

Florida Food Fare

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Plantain

Description: Native to India, plantains are grown most widely in tropical climates. At first sight, many people confuse them with bananas. Although they look a lot like green bananas and are a close relative, plantains are quite different. They are starchy rather than sweet and are used as a vegetable in many cuisines, especially those of Latin America and Africa. Plantains are sometimes referred to as the pasta and potatoes of the Caribbean. Sold in the fresh produce section of the supermarket, they usually resemble green bananas but ripe plantains may be black in color. They are longer and have thicker skins than bananas. They also have natural brown spots and rough areas. This vegetable-banana can be eaten and tastes different at every stage of development. The interior color of the fruit will remain creamy, yellowish or lightly pink. When the peel is green to yellow, the flavor of the flesh is bland and its texture is starchy. As the peel changes to brown or black, it has a sweeter flavor and more of a banana aroma, but still keeps a firm shape when cooked.

Availability: Plantains grow best in areas with constant warm temperatures and protection from strong winds. They have been grown in scattered locations throughout Florida since the 16th century. Because of the occasional freezes, Florida is considered a marginal area for plantain production. They are available year round in the supermarket.

Nutritional Value: Plantain is relatively high in calories at 125 per cup. It is an excellent source of potassium, a good source of vitamin C, contains no cholesterol and is low in sodium. One cup cooked plantain yields a trace of fat, 2.3 g dietary fiber, 465 mg potassium, 26 mcg folate, 10.9 mg vitamin C, 909 IU vitamin A, 32 mg magnesium, and 31.1 g carbohydrates.

Selection and Care: What state of ripeness you choose, depends upon how you plan to cook them. Kept at room temperature they will slowly ripen and store for a considerable time. Fully ripe black plantains should be firm, like bananas but not hard. Do not use if they are squishy, moldy, hard or cracked. Do not refrigerate plantains unless they are at the stage you wish to use them, or they will stop ripening. Even when ripe, they will hold for awhile at room temperature.

Use and preparation: Green plantains, which are very hard and starchy, have little banana flavor and no sweetness. They are generally cooked in the same ways as potatoes. They may be boiled or fried or added to soups and stews. Yellow-ripe plantains are more tender but can be used in these same ways, and will have a creamier texture. They can also be mashed, grilled or baked. Black-ripe plantains are also delicious prepared in any of these methods but have a sweeter flavor and a banana aroma. If you wish to peel the plantain before cooking, the way you go about it depends on its stage of ripeness. Black-ripe fruit can usually be peeled as you would a banana. Other fruit is usually washed, the ends trimmed and the fruit cut across in 2 to 4 sections. The very thick, stiff peel is then cut lengthwise along its four ridges. Remove each strip of skin, starting at a corner and pulling slightly crosswise, rather than down. Remove woody fibers, if necessary with a paring knife.

Recipes:

Plantain Baked in its Skin

For the simplest, most basic dish, plantain needs nothing more than to be baked in its skin like a potato. Choose brown to black-ripe plantain for full flavor and softness. Rinse and dry as many plantains as needed, usually figuring on one medium sized fruit per person. Trim off tips. Cut a lengthwise slit in each fruit. Set slit-side up in a foil-lined pan and bake in 375 degree F. oven until tender, about 40 minutes. When it is baked, serve whole or separate in lengthwise strips along the natural seed divisions or slice crosswise in rounds or diagonals. Serve with your favorite topping; butter, spices, lime juice, pan drippings or gravy, pineapple and brown sugar or nuts.

Spicy Fried Plantains

4 large plantains, peeled	1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
2 tablespoons fresh ginger root, grated	1/2 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon ground cloves	2 tablespoons warm water

1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1/4 teaspoon grated nutmeg

Vegetable oil for frying

Cut plantains into diagonal slices about 1/2 inch thick. In a bowl, combine ginger, cloves, cayenne, nutmeg, cinnamon, and salt. Stir in water to form a paste. Add plantain slices and toss to coat well. Let stand 30 minutes.

Preheat oven to 200 degrees F. Pour enough oil into large skillet to reach 1/2 inch up the sides. Heat oil over medium high heat until hot but not smoking. In batches, fry plantain slices, turning once, until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer fried plantains to a paper towel lined baking sheet and keep warm in the oven while frying remaining plantains. Serve warm.

Plantain Soup

3 semi-ripe plantains(yellow with
some spots)
1 large carrot
1 tablespoon oil
1/4 cup chopped onion

6 cups chicken broth
1 teaspoon ground cumin
Black pepper
Salt

Cut ends from plantains and peel fruit. Cut fruit into 1/2 inch thick slices. Grate carrot and saute in oil, with onion until tender. In heavy saucepan bring broth to boil with plantains and cumin, add onions and carrot. Simmer, covered until plantains are very tender, 20 to 25 minutes. In blender, puree mixture in batches until smooth. Season with salt and pepper. Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Green Plantain Chips

Peel green plantains. Cut diagonally into very thin slices. Let stand in ice water for 1/2 hour. Drain, pat dry. Fry in deep hot oil at 370 degrees F. until lightly browned and crisp. Drain on paper towels, sprinkle with salt. Serve as a garnish with fruit salad or as an appetizer.