

“CHICKEN OF THE TREES”-IGUANA RECIPE IDEAS

Keep Food Safety in Mind

There is a lot of discussion about iguanas in the South Florida landscape. This exotic species is not native to FL but has been in the state for a while. These creatures are a unique part of our Broward environment. Like it or not, we are forced to share our living space with them. Some say they look like alligators or mini-dinosaurs and others say they look good for dinner!

I have been receiving a few calls in the office on how to prepare and cook iguana. It has been called the “*chicken-of-the-mountain*” or “*chicken of the trees*”. It is an economical source of protein. Think about food safety when preparing any type of reptile meat.

According to Dr. Bill Kern, associate professor, Entomology and Nematology Department, Ft. Lauderdale Research and Education Center, UF/IFAS FLREC, iguana meat is mild flavored and usually not tough. Most of the meat is on the legs, along the spine and on the tail. Rib meat is usually not worth the effort. De-boned iguana meat is very well suited to curries, soups, stews, gumbo, and etouffée. The immature eggs from females can be saved and added to soup and stews. Small animals are usually cut into pieces and boiled, then cooled enough to pick off the meat. The meat is then returned to the pot for soups and stews. Large animals (over 4 ft.) can be de-boned and the dorsal meat filleted. The raw de-boned meat then must be thoroughly cooked in any way you would prepare diced or sliced raw chicken.

DO NOT TRY TO MAKE IGUANA CERVICHE, because there is no evidence that the acid kills all possible parasites or pathogens.



Food Safety Tips

When you think you may have a food borne illness seek medical attention. Handle food properly. Clean all food preparation surfaces thoroughly. Use a food thermometer to make sure food is cooked to the recommended temperature. (Food color does not indicate whether the food is completely cooked.) Store food at the proper temperature. Discard expired food items. Clean, sanitize and air dry, as able, reusable grocery bags that may have leaked meat drippings from transporting food items from the grocery store to home. Engage in proper and regular handwashing. Handwashing is the best way to stop the spread of infection.

This is a great rule of thumb: *When in doubt, throw it out!*

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If interested in serving up this type of wildlife, here are a few preparation tips, recipe ideas and things to consider- To prepare an iguana for cooking, several steps are recommended.

It is recommended reptile meat be purchased from a reputable processor. Iguanas can be cleaned and skinned and cut up into pieces, like a chicken, using the same best food safety practices, since iguanas do carry salmonella. Remove the head, organs, and entrails. If you don't want to skin it, it can be parboiled in salted water for 20 to 30 minutes before roasting or stewing.

“Remember food safety principles do apply during all types of food preparation: clean, separate, cook, and chill.”

According to Dr. Amarat Simmone, Professor and Extension Specialist (Food Safety and Quality) UF/IFAS Extension Family Youth and Community Sciences, there has been a lot of information going around the internet about cooking reptile meat(s). Consumers should always buy meat from a reputable processor and there should be no problem educating and reminding people to follow proper food handling, cooking and preparation practices, using the current USDA materials and recommendations. It appears from the research, if reptile meat is slaughtered in the right manner, prior to marketing, there should be minimal risk.

“Always put food safety practices and ensuring the health and safety of your family first.”

Dr. Chad Carr, Extension Meat Specialist & Associate Professor, Department of Animal Sciences, University of Florida states, “To the knowledge of the authors, no known research has evaluated the thermal death time of *salmonella* on iguana meat. However, the USDA-FSIS’s suggestion for cooking whole chickens for 165°F should be effective at killing *salmonella* pathogens”.

Iguana Hominy Stew

Ingredients:

- 2 medium iguanas
- *5 cups of [hominy](#)
- 10 cloves of garlic
- 1 onion, sliced
- 1 slice of cabbage, diced
- 1 bay leaf
- Oregano, to taste
- Cilantro, to taste
- Salt and pepper, to taste



* Hominy is a food produced from dried maize (*corn* in the U.S.) kernels that have been treated with an alkali.

Directions:

1. Skin, wash and cut the iguana in pieces.
2. Wash, salt and **blanch in boiling water for 15 to 20 minutes in a large pot.
3. Simmer the hominy/corn, garlic, onion, a bay leaf, and salt together in a large pot.
4. After 10 minutes, add the iguana meat. Cook for another 15 to 20 minutes.
5. Serve with sliced cabbage, onion slices, cilantro, oregano, and pepper to taste.

** Blanching is a cooking process wherein a food is scalded in boiling water, removed after a brief, timed interval, and finally plunged into iced water or placed under cold running water to halt the cooking process. Other benefits of blanching include removing pesticide residues and decreasing microbial load.

Reference: Adapted from G. Campos recipe

Iguana Tacos/Burritos

For people who aren't accustomed to cooking iguana, it is suggested that an easier route may be to make iguana tacos or burritos.

Ingredients:

Iguana meat (cooked and cut into small pieces)

Onion

Chives

Avocado

Lime

Chili-lime seasoning

Curry or taco seasoning

Sour cream

Salsa

Flour tortillas



Directions:

1. Wash the iguana meat thoroughly after removing the skin, organs and entrails, so that just the meat and cartilage remain.
2. Put the iguana meat in boiling water. Add onions to the water for flavor. Let cook for at least an hour or longer, until tender.
3. Remove the tender meat from the cartilage. Cut into small pieces, separating the white and dark meats, then season with whichever type of seasoning you enjoy in tacos/burritos.
4. Season the white meat with chili-lime seasoning, curry or any other type of taco-type spice.
5. Chop onions and chives, avocado, limes and other desired toppings.
6. Mix the onions and chives in with the meat. Then, sauté the mixture on medium-high heat until it is soft.
7. Place the meat in the center of a flour tortilla with avocado, sour cream, salsa and other toppings.
8. Wrap and enjoy.

Reference: *Sun Sentinel*; Adapted from Brittany Peters recipe—July 2018

For more information:

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/an316>

<http://www.fightbac.org/food-safety-basics/the-core-four-practices/>

http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_series_food_safety

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/FY/FY19000.pdf>

http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_home_food_safety

<https://www.usda.gov/topics/health-and-safety>

<https://academic.oup.com/af/issue/4/4>

<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/home>

International Journal of Food Microbiology 134 (2009) 163–175

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) Journal (2007) 578, 1-55

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