I make pasta alla Norma all the time; you will find more than one recipe from me on the classic tomato and eggplant sauce. But this is my favorite version, created on the spur of the moment and at the suggestion from a friend.

INGREDIENTS

- 20 to 30 cherry tomatoes, depending on size, cut in half
- Olive oil
- Salt
- Thyme sprigs, if you have them
- 2 cloves garlic, lightly crushed and peeled
- 12 small eggplants, about a pound total, trimmed and cut in half the long way
- 300 grams of pasta, about 2/3 pound
- 2 to 3 ounces ricotta salata, grated or diced small
- 20 basil leaves, torn

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Heat the oven to 275 degrees. Put the tomatoes in one layer in an ovenproof pan and drizzle them liberally with oil, then salt and sprinkle with thyme sprigs, if using. Roast for about an hour, then stir and roast for another half-hour or so. When tomatoes are shriveled, add garlic, turn down heat to 225 degrees and roast for at least another hour. They should not cook completely dry; if they threaten to overcook, turn the heat down or pull them out. Fish out the garlic if you like.
2. Sizzle the eggplant in about 1/4 inch of oil over medium heat. The oil should bubble steadily. Turn eggplant as needed until nicely browned. Drain on paper towels, and when cool enough to handle, cut roughly into strips.

3. Meanwhile, bring a large pot of water to boil for the pasta. Add the eggplant to the tomatoes and stir. If the sauce is too thick, thin it with a bit of the pasta water. Cook the pasta and warm a serving bowl. At the bottom of the bowl put half the sauce and half the ricotta salata. Add the pasta and the remaining sauce, cheese and basil and toss.