

Beans are good for the planet, for you and for your dinner table. Here's how to cook them right.

By Joe Yonan, February 2, 2020 Washington Post

(Photos by Stacy Zarin Goldberg for The Washington Post; food styling by Lisa Cherkasky for The Washington Post)

The following is an edited excerpt from “Cool Beans” by Joe Yonan (Ten Speed Press, 2020).

“We’re just here for the beans.” That’s what we told the waiter at Máximo Bistrot in Mexico City, where my husband, Carl, and I were honeymooning.

More specifically, the beans we had heard so much about, the ones chef Eduardo Garcia calls his “very, very old fashioned” soup. These beans, which he gets from the state of Hidalgo, are named cacahuate because they resemble peanuts when raw. (As I discovered later, they’re the same variety as cranberry or borlotti.) The waiter brought us two big bowls: The beans were super-creamy and golden in color, fatter than pintos, with a broth so layered and deep and, well, beany, that it made me swoon. It seemed so simple — just beans and broth and pico de gallo — that I could hardly believe how much flavor I was tasting. My husband, still recovering from a bout of digestive distress, seemed to come back to life before my very eyes. We left happy and restored.

Such is the power of a humble bowl of beans.

For far too long, beans have had something of a fusty reputation in the United States. But over the past few years, thanks partly to a growing interest in plant-based cooking and an awareness of the impacts of our dietary choices on the planet, beans have become hipper than ever. Also playing a role: the growing realization that

beans have deep roots and are part of the culinary fabric of nations around the world.

When cooked from dried, with precious few other ingredients added, they create a rich broth to rival anything that ever came from boiling a chicken. They freeze beautifully in this liquid, making them ideal for make-ahead, finish-quickly meals. They're pretty darn good straight from a can. And they can play into virtually every kind of dish, in every part of the meal: dips and snacks, salads and soups, main courses, sides and even desserts. As far as I'm concerned, anything meat can do, beans can do better.



Lentil-Mushroom Farmer's Pie With Turmeric Cauliflower Mash.
[[Make the recipe: Lentil-Mushroom Farmer's Pie With Turmeric Cauliflower Mash](#)]

Still, beans are a little mysterious and perhaps even intimidating, and questions abound about the best ways to cook them.

I used to follow the conventional wisdom: Always soak, to help them cook more quickly. Never salt until near the end of cooking, to avoid making them tough. Ditto for acidic ingredients of any kind. Only use a pot on the stove top or in the oven, so you can peek from time to time and add water as needed.

Over the past several years, however, many of these rules have gone out the window. Now, here's how I say you can make the most flavorful pot of simple beans ever. Quantities are all based on 1 pound.

Pick over/rinse. Quickly sift through a batch of beans, looking for any foreign matter or dirt, and rinse if they're not going to be soaked and it seems necessary. Most beans I get are very clean, so this step has become more and more moot.

To soak or not? For the most part, I don't bother. Soaking usually doesn't speed things up enough to make it worth it, and you get more flavor and color in the beans when you skip it. (This is especially true of such thin-skinned varieties as black beans.) There's no need to soak when you use a pressure cooker or Instant Pot, either. But I am usually buying beans from such sources as Rancho Gordo, Camellia and other high-end purveyors, and their beans are pretty fresh. The one exception: If you suspect a batch of beans might be very old or you're unsure of the age, then soak them to give the beans a fighting chance to cook in a reasonable time. When you do soak, follow the advice of food scientist/writer Harold McGee and America's Test Kitchen and add 1 tablespoon of kosher salt to enough water to cover the beans in a bowl by three inches, creating a brine that adds flavor to the

beans and helps them soften faster. Soak them overnight (or for at least four hours), covered, at room temperature, then drain before proceeding.

Add salt. Forget the conventional wisdom that holds that you never salt beans until the end of cooking. It's been disproved. If you have brined the beans, add 1 teaspoon kosher salt to the cooking water at the outset. If you haven't brined them, add 1 tablespoon. There's no better way to get your beans fully seasoned.



Orecchiette With Borlotti Beans, Bitter Greens and Lemony Bread Crumbs.

[Make the recipe: Orecchiette With Borlotti Beans, Bitter Greens and Lemony Bread Crumbs]

Use other seasonings. For every pound of beans, throw in half an onion, a few garlic cloves, a bay leaf or two and a strip of kombu, a dried seaweed that's known to have as positive an effect on softening the beans as soaking does.

Enzymes in kombu can also help the digestibility of beans, including reducing the gaseous effects. Add a dried chile pepper or two, plus any herbs or other spices you like. (I like to lightly flavor the beans to increase their versatility.)

What about tomatoes, citrus and other acids? As with salt, the idea that these ingredients will toughen the beans if included at the beginning is overstated. If it's no more than a few tablespoons as part of the seasoning, go ahead and add at the beginning. The hardening effect of acidic ingredients kicks in only when they're included in higher proportions; if you want to do that, wait until they're tender.

Water. I don't typically measure the amount, instead filling the pot with as much water as needed to cover the beans by two inches if they've been soaked, three inches if they haven't. Less than this, and you'll probably need to add more water before the beans are ready, especially when cooking in a stove-top pot. Much more, and the bean liquid — liquid gold — won't be concentrated enough. (The exception is when pressure cooking, when you should use three cups of water for every one cup of beans.) I use tap water, even though D.C.'s municipal water is considered "moderately hard," meaning it has moderate amounts of such minerals as calcium and magnesium, and hard water can cause beans to take longer to soften than distilled water. If you have particularly hard water or want to shorten your bean-cooking time, consider using distilled water, or add 1/4 teaspoon baking soda to the cooking water for each pound of beans. (Some say the baking soda can make the beans taste a little soapy; if you find this, rinse them before using.)

Pick your cooking method. I vary this depending on the amount of time I have, how much attention I feel like paying, and whether I want the intoxicating aroma of beans to fill the house or to be sealed up inside an Instant Pot or other pressure cooker. Note that when it comes to cooking beans, all times are approximate, because there is so much variation depending on the age of the beans.

- Pressure cooker. You can cook most varieties of beans on any given weeknight in only 15 to 30 minutes (not including the time it takes to come to pressure or to naturally release), with no soaking required. You can use a stove-top model, an Instant Pot or another multicooker. Prepare the beans as described above, cook at high pressure and let the pressure naturally release. If the beans are undercooked, either bring the machine back to pressure and cook for another 5 minutes, then manually release the pressure to check again, or continue cooking the beans uncovered. Even once the beans are ready, I like to cook them uncovered for 10 to 20 minutes more to concentrate the broth. As Rancho Gordo's Steve Sando puts it, this "breathes life" back into what can be a lackluster broth.

- Stove top or oven. I usually use a Dutch oven for this. First, bring the beans to a boil for 10 minutes; this helps get rid of some of the "anti-nutrients" such as lectins. Then lower the heat as low as it will go, cover the pot and cook until the beans are very tender (usually 1 to 1 1/2 hours); you can continue to cook them uncovered for a bit, if you'd like, to reduce and concentrate the broth. In the oven, after the initial boiling, bake at 300 degrees for about the same amount of time.

Store them right. Unless eating the beans immediately, remove the kombu, bay leaf and onion (the garlic usually disintegrates), and pour the beans into glass Mason jars with enough of their liquid to cover them for the best storage. (Add a bit of water if needed to cover.) One pound of dried beans results in enough cooked beans plus liquid to barely fit in two quart-size jars. Refrigerate them for up to a week. Or store them for up to six months in gallon-size zip-top freezer bags, in their liquid (or water if needed to cover), freezing them flat for easy defrosting later. They also freeze well in tempered glass. Now that you've got them cooked and ready, here's something I've learned while researching my latest book: In addition to recipes that were built for beans, you can take almost any favorite — a shepherd's pie that would normally feature lamb, a pasta where you might expect to find sausage, even a chocolate brownie — and seamlessly weave beans into it. Such is their power.