Cracker Recipes

SNACKS

The closest thing an early Florida Cracker ever came to, in the way of an hors d’oeuvre, was a sack of boiled peanuts. Snacks in Cracker Florida are simple and straight forward: nuts and berries gathered in the woods, wild oranges, and a stalk of sugar cane at syrup making time. Peanuts, roasted and boiled, were a special treat for kids and adults alike.

BOILED PEANUTS

5 lb. raw peanuts in shell
5 gallons water, possibly more, depending on size of pot
2 lb. salt

Wash peanuts to remove any dirt. Make a brine solution of the salt and water. Add peanuts, making sure there is enough brine solution to cover. Bring to a boil, cover, and boil until peanuts are tender. This will vary from 2 to 4 hours. Check water every 30 minutes or so. You may need to add water to make sure peanuts remain covered with brine solution. When peanuts are tender, drain, and eat them from the shell. They are messy, but, boy, are they good. Some folks like spicy boiled peanuts. Just add a few hot peppers or some hot sauce to the pot while peanuts are boiling.
GRITS, CORNMEAL, HOECAKE, CORNPONE, & HUSHPUPPIES

One theory about how Crackers came to be called such, is that they cracked corn to make cornmeal and grits. Today, most Florida Crackers prefer the cracking of bullwhips, as the origin of the name. Whatever the case, grits or cornmeal were served from morning to night. A pot of grits, a pone of corn, and a couple of slices of side meat were the ways you started the day. Leftover grits could be fried later in the day, and the cornpone could be served with gravy or cane syrup. Hushpuppies are tasty fried tidbits of cornmeal, traditionally served with fried fish. Folklore has it that the name comes from outdoor cooks tossing the tidbits to hungry hunting dogs with the command “hush puppies.”

HOECAKE

Combine 1 cup of stone-ground cornmeal with ½ tsp. salt and enough hot water to make a stiff batter. Form one large cake or several small ones about ½ inch thick. Fry in bacon fat or butter until brown, turn, and fry other side until done.

CORNpone (MODERN VERSION)

1 cup self-rising cornmeal
¼ cup flour
1 egg

4 Tbs. onion (chopped fine)
bacon fat or oil for frying
buttermilk
pinch of sugar    salt & black pepper to taste

Mix dry ingredients well. Add onion, egg that has been beaten, salt and pepper and mix together. Add enough buttermilk to make a heavy batter. Batter may be divided into several small pones, or formed into one large one. Fry in bacon fat or oil over medium heat until light brown. Turn and cook until done – about 3 minutes on each side.

HUSHPUPPIES

1 cup cornmeal  
1 egg  
½ tsp. salt  
⅛ cup water  
2 tsp. baking powder  
1 small onion (chopped)

Mix cornmeal, baking powder, and salt. Add onion, a well-beaten egg, and enough water to hold batter together. Shape into small balls and fry in very hot fat or oil until golden brown. Serve hot.

Meat

ALLIGATOR, GOPHER, VENISON, POSSUM, AND COON
Hunting wild game put meat on the table. Crackers hunted wild Spanish cattle when they first arrived in Florida. They rarely allowed themselves the luxury of a beefsteak. It was more important to sell those scrub cows for cash money. More often than not, deer, bear, or wild hog found their way into a cast iron skillet. After a number of years of state protection, alligators have once again become plentiful enough to hunt legally. The meat is often available at fish markets.

**FRIED GATOR TAIL**

Only the meat from the tail is fit to eat, and it’s tough as shoe leather. Slice meat into thin (1/4 inch) strips. Pound to tenderize. Dredge in some cornmeal or flour seasoned with salt and pepper. Fry in bacon fat or vegetable oil in a hot skillet for about three minutes on each side.

Another way to prepare alligator is to simmer meat for several hours over low hear, together with onions, peppers, tomatoes, a few bay leaves, and a few shots of hot pepper sauce. The slow cooking helps tenderize the meat and pick up the flavors. Serve over rice.

**GOPHER TORTOISE STEW**

This was an Old Florida standby, and a Minorcan favorite in St. Augustine as well. Today, gopher tortoise is a protected species. Substitute pork.
Meat from gopher (about 2 lbs.) 2 onions, chopped
¼ lb. salt pork (diced) 1 bell pepper, chopped
flour, seasoned with salt & pepper 1 large can tomatoes
6 bay leaves Tbs. Datil pepper sauce

Dredge 1” cubes of meat in seasoned flour. Brown meat in fat rendered from half of the salt pork in a Dutch oven. Set aside. In a skillet, fry remaining salt pork to render fat. Add onions and peppers, and fry until soft. Add about a quart of water to the gopher meat in the Dutch oven, and stir to make gravy. Add onions and peppers, bay leaves, and pepper sauce, and simmer over low heat for 2 hours. Taste, adjust seasoning, and serve hot over rice.

**PORK RIBS WITH ORANGE SAUCE**

Crackers often kept hogs. Sometimes, a litter of wild pigs would raid the garden. Captured piglets would be raised for the table. In the winter, when the temperature dropped, it was time to kill a hog. Folks would get together to help, and share in the bounty. Lard would be rendered for cooking, bacon and hams cured and put in the smokehouse, sausage made, and the various parts divided up for all sorts of Cracker fare. It is said that done right, a Cracker used every part of the hog but the squeal. Today, we get our pork from the supermarket. But you can still do up a batch of ribs that were a hit in Florida’s backcountry.

6 lb. pork spare ribs 6 cloves garlic (minced)
1 quart orange juice 3 onions (chopped)
2 cups tomato catsup 1 tsp. salt
1 cup cider vinegar 1 Tbs. mustard
1 cup brown sugar 1 tsp. Datil pepper sauce
Mix all ingredients except ribs into a sauce. Place ribs on a rack in a pan of water and steam for 45 minutes. Put sauce in a pan and cook over medium heat until reduced by half. Remove ribs from pan of water and transfer to grill, or place in a shallow pan in a 350 degree oven. Baste with sauce and cook until tender. At serving time, top with remaining sauce & garnish with orange slices.

**FRIED CATFISH**

Florida’s lakes, rivers and streams are filled with tasty pan fish, and catfish is a Cracker favorite. Today, most catfish are “farm raised,” and readily available in the fish market. There is no better way to fix them than Cracker style.

5 lb. catfish fillets  1 Tbs. salt  
yellow cornmeal  1 tsp. black pepper  
vegetable oil (peanut oil is best) for frying

Salt and pepper fish and bring to room temperature for at least an hour before frying. This will keep the oil from cooling down when fish are added to the fat. Put oil in a skillet or fryer, enough to completely cover fish, and heat to 375 degrees. Hot oil prevents the fish from becoming “greasy.” Dredge fish in cornmeal. Shake away any excess, and place in oil, a few at the time. Fry for 4 or 5 minutes. Drain, and serve hot, with hushpuppies and cheese grits. Crackers on the coast fix mullet the same way.
Florida Crackers will tell you there is nothing like a good “mess o’greens.” Some, like poke “sallet” and Spanish needles, are gathered in the wild. Others, like turnips and mustards, come from the garden. The favorite is collards, just touched by frost and cooked down to pot liquor. Not as traditional, this method takes less time, adds a little zest, and saves some of the crunch.

**Collards**

Wash and remove the stems from a bunch (2 lbs.) of collards. Chop coarsely with kitchen shears. Put a quarter pound of seasoning meat into one gallon of boiling water and simmer 15 minutes to flavor stock. Add greens, a few at a time, so that all are blanched, and then simmer over low heat. Add one small onion (chopped fine), a dash of hot pepper sauce, and salt and black pepper to taste. Cook over medium heat until onion is soft, about 15 minutes. Greens will still be crisp, with garden fresh flavor.

**FRIED OKRA**

One of the few things you can count on from the summer garden is okra. Many folks just don’t like okra. The problem is, they don’t know how to fix it. First off, you have to pick it young, when the pods are still tender. Old pods, over 4 inches long, are tough and stringy. Young ones, on the other hand, fried right, will change the opinion of the most ardent okra haters. Try this recipe, and you too, will sing praises to the lowly okra pod.
1 lb. fresh okra  
½ tsp. salt

½ cup yellow cornmeal  
¼ tsp. black pepper

bacon fat or vegetable oil for frying

Cut off tips and stems from young pods, and then cut into ½ inch slices, cutting across the pods. Season cornmeal with salt and pepper. Add okra, a few at the time, to cornmeal, and coat well. Heat enough bacon fat or vegetable oil in a skillet to a depth of about a half an inch. Add okra and fry until golden brown, stirring with a wooden spoon, about six to eight minutes.

**CHAINY BRIAR (WILD ASPARAGUS)**

Smilax is a vine that grows in the woods and along the dunes throughout Florida. In the spring, folks gather young shoots (the tips on the end of the vines or just emerging from the ground).

A big bunch of tender green tips
2 Tbs. bacon fat. Today, we suggest butter
Salt and pepper to taste

Break off the tough part, like you would on asparagus stalks. Boil in water until tender (about 5 minutes). Salt and pepper to taste. Add a dab of butter. Serve as a green vegetable.

**SWAMP CABBAGE**
Hearts of palm is available today in gourmet grocery stores. In the old days it was called swamp cabbage. Today, in Cracker Florida, the bud cut from a sabal palm, is still called swamp cabbage. Most people would rather look at their palm trees than eat them. There was a time, however, when swamp cabbage might be the only green vegetable a cracker could put on the table. It is still served in hunting camps and at Cracker Day celebrations. If cabbage palms are being removed from a construction site, you might be able to cut your own cabbage. The best ones come from trees that are from eight to twelve feet tall.

This recipe comes from Oliver Winn, a fourth generation Floridian. The Winns were pioneers in the early days of Volusia County.

Cut a four-foot section from just below the fronds. Pull away the boots and peel down to the heart. It will be about 3 to 4 inches in diameter, ivory in color, and crisp like fresh stalks of asparagus. Break heart into bite size chunks and soak in cold water until ready to cook. Chop some onions. Fry a ½ pound piece of salt pork, cut into small pieces, in a skillet. Add a handful of onions and some butter and cook until onions are soft. Meanwhile, in a Dutch oven, melt a stick of butter. Add a generous amount of cabbage and a fourth of the onions from your skillet. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Add more cabbage and onions, in the same portion, until pot is half full. Cook over low heat for about 30 minutes, stirring with a spoon to keep cabbage from burning. Serve when cabbage is tender.

**HOPPING JOHN**
Eat black-eyed peas on New Year’s Day and good luck will follow you all year. Rich and poor alike salute the New Year with Hopping John throughout the South.

1 lb. dried field peas (black-eyed)  1 cup uncooked rice
½ lb. cured pork or bacon   1 tsp. hot pepper sauce
1 large onion, chopped   1 Tbs. bacon fat or butter

Soak peas in enough water to cover overnight. Rinse well in morning, drain, and place in a pot with water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat, add seasoning meat, pepper sauce, and salt and pepper to taste. Meanwhile, cook onions in bacon fat until soft and then add to peas. Cook over low heat for about 30 to 45 minutes. Check water level and add rice, so that there is at least 2 cups of liquid for one cup of rice. Reduce heat, cover pot until water is absorbed and rice is tender (about 20 minutes). Good Luck!

**ROASTING EARS OF CORN ON THE COBB IN THE HUSK**

When sweet corn comes in, nothing is better than roasting ears. Just pull back the husks, remove silk, secure husks back around the kernels, and soak in water for an hour. Just before cooking, peel back husks, salt and pepper to taste. Secure husks with a bit of string, and add to the coals or place on the grill. The corn will steam and the kernels will melt in your mouth. Cooking time will depend on heat of the fire, usually about 10 minutes.
SWEET POTATO PONE

Sweet potatoes are a must in the Southern garden. This substantial pudding has long been a Cracker favorite.

2 sweet potatoes or 2 cups canned 2 eggs beaten
½ cup brown sugar 1 cup milk
4 Tbs. butter, melted ½ tsp. ground cinnamon
½ tsp. salt ½ tsp. ground nutmeg
½ tsp. vanilla extract

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. If using canned sweet potatoes, drain and mash. If using raw potatoes, peel, boil until tender, and then drain and mash until smooth. Combine all ingredients, stir together and mix well. Place in a greased baking dish. Bake for 1½ hours.

WATERMELON BOWL

What could be more refreshing on a hot summer day than a slice of watermelon? A field of melons, ripe for the picking, offered a tempting challenge to Cracker kids. The trick is to find a fully ripe melon, and beat the coons to it. Raccoons raided the fields as well as the children, and they always seemed to pick a moonlight night when melons reached the perfect stage. The next morning, pickers
would find a hollowed out shell and tracks leading back to the woods.

Pick a ripe melon. Cut it in half. Scoop out the melon balls with a spoon or melon-baller. Scrape out shell. Combine melon balls with a cup of sugar syrup (see recipe for Sour Orange Drink) and a cup of sour orange or lime juice. Refrigerate for several hours. Return melon to shell and garnish with mint and citrus fruit slices. For a more colorful presentation at a party, add honeydew melon, cantaloupe, pineapple, and other tropical fruit.

ROSELLE - THE FLORIDA CRANBERRY

Most cracker homesteads had roselle plants in the backyard. The fruit was used to make jellies and relishes. Since no one makes jelly anymore, we think you will enjoy roselle as a beverage. Another name for this heirloom plant is Jamaican sorrel. In the islands sorrel is the traditional holiday beverage during the Christmas season. In Florida, it is also refreshing when served chilled on hot summer days.

1 cup roselle (dried or fresh)
2 Tbs. cinnamon chips or 2 sticks
1 tsp. Whole allspice berries
1 tsp. Grated orange peel

Bring 2 quarts of water to a boil. Add all ingredients and turn off heat. Steep for 10 minutes. Strain and sweeten to taste with sugar or honey. Serve hot or chilled. Roselle is a wonderful base for a rum punch.
SOUR ORANGE DRINK

The Spanish brought Seville oranges to Florida, planting them in St. Augustine as soon as they arrived. Within a few years they escaped into the surrounding forest. This tart flavored citrus, called sour oranges by many, spread throughout the peninsular where both natives and Crackers took to them with a relish. Wild oranges make a great beverage.

1 cup sour orange juice  
¼ cup sugar syrup  
2 cups water

Combine everything, mix well, and serve over ice. To make sugar syrup, combine equal amounts of water and sugar and heat until dissolved.

SOUR ORANGE BARBECUE SAUCE

Today, most sweet oranges and other citrus are grafted onto sour orange rootstock. After a hard freeze, the top of the tree may freeze down to the ground. The new growth that pops up in the spring is from the original seedling. When this happens, a Cracker might be heard to say “the tree done gone sour.” We now have a sour orange, from which we can make all kinds of good things. Try this barbeque sauce with a Florida flavor.
3 sour or Seville oranges
¼ cup red wine vinegar
¼ cup olive oil
¼ cup orange blossom or palmetto honey
1 large onion, chopped
1 Tbs. Worcestershire sauce
2 garlic cloves, minced
3 Tbs. Dijon mustard
2 cups tomato catsup
1 Tbs. Dijon mustard

Grate zest (skin) from oranges and set aside. Squeeze juice and set aside. Cook onions over low heat in oil until soft. Add zest and garlic, and cook another couple of minutes. Add remaining ingredients and bring to a boil. Immediately reduce heat and simmer for 10 minutes. Remove from heat and cool. For best results, marinate chicken, fish, or meat in sauce for several hours before cooking. At cooking time drain marinade and place food on grill. Baste with sauce occasionally. Additional sauce may be added at serving time.

WATERMELON RIND PICKLES

A Florida Cracker never wasted anything, especially a watermelon. Not many folks make pickles anymore. This recipe is worth the trouble.

watermelon rind
4 cups vinegar
8 pounds sugar
4 Tbs. whole cloves
4 cinnamon sticks

Cut off green skin and scrape away any of the pink flesh left on the inside of the rind. Cut rind into 1 ½ inch cubes and rinse in water. Soak melon cubes in a cup of salt and enough water to cover for 10 to 12 hours. Pour off water. Dissolve sugar in vinegar and bring to a boil for a few minutes. Add cinnamon and cloves and simmer.
until mixture becomes syrup, about 2 hours. Add watermelon cubes and simmer for an hour. Fill sterilized jars and seal.