

Regal Fruit Cocktail

Many of us have childhood memories of a dish of fruit cocktail served as part of a meal or school lunch. Did you try to find a cherry and eat it first? As a kid, I loved fruit cocktail.

Fruit cocktail is made with various kinds of fruit served in a liquid of fruit juices or syrup. Canned fruit cocktail contains diced fruit as opposed to canned fruit salad which has larger chunks. Presently, fruit cocktail can be purchased in cans and individual plastic serving cups or glass jars. However, we shouldn't forget that we can also make our own fresh fruit cocktail with berries and other fruits. Be creative, and combine chopped pieces of your favorite fruits.

Nutritionally, fruits contain fiber, minerals, vitamins, and antioxidants that are important for a healthy diet. Fruit cocktail can be packed in natural juices, light syrups, or heavy syrups. The liquid it is packed in makes a big difference in the nutritional content of fruit cocktail. Of course, natural juices are always best and lowest in calories. Light syrup will have added sugars, and heavy syrup will contain corn syrup and sugar and have the most calories. Remember, sweeteners do not offer any nutritional benefits and can be harmful when consumed in excess.

When most people hear the word "cocktail," they think of a mixed drink containing alcohol. While that is one definition of the word, it can also be used to describe a food made with a combination of pieces of food such as fruit or seafood. Two different men are credited with the invention of fruit cocktail; both Herbert Gray of the Barron-Gray Packing Company, and William Vere Cruess of the University of California, Berkeley.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulates food to ensure it is safe to eat and properly labeled for consumers. For fruit cocktail, the USDA stipulates that canned fruit cocktail must contain specific percentages of fruit. It must include grapes, peaches, and pineapples; optional maraschino cherries and other fruits are permitted. The percentages are 30% to 50% diced peaches, any yellow variety; 25% to 45% diced pears, any variety; 6% to 16% diced pineapple, any variety; 6% to 20% whole grapes, any seedless variety; 2% to 6% cherry halves, any light sweet or artificial red variety (usually maraschino cherries).

While fresh fruits are always preferable, this pantry staple is great to keep on hand and has many practical uses besides just enjoying it as a stand-alone treat. Try draining the juices and adding the fruit to yogurt, or leaving the juices in and putting it in a smoothie. Fruit cocktail can also be poured over ham and used as a sweet sauce while baking. Fruit cocktail is also a delicious topping for ice cream or frozen yogurt. If you want to sweeten up a traditional salsa, try draining and chopping up fruit cocktail and adding it to the salsa to transform it into a fruit salsa. A delicious and traditional way to use fruit cocktail is, of course, to add it to jello before chilling.

A yummy combination of your favorite fruit and a splash of juice makes a perfect ending to a meal. It's a great snack when everybody comes home from work or school and wants a healthy boost. It looks great at picnics and potlucks. It's a favorite of kids and adults alike!

(Sources: en.wikipedia.org; thenibble.com; United States Department of Agriculture; www.tasteofhome.com)