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Harvesting palmito in Ecuador

## ...Eat Palmito (Heart of Palm)!

### *The "millionaire's salad"*

Palm trees are more than the symbol of tropical beaches. Many have eatable fruits (dates and coconut are the most famous), while the wood is employed for building houses, including covering of the floors, and the leaves are employed for making of roofings, parquets, brooms and baskets. Starch is extracted from the sago palm. But perhaps one of the least known and exquisite products of the palm trees is the palmito, or 'heart of palm'. Heart of Palm is the crunchy-creamy growing terminal bud, from which all the new leaves will grow, collected from about 20 species of palm trees. The palm tip is cut off, and the fibrous husk is removed. Most edible palms have one bud, and its removal kills the tree. The palmito of a 32-foot (11 m) coconut palm can weigh 4 to 7 pounds (1.8-3 kg); but usually one kg (2.2 pounds) is obtained from two trees, 10-15 years old. For many years, Brazil has been producing uncultivated heart of palm from Juçara palm (*Euterpe edulis*) and Açai palm (*Euterpe oleracea*), with a great detriment to ecological environment as 100 million wild palm trees were destroyed each year. Heart of palm is an expensive exotic "gourmet" commodity, and the main world consumer is France. In 1983 Brazil exported to France about 95.69 % of its production. As harvesting from the wild does not secure a prime quality product, for 1994 Brazil's exports' to France dwindled to half, while Costa Rica turned into the main exporter to US and Ecuador to France. Both countries cultivate palms for the palmito trade. Cultivated heart of palm is of high quality. Açai palm is cultivated in Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay for this purpose, while peach palm or pejobaye (*Guilielma gasipae*) in Ecuador and Costa Rica. The palmito is crunchy and has an intense nutty flavor, like immature almonds or hazelnuts with a legume overtone, being popularly consumed raw in salads. Palmito cooked together with the unopened young leaves growing from it is called "palm cabbage". When pickled and fermented, it is called "palm cheese." The palm hearts coming from various palm tree species may look superficially similar, still they differ not only in size, but also in sweetness, bitterness, and fiber content (which gives tenderness). In the case of the peach palm, harvesting the heart does not kill the tree, which produces several new stems. The coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) and sabal (*Sabal spp.*) too are harvested for palmito.