



Full of Beans

BY PERRI BLACK

Some people inherit fine jewelry, valuable artwork, or large tracts of real estate; I inherited jars and bags of dried beans, and not the kind that grow into giant beanstalks leading to castles in the clouds. While not redeemable for significant amounts of hard currency, these beans are a welcome and nutritional part of my family legacy.

My mother was a big fan of dried beans, especially the heirloom varieties she grew to exhibit at the Fryeburg Fair. Mom was a historian who earned her second degree in New England Studies from the University of Southern Maine. She focused on traditional rural home crafts, such as spinning fibers and weaving textiles, and I'm sure dried beans appeared somewhere during her research into 19th century New England life. At any rate, something sparked her interest and she began to grow dried beans in our vegetable garden.

After her first harvest, she was hooked. She continued to grow different varieties of dried beans over the years and won many prize ribbons, including blues, at the Fryeburg Fair. To enter the fair, however, one needs only enough beans to fill a few half-pint jars; the rest of the harvest is presumably consumed by the farmer. Not so with Mom—she wasn't interested in cooking. Despite my protestations, she continued to grow several kinds of dried beans every year; she'd shell some to enter in the fair and leave behind paper bags full of the rest, still in their crispy pods. Thus, my inheritance.

I'm not complaining, though. I whiled away many autumn evening hours shelling those bags of beans and fondly remembering my mom. The beans are very decorative in their jars lined up on the shelves and they are delicious in salads, soups, and other recipes depending on the season. I have also given some to friends who will carry on my Mom's tradition of growing the beans to exhibit at the fair.

Beans are culturally ubiquitous, versatile, and good for you. Most cuisines include some of the thousands of varieties—think soybeans in Asia, lentils in India, Italian cannellini beans, Mexican black beans and navy beans in the U.S., to mention only a few. Beans are high in fiber and protein and can serve as a low-carb substitute for potatoes in many recipes, particularly soups. They are also inexpensive, easy to cook, and freeze well. Properly stored dried beans will keep virtually indefinitely in the pantry but for the best taste and nutritional value they should be consumed within two or three years of drying.

As an added bonus in these pandemic times, the (usually undesirable) flatulent effect of beans may encourage social distancing and wearing face masks to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Perhaps the CDC should include bags of dried beans in their list of essential Personal Protective Equipment.

There are a number of ways to cook dried beans so experiment to find which way suits you best. I always soak beans before cooking. Beans dried from the current har-

vest won't need much soak time, maybe as little as a few hours, but older beans require much longer—I've soaked some for as long as three days. My mom cooked her beans in a crock pot and I usually do, too. Drain soaked beans and put three parts water to one part beans in the crock pot; cook on high for three hours. When the time is up, taste the beans and, if necessary, continue cooking, tasting every 20 minutes or so until desired tenderness is reached. You can also bring the soaked beans to a boil in a large pot, cover the pot, and simmer on the back burner until done, tasting every 20 minutes after about an hour. Like soaking, the length of cooking time will depend on the age of the beans.

I often put a halved onion, some whole garlic cloves, a few black peppercorns, and a couple of bay leaves into the crockpot with the beans to add a little flavor. Other spices and herbs can be added depending on how you intend to use the cooked beans. The jury is still out on whether or not to salt the beans before they are fully cooked (apparently some think salt toughens the bean skins). I salt mine after cooking, just to be safe.

There are too many recipes for traditional New England baked beans to include here—I'm sure most people already have their own favorites. I prefer the English version with Heinz baked beans (vegetarian in a tomato sauce) on toast topped with chopped onion and grated Cheddar cheese, anyway. But I will share a few of my favorite bean recipes that most people seem to like. ✨

QUICK, EASY BEAN SALAD

2 to 4 servings as a side dish

This delicious salad is very free-form and has endless variations. It can also be doubled or tripled to take to potluck dinners or picnics. Use whatever beans you like and have on hand. Vary the amount and type of sturdy fresh salad vegetables depending on taste and availability. Use a pre-made bottled vinaigrette dressing or make your own—try experimenting with different types of vinegar.

1 1/2 c cooked chickpeas (1 can) or other beans of choice

1/4 c each diced onions, green bell

peppers, red bell peppers, and cucumber salt and pepper to taste

1/4 to 1/2 c vinaigrette dressing*

*Classic French vinaigrette: In a small bowl mix together 1 tbsp vinegar, 1/8 tsp salt and freshly ground black pepper until salt dissolves. Whisk in 4 tbsp olive oil and 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard until thoroughly combined.

Combine beans and vegetables in a bowl. Add ¼ cup dressing and taste. Gradually add more dressing plus salt and pepper, tasting all the time (as cook you decide when it's right!). Chill at least an hour before serving. Refrigerate leftovers for a great lunch.

CREAMY WHITE BEAN AND FENNEL CASSEROLE

From Aaron Hutcherson in *The New York Times*, 4 to 6 servings

- 6 tbsp olive oil
- 2 large fennel bulbs (about 2 lbs.)
- salt and black pepper
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 c cooked dried white beans (cannellini, Great Northern, navy) or 2 14-ounce cans
- 1/2 c heavy cream
- 1 tsp fresh lemon zest plus 2 tbsp juice from 1 lemon
- 1/2 c panko breadcrumbs (use chopped nuts for a gluten-free dish)
- 1/2 packed c finely grated Parmesan cheese

Preheat oven to 425°. Trim fennel, reserve and roughly chop about ¼ c fennel fronds. Cut bulb in half lengthwise, then slice crosswise into ¼-inch thick slices.

Heat 2 tbsp oil in large oven-proof skillet over medium heat. Add sliced fennel, season with salt and pepper, cook, stirring occasionally until softened but retaining a little bite, about 12 minutes. Stir in garlic and cook 1 to 2 minutes.

Pour 1-1/2 c cooked beans (or 1 can with liquid) into a blender. Add cream, lemon juice, and 2 tbsp oil; puree until smooth. Add remaining beans to the skillet along with the bean puree. Stir and season generously with salt and pepper.

Mix panko with remaining oil in a small bowl. Add Parmesan, lemon zest, and ½ tsp pepper, toss to coat. Sprinkle evenly over fennel/bean mixture in skillet.

Bake until bubbly and lightly golden, about 15 minutes. Broil 1 or 2 extra minutes until topping is browned in spots (if desired). Top with reserved chopped fennel fronds and serve hot.

RIBOLLITA (Tuscan "reboiled" bean soup)

Adapted from *Soups and One-pot Meals* by Christian Teubner, 4 to 6 servings

- 8 1/2 ounces dried (or 2 cans) white beans (cannellini, navy, Great Northern)
- 4 tbsp olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, diced
- 2/3 c diced onion
- 5 ounces ham, meaty ham bone, or pork chop
- 1 small dried chili pepper
- 2 thyme sprigs and 1 rosemary sprig, or 1/2 tsp each, dried



- 1 c diced carrots
- 2/3 cup thinly sliced celery
- 3/4 c thinly sliced leeks
- 10 ounce pkg. frozen spinach, thawed, or equivalent fresh
- Salt and pepper
- 4 to 6 slices baguette or country-style bread, toasted
- Freshly grated Parmesan cheese

If using dried beans, soak overnight and drain. Heat half the olive oil in a large pot and sauté garlic and onion without letting them brown. Add the beans and ham/pork, pour in 9 cups of water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and add chili pepper, thyme, and rosemary. Simmer covered for an hour.

Heat remaining olive oil in frying pan and sauté carrots, celery, and leeks 3 to 4 minutes stirring continuously. Add vegetables to beans and meat, simmer 50 minutes. Add spinach and simmer another 20 minutes.

Set oven to broil. Remove meat from soup and chop into small pieces. Set aside.

Remove half the soup to a bowl or blender and purée using an immersion or regular blender and then return to the pot. Add meat and season with salt and pepper.

Put toasted bread in ovenproof soup plates or bowls and sprinkle with half the Parmesan cheese. Ladle in the soup, sprinkle with remaining cheese, and place briefly under the broiler to melt the cheese. Serve immediately.

CASSOULET WITH LOTS OF VEGETABLES

Adapted from Mark Bittman's *The Food Matters Cookbook*, 4 to 8 servings

I make this in my slow cooker.

- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 1 pound Italian sausages, bone-in pork chops, bone-in duck breasts, or mushrooms
- 1 tbsp minced garlic
- 2 leeks, rinsed and sliced, 2 sliced onions, or 2 small sliced fennel bulbs
- 2 carrots, cut into 1-inch lengths

- 3 celery stalks, cut into 1/2 inch pieces
- 2 zucchini or 1 small head green cabbage, cut into 1/2 inch pieces
- Salt and pepper
- 2 c chopped tomatoes (canned are fine – include their juice)
- 1/4 c chopped fresh parsley
- 1 tbsp fresh thyme or 1 tsp dried
- 2 bay leaves
- 4 c cooked beans of choice (canned okay, reserve liquid)
- 2 c stock (vegetable or chicken), dry red wine, bean liquid, or water

Heat oil in a large pot over medium-high heat for 1 minute. Add meat or mushrooms and cook, stirring occasionally, until deeply browned, 10 to 15 minutes for meat, a bit less for mushrooms. Remove from pan with slotted spoon and transfer to slow cooker (if using) or plate.

Reduce heat to medium, add garlic, leeks, carrots, celery, and zucchini; sprinkle with salt and pepper, cook about 5 minutes. Add tomatoes with their liquid, herbs, and meat/mushrooms (if not using slow cooker) and bring to a boil. Add beans and bring to a boil, stirring occasionally. If using a slow cooker, transfer everything to it now. If not, reduce heat so mixture bubbles gently and continuously, cook 20 to 30 minutes, adding stock or other liquid about halfway through cooking if mixture gets too thick and vegetables are melting away.

For slow cooker, set to high and cook 2 to 3 hours, checking on progress starting at 2 hours. Add stock or other liquid if mixture looks too dry.

When ready to serve, remove meat (if using) and debone (if necessary) and chop into chunks. Discard bay leaves. Return meat to pot, add a pinch of cayenne, cook another couple minutes to warm through (may take a little longer with a slow cooker). Taste and adjust seasonings.

These recipes are lovingly dedicated to Sue Black, who passed away on June 22, 2018, and is deeply missed by her family.