

Pineapple

Pineapple is a fruit we sometimes take for granted. It's always available in cans at the grocery. But perhaps it's time to give it a second look. You might even give fresh pineapple a try. Don't let its sharp long, sword-like leaves or prickly outer shell intimidate you. It isn't as hard to prepare as you might imagine, and the rewards are definitely worth it. Canned or fresh, pineapple is a tasty, healthy snack.

The pineapple originated in South America. Christopher Columbus may have introduced it to Spain. It was called "pina" because of its similarity to the pine cone. In the 17th century, pineapple became highly prized in Europe. It was grown in hothouses so the wealthy could use it to decorate their banquet tables. The pineapple symbolizes hospitality, wealth, and welcome. It was often seen in wood flourishes and stonework of early American homes, and is still found in households today.

Most U.S. pineapple is grown in Hawaii, but pineapple is produced in all the tropical and warm subtropical areas of the world. The fruit is harvested almost continuously throughout the year. It takes about 18 to 22 months to produce ripe fruit after a pineapple has been planted. The fruit itself consists of many small seedless sections fused together on a central core. The surface of the shell is textured, covered with "eyes," and varies in color from green to yellow. The shell's color is not always a reliable indicator of maturity. In fact, pineapples are harvested ripe to ensure peak sweetness, so you should use it as soon as possible.

When buying a fresh pineapple, look for one that is heavy for its size with a crown of deep green spikes that are compact and crisp. Avoid fruit that is discolored or has soft spots. A whole pineapple may be stored for 3-5 days in the refrigerator before cutting it. Once cut, the refrigerated pineapple should be used within a week. One 1/2-cup serving of pineapple, fresh or canned, contains 70 calories and 2 grams dietary fiber, as well as potassium and Vitamin C.

Pineapple is widely available year-round. On the grocery shelves you can find many convenient canned varieties-- sliced, crushed, tidbits, and chunks. Look for canned selections that are packed in 100% pineapple juice rather than light syrup to avoid added sugar. If you drain the canned pineapple, save the juice and use it for a morning starter or even mix it with your usual juice selection.

Pineapple adds color, flavor, and texture to any meal. It is a refreshing snack or dessert served by itself or combined with other fruits. Fresh pineapple is often used in meat marinade to tenderize and add flavor to meats. Pineapple can be added to salads, seafood, poultry, beef, or pork dishes to enliven the main course.

Here are a few ideas for using pineapple:

- Alternate pineapple chunks with seafood and vegetables on skewers, and broil or grill for an appetizer.
- Mix crushed pineapple with cream cheese for a refreshing spread.
- Add pineapple chunks to pizza.
- Make a sunshine salad by adding a scoop of cottage cheese into the center of a pineapple ring. Top with a maraschino cherry.
- The next time you are grilling, try grilling pineapple rings. It will only take a few minutes, so don't put the pineapple on the grill until the meat is almost done.
- Add pineapple chunks to chicken or tuna salad.
- Make a pineapple ring into a fun "wheel" by putting a grape in the center hole of the pineapple slice.
- Add a slice of pineapple to a grilled cheese sandwich.
- Add pineapple chunks to a flour tortilla spread with salsa; top with cheese.
- Make skewers with pineapple, grapes, strawberries and any other fruit of your choice.
- Cut fresh pineapple into chunks or strips. Freeze for a cool, refreshing snack.

Here's how to cut a fresh pineapple. First, rinse the pineapple with cold water. Slice off the crown and stand the pineapple on end to remove the outer shell by peeling it length-wise with a sharp knife. Then cut the fruit length-wise, first in half and then in quarters. Finally, cut away the core. If the "eyes" remain, you can trim them out with a paring knife or other small utensil. I have a small strawberry huller that looks like a melon baller with tiny spikes. It removes the eyes easily with little loss of fruit.

If you want a decorative serving container, slice a fresh pineapple in half length-wise and carefully remove the fruit.

Keep in mind that fresh pineapple contains bromelain, an enzyme that breaks down protein. Because of this, gelatin made with fresh pineapple won't set. Canned pineapple may be used, however as the process is deactivated by heat. Cottage cheese, sour cream, and other dairy products should be mixed with fresh pineapple just before serving.

If you have young children, here is an activity to try. On your next trip to the grocery store, see how many different kinds of pineapple you can find, such as fresh, canned, frozen, and dried. Discuss with your child what is the same and different about each one. Purchase two or three different forms of pineapple. Taste and compare them. Which one is the family favorite?

Tropical Chicken Salad

2 cups diced cooked chicken breasts	2 Tablespoons low fat sour cream
1 cup mandarin oranges, drained	1/4 cup sliced water chestnuts
1/2 cup chopped celery	1 teaspoon coconut extract
1/4 cup low fat mayonnaise	2 cups diced fresh or canned pineapple
1/2 cup chopped mango	

In a mixing bowl, combine the above ingredients. Mix well and refrigerate. Serve on salad greens or stuffed into a whole wheat pita. Yield: 6 servings

Baked Acorn Squash with Pineapple

1 large acorn squash (approximately 32 oz)	1 teaspoon ground nutmeg
2 teaspoon ground cinnamon	1/2 teaspoon ground allspice
1 cup crushed pineapple, drained	1/2 teaspoon ground ginger

Preheat oven to 350°F. Cut the squash in half and remove the seeds. Place each half, cut side down, in a baking dish. Cover dish and bake for 45 to 60 minutes until squash is soft and tender. Meanwhile, combine the cinnamon, pineapple, nutmeg, allspice, and ginger. When squash is cooked, remove from oven. Let it cool for 10 minutes. Scoop out the pulp from both halves and combine with the pineapple mixture. Replace mixture into shells and return to the oven and bake for 7 minutes until pineapple mixture is hot and bubbly. Yield: 6 servings

Nutrition Facts per serving: Calories 80; Total Fat 0g; Saturated Fat 0g; Sodium 5mg; Total Carbohydrate 22g; Dietary Fiber 3g; Sugars 8g; Protein 1g

Pineapple Salsa

1 1/2 cups diced fresh pineapple (or canned unsweetened drained chunks)	2 1/2 teaspoons minced seeded jalapeno pepper
1/4 cup red bell pepper, chopped very fine	1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro	1/4 cup minced red onion
1/4 cup green bell pepper, chopped very fine	1/4 teaspoon grated lime peel

Combine all ingredients in a bowl, cover and refrigerate for up to 6 hours before serving. Excellent with salmon or other fish.

Pineapple Banana Yogurt Pops

2 cups plain yogurt
2/3 cup crushed pineapple
1/2 cup mashed banana

1 teaspoon lemon juice
6 Tablespoons honey or sugar

Blend yogurt, pineapple, banana, lemon juice, and honey or sugar. Pour into 3 ounce waxed paper cups or muffin tins with paper muffin liners. Insert wooden sticks and freeze until firm. Yield: 9 pops
Each serving: 95 calories, 1 g fat, 1 g saturated fat, 3 mg cholesterol, 40 mg sodium, 20 g carbohydrate, .4 g fiber, 3 g protein.

Winter Fruit Salad

1 can (20 oz) pineapple chunks (juice packed)
1 can (16 oz) pear halves (juice packed)
1 can (16 oz) sliced peaches (juice packed)
1 can (16 oz) apricot halves (juice packed)

1-1/4 cup lemon or vanilla lowfat yogurt
1 cup low-fat granola
Cinnamon, optional

Drain each can of fruit very well. Cut the fruit into bite-sized pieces, if necessary. Gently mix the fruit in a medium sized bowl. Pour the yogurt over the top and blend gently. Spoon into 10 individual bowls and sprinkle the granola on top. Sprinkle a little cinnamon on top, if desired. Yield: 10 servings
Nutrition Facts per Serving: Calories 160; Total Fat 2g; Saturated Fat 0.5g; Trans Fat 0g; Cholesterol 2.5 mg; Sodium 35mg; Total Carbohydrate 35g; Dietary Fiber 4.5g; Sugars 26g; Protein 4g

Pineapple Slaw

2½ cups cabbage, shredded
1 cup carrots, shredded
1 cup pineapple chunks

¼ cup raisins
2½ tablespoon pineapple juice

In a large bowl, combine all ingredients. Mix gently. Serve immediately or cover and put in the refrigerator. Yield: 6 servings

Nutrition Information per Serving: Calories 60, Total Fat 0 g, Sodium 20 mg, Total Carbohydrate 14 g, Dietary Fiber 2 g.

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Sources:

Florida Food Fare; Mary King and Mary Jo Oswald, University of Florida, Sarasota County Extension
Fruit Adventures from The University of Minnesota Extension at www.extension.umn.edu