
Flavors of Florida

One way to express Florida's expanse is geographical: It's almost 1,000 miles long. Another is by its food, which ranges from oysters in Apalachicola to conch in Key West. Here are many hallmark dishes, some of which are fading from practice into history because the main ingredient is protected by conservation law.

Alligator, frogs legs, catfish

Three of the favored tastes from Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, they can be prepared in myriad ways, but the three meet the deep fryer as often as not.

Arroz con pollo

Translated as "rice with chicken," this is a Latin staple, emblematic of the deep influence that Cuban, Nicaraguan, and other Latin cultures have had on culinary South Florida.

Conch

The large-shell mollusk will forever be linked with Key West, though it's now protected there. The conch for fritters, chowder, and cracked conch generally comes from the Bahamas.

Cooter

This soft-shell, freshwater turtle is sometimes associated with Cross Creek, south of Gainesville; usually fried. All marine turtles are now protected.

Gopher

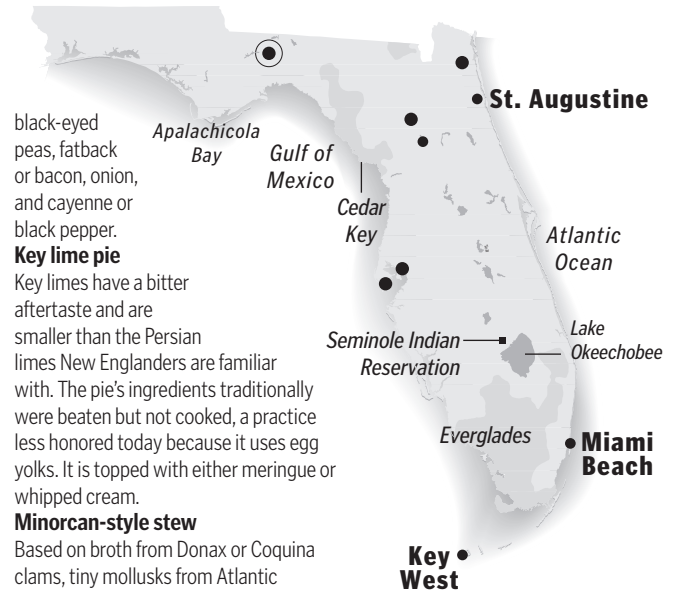
A land tortoise, also protected by law, prized for frying, stewing, and soup.

Hearts of palm salad

The US protects the Sabal palm from harvesting, so most hearts come in cans from South America. But you can still get fresh hearts in Florida; federal protection doesn't extend to the Seminole Indian reservation north of Lake Okeechobee.

Hoppin' John

Traditionally eaten on New Year's Day, this dish has many variants but includes rice,



black-eyed peas, fatback or bacon, onion, and cayenne or black pepper.

Key lime pie

Key limes have a bitter aftertaste and are smaller than the Persian limes New Englanders are familiar with. The pie's ingredients traditionally were beaten but not cooked, a practice less honored today because it uses egg yolks. It is topped with either meringue or whipped cream.

Minorcan-style stew

Based on broth from Donax or Coquina clams, tiny mollusks from Atlantic intertidal zones. Also features the datil pepper, which is grown around St. Augustine. Its New World arrival is unclear, but it may have been brought by Minorcans in the mid-1700s.

Oysters

Usually fried or served raw, oysters are most associated with Apalachicola Bay, but also come from the waters around Cedar Key, further south on the gulf.

Perloo or pilau

A favorite dating even before statehood in 1845, the ingredients of this rice-based

stew vary but often include game meats or chicken, peas or beans, greens, and other vegetables.

Mullet

A mainstay of the Gulf Coast and Panhandle, its rich, oily flesh is prized when smoked.

Stone crab

Generally cooked and served cold with melted butter or mustard sauce, as devised by Joe Weiss of the legendary Miami Beach eatery Joe's Stone Crab.

SOURCES: Steven Raichlen, author of "Miami Spice"; Leslie Lieberman and Linda Bobroff, coauthors of "Cultural Food Patterns of Florida"

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