



Ripe Banana Cake *Pilhai*

Preparation time: 20 minutes • Cooking time: 1 hour • Serves: 24

1 dozen ripe bananas
1 cup self raising flour
1 small tsp salt

Mash bananas very well and add flour and salt. Put into greased baking tin and bake in moderate oven for one hour.



Origins and Transformations

The different variations of this dish result in very different requirements and results. The two basic varieties of *pilhai* are the savoury variety using boiled mashed *kumeras* (sweet potatoes) and the sweet variety using ripe bananas. *Kumeras* are also referred to as *taty* in the local Pitkern-Norf'k language, contrasting with Irish *taty*. Unripe green bananas can also be used. There are 10 varieties of *pilhai* listed in the Sunshine Club's Norfolk Island Cookery Book, and all involve grating or mashing vegetables and fruits into a mixture that can be baked. There are additional varieties on Pitcairn Island where other ingredients are available. Whatever the ingredients and whatever the season, the outcome is always tasty. There are lots of varieties of *kumeras* on Norfolk; good cooks (and good farmers) know the ones most suited to the best types of *pilhai*. They also know when the produce should be picked and used for the best results. The flexible and adaptable nature of what is used in *pilhai* and how it is prepared reflects the spontaneity that is required to adapt to living on Norfolk Island and using whatever is in season as part of one's culinary livelihood. What we provide here is a savoury and a sweet version of *pilhai*.

The 193 strong population of Pitcairn Island, a small island to the south east of Tahiti, which was settled by the *Bounty* mutineers and their Tahitian wives in 1789, was relocated to Norfolk Island in 1856, another small island some 1,700 km east of Sydney. They brought with them their language, tangible and intangible culture, ways of seeing the world, and of course, food. There are many traditional foods on Norfolk Island typically associated with the population that was moved from Pitcairn. *Pilhai* is one of the most well-known and most versatile Norfolk dishes.

Pilhai refers to a baked pudding made from a variety of grated or pulverised products including grated *kumara* (sweet potato), taro, breadfruit, or pumpkin. The traditional instrument used to grate produce for *pilhai* is the *yorlo*, *yollo*, a large serrated pumice stone brought from Pitcairn to Norfolk. *Pilhai* is made from whatever is around or in season. During the banana boom years on Norfolk in the 1920 and 1930s, bananas were a cash crop and were sent back to Australia for sale so *kumera pilhai* (the savoury variety) was more popular at that time. The difference between sweet and savoury was probably not as pronounced as it is today. Sugar and honey were not plenty in the early days, and people did not go to the shop for their food much. Today because bananas are more easily grown and prepared and are sweeter, ripe banana *pilhai* is more popular.

The word *pilhai* is recorded in both on Pitcairn and Norfolk. This means that it is one of the many words and concepts that was brought from more than 6000 kilometres away and which was adapted to Norfolk culinary and cultural capital. There are several spellings of the dish including *pilahai*, *pilai*, *pilhi*, and *pillhigh*. It was first documented, and referred to as *pillihey* on Pitcairn Island by Captain Beechey in (1831) who visited there in 1825:

The productions of the island being very limited, and intercourse with the rest of the world much restricted, it may be readily supposed their meals cannot be greatly varied. However they do their best with what they have, and cook it in different ways, the pig excepted, which is always baked. There are several goats upon the island, but they dislike their flesh as well as their milk. Yams constitute their principal food; these are boiled, baked, or made into *pillihey* (cakes), by being mixed with cocoa nuts; or bruised and formed into a soup. Bananas are mashed, and made into pancakes, or, like the yam, united with the milk of the cocoa-nut, into *pillihey*, and eaten with molasses, extracted from the tee-root.

When wrapped in soft banana leaves, the meal is called *wihi pilhai*. When home ovens replaced ground ovens on Norfolk, leaves were only used to line the base of baking dishes to prevent sticking and impart a unique flavour. *Plun* or banana *pilhai* uses mashed ripe bananas with flour, while *tieti* or *kumera pilhai* is generally prepared using only plain mashed *kumeras* along with a little desiccated coconut. *Pilhai* is similar to *poi*, *popoi* or *po'e* (a Tahitian desert made with fruits and arrowroot). This fruit pudding, generally eaten as a dessert, is prepared in a similar way to *pilhai*. It is traditionally made from cooking bananas, but eating bananas can also be used. *Poi* is very similar to Cook Island 'puke' but should not be confused with Hawaiian *poi* which is made from taro and water.

The Sunshine Club's Norfolk Island Cookery Book contains a number of other dishes with names in Norf'k, including *anna*, *mudda* and *marie*, all of them variations of the original recipe. The name of the dish made from cold *kumaras* and coconut milk is *anna*. A dish made from flour, boiled milk, and fruit such as red guavas, mulberries, or loquat is called *marie*, probably in honour of the woman who first produced it. The origin of the word *mudda* or *mada*, 'grated banana dumplings boiled in milk' is not clear. It has been suggested that the name of this dish, made from grated green banana dumplings boiled in milk derives from Polynesian *mata*, 'uncooked', 'unripe' although a form with this meaning is not recorded for Tahitian. The word appears in Källgård's 1998 Pitkern wordlist as *mada*, though the more usual Pitkern name of the dish is *China dumpling*, so named after the banana variety 'China'. It is possible that the Pitkern-Norf'k word *mada* may refer to the use of bananas when they are unripe or raw but

there is another possibility: the dish may have been named after an old Pitcairnesse woman who was called *Mudder* (Mother), and the first person to make *mudda*.

Pilhai probably originates from the Tahitian *pirahi*, translated as ‘the name of a species of food, bundles of food tied up’. The dish was one of the meals that the Polynesian partners of the *Bounty* mutineers introduced to Pitcairn Island and adapted to local ingredients. There are several spelling variations, multiple methods of preparation, all using vegetables that were easily found on the island.

Like other linguistic and cultural adaptations, *pilhai* adapted to the new environment of Norfolk Island. In the same way that cow’s milk, which was not present on Pitcairn, was substituted for coconut milk in the dish *mudda*, because coconuts did not ripen properly on Norfolk, *pilhai* also changed its form and content on Norfolk. Again due to the absence of fresh coconut in the early days after the Pitcairners arrived on Norfolk, it was simply left out. Once a store was established and there was a ready supply of tinned and desiccated coconut, the traditional Pitcairn interpretation of the dish was revived. *Pilhai* is an essential dish served at the *Bounty Day* (8 June) picnic at Kingston on Norfolk, the annual celebration of the arrival of the Pitcairners on Norfolk Island. The event reinforces the cultural identity of the Pitcairners as connected to Norfolk’s natural and cultural landscape and also to a broader connection to Pitcairn, Tahiti and the South Pacific.

Different spellings and recipes for *pilhai* and different names for the same dish are typical of an oral language spoken in a subsistence society. It also is indicative of the adhoc-ness of Pitcairn and Norfolk cooking as an element of its culture. The language has a number of informative expressions such as the Pitkern *allen* ‘poor food’ after Allen Christian who, when disappointed with dinner said grace with the words ‘where is the food we are about to receive’ or Norf’k *snel* ‘to cater insufficiently’, or *slogos* ‘hastily whipped up scones.’ Because the cuisine was not overly sophisticated, the main meal was eaten in the evening and the same meal served cold often made its reappearance at breakfast time or in the lunch boxes of the islanders who worked in their *fence* ‘enclosed gardens’ or on fishing vessels. In this sense *pilhai* was a sensible and practical dish to prepare and eat; it did not require refrigeration and would keep for several days. The main meal was usually in the evening and they also would have had a Sunday meal – such as leg bone stew.

Recipe books are not necessarily able to cope with ingredients that are not continually present in the cultivated or wild vegetation where they are collected. In oral cultures and cultures where things such as vegetables and other perishable items are not consistently present, the writing of recipe books and the documentation of recipes as intangible cultural heritage and the utilization of recipes for creating tangible (and edible) cultural heritage is quite a problematic exercise. Norfolk cookbooks are not essential because the recipes come from such an oral culture. However, they are ideological statements and markers of identity, just as the use of the *yorlo* stone for grating the ingredients is not essential but is understood to lend the dish authenticity. Cookbooks are sold to tourists and islanders in order to show that they support an important social activity, e.g. the Sunshine Club, the publisher of the most well-known Norfolk cookbook, which is a hospital auxiliary and helps finance medical supplies for Norfolk Island. In the same way that Norf’k has moved from being an everyday language to a marker of social identity, *pilhai* has also moved from being an unmarked, everyday food in the past to a symbolic marker of Norfolk identity and culture in the present.

Further Reading

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