

Beans Are Healthy, Tasty, Cheap Comfort Food

BY ANDREA WEIGL

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In winter, there's nothing more comforting than a warm, meltingly tender bowl of beans — whether as soup, side dish or cassoulet.

The best starting point for those meals is dried beans, one of the most frugal items at the grocery store and healthiest forms of protein. Dried beans also can help many of us succeed at those New Year's resolutions to save money and eat better.

The problem is, dried beans scare home cooks. They require forethought because most recipes call for soaking them overnight. Plus, there's a lot of conflicting advice. To soak or not to soak? When to add salt? To cook in the soaking liquid or start with fresh water?

We contacted experts to sort through confusion: Nancy Harmon Jenkins, author of half a dozen cookbooks focused on Mediterranean cuisine; Megan Lambert, a senior instructor at Johnson & Wales University in Charlotte, N.C.; and Steve Sando, owner of Rancho Gordo, an heirloom bean company based in Napa, Calif.

2 COOKING METHODS

If you are a home cook who plans ahead, you should soak the beans ahead of time. Place the beans in a pot covered by 3 inches of water, and let sit for 6-8 hours. The next day, bring the beans to an initial boil and then turn down to a simmer. Depending upon the age and type of bean, it can take an hour and a half or longer to cook the beans. You may have to add water from time to time if the beans absorb it all. Do not salt the beans until they are tender because salt can turn out mealy beans instead of creamy ones. (Chick peas and runner beans need to be soaked.)

If you are a procrastinator, beans may need to be a weekend meal or one enjoyed on a day when you are working from home. Or you can make a basic pot of beans one day to use in a recipe the next day.

Sando suggests a method from Russ Parsons, food editor at the *Los Angeles Times*. Place 1 pound of beans and 6 cups of water in a Dutch oven and bring to a simmer. Once simmering, put a lid on the pot and place it in a 350-degree oven. Cook until the beans are done, 1 to 2 hours; you want a tender bean, but dried beans produce a firmer end result than canned. The bean's skin can split, but you don't want the beans to be disintegrating.

Add 1 teaspoon of salt halfway through the cooking time. Parsons swears the beans taste better this way.

Consider doubling the beans that you need for a recipe and freezing half. That way you have them on hand to make soups, baked beans, salads, or purees to spread on toasted bread.

A SLOW COOKER

Lambert, whose husband is Mexican, often cooks black beans at home. She soaks the beans overnight and then brings them to a boil. She then transfers the beans and their cooking liquid to a slow cooker, adding a chopped onion, a bit of lard and some epazote, a Mexican herb that some believe lessens beans' gas-inducing effects.

Epazote can be bought fresh at Latin groceries or dried at Penzey's stores or online, penzeys.com

TUSCAN BEANS WITH OLIVE OIL AND AROMATICS

This dish could be a main dish with bread and a salad or a side dish to grilled chicken breast, pork chop or steak. Dried cannellini beans can be found at Whole Foods but check cooperative grocery stores and specialty grocery stores. From "The New Mediterranean Diet Cookbook," by Nancy Harmon Jenkins (Bantam Dell, 2009).

1 1/2 cups dried white beans, such as cannellini, soaked overnight and drained

Any or all of the following aromatics: 1 small onion, quartered; 1 garlic clove, lightly crushed; 4 or 5 sage leaves; 2 bay leaves; 2 bay leaves; 12 black peppercorns; 1 small dried hot red chili

1/4 cup best-quality extra-virgin olive oil

Sea salt and freshly ground black or white pepper

1 tablespoon minced flat-leaf parsley

Set beans in a saucepan and add 3 1/2 cups water and any or all of the aromatics. Do not add salt. Bring water to a boil, turn the heat down, cover the beans and simmer gently for 30 minutes to 1 1/2 hours, adding boiling water from time to time if necessary to keep the beans from scorching. Be attentive; if the water gets low, the beans will scorch very quickly. Cooking time depends on the size and age of the beans, which is hard to assess. At the end of 30 minutes, start testing the beans to judge how tender they are and continue testing periodically until the beans are done. They should be very tender but not falling apart.

Remove beans from the heat and drain them, reserving the cooking liquid. Discard the aromatics used in cooking the beans. At this point, if you wish, remove about 1/2 to 3/4 cup cooked beans and crush them gently, using a fork, in about 1/2 cup of the reserved cooking liquid. Then stir in the crushed beans with the whole cooked beans. Add more cooking liquid if you wish to reach the desired consistency. Or leave all the beans whole and add 1/2 cup or more of the reserved cooking liquid.

Add olive oil to the beans while hot and stir to coat the beans well. Dress them with one of the combinations or devise your own:

1 garlic clove, minced, and 6 scallions, both white and green parts, sliced on the diagonal.

A little chopped raw onion and finely slivered fresh green chilies.

The juice of 1/2 lemon along with 1/2 teaspoon ground cumin and chopped fresh hot red chilies or a pinch of hot red pepper flakes.

Finely minced fresh green herbs — basil, dill, fennel tops, chervil, sage, lovage, borage or others.

Taste and add salt and freshly ground black or white pepper after dressing the beans. Whatever the flavors or garnishes, however, the beans should be sprinkled with minced parsley

before serving. Serve hot or at room temperature.

Yield: 6-8 servings

CHICK PEA STEW

This Turkish dish has a lot of ingredients but it's easy to cook and delicious. Drained yogurt is made by draining the yogurt in a cheesecloth-lined strainer for several hours. This dish keeps well for a few days in the refrigerator and benefits from being made ahead. From "Mediterranean Harvest: Vegetarian Recipes from the World's Healthiest Cuisine," by Martha Rose Shulman (Rodale, 2007).

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
2 onions, sliced
4 garlic cloves, chopped
1 teaspoon cumin seeds, crushed
1 teaspoon fennel seeds, crushed
1 teaspoon brown sugar or 2 teaspoons pomegranate molasses
1 tablespoon white wine vinegar,

sherry vinegar, or lemon juice

4 tomatoes, peeled and chopped; or 1 (14-ounce) can of tomatoes, drained and chopped

1/2 teaspoon Aleppo pepper, or 1/4 teaspoon sweet paprika and 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper

4 ounces leaf spinach

1/2 pound dried chick peas, cooked and drained; or 2 (15-ounce) cans chick peas, rinsed and drained

Salt
1/4 cup chopped fresh herbs, preferably a mix of flat-leaf parsley, dill and mint

Lemon wedges

Drained yogurt (see headnote)

Heat oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium heat and add onions.

Cook, stirring, until tender, about 5 minutes, and add garlic, cumin and fennel seeds. Cook until onion has colored slightly, 5 to 8 minutes. Add sugar and

stir together for a minute, then stir in the vinegar, tomatoes and Aleppo pepper or substitutions. Cook, stirring, until the tomatoes have cooked down a bit, about 10 minutes.

Stir in spinach, chick peas and about 1 teaspoon salt. Add enough water so the dish can simmer. Simmer uncovered over medium heat, stirring often, about 20 to 25 minutes. The stew should be saucy but not watery. Add salt to taste and stir in the herbs. Serve with lemon wedges and yogurt.

Yield: 4 servings

DOWN-EAST BAKED BEANS

Adapted from "Serious Pig: An American Cook in Search of His Roots," by John Thorne with Matt Lewis Thorne (North Pointe Press, 1996).

1 pound (2 cups) Maine yellow-eye beans (acceptable substitutes: Great Northern or white navy beans)

1/4 pound salt pork
1/2 cup dark, full-flavored molasses
2 tablespoons dark rum
1 teaspoon mustard powder
Salt and pepper to taste

Pick over the beans, removing any debris or pebbles. Place beans in a non-reactive pot, cover by 3 inches of water and let sit for 6 to 8 hours.

Place beans and what remains of soaking liquid into a large pot, adding more water if necessary to ensure the beans are covered. Bring this to a simmer, and after 15 minutes, check every 5 minutes until a sharp breath will split the skin of a bean. Then drain the beans into a colander, sitting on top of a bowl to catch the cooking liquid. Return cooking liquid to pot and let simmer on the stove while preparing beans for baking.

Preheat oven to 250 degrees.
Cut salt pork into bite-sized pieces and pour boiling water over to cover

well. Drain after several minutes, discarding the liquid. Mix the salt-pork pieces into the prepared beans and pour them together in a 2-quart bean pot. Stir in the molasses and rum. Dissolve mustard powder in a bit of water and mix this in well. Add seasoning to taste, starting with about 1/2 teaspoon each of salt and pepper. Pour over just enough of the simmering bean liquid to be visible through the beans.

Turn off the heat under the pot of simmering bean liquid. Reserve to add to baked beans as needed.

Cover baked bean pot and put in the oven. Bake beans for 5 hours, tasting occasionally, noting texture and seasoning, and adding more of the remaining bean liquid or else water as necessary. When beans are soft and succulent, stir them well, uncover and bake 1/2 hour more to thicken the liquid into sauce.

Yield: 4-6 servings

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