

## Micronesia Culture & Foods

Country of Origin: Federated States of Micronesia

Primary Language(s): Marshallese, Gilbertese, Chuukese, Pohnpeian, Kosraean, Carolinean, and Ulithian

Percent of Iowa's Population:

### Background

Micronesia is divided among several sovereign countries. One of these is the Federated States of Micronesia, which is often called "Micronesia" for short and is not to be confused with the overall region. The Micronesia region encompasses five sovereign, independent nations—the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Nauru—as well as three U.S. territories in the northern part: Northern Mariana Islands, Guam and Wake Island.

The Federated States of Micronesia is the 45<sup>th</sup> poorest country in the world with the primary income source coming from the sale of fishing rights to foreign nations that harvest tuna. The island tourist industry consists mainly of scuba divers that come to see the coral reefs, do wall dives and visit sunken ships from WWII. Relatives working in the US that send money home to relatives represent the primary source of individual income.

The FSM has a generous system of social welfare. Health services are provided and medications dispensed for a minimal fee to all citizens with the government absorbing most costs. Grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services cover the cost of many immunization and disease prevention programs within the country.



*A Micronesian family enjoying a picnic*

### Education and Literacy

Formal education is mandatory in Micronesia with most children attending grade school between the ages of 5 and 14. Families are beginning to place a higher value on education with education beyond grade school increasing from 25 to 47 percent. Only 27 percent of males and females between the ages of 18 and 21 attend college.

### Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

Men typically have the more dominant role in a Micronesian home. Women show respect for their husbands by walking behind them in public or serving them first during meals. Public displays of affection between males and females are extremely rare.

Older members of society are highly respected and assurances are made that they are well cared for.

Food illustrates the importance of generosity in Micronesian cultures. Sharing food with visitors is necessary, and hosts take pride in providing meals to others. Guests are generally fed first and are expected to eat well before socializing.

Many Micronesians believe in the power of deceased ancestors to influence events and the existence of spirits.

### Holidays & Celebrations

Food and dance are the focal point of most ceremonial occasions. Feasts involving the distribution of enormous quantities of food are integral to religious ceremonies, government celebrations, and secular parties marking life-cycle events and changes in status.

National holidays include New Year's Day (1 January), Constitution Day (10 May), United Nations Day (24 October), and National Day (3 November). Christmas (25 December)

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## Health Disparities

According to the World Health Organization, Micronesia has the highest prevalence of Hansen's disease (leprosy) in the entire Pacific region with 100 new cases diagnosed annually.

In comparison to other racial and ethnic groups, Pacific Islanders have higher rates of smoking, alcohol consumption, and obesity in the US. On the islands many of the Micronesian citizens chew tobacco as well.

Data has shown that Micronesians suffer disproportionately from diabetes.

The incidence rates for liver cancer among Micronesians was 39.4 per 100,000; significantly higher than the remaining United States at 5.2 per 100,000. This could be linked to the nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands completed by the US in the 50's.

## Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

Micronesians traditionally enjoy a diet of coconut, taro, yams, breadfruit, bananas and citrus fruits. The main source of meat among this population tends to be fish and seafood along with occasional pork; however, they also enjoy chicken, primarily on special occasions on the islands. Rice, ramen noodles or bread are typically served with each meal.

## Considerations for WIC

- If the participants come in as a family, the male often times will be the one to speak on behalf of the participants. Women are often very soft spoken.
- Micronesian families will often use the full WIC food package without modifications needed.
- Micronesians are typically quiet and soft spoken. They tend to be close to family members and males are often seen as the head of the household.
- Micronesian citizens are free to come to the United States with I-94 documentation as part of the Compact Free Association Amendments Act of 2003 however; they are not eligible to receive federal public benefits. The most widely needed referral is health and dental coverage for these families.
- Breastfeeding is the standard form of infant feeding among the Micronesian population. Most have become very "westernized" and are able to navigate systems easily.

## What's the Iowa Connection?

The Micronesian population has migrated to Iowa seeking employment in factories, nursing homes and restaurants (often times Japanese or Chinese restaurants). In addition, Micronesian citizens come to the United States to provide quality education and health care for their children.



*Coconut Chicken With Yams and Rice*

## How are we Living?

Traditionally Micronesians live in households with extended family all under one roof, however, as they have become more westernized; they are moving toward more single-family households in the US. Coconut is a staple in Micronesian food preparation using coconut oil, milk, meat... Hot rocks are used to cook on and banana leaves are used to wrap rice, taro, noodles, and meats in. Food is a central part of the Micronesian lifestyle and families sit together to eat. Much like most Iowans the Micronesian population drives cars for transportation. A large population is located in Dubuque, Maquoketa, Davenport, Durant, Storm Lake and Mason City though this culture is becoming more widely dispersed throughout Iowa.

