

All About Limes

By George Geary CCP



Lime History

In the eighteenth century, Scottish naval surgeon Sir James Lind learned by his observation of long-haul sailors that citrus fruits conquered the dreaded scurvy (lack of Vitamin C) which had divested the ranks of

the British navy more than any enemy. Between 1795 and 1815, some 1.6 million gallons of lime juice drastically reduced the mortality rate of seamen. Along with their daily ration of rum, British sailors were required to consume a daily ration of lime juice; hence British seamen became known as *limeys*. Since Britain was often at war with Mediterranean countries that exported lemons, limes imported cheaply from the English colony of Jamaica were substituted as the citrus of choice.

Key Lime (also known as Mexican Lime and West Indies Lime)

Cultivated for thousands of years in the Indo-Malayan region, this variety has long been treasured for its fruit and decorative foliage. The Key lime made its way to North Africa and the Near East via Arabian traders, and then carried on to Palestine and Mediterranean Europe by the Crusaders. Columbus is credited with bringing the Key lime to Haiti, where Spanish settlers to Florida carried it on. It flourished in South Florida, particularly the Florida Keys, hence the current common name of Key lime. Due to hurricane-depleted soils, locals switched from pineapple commercial crops to limes in 1906, and business boomed until a hurricane once again reared and wiped out the lime groves, never to be restored. Today, most Key limes come from Mexico.

Key limes are much smaller (ping-pong to golf ball-sized) than Persian limes, nearly spherical, thin-skinned, and often contain a few seeds. Green key limes are actually immature fruits, prized for their acidity. As they ripen to a yellow color, the acid content diminishes greatly, resulting in a sweeter fruit. Fresh Key lime is preferred for flavoring of fish and meats, marinades, making limeade, and garnishing drinks and plates due to its tantalizing bouquet and unique flavor. The juice is used for syrups, sauces, preserves, and of course, Key Lime Pie. Alas, most commercially available Key Lime Pies these days are made from the frozen concentrate of the Persian lime, not the Key lime. The Key lime is more difficult to find outside of Florida and California markets, and may be available only seasonally and/or in gourmet markets.

Persian Lime (also known as Tahiti Lime)

This variety has unknown origins but is suspected to be a hybrid of the Mexican lime and citron, a huge, yellow-green, lumpy lemon. Botanists believe this variety was introduced to the Mediterranean area via Persia (now known as Iran). It was carried to Brazil by Portuguese traders, and eventually made it to California in the latter half of the 1800s. Today, Florida is the largest grower of this variety, producing 90 percent of the U.S. crop, most of which is used for making fresh juice and canned or frozen juice concentrate.

The Persian lime tree has no thorns and produces thick-skinned fruit larger than the Key lime which keeps longer, good traits that make it a preferable commercial crop. The fruit is oval-shaped, about the same size as a lemon, with vivid green peel, which turns yellow when ripe. This is the variety most commonly found in stores. It is usually seedless, with light green to yellow pulp that is tender and acidic yet lacking the distinctive bouquet of the Key lime. It can be used interchangeably for the same purposes as Key limes and lemons, and is often used as a substitute for vinegar. Lime juice can also be used to clean lime deposits from the interiors of coffee pots and teakettles. Homeopathically, lime juice has also been used effectively to relieve the effects of stinging coral.

The origin of Key Lime Pie

The first Key Lime Pie was created in the 1850's. There were very few cows on the Keys of Florida in those days. The advent of sweetened condensed milk in 1856 was a real boon to the residents of the Keys. It was a natural reaction to combine the new product with the limes into a pie. The original pies had a pastry crust, of course, but the graham cracker crust dates back at least to 1949. Beware those pies tinted green. They are most likely not the real thing.

Lime selection and storage

Choose brightly colored, smooth-skinned firm fruits that feel heavy for their size. Avoid those with blemishes or decayed spots and those that look shriveled and feel soft. Although small brown areas on the skin (known as scald) will not affect the flavor or juiciness of the lime, a dry and shriveled skin will indicate an inferior fruit way past its prime. Persian limes are generally available year-round, with peak season from May through August. Be sure to wash limes thoroughly before using for zest.

Whole limes can be refrigerated up to ten days in a plastic bag. You may find they last up to several weeks but know that the flavor will be greatly diminished the longer they are kept. When the end of a lime's storage life is near, the skin becomes pitted. Lime slices or wedges should be bagged and refrigerated up to five days. Lime juice can be frozen, but not the whole fruit. Put the juice into ice cube trays. When frozen, pop them into a plastic bag, seal, and store up to four months in the freezer. For future recipe accuracy, you may wish to measure the

juice into the ice trays before freezing. Grated lime zest can be frozen in a sealed plastic bag.

Lime cooking tips

If you have no access to Key limes for some of these recipes, try substituting half lime juice and half lemon juice for the required amount of Key lime juice. It won't be the same, but it will be closer than using all Persian lime juice. Avoid using an aluminum pan when cooking with limes, particularly when making desserts. The acid reacts with the aluminum that can impart an off-flavor and a grayish color. Try substituting limes in your favorite Preserved Lemon recipe for a delightful change. For those on a salt-free diet, try using a bit of lime juice as a replacement seasoning.

Equivalents of Persian:

1 pound	=	6-8 medium limes
1 pound	=	1/2 to 2/3 cup of juice
1 medium	=	1-1/2 tbsp of juice
1 medium	=	1-1/2 tsp of zest

Key Limes:

1/2 of amount of Persian lime juice and 1/2 of amount of lemon juice
Estimate 2-3 times the equivalents for Persian