplant to the rescue." Try it and see if this often overlooked vegetable doesn't get newly found respect.

Based on "Eggplant to the Rescue," first published by Judy on April 28, 2015