

Florida Food Fare

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Cantaloupe

Description: Actually, the correct term for cantaloupe in the United States is muskmelon. "Musk" comes from the Persian, meaning perfume, probably due to the sweet fruity fragrance of the ripe muskmelon, and "melon" from the Latin "melopepo" meaning "apple shaped melon". When these melons were brought to Italy, they were called "cantaluppi" which is the name of a castle in Italy. Columbus brought muskmelon seeds to the New World on his second voyage and by 1870 commercial cantaloupe production had begun in several Eastern Seaboard states. When perfectly ripe, these melons have a raised netting on a smooth grayish-beige skin. The pale orange flesh is extremely juicy and sweet. The center of the melon contains seeds that are removed just before serving.

Availability: Cantaloupes were originally cultivated on the Eastern Seaboard but the climate was not suited to this type of melon, which had originally thrived in the hot dry climate of Persia, and today most are grown in California, Arizona and Texas. Cantaloupe is not currently widely grown in Florida, with presently only about 1300 acres produced. It is available almost year round in the supermarket. Florida cantaloupe is available from April through June and from December through February. Peak season for California varieties is June through October.

Nutritional Value: Cantaloupe is low in calories, contains no fat or cholesterol and is an excellent source of Vitamins A and C, as well as other valuable minerals. One serving, 1/8 of a wedge from a large melon, yields approximately 35 calories, 8.5 g carbohydrates, 315 mg potassium, 43 mg vitamin C, 17 mcg folate, 11 mg calcium, and 3288 IU vitamin A. It contains almost a gram of natural fiber and 91.5 g. water.

Selection and Care: Selection of melons for quality and flavor is difficult, even for the most experienced shopper. Considering several factors when judging a melon will increase the likelihood of success. There are three major signs of full maturity. First the stem should be gone, leaving a smooth well rounded, shallow base. If all or part of the stem base remains, or if the stem scar is jagged or torn, the melon is probably not fully mature. Second, the netting or veining should be thick, coarse, corky and well raised. Third, the skin color between the netting should have changed from green to yellowish-buff, yellowish-gray or pale yellow. A cantaloupe might be mature but not ripe. A ripe cantaloupe will have a yellowish cast to the rind, have a delicate fruity aroma and yield slightly to light thumb pressure on the blossom end of the melon. Avoid melons with soft spots or an overly strong odor. Mold growth on the cantaloupe (particularly in the stem scar) is a sign of decay. Small bruises normally will not hurt the fruit but large bruised areas should be avoided. Most cantaloupes are firm when displayed in retail stores, but most have not yet reached their best eating stage. You can hold them for 2-4 days at room temperature to allow completion of ripening. Store ripe melons in refrigerator. Don't remove the seeds until the melon is ready to be used since the seeds keep the flesh from drying out.

Use and Preparation: Cantaloupe can be eaten right out of the rind, with the seeds removed, or it can be scooped out in little balls for a fancier dish. It makes a delicious addition to any breakfast, a low-fat, high-energy snack, a refreshing cold soup or an elegant dessert. Once the melon is cut, if the whole fruit is not being used, it should be tightly covered and refrigerated, as cantaloupes tend to absorb other food odors and also easily dry out.

Recipes:

Cantaloupe Sorbet

2/3 cup sugar 3 cups 1- inch pieces peeled, seeded
1/2 cup water cantaloupe (about 1/2 cantaloupe)

Combine sugar and water in medium saucepan. Stir over medium heat until sugar dissolves. Bring to boil. Transfer to 11x7x2 inch glass dish and chill until cold, about 2 hours. Puree cantaloupe in blender until smooth. Add to sugar syrup in dish and stir until well blended. Freeze until almost firm, stirring occasionally, at least 3 hours or overnight. Transfer cantaloupe mixture to large bowl. Using electric mixer beat until fluffy. Return to freezer and freeze until firm (do not stir), at least 3 hours or overnight. Sorbet can be made 3 days ahead. Cover and keep frozen.

Melon Grape Salad

3 cups honeydew balls 1 tablespoon water

3 cups cantaloupe balls	1 1/2 tablespoons vegetable oil
2 cups seedless red grapes	1/8 teaspoon dry mustard
2 tablespoons honey	1 teaspoon poppy seeds
1 tablespoon cider vinegar	

Combine first 3 ingredients in a bowl; cover and chill. Combine honey and next 5 ingredients, stirring with a wire whisk. To serve, pour dressing over fruit; toss gently. Makes 8 servings.

Fruit Kabobs with Vanilla Mint Yogurt Sauce

1 cup plain fat free yogurt	3 kiwi fruits, peeled and sliced
2 teaspoons sugar	1 fresh pineapple, peeled, cored, cubed
1/8 teaspoon vanilla	1 honeydew melon cubed
2 tablespoons thinly sliced fresh mint leaves	1 cantaloupe cubed
2 pints strawberries, washed and hulled	24 6-inch wooden skewers

In a bowl, whisk together the yogurt, sugar, vanilla and mint. (The sauce may be made 1 day in advance and kept covered and chilled). Thread the fruits, alternating strawberries, kiwis, pineapple and melon onto the skewers. Serve the fruit kabobs with the sauce. Makes about 24 kabobs

Cantaloupe Soup

1 large ripe cantaloupe	2 tablespoons lime juice
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon	Fresh mint sprigs
2 1/4 cups orange juice	

Remove seeds from melon and cube the pulp. Place pulp and cinnamon in a blender and puree. Combine orange and lime juices, then stir in puree. Chill. Serve in chilled bowls; garnish with mint sprigs. Serves 6.