

1992

Possum Trot Culinary Traditions: A Collection of Southern and Tropical Recipes

Robert Barnum

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Box 523
Birmingham, Alabama 35201
205-877-6000

Southern Living

September 25, 1992

Robert Barnum
Possum Trot Nursery
14955 SW 216 Street
Miami, FL 33180

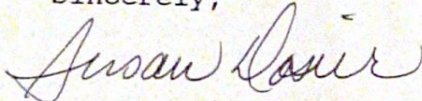
Dear Robert:

Greetings from Birmingham! I've been trying to get in contact with you ever since the hurricane. Our editor has been asking about you almost daily. After failing repeatedly by phone, I'm sending this letter and hoping it gets to you. I can only imagine what you've been through in the past weeks. If it is any consolation, our staff has been keeping you in our thoughts. We're pulling for you and wishing you the very best!

When you do get a chance, let us know if we can do anything to help or provide any assistance. I can't get over the irony of your article coming out right after Andrew struck. What a strange world this is!

I send my best wishes for your parents' safety and wellbeing and hope you are able to see strands of hope as you rebuild and regroup. God bless you!

Sincerely,



Susan Dosier

The Fruits Of His Labor

If Robert Barnum invites you over for dinner, you should go. But expect a refreshingly different menu and an evening that's, well, a little exotic. Robert owns Possum Trot Nursery, a tropical fruit farm near Homestead, Florida, about 60 miles south of Miami. His lifestyle is much like his recipes—savory and unpredictable.

"I cook by art—not science," Robert explains. Today, he handily stuffs chayotes, mixes Florida Fruit Punch, and checks on the chicken grilling just outside the door. His artist's palette of flavors includes ingredients from many cuisines. For his barbecue sauce, he mixes Asian teriyaki flavors with Florida limes and carambola for a sweet-sour chicken. His Avocado Salad is a surprising blend of capers, lime juice, herbs, and Italy's Gorgonzola cheese.

"The secret to a good recipe is flavor and texture. Every part of the tongue should be touched by what you cook," Robert says. "You've got four basic things to consider: acid, salt, sugar, and the body of the food. You have to hit the front, middle, sides, back, and top of the palate. You must create intricate flavors and learn how to balance all that. *That's* cooking in a nutshell."

His kitchen looks more like a workshop than a gourmet oasis. Robert built his cabinets, an island, wine racks, and kitchen tools himself. Also, he designed a coffeemaker based on his favorite way to make coffee—"the Costa Rican sock method." It's a drip method that uses a woven "sock" instead of a coffee filter. The emphasis here is on function rather than show with Robert opting for a natural, unfinished look over a slick one.

Tired of having a "bored palate," Robert threw himself into cooking years ago and even worked at a restaurant in Grenada before coming back to his family's nursery. Passion fruit, avocado, guava, carambola, and other delicacies from the nursery provide inspiration for his cooking.

Here, he shares recipes. If some of these fruits are not available in your market, talk to the produce manager. For more information on exotic fruits, see "From Our Kitchen to Yours" on page 182.

Susan Dosier



A monstera leaf provides the perfect place mat for Avocado Salad, Carambola-Glazed Barbecued Chicken, Stuffed Chayote, and Boniato Chips.

A MENU FROM SOUTH FLORIDA FOR EIGHT

Avocado Salad
Carambola-Glazed Barbecued Chicken
Stuffed Chayote
Boniato Chips
Tropical Trilogy Parfait
Guava Puffs
Florida Fruit Punch

■ Robert says October is a prime month to get good avocados from Florida.

AVOCADO SALAD

1 ripe avocado, cubed
2 tomatoes, cubed
1 small onion, sliced
3 to 4 ounces Gorgonzola cheese, crumbled
3 tablespoons fresh lime juice
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 tablespoon balsamic or red wine vinegar
2 teaspoons capers
½ teaspoon seasoned salt
½ teaspoon pepper
½ teaspoon garlic powder
½ teaspoon dried marjoram
½ teaspoon dried thyme
8 cups mixed salad greens
Garnish: carambola slices

Combine first 13 ingredients in a medium bowl. Arrange salad greens on individual plates, and top with avocado mixture. Garnish, if desired. Yield: 8 servings.

■ Carambola, also called "star fruit," is good eaten out of hand or used as a garnish. Here, Robert blends it with juice and other seasonings to make a basting sauce.

CARAMBOLA-GLAZED BARBECUED CHICKEN

2 (3- to 3½-pound) broiler-fryers, quartered
1 cup corn oil
1 cup white wine vinegar
½ cup dry sherry or white wine
1 teaspoon garlic powder
1 teaspoon seasoned salt
1 teaspoon pepper
½ teaspoon poultry seasoning
2 carambolas, sliced
¼ cup lime juice
¼ cup honey
2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
1 tablespoon soy sauce
1 clove garlic
½ teaspoon seasoned salt
½ teaspoon pepper
Dash of hot sauce

Place chicken quarters in a shallow dish. Combine corn oil and next 6 ingredients. Reserve 1 cup of marinade mixture, and set aside. Pour remaining mixture over chicken. Cover and refrigerate 3 to 4 hours. Remove chicken from marinade; reserve marinade. Grill chicken, uncovered, over medium coals (300° to 350°) for 1 hour, turning occasionally and basting with marinade after each turn.

Place carambolas in container of an electric blender; add lime juice and remaining ingredients. Process until smooth, stopping to scrape down sides. Gradually add 1 cup reserved

marinade mixture; blend until smooth. Brush glaze over chicken; grill 20 additional minutes or until chicken is done, turning occasionally and basting with any additional glaze after each turn. Yield: 8 servings.

■ In Louisiana, chayotes are called "mirlitons." Shaped like a pear, chayote may be cooked much like a summer squash.

STUFFED CHAYOTE

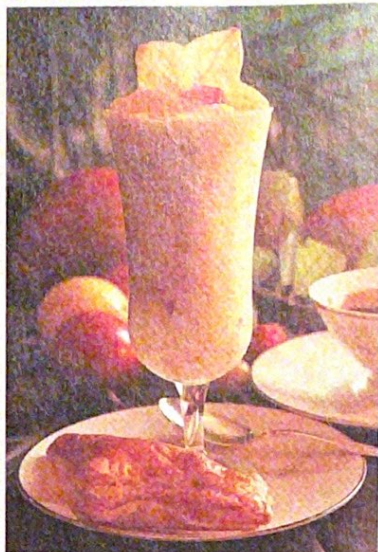
- 4 chayotes, cut in half
- 3 slices bacon, chopped
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ teaspoon dried thyme
- ¼ teaspoon dried marjoram
- ¼ cup (1 ounce) shredded Cheddar cheese
- 2 tablespoons soft breadcrumbs
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 2 teaspoons grated Parmesan cheese

Cook chayotes in boiling water to cover 10 minutes; drain. Let cool to touch. Using a melon baller or spoon, carefully scoop out pulp, leaving shells intact; set pulp and shells aside.

Cook bacon and next 6 ingredients in a large skillet over medium-high heat until bacon is crisp; drain. Combine bacon mixture, chayote pulp, Cheddar cheese, breadcrumbs, and parsley; spoon into shells, and sprinkle with Parmesan cheese. Bake at 350° for 45 minutes or until tender. Yield: 8 servings.



Robert Barnum grills his Carambola-Glazed Barbecued Chicken on a barbecue pit he built near his Homestead, Florida, home.



Tropical Trilogy Parfait features three fruits—banana, pineapple, and mango. It's served with Guava Puffs.

■ Boniato chips are similar to potato chips, but they have more flavor. "The boniato is not quite as easy to peel as a potato," Robert admits.

BONIATO CHIPS

- 2 boniatos, peeled (about 1½ pounds)
- Vegetable or peanut oil

Using a very sharp knife, slice boniatos crosswise into ¼-inch slices; place in cool water to prevent discoloring. Pour oil to depth of 2 inches into a Dutch oven; heat to 375°. Drain boniato slices on paper towels, and fry 2 to 3 minutes or until golden brown. Drain on paper towels. Yield: 6 to 8 servings.

■ This parfait pairs three fruits—banana, pineapple, and mango. Robert often substitutes other combinations, such as apple, peach, and pear.

TROPICAL TRILOGY PARFAIT

- 1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
- ¼ cup lime juice
- ¼ cup passion fruit juice
- 1 cup whipping cream
- ⅓ cup sifted powdered sugar
- ½ teaspoon cream of tartar
- 2 bananas, sliced
- 2 cups fresh pineapple cubes
- 1 mango, peeled and finely chopped
- Garnishes: carambola slices, maraschino cherries

Combine sweetened condensed

milk, lime juice, and passion fruit juice in a large mixing bowl; beat at low speed with an electric mixer until thickened.

Beat whipping cream, powdered sugar, and cream of tartar at medium speed with an electric mixer until stiff peaks form. Fold into condensed milk mixture. Carefully fold in fruits; spoon into parfait glasses, and garnish with carambola slices and cherries, if desired. Serve with cookies or Guava Puffs. Yield: 8 servings.

■ Goya is the company most likely to market guava paste in the South. Ask your grocer if he can order the paste for you.

GUAVA PUFFS

- 1 (17¼-ounce) package frozen puff pastry, thawed *
- 1 (14-ounce) can guava paste

Roll each sheet of pastry dough to a 12-inch square, and cut into 16 (3-inch) squares. Place 1 teaspoon paste in center of each pastry square. Brush edges with water; fold edges to form a triangle, pressing to seal. Crimp edges with fork, and place on ungreased baking sheets. Bake at 350° for 20 to 22 minutes. Yield: 32 pastries.

* 2 (8-ounce) cans refrigerated crescent dinner rolls may be substituted for frozen puff pastry. Roll each can of rolls into a 12-inch square, and cut into 16 (3-inch) squares. Fill with paste and bake at 350° for 10 to 12 minutes.

Note: Puffs may be brushed with egg whites before baking.


■ Passion fruit can be expensive outside of certain markets, so don't be afraid to try this beverage without it or substitute other juices.

FLORIDA FRUIT PUNCH

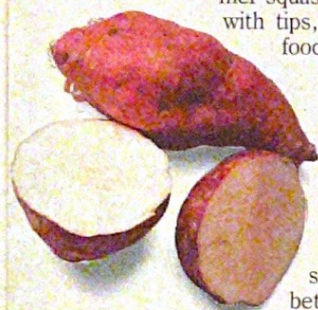
- 2 quarts fresh orange juice
- 1 quart fresh grapefruit juice
- 1⅓ cups sugar
- 1 cup fresh lime juice
- 1 cup passion fruit juice
- ⅓ cup grenadine
- 10 cups water
- 2 cups rum (optional)
- Garnishes: orange and carambola slices, maraschino cherries

Combine first 7 ingredients, stirring until sugar dissolves; chill. Add 2 cups rum, if desired. Serve over ice. Skewer orange and carambola slices and maraschino cherries onto wooden picks for garnish, if desired. Yield: 6½ quarts.

From Our Kitchen To Yours

 Passion fruit, mango, chayote, and boniato might be unfamiliar to you now, but they won't be strangers for long. These newcomers to the produce section of many supermarkets are waiting to be discovered.

Before testing recipes using this exotic produce (see page 178), the Test Kitchens staff had many questions about taste, selection, storage, and preparation. We found the taste sensations refreshing and the preparation simple. It's just as easy to cook a boniato as it is a sweet potato, and chayote can be prepared like summer squash. Here is a guide, with tips, from our tropical food adventure.



BONIATO

Boniato (bow-knee-AHH-toe) or Cuban sweet potato, is an irregularly shaped, starchy tuber resembling a cross between a Louisiana yam and an Idaho russet. When cooked, the white flesh has a creamy texture with a nutty, mildly sweet flavor.

Selection and storage: Choose rock-hard vegetables without shrinkage or decay. Try to buy small ones; they're more tender. The skin may have tones of pink, purple, cream, or red. Keep at room temperature in a well-ventilated area no more than a few days.

Preparation: To prevent discoloration, peel under running water; then immediately drop peeled portions into cold water. To boil, cover with water. Do not overwhelm the subtle flavor with heavy seasoning. Cook as you would a sweet potato—bake, boil, fry, mash, or combine in custards, puddings, pies, and muffins.

Serving suggestions: Season mashed or cubed boniato with garlic butter and cilantro; or bake at 400° for 1 hour (skin will be crunchy and hard). Enrich the pulp with cream, honey, and allspice.

Substitution: Sweet potato.

Nutrition: Good source of vitamin C.



CHAYOTE

Chayote (chy-OH-tay), also known as mirliton, is a firm-textured, gourd-like fruit that resembles a pale-green gnarled pear with uneven furrows running its length. The skin may be fairly smooth, or have a hairbrushlike covering of prickles. Beneath the pale-green skin is a white, bland-tasting flesh, which surrounds a soft seed. Its taste and texture are between a cucumber and a zucchini.

Selection and storage: Choose firm, unblemished ones; smaller chayotes are slightly more tender. Refrigerate vegetables in a plastic bag up to two weeks.

Preparation: Prepare as you would summer squash, but allow longer cooking time (20 to 25 minutes) due to the firmer texture. Peel chayotes either before or after cooking. Use a vegetable peeler on uncooked ones. A slippery substance may ooze out as you peel raw chayote; it's neater to work under running water. The fruit can be boiled, steamed, pureed for soups, or stuffed. Before stuffing, partially cook in boiling water 10 minutes.

Serving suggestions: Slice peeled fruit, and use instead of water chestnuts in stir-frys; peel, shred, combine with shredded carrots, and cook quickly in herb butter; or grate peeled fruit, soak in cold water 10 minutes, squeeze out water, and use raw in slaw. The flavor blends well with seafood or ham.

Substitution: Summer squash.

Nutrition: A good source of vitamin C and potassium.

MANGO

Mango (MANG-go), called the "apple" of the tropics, can be oval, round, or kidney-shaped. As the fruit ripens, the thin, tough, green skin turns yellow with a red blush. Yellow or golden-orange flesh, which tastes like a blend of peach, apricot, and pineapple, clings to a large flat

seed. Unripe fruit is bitter.

Selection and storage: Look for full, firm, partially ripe fruit showing some yellow or red, although color is not a reliable sign of ripeness. Aroma determines ripeness. Sniff the stem end; a pleasant scent hints of rich flavor. Keep at room temperature until tender and aromatic; refrigerate ripened fruit in a plastic bag up to a few days. For longer storage, cube peeled flesh, process in a food processor or electric blender until smooth, pour through a wire-mesh strainer, pressing with back of a spoon, and freeze in small airtight containers.

Preparation: To peel, score skin in quarters from the top to stem end; peel like a banana. Cut flesh into small cubes by crisscrossing it with a knife, then cut cubes away from the seed. For slicing, score peeled flesh in quarters, remove from the seed, and slice. Processed pulp has a smoothness similar to a sweetened, cooked, and thickened sauce, but it is lighter. If desired, add lime juice and sugar to processed pulp, and freeze as a base for making ices, ice creams, sorbets, and parfaits.

Serving suggestions: Cube and add to chicken, fruit, and vegetable salads; dice and use as a filling for crêpes, or add to seafood, meat, or poultry stir-frys; add fruit liqueur or lime juice to pureed fruit, and serve over fresh fruit, ice cream, or pound cake; drizzle slices with orange liqueur for serving with yogurt or cake. For a refreshing shake, combine fruit in an electric blender with milk, a splash of fresh lime juice, sugar or honey, and ice.

Substitution: Peaches may be used in most recipes.

Nutrition: Excellent source of vitamins A and C; good source of potassium.



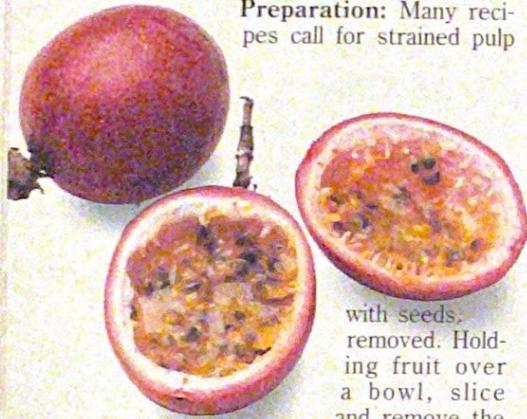
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PASSION FRUIT

Passion fruit looks like a small, round, dimpled pink, purple, or yellow ball. Its sweet/tart flavor is often preferred sweetened with a little sugar. The thin, hard shell of the fruit encloses a small quantity of juice, as well as a translucent pulp of teardrop-shaped golden capsules containing tiny edible dark seeds.

Selection and storage: Choose large, heavy, firm fruit. Don't be misled by a wrinkled or dimpled shell and a sloshy sound, that actually ensures a delicious interior. To ripen, let stand at room temperature until wrinkled. Store ripened fruit in the refrigerator up to five days; for longer storage, place whole fruit in plastic bags, and freeze.

Preparation: Many recipes call for strained pulp



with seeds, removed. Holding fruit over a bowl, slice and remove the shell tip, scoop

out all the pulp, and stir in a little sugar to help break up the pulp. Pour pulp through a wire-mesh strainer (be sure that you don't use an aluminum one), pressing with back of a spoon to squeeze out juice; discard seeds.

Serving suggestions: Cut in half crosswise and carefully open; add whipping cream, and eat with a spoon. Flavor prepared punches, sauces, sorbets, ice creams, and fruit and gelatin salads with pulp. Combine juice and powdered sugar; toss with fresh fruit. Lightly sweeten pulp with sugar or a sweet liqueur, and pour over fresh fruit or yogurt; for a richer topping, blend pulp with sugar, and fold in whipped cream. Combine vanilla yogurt with juice for a fruit dip. Use juice as a flavoring as you would an extract.

Substitutions: Canned passion fruit juice is available in many supermarkets, or orange juice may be used in some recipes.

Nutrition: Excellent source of vitamin C; good source of vitamin A.



CARAMBOLA

Carambola (kair-ahm-BOH-lah or kah-rahm-BO-la), or star fruit, is easily recognizable with its golden yellow, glossy skin. The matching translucent flesh, dotted occasionally with a dark seed, is very juicy. Its five wings or ribs create a star shape when sliced crosswise. When sweet, the flavor suggests a blend of plums, apples, and grapes with a citrus edge. When sour, it is sharp as a lemon, but less harsh and more fruity.

Selection and storage: Choose full, firm yellow fruit. Sweet varieties often have thicker, wider ribs, while tart varieties have very narrow ribs. Store green or green-tinged fruit at room temperature; when golden, refrigerate in plastic bags up to one week. For longer storage, freeze whole fruit in plastic bags.

Preparation: This easy-to-prepare fruit requires no peeling or seeding. Scrape off the tiny brown stripe running down the ribs with a vegetable peeler or knife, if desired.

Serving suggestions: Garnish entrées and desserts; float slices in beverages; make a daiquiri; add to green, fruit, or poultry salads; puree for ices or sherbets; slice and arrange on cheesecake with fresh mint; dip into melted chocolate. Stir-fry slices with strips of green pepper and onion; add chicken and shrimp for an entrée. Quickly cook in a skillet with a touch of sugar to glaze, and serve as an accompaniment to fish or poultry; combine with other fruit for a strudel filling.

Substitution: There is no good substitute for carambolas.

Nutrition: Good source of vitamins A and C.

AVOCADO

Avocado (a-voh-CAH-doh) varieties differ in shape and size, ranging from round to pear-shaped with thick to thin, green to purplish black, smooth to corrugated skin. The pale yellow-green flesh surrounds a seed and has a buttery consistency with a rich, nutty flavor.

Selection and storage:

Firm, unripe ones are usually found in the market. Never use hard fruit—it has little flavor and is difficult to peel. Ripe avocados yield to gentle palm pressure. To speed the ripening process, enclose in a paper bag at room temperature two to four days. Refrigerate ripe avocados, but for longer storage, mash with a little lemon or lime juice, and freeze. (Whole or sliced fruit does not freeze well.)

Preparation: Cut lengthwise around the seed; then turn halves in opposite directions to separate. Lift seed out with fingers or a spoon. Using a knife or your fingers, gently peel off skin; cut as desired. To prevent discoloration of cut surfaces, sprinkle with lemon or lime juice. Very soft flesh is best for mashing; slightly firmer flesh should be used for slicing and cutting into chunks. Add cubes or slices to a recipe at the last moment, and include lemon or lime juice in dishes calling for mashed avocado. Add to hot foods at the last minute; prolonged heat causes a bitter flavor.

Serving suggestions: Add to seafood, pasta, fruit, and green salads; mash and spread in pita pockets, and fill with fresh vegetables; toss with hot pasta and seafood; use as a pizza topping; float thin slices on soups as a garnish; fill halves with chilled salads; combine with artichoke hearts and a vinaigrette.

Substitution: There is no good substitute for avocados.

Nutrition: Excellent source of vitamin A; good source of vitamin E and potassium.

*Kaye Mabry Adams
Test Kitchens
Director*



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