

# ***Florida Food Fare***

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## **Chayote**

**Description:** The Chayote (pronounced chy-O-tay) has been grown to a limited extent in Florida for many years. While native to Guatemala, it is popular throughout tropical regions, where it is known by several names including vegetable pear, mirliton, and mango squash. A popular vegetable in the Caribbean Islands, it is usually called “cho-cho” there. Roughly pear-shaped and sized with uneven furrows running its length, the chayote is usually light green in color, though some varieties are darker green, with either smooth or prickly skin. The pale flesh is crisp and fine-textured with a taste and consistency that blend cucumber, zucchini and kohlrabi. This climbing vine with leaves that resemble those of the cucumber contains a single flat edible seed. The fruit generally weighs from 1/2 to 1 pound, with 3/4 pound the average size.

**Availability:** In some regions the vine grows all summer but does not usually bear fruit until September or October. It continues to bear until killed by frost. In other warmer regions, another crop appears in late spring and early summer. Because chayotes may be shipped from various sources, you can find them almost year round, if not in supermarkets, in Oriental, Spanish or Indian Markets.

**Nutritional Value:** Chayote is very low in calories, fat and sodium, has no cholesterol and is a good source of fiber, vitamin C and potassium. One cup of raw fruit, approximately 132 g, contains: 25 calories, a trace of fat, 2.2 g dietary fiber. It also yields 22.4 mg calcium, 165 mg potassium, 23 mg phosphorus, 10 mg vitamin C, 73.9 IU vitamin A and 122 mcg folate.

**Selection and Care:** Look for very firm, unblemished chayotes, the smaller fruit usually being more tender. Lightly wrapped and refrigerated, they store for

several weeks if not bruised or sprouted. They may also be frozen for longer storage.

**To freeze:** Select those with tender skins. Wash, remove stem and blossom end. Do not pare. Dice removing seed. Blanch 2 minutes. Cool, drain and package, leaving 1/2-inch head space. Seal and freeze.

**Preparation and Use:** Chayote can be used the same way that you would all summer squashes and more. Because it has a firmer texture, mature fruit needs more cooking time, but holds up better than the others when stuffed or used in salads. The skin can be removed before or after cooking, depending upon the dish. The single large seed does not have to be removed, but can be eaten with the pulp in whatever way it is prepared. When scarcely fully grown, they may be cooked and served without peeling, as the skin is very tender. Raw young chayote slices are crisp and delicious marinated in French dressing or can be substituted for water chestnuts in Oriental cooking. Chayote lends itself well to soups, casseroles or salads and can be steamed, baked, stir-fried, or sautéed in a variety of ways.

### **Recipes:**

#### **Chayote and Black-Eyed Pea Relish**

1 small chayote squash	2 scallions (white part only) thinly sliced
1 cup black eyed peas, cooked	1/4 cup fresh corn kernels, roasted
1 small clove garlic, minced	2 teaspoons lime juice
1 serrano chile, seeded and minced	2 teaspoons white wine
2 teaspoons fresh cilantro, chopped	2 tablespoons low fat vinaigrette dressing
1/4 cup mango or papaya, diced	Salt to taste

Peel the chayote, cut in half, and remove seed. Cut into 1/4-inch cubes and place in mixing bowl. Combine remaining ingredients. Let sit for at least 1 hour, covered in the refrigerator. Makes about 2 cups of relish. Goes well with chicken or fish.

#### **Chayotes Stuffed with Cheese**

3 large chayotes	2 teaspoons garlic, minced
1 1/2 cups fresh bread crumbs	1/4 cup scallions, finely chopped
2 1/2 cups low fat muenster cheese, finely grated	1/4 teaspoon hot pepper flakes
1 egg, lightly beaten	Salt and pepper to taste
	2 tablespoons butter

Split the chayotes lengthwise in half. Put them in a kettle of cold water with salt to taste. Bring to a boil and simmer about 10 minutes. Do not overcook. Drain and run briefly under cold water. Drain again. Using spoon, scoop out flesh and seeds of each half, leaving a shell of about 1/8 inch thick or slightly thicker. Set the shells aside. Chop flesh and seeds fine. There should be about 1 cup. Preheat oven to 425 degrees F. In mixing bowl, combine chopped pulp with one cup bread crumbs, two cups cheese, egg, garlic, scallions, pepper flakes, salt and pepper. Use this mixture to fill chayote halves. Combine remaining 1/2 cup cheese with remaining 1/2 cup bread crumbs. Sprinkle tops with mixture, patting to help it adhere. Dot with butter. Arrange stuffed halves in a lightly buttered baking dish and bake for 20 minutes. Serves 6.

### **Chayote Salad**

1 yellow or zucchini squash	1 large red bell pepper chopped
1 small chayote	Basil leaves, chopped
1 large tomato, diced	Vinaigrette dressing
1/3 cup chopped scallions	

Shred squash with cheese grater. Toss with tomatoes, scallions, red peppers and basil. Season with vinaigrette.

### **Butter-Steamed Chayote**

1 medium sized chayote	Salt and pepper to taste
2 tablespoons butter or margarine	1/4 teaspoon oregano or thyme leaves
2/3 cup water	2 tablespoons chopped parsley

Rinse chayote, peel it, then slice crosswise through seed to make 1/8-inch thick slices. Cut slices in half. Melt butter or margarine in a wide frying pan (one with a tight fitting lid) over medium heat. Add sliced chayote, water, salt and pepper. Add oregano or thyme leaves. Stir mixture, cover tightly and cook to 8 to 10 minutes or until chayote is tender and liquid is absorbed. Stir in chopped parsley and turn into a serving dish. Makes 3 or 4 servings

### **Chayote Soup**

2 scallions, minced	1 ½ pounds chayotes (2 to 3), peeled, quartered lengthwise, and pitted if necessary, then cut into ½-inch pieces (4 cups)
1 small garlic clove, minced	½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon minced small fresh hot green chile such as Serrano or Thai	2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh cilantro
½ tablespoon butter	1 ¾ cups water

Cook scallions, garlic, and chile in butter in a 3-quart heavy saucepan over moderately low heat, stirring, until softened, about 3 minutes. Add chayotes, salt, and 1 tablespoon cilantro and cook, stirring, 2 minutes. Add water and simmer, covered, until chayotes are very tender, 15 to 20 minutes. Stir in remaining tablespoon cilantro and puree soup in blender until smooth (use caution when blending hot liquids). Season with salt. Makes 4 servings.

### **Cactus, Chayote, and Green-Apple Salad**

1 pound nopales (prickly pear cactus paddles, about 5)

2 chayotes (1 pound total), peeled, halved lengthwise and seeds discarded, cut into ¼ inch thick sticks (3 to 4 inches long).

1 Granny Smith apple, left unpeeled, halved, cored and thinly sliced lengthwise

2 scallions, trimmed and thinly

4 navel oranges

3 tablespoons fresh lime juice

¼ teaspoon salt

1/8 teaspoon black pepper

1/3 cup raw (green) hulled pumpkin seeds, toasted

5 tablespoons olive oil

Rounded 1/8 teaspoon cayenne

Put 1 cactus paddle, flat side down, on a work surface. Scrape horizontally from narrow base of paddle toward wider end with a vegetable peeler or knife to cut off thorns and brown spots. Dethorn paddle on other side in same manner, then trim all around edge. Repeat with remaining paddles, then cut paddles crosswise into ¼-inch-thick slices.

Blanch cactus in a 6- to 8-quart pot of boiling salted water until just softened, about 1 minute. Immediately transfer with a slotted spoon to a bowl of ice and cold water to stop cooking. Drain in a colander and rinse under cold water. Pat dry, then transfer to a large bowl along with chayotes, apple, and scallions.

Cut peel and all white pith from 3 oranges with a sharp knife. Working over bowl containing cactus mixture, cut segments free from membranes, letting segments fall into bowl. Squeeze juice from membranes and remaining orange into bowl, then add lime juice, salt, and pepper and toss. Let stand until chayotes are wilted, about 30 minutes.

While salad stands, toast pumpkin seeds in 2 tablespoons oil in a 10-inch heavy skillet over moderately low heat, stirring frequently, until puffed and pale golden, 3 to 4 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in cayenne. Cool seeds I oil in skillet.

Drain salad in a colander set over a bowl, than transfer juice to a 1-quart saucepan and boil until syrupy and reduced to about 1/3 cup, 4 to 5 minutes. Remove from heat and whisk in remaining 3 tablespoons oil. Return salad to bowl and toss with dressing, pumpkin seed, and salt to test.

Makes 6 -8 first course servings