

PENNY SAVER NEWS

FAX: 932-5261

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BY: Mary A. Keith, Ph.D., L.D.
Food, Nutrition and Health Agent**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY**

5339 S. County Road 579

Seffner, FL 33584-3334

PH:(813)744-5519 x 136, FAX:744-5776

e-mail:makeith@ifas.ufl.edu

Gator on Your Plate, Not in Your Pond

With all the alligators being caught in our backyard ponds and streams recently, someone had the bright idea to ask me about eating some of them. Trappers are allowed to sell the meat, and there is a legal hunting season for gators. Florida alone sold over 131,000 pounds of gator meat last year. Gator is available on-line as frozen steaks, or as frozen sausage links or patties. So there's no need to try to catch your own gator dinner! It turns out the questioner was more interested in the nutritional value of gator meat.

Although alligator is not in the usual nutrient content of foods lists, I did find some information in *Ethnic Foods Nutrient Composition Guide*. Compared to a beef chuck roast, alligator meat looks pretty good. The differences show up immediately. With 126 calories in 3 ounces of cooked gator compared to 224 calories in 3 ounces of braised beef, you can tell which is leaner. And where the beef has 12 g of fat, the gator has only 2 g! Beef has 90 mg of cholesterol where the gator only gives us 57 to 65 mg. Probably it has much less fat because the gator gets more exercise searching for its meals, and might go longer between meals.

As for eating gator, the flavor and texture seem to depend on who ate it and what part of the animal the meat came from. It's been described as feeling soft like fat or being very chewy, being white like chicken or darker like pork. Tail meat is whiter than the body meat and usually not as tough. The tenderloin is the big muscle that runs the length of the tail. It's considered the best cut. The texture is similar to veal or pork

shoulder.

Tail meat is also milder in flavor than meat from the legs or body. Some people say gator tastes like chicken or rabbit, others can taste pork, or frog legs. Probably gator has its own unique flavor that no two people describe the same way.

Very lean meat can get tough when it's dry-cooked, on a grill or broiler. So it's safer to cook gator tail in a stew or gumbo until you're used to working with it. Or use a marinade to flavor and add moisture. Cut into tiny bits, gator can be battered and deep fried too. It's almost like popcorn shrimp, tasty little mouthfuls. But that puts lots of fat back into the lean meat. You lose the benefit of eating low fat gator.

If the meat seems very tough, you can tenderize it by pounding it with a mallet. It can also be ground and cooked like burgers, or chopped finely and used in tacos.

Some sources say you can do anything with gator that you could with pork or chicken!

If you decide to you want to try some, compare prices. I found everything from \$5.50 to \$14 a pound. Some were steaks or pieces, some was sausage with spices all ready added. It can be stored frozen for 4 to 6 months. Thaw all frozen meat in the refrigerator. If you buy from a local seller you not only support the local economy but can get some personal tips on where the meat came from, and how to prepare it for the best results. Just be sure the seller has a valid license on display!

Here's an interesting recipe that can be prepared a day in advance. If you still aren't interested in cooking gator, you can make it with cooked chicken or leftover grilled pork chops too.

Gator-Tater Salad

2 pounds gator meat

1 Tbsp vegetable oil

½ C chopped pecans

¾ tsp minced garlic

2 C cubed boiled potatoes

1 C Caesar salad dressing

1 C chopped red bell pepper

3/4 C crumbled Feta cheese

1/2 C chopped celery

Salt, pepper to taste

Cut meat into bite-sized pieces. Heat oil in skillet over medium heat. Cook meat for 5 minutes, turning as necessary. Add pecans and garlic and cook 1 more minute.

Remove from skillet and refrigerate until cool. Stir in rest of ingredients and mix well.

Cover and chill overnight. Serves 6.

(Recipe courtesy of Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services)

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