

White Sweet Potatoes

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

My birthday was always a special occasion in our home, in spite of coming right after Christmas: It was also my father's birthday and everybody knew that we were going to have grated sweet potato pudding for dessert. Mother agreed to make the pudding *provided* Daddy grated the sweet potatoes. Not just any old sweet potato, mind you, but Hayman *white* sweet potatoes. The Hayman is an old variety that is sweeter and tastes better than other types (in my opinion). It is also hard to find as it is seldom grown commercially. We sometimes grew them in our garden but often bought them from an old-timer down the road who usually grew enough to have a few extra bushels to sell.

Most folks are only familiar with yellow, orange and red-fleshed sweet potatoes — popularly referred to as moist sweet potatoes (misleading) or yams (incorrect). As an Ethno-Gastronomist, I refer to them simply as “common-taters”. Sweet potatoes are in the Morning Glory family and native to South and Central America. Yams are in a different botanical family altogether, are large and starchy with little or no sweetness and are native to Africa. Sweet potatoes are not tubers like white potatoes and yams, but are swollen sections of root used to store nutrients and energy for the next generation. They are all highly nutritious and healthful, especially if you eat the skin. Sweet potatoes are rich in complex carbohydrates, dietary fiber, beta-carotene, vitamin C, vitamin B6, potassium, antioxidants and lots of other good stuff including cancer-fighting elements.

White sweet potatoes have a delicate, smooth flavor and the true Hayman, though referred to as white, is in a class of its own due to its sweetness and greenish hue when cooked. Legend has it that they were brought from the West Indies to the Eastern Shore by a ship's captain named Hayman about 150 years ago. A Methodist minister bought the lot and soon they were being grown throughout tidewater Virginia and down into North Carolina, but predominantly on the Eastern Shore. The Hayman is not a pretty potato — it has lumps and veins on the skin, grows in all sorts of shapes and sizes, only yields about one-third as

well as other varieties, is susceptible to disease, splits open readily during wet growing seasons and has to be cured and stored properly or it will rot. This all means that they have low producer, distributor and consumer appeal — except amongst the initiated minority. Truck farmers and market gardeners in Virginia and North Carolina typically grow higher yielding yellow or red sweet potatoes for the market and plant a patch of Haymans for themselves.

We have an unmentionable friend on the Eastern Shore who is an accomplished woodturner and sweet potato snob. She believes that the best tasting sweet potatoes come *only* from the Eastern Shore because of the terroir, or unique characteristics of climate and soil. She was raised on heirloom Haymans as was her mother and her grandmother. She maintains that, even on the Eastern Shore, there are a lot of plain white sweet potatoes that are sold as Haymans. The only way to tell if it is a true heirloom Hayman is to know who grew them or to take a few home and roast them. The heirloom Hayman is so sweet that it oozes puddles of syrup when roasting. It is soft and moist when done and has a distinctive green tint to the flesh. Natives know the growers of real Haymans and when they will be harvesting. They buy right from the field to be sure they get theirs before they are gone. They then take them home and cure them. In order to keep, sweet potatoes need to be cured. Once dug, they may be left in the sun for a day or two, then spread out in a dark, warm, humid room (about 85°) for a week or so before being stored in a cool dark area that never gets colder than 55°. Properly cured and stored, they will last through the winter and well into the summer. Never refrigerate sweet potatoes as they lose their sweetness, become mealy and deteriorate quickly at temperatures below 50°.



This fall, my local sweet potato grower introduced me to the O'Henry white sweet potato. Though not as sweet as an heirloom Hayman, the O'Henry is the next-best thing and often substituted in the markets: Flavor and texture is good, there are

no strings and the skin is smooth and thin. I bought the remainder of his crop for the store. We will be making grated white sweet potato pudding, roasting them for the deli and selling them raw until they are gone. In the deli, we generally reheat and caramelize the roasted potatoes on the flattop with lots of butter, a little cinnamon sugar and a sprinkle of our KA seasoning. We can omit any or all of these by request and serve them as unadulterated as you please.

Sweet Potato Recipes

Roasted (baked) sweet potatoes:

Select potatoes of a fairly uniform size so that they will cook evenly, wash them well (we use a stainless steel scrubby to remove any grit or rough spots), poke a few holes in the skin (not necessary or recommended with true Haymans), rub a little oil, butter or bacon fat on the skin, if desired, and roast until they are soft throughout, using the pinch test. Some people bake them in a quick oven, as high as 425°. I prefer a moderate oven (350° conventional or 325° convection) because we use the skins and don't want them over-cooked. A slow oven may even be better if you are not in a hurry as there are flavor enzymes that are active longer at lower cooking temperatures. On removing them from the oven, cover with a damp tea towel while they cool to soften the skin and enhance flavor. Another old timers trick from the Eastern Shore is to cook a bunch at a time and freeze them whole. Freezing the cooked potato actually improves the flavors. For a real Southern feast, serve with pork, fried or baked tart apples and greens.

Grated Sweet Potato Pudding:

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| 2 | Eggs |
| 2 Cups | Milk |
| 1 1/4 Cups | Sugar (I use 1 Cup with O'Henrys and even less with Haymans) |
| 3 Cups or about 1 Lb. | grated Sweet Potato, preferably white |
| 1/4 Cup | Butter |

A few splashes of pure Vanilla Extract or about 1 teaspoon.
Nutmeg to season - optional

Beat eggs and whisk in milk, butter and vanilla. Stir in potato soon after grating and before it turns brown. Sprinkle with nutmeg if desired. Pour into a buttered baking dish and bake at 350° for about 1 hour or until pudding is firm, nicely browned on top and a knife comes out clean. Serve warm (mnor cold) with heavy cream.

Note: We scrub rather than peel the potatoes and we now use a food processor attachment to grate them, then pulse briefly in the food processor bowl to break up the strands.

Candied Sweet Potatoes:

We never used a recipe, but this is basically how my mother made them at Thanksgiving and Christmas. We never used marshmallows. Figure on one good-sized potato per person plus however much you want for leftovers. Cook sweet potatoes in the oven or in boiling water until tender but not soft. It is better to undercook than to overcook. Peel and slice cooked potatoes and layer in an appropriately sized casserole dish.

On each layer place thinly sliced pieces of butter, white sugar, a few drops of vanilla, a little sprinkle of salt and a dash or two of ground cinnamon. Continue until container is full, ending with sugar, butter, cinnamon and vanilla.

Cover the dish with either aluminum foil or a tightly fitting cover and cook in a moderate oven (350°) until tender and bubbly (about an hour). If there is not enough liquid after this step, you can add some water or fruit juice. Uncover and increase oven temperature to 400°. Allow juices to cook down, basting the top with the syrup about every 10 minutes until it is as brown and crispy as you want.