

Brown Beans

by Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

I recently drove through the hill country of Western Virginia to pick up some apple butter and the makin's for our ice creams. As I passed by the small towns, I had a persistent hankering for a good old bowl of brown beans fixed "mountain style". Back before fast food joints took over the highways, every small town had a café or lunch counter serving brown beans. On the winding mountain roads, most small country stores had gas pumps out front and kept a big pot of brown beans simmering on the back of the cook-stove to serve lunch to local workers and travelers. Finally I could stand it no longer and pulled into a small truck stop-deli outside of Lynchburg and, lo and behold, they had a soup-pot full of brown beans just simmering away. I filled a bowl, topped it with minced onions, asked for two slices of white bread (they were out of corn bread) and sat down to savor the satisfying goodness of unpretentious country cooking. And oh, the memories!

Mountain-style beans are cooked slowly for hours or days in plain water with a ham hock or some salt-cured meat such as fatback, jowl or bacon and seasoned only with salt and pepper. In spite of prolonged cooking, mountain style beans retain their individual "beanness". They are soft but not mushy and the flavorful broth is relatively thin. Generally speaking, flatlanders and Yankees just can't cook beans the same way. They tend to cook them too fast and add all sorts of aberrant ingredients such as molasses, mustard and tomatoes. Mountain-style beans are served with broth in a bowl, topped with a dollop of finely minced onion and accompanied with bread, traditionally corn bread but sometimes biscuits or white bread. Often the corn bread is crumpled up and added to the bean broth. When cooked greens, usually collards, are added to the fare, it is called "supper" and constitutes a complete meal, nutritionally and gastronomically.

The brown bean belt extends about 100 miles on each side of the "Great Warriors Path", which runs through the valleys from Pennsylvania to Georgia and later became Route 11 or Lee Highway in Virginia. Scotch-Irish and German settlers migrated down ancient trails through the valleys and spread out laterally to occupy every hollow that had a source of water and some flat land to grow at least enough food to last through the winter, with hopefully enough left over to trade for necessities. Similar food traditions are found throughout the mountainous regions of Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North and South Carolina and Georgia.

Settlers in these regions quickly learned the value of Indian crops and cropping systems, notably the planting together of the "three sisters", corn, squash and beans. Corn gives bean vines something to climb on, beans enrich the soil with nitrogen and help support corn stalks. Squash vines function as living mulch, shading the soil to keep it cool and moist and discouraging weeds and varmints.

Native Americans knew instinctively that beans and corn (or any grain) are also nutritionally synergistic. Succotash, Brunswick stew, bean cakes fortified with cornmeal and brown beans served with corn bread are all adaptations of Native American foods. Beans are high in the essential amino acids that corn lacks and vice-versa. Together they provide the cheapest source of complete protein available. Squash and other vegetables round out the diet with additional vitamins and minerals. Meat, though a welcome addition, is not nutritionally essential.

Beans have been proven by research to be good for your health and longevity. They are high in fiber and low in fat and have a low glycemic index. They are a good source of potassium, magnesium, folic acid and other essential vitamins and minerals. They help reduce cholesterol, reduce the risk of coronary disease and diabetes and have been shown to reduce the risk of some types of cancer.

Many types of beans were grown by different tribes and traded to settlers who saved seeds for replanting over many generations. Isolation and selection resulted in hundreds of local “heirloom” bean varieties. Many have been lost but many have been collected and saved by organizations and individuals dedicated to preserving our cultural heritage. Bean snobs are quick to tell you that, as in much of agriculture, the few varieties that have been bred and selected for commercial production are bland, tough and tasteless when compared to the old “unimproved” varieties.

Beans grown by early settlers were multipurpose: When young and while the pods were still tender, green beans were used fresh as “snaps” or “string beans” and were threaded and hung to dry for use in the winter as “leather breeches.” As they matured, the beans were shelled and became known as “shelly” or soup beans. These were either eaten as fresh beans or dried for winter use. Over time, plants were selected and propagated that were more suitable for one use or the other. Later maturing varieties were best suited for shelling and drying and became known as “October” or horticultural beans. Some cultivars were better suited as green beans and were harvested during the summer. Anyone who has ever had a garden knows how good home grown Kentucky Wonders are, especially when cooked “Southern-style”; long and slow and seasoned with a ham hock. Unfortunately, we now have to settle for commercial beans. The only way for most of us to experience beans at their best is to grow our own or be fortunate enough to find some at a farmer’s market. Even in the mountains, brown beans are usually pintos instead of Octobers.

No article on beans is complete without addressing the common association between beans and flatulence. Beans contain complex sugars and starches which are difficult to digest and pass into the lower intestine to feed the natural population of harmless bacteria which, in turn, produce particularly odoriferous vapors. There are several simple ways to minimize the digestive discomfort associated with legumes in general and dried beans in particular. First: Eat more beans to build up the population of suitable flora higher in the digestive system. Start with small portions and increase until beans are an integral part of your diet. Second: Prepare beans in ways that reduce or denature troublesome sugars. Soaking overnight and discarding the soaking water helps some, but you also discard significant nutritional and flavor components. Long, slow cooking with or without pre-soaking breaks down the complex and indigestible sugars into easily digested simple sugars. Third: Add some herbs and spices during cooking. Bay leaves, black pepper and onions improve flavor and digestibility. Fourth: If you have persistent problems, try some *Beano*, which provides a digestive enzyme the body lacks.

To prepare mountain-style brown beans: Spread dry beans out in a pan and pick out any rocks or foreign matter. Rinse well, then put in a pot and cover with plenty of water and soak overnight. The overnight soaking softens the beans all of the way to the center so that they cook faster and more evenly, but with slow cooking is not really necessary. Most people discard the soaking water thinking that they are getting rid of the sugars that cause flatulence, but they are also discarding nutrients and flavor. I prefer cooking them in the soaking water and rely on long slow cooking to change the sugars to more digestible forms. Most people add the salted seasoning meat when they start cooking beans. Salt toughens the skins and acids, such as tomato or vinegar, prevent softening. I don’t add anything to the pot until the beans start to soften. Bring to a boil and then immediately reduce the heat to a simmer or about 190°F. After about an hour, add a ham hock or some fatty cured meat such as bacon and forget about them for a few hours. They are even better reheated the second day.

