



ACKEE

Ackee is the national fruit of Jamaica. Its name is derived from the West African Akye fufo. The tree is not endemic to the West Indies but was introduced from West Africa during the 18th Century. The plant was further named *Blighia sapida* in honour of Captain William Bligh who took samples to Kew in 1793.

Evergreen ackee trees grow all across the island of Jamaica, but the main producing areas are the farming regions of the south central plains in Clarendon and St. Elizabeth. Ackee is now grown in some of the other Caribbean islands where in some cases, it is more ornamental whereas in Jamaica, it is for edible purposes. Botanically, ackee is a fruit but it is sometimes referred to as a vegetable. As it has a high fat content, it is included in the Fats and Oils, Caribbean Food Group. Jamaican ackee is not to be confused with guinep/chenette/ ackee that is grown in the wider Caribbean.

There are two bearing seasons between January to March, and June to August. The fruits bear in clusters, turn red on reaching maturity and split open along the seams with **continued** exposure to the sun. When open it reveals three large black shiny seeds and bright yellow flesh. Traditionally it is at this time that the ackees are harvested and the arilli removed and cleaned in preparation for cooking. Only the fleshy arils around the seeds are edible, not the fruit. The fruit

must only be picked after it has opened naturally, and must be fresh and not overripe.

Is Ackee Poisonous?

Consumers of the unripe fruit can experience 'Jamaican vomiting sickness syndrome' (JVS) allegedly caused by the unusual amino acid components, hypoglycin A and B. In this regard the nutritional status of the consumer is important since diagnosed patients generally show manifestations of chronic malnutrition and vitamin deficiency. Although JVS has resulted in some fatalities in the past with symptoms including vomiting and severe hypoglycaemia, the incidence today is rare with the increased awareness of the necessity for consuming only ripe, opened ackees. Levels of hypoglycin A in the ackee arilli peak at maturity but rapidly diminish to non-detectable levels in the opened fruit making it safe for consumption.



Nutritive Value

In the Biochemistry Department at University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, studies conducted on the fatty acid composition of the arilli from ackee found that 51-58% of the arillus dry weight consists of lipids. Linoleic, palmitic and stearic acids were the major fatty acids with linoleic acid, accounting for over 55% of the total fatty acids. These results show that the purified oil from ackee has high nutritive value and makes an important contribution to the fatty acid intake of many Jamaicans. According to CFNI's "Food Composition Tables for the English-speaking Caribbean" (1998), the contents of a 100g serving of "Ackee, canned, drained" are as follows: Water (76.7 g), Energy (625 kJ or 151 kcal), Total carbohydrate (0.8 g),

Dietary fibre (2.7 g), Protein (2.9 g), Fat (15.2 g), Saturated fat (0 g) Cholesterol (0 mg), Calcium (35 mg), Iron (0.7 mg), Potassium (270 mg), Sodium (240 mg), Zinc (1 mg), vitamin A -, thiamin (0.03 mg), riboflavin (0.07 mg), niacin (1.1 mg), total folacin (41 microgram) and vitamin C (30 mg).

Dietary Uses

This delicacy is enjoyed by many at breakfast or as an entree. The canned product is exported to ethnic markets worldwide and continues to be enjoyed by both visitors to the island and Jamaicans residing overseas. Cooked ackee has the consistency and look of scrambled eggs. It is enjoyed by many at breakfast or as an entree throughout Jamaica.

When boiled, drained and simmered in oil with dried salted cod fish and a choice of

vegetables and hot peppers, it becomes Jamaica's national dish Ackee and Saltfish. This combination gives a nutritional composition similar to meat, since the saltfish boosts the protein content. The saltfish, being low in fat is complemented by the fat in ackee and the dish is now comparable to medium fat meat. The fatty acid combination is healthier than that of meat, the ackee dish being unsaturated and without cholesterol.

Served as a vegetable, ackee is eaten with susumber or callaloo/baghi, and other vegetables. A small amount of cheese could be added to increase protein and calcium. Adding bacon only serves to alter the nutritional quality of ackee and saltfish. Generally, it would be prudent to reduce the amount of added oil to help control the caloric content of dishes that include ackee. ♦

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