

Bumper Crop

- With their culinary versatility and nutritional punch, legumes are finally getting the respect they deserve ●

By Stephanie Cooper

Not too long ago, mentioning beans in polite company would elicit responses ranging from nervous titters to eye-rolling. Notorious for causing gastrointestinal distress and about as exciting as Cream of Wheat, beans and their cousins in the legume family were relegated to the status of second class citizens in the culinary world.

Aliza Green, who wrote *The Bean Bible* five years ago, says that at the time, no one gave the book a second glance. “My late grandmother even said, ‘Why do you want to write a book about beans? Everybody hates beans.’”

Today, the tides have shifted, and legumes are getting the respect they deserve as a nutritional powerhouse and a versatile culinary ingredient. Green, who revised and expanded her original book, has seen *Beans: More than 200 Delicious, Wholesome Recipes from Around the World* go into a second printing. “Americans,” says Green, “are very limited in what they know about beans. There are three dishes that Americans know: split pea soup, three bean salad and baked beans.” Thanks to a variety of factors, though, we’re beginning to catch on to the wonders of the legume.

Legume Legacy

Before delving into the reasons behind our evolving enlightenment, let’s explore the variety of edibles that make up the legume family. Legumes are plants that have seeds inside their pods. These edible seeds, also known as pulses, fall into four categories: beans, peas, lentils and peanuts. The first three are often dried, and eaten either whole (such as kidney beans) or split in half (such as lentils). Sometimes they’re eaten with their skins intact, and sometimes the skins are removed.

The consumption of legumes dates back over 12,000 years, when our hunter-gatherer ancestors roasted the morsels. Scientists have discovered fava beans in the Egyptian pyramids, and ancient civilizations in Peru and Mexico grew bean crops 9,000 years ago. Likewise, lentils have been traced back 9,000 years in the Middle East and Ethiopians domesticated the cowpea over 5,000 years ago. Clearly, legumes were an integral component of the diets of our ancestors in every corner of the world.

To Your Health

Our ancestors incorporated legumes into their diets for good reason: beans, peas and lentils are packed with nutrition. Starting at the top, they’re protein-rich—lentils and chickpeas (also known as garbanzo beans) are 25% protein,

and one cup of beans provides as much as 16 grams of protein. Because they contain significant amounts of the amino acid lysine but are low in the amino acids found in grains, legumes and grains are often eaten together to provide a “complete” protein. Indeed, nature reinforced the complementary nature of the two: peas and lentils often grew as weeds when grains were being domesticated. It’s interesting to note that the soybean contains both sets of amino acids, and so is considered a complete protein.

Legumes are also rich in B vitamins, particularly folate. Because our bodies don’t produce folic acid, it’s important to get this vitamin—which has been shown to help prevent birth defects, curtail cancer risk and promote heart health—from the foods we eat. One cup of cooked beans can provide the daily recommended intake of folic acid (except for pregnant women, who should consume more).

Beans and their legume cousins contain many other important nutrients, including iron, potassium, calcium and thiamine. Plus, they’re low in fat. With the exception of soybeans and peanuts, legumes get less than five percent of their calories from fat.

When it comes to dietary fiber, legumes come out on top every time. The insoluble fiber helps keep our digestive tracts healthy, while the soluble fiber helps our bodies handle fats and carbohydrates. A myriad of studies have documented the ways in which a diet high in fiber can decrease a number of health risks, ranging from heart disease to some types of cancer.

Seeing the Light

Aliza Green believes that, until recently, Americans have relegated legumes to the back burner because of fear. “The fear of beans is the fear of embarrassment,” she says, referring to the effects of beans on the digestive system. “The health benefits get people over their fear,” she says.

According to Green, their nutritional value is but one reason that Americans are beginning to embrace beans and other legumes. There are a number of factors that, when taken together, create an environment



Chickpea Fries Riviera Style

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 1/2 cups chickpea flour
- 4 cups cold water
- 4 cups canola, peanut or soybean oil, for frying
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 cup freshly shredded Parmigiano-Reggiano or other strong-flavored hard grating cheese, such as Asiago or Pecorino Romano

Generously brush an 8-inch square baking pan with the olive oil. Place the chickpea flour into a bowl and vigorously whisk in the cold water. Keep whisking until you have a smooth paste. Pour the batter into a heavy-bottomed pot and bring to a boil over medium heat, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon. Cook for 5 to 10 minutes, or until the mixture thickens and comes away from the side of the pan, as with polenta. Remove from the heat and beat until very smooth. Using a rubber spatula, scrape the batter into the oiled pan and cool; then place a sheet of waxed paper or plastic wrap on top and chill in the refrigerator.

When ready to finish the dish, cut the cold batter into 2 1/2” long matchsticks, the size of French fries. In a large pot, heat the canola or other oil to 365°F on a deep-frying thermometer. Fry about one-fourth of the sticks at a time. When they are crispy, golden and covered with blisters (about 8 minutes), remove them carefully using a wire skimmer or slotted spoon and drain on paper towels. Sprinkle with salt and pepper to taste.

Preheat the broiler. Arrange the chickpea fries in a single layer on a shallow baking pan and sprinkle generously with salt, pepper and the cheese. Broil for 5 to 10 minutes, or until the cheese is lightly browned and crusty. Serve immediately.

Makes 6 servings.

Recipe excerpted from *Beans: More than 200 Delicious, Wholesome Recipes from Around the World*, by Aliza Green, 2005, Running Press Book Publishers. Photo by Steve Lagato

BEAN BIBLE

Whether you're seeking information or inspiration on your voyage into the world of legumes, you need look no farther than *Beans: More than 200 Delicious, Wholesome Recipes from Around the World* (Running Press Books, 2004, \$19.95). Aliza Green's passion for pulses is evident from the depth and breadth of knowledge she imparts. While *Beans* is a fabulous cookbook, what makes it special is that it is also a primer on everything relating to legumes.

In the first two chapters, Green covers the history and importance of legumes, along with a guide to 120 varieties of the gems. Those who may feel timid about preparing beans will embrace the third chapter, which outlines all of the cooking basics. Notes on ingredients and a comprehensive glossary round out the educational aspects of *Beans*.

We wouldn't want to overlook the body of the book, though, since Green has lovingly compiled a compendium of culinary delights that draw on her travels around the globe. The soup recipes range from Cuban Black Bean Soup to Egyptian Fava Bean Soup, while the main dishes will take you from Thai Shrimp and Green Beans in Orange-Red Curry Sauce to Roasted Gigot of Lamb with Flageolet Gratin. Lest you think legumes are only suitable for soups, salads and side dishes, Green cooks outside of the proverbial box and offers a number of delectable desserts. The Idaho Pinto Bean pie is reminiscent of pecan pie, while the Viennese White Bean and Hazelnut Torte uses ground nuts as a replacement for flour.

Those adhering to a strict low-carb eating plan will need to make some substitutions (Splenda instead of white sugar, for example) in a few of the recipes. One of the wonderful things about *Beans*, though, is that it invites you to use your own creativity in making the recipes your own. For those who might be intimidated by the sophistication of some of the recipes, Green's mastery of the world of legumes will be there to guide you each step of the way.

that is definitely legume-friendly. The growth of Spanish and Latin cuisine, which incorporates beans into a variety of dishes, has spurred an interest in legumes, as have Mediterranean and Indian cuisines.

Green also notes that chefs have begun to incorporate beans into their restaurant offerings. "Chef Cesare Casella from Beppe uses Italian heirloom beans. His signature dish is a seven-bean salad. He cooks seven different kinds of heirloom beans in seven different pots and mixes them together." Casella's passion for beans spilled over into his website, www.republicofbeans.com, where he offers a selection of beans and other products from Italy.

The interest in beans and other legumes is in large part due to the greater availability of many varieties of beans. "With the Internet,"

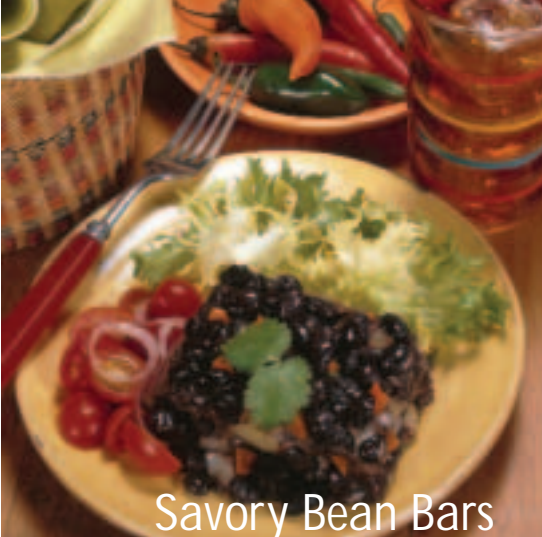
Green says, "you can get almost any heirloom bean you want." This includes her favorite, imported Spanish beans, "which, in my opinion, are the best in the world."

Farmer's markets are increasingly offering beans for sale. "You can buy fresh shelled lima beans and cranberry beans," Green says, "and quite a few vendors are selling fresh beans that you can shell." She's also starting to notice that grocers are offering frozen beans. "At my local Latin market, I can find eight kinds of frozen, shelled beans, and I can get frozen favas at the Portuguese market."

Americans may be more apt to embrace legumes because they're fresher than in years past. "The quality of beans in general is getting better," Green says. "Dried beans used to be up to ten years old. The older the bean is, the harder it is to digest." Increased interest means



LOSING WEIGHT WITH LEGUMES ● Whether you're watching your carbs, your glycemic index or your calories, beans, peas and lentils can help you lose weight. The high fiber content of legumes brings down their net carb count, and makes you feel full longer. In addition to increasing your satiety levels, legumes have a low GI rating, helping to prevent spikes in your blood sugar. These factors, together with the nutritional punch that legumes provide, should make them an integral part of your eating plan.



Savory Bean Bars

- 1 1/2 cups black beans, soaked overnight in large pot of water
- 4 cups seasoned broth
- 2 large red or yellow bell peppers
- Optional: 1 small jalapeno pepper
- 3 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2 teaspoons cumin
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/3 cup chopped, packed cilantro leaves
- 1/2 pound sliced Jarlsberg Lite cheese, finely chopped
- Salt to taste

Drain soaked beans. Place beans in saucepan with broth. Bring to a boil and simmer until beans are tender (between 40 and 90 minutes). Note that cooking times vary greatly; follow package directions.)

Meanwhile, char bell peppers (and jalapeno, if desired) over an open flame or under broiler, turning often to blacken evenly. Place in plastic bag 10 minutes to steam. When cool enough to handle, gently scrape off charred skin. Remove seeds and stems. Dice bell peppers to yield about a cup. Mince jalapeno.

Mix cocoa, cumin, cinnamon, cilantro and Jarlsberg Lite into peppers mixture. Set aside. Drain beans well (reserving broth for another use). Mash 1/2 the beans with a fork or potato masher. Add both mashed and whole beans to cheese mixture.

Line 8-inch square baking pan with foil. Spray with non-stick oil spray. Spoon in bean mixture and press down. Cover with oil sprayed foil. Bake at 375°F for 30 minutes. Using oven mitt, press down again on top of foil. Serve warm. Note: Bars may be cooled and cut into 16 2-inch pieces, stored in airtight container or wrapped in foil and refrigerated for up to 2 days.

Makes 16 servings. Calories 111, Protein 9g, Total Fat 2g, Sodium 304mg, Cholesterol 6mg, Carbohydrates 14g, Calcium 130 mg.

Recipe and photo courtesy of Jarlsberg Norwegian Cheese.

greater turnover in beans, which means they're fresher. "Fresh beans make all the difference in the world," exclaims Green.

Taking the Plunge

If you're ready to incorporate more legumes into your diet but are still a bit apprehensive, Green offers reassurance. "Start with a side dish. Don't kill yourself trying to make a whole meal of beans." She says salad recipes are very easy, though you can also throw a can of chickpeas on top of a green salad or include a can of white or red beans into a soup.

Green's experience with beans proves that they can fit nicely into a virtually any eating plan. "Take white beans, put them in a blender with a little water and make a sauce that you can use instead of a cream sauce," she suggests. "In Italy, when they serve steak they serve cranberry beans with sage, garlic and a little tomato. Instead of potatoes, have

lentils. Instead of mashed potatoes, have white bean puree."

Green also encourages Americans to follow the rest of the world, and start snacking on beans. "Have edamame and beer instead of potato chips and beer. Eat chickpea fries. They're still fried, but they're a lot better for you than regular French fries," she says.

And don't be timid when it comes to cooking beans. Beans pair well with strong seasonings, and Green advises, "Be a little heavy-handed. Use chili powder or Indian curry spices. Beans are kind of plain and it's hard to overdo it with seasonings."

With beans making a name for themselves in restaurants and home kitchens alike, it's time to embrace these nutritional nuggets. The variety of legumes and the options for preparing them are virtually endless, so let's stop counting beans and start cooking them! ♦

BEAN BASICS

WHEN SHOPPING FOR LEGUMES:

- Visit ethnic markets, such as Indian shops, for less common legumes, or buy them online at www.chefshop.com
- Look for beans, peas and lentils that are of a similar size and condition, as they will cook more evenly
- Be sure the legumes are free from mold
- A deep, glossy color signals that the legumes are fresh

WHEN USING DRY BEANS:

- Before soaking or cooking, remove any dirt or debris mixed in with the beans
- Store dry beans at room temperature in a dry, airtight container away from heat and light
- Use beans within one year of purchase
- Rinse beans before using

HOW TO SOAK:

- You don't need to soak split peas or lentils
- Most beans rehydrate to triple their dry size, so use at least five cups of water for each cup of dried beans
- Soaking beans overnight will keep the beans uniform
- For a quick soak, bring water (10 cups per one pound of dry beans) and beans to a boil for two to three minutes, remove from heat, cover and let stand for one hour

- Always drain and rinse beans before cooking; never use the soaking liquid to cook the beans

COOKING TIPS:

- Place beans and cold water (about four times the volume of the beans) into a heavy-bottomed pot
- Simmer beans instead of boiling them; boiling will cause the skins to split
- If the beans will be cooked a second time in a recipe, cook until just tender the first time
- Skim off any foam that forms as the beans cook
- Add seasonings such as garlic, onion, oregano and thyme to the pot while beans are cooking
- Salt and acids (like tomatoes) inhibit penetration of the water and slow down the beans' softening; add these ingredients no sooner than halfway through the end of the cooking time
- Cooking times for beans vary greatly; be sure to read the directions on the package
- A pressure cooker can significantly reduce cooking time, while retaining vitamins and minerals normally lost through steam
- Beans need salt to bring out their full flavor, so don't skimp on the seasoning
- Beans are done when they are tender, but not mushy.



Zippy Lentil Soup with Warm Smoked Turkey Salad

- Zippy Lentil Soup
- 2 tablespoons Lucini Premium Select Extra Virgin Olive Oil
- 1 cup chopped onion
- 2 teaspoons chopped garlic
- 1/2 cup pearl barley
- 1/2 cup lentils
- 1 can (16 oz.) crushed tomatoes
- ? teaspoon marjoram
- ? teaspoon black pepper
- 2 cans (13.75 oz.) beef broth
- 1 cup chopped celery
- 1 1/2 cups (6 oz.) shredded Jarlsberg or Jarlsberg Lite cheese

Heat olive oil in large saucepan. Sauté onion and garlic 2 minutes. Add barley and sauté 2 minutes more. Add next five ingredients and bring to boil. Simmer, covered, 30 minutes. Add celery and simmer 10 minutes longer. Sprinkle about ? cup cheese on each serving. Makes 4 servings.

Legume Lingo ● There are over a thousand varieties of legumes and many more subspecies. To help you navigate the world of peas, beans and lentils, here is a sampling of the most popular varieties.

PEAS:

Black-Eyed Pea ● The black dot on white skin gives the black-eyed pea its name. With a savory flavor and smooth texture, it's popular in the South, where it's traditionally eaten for luck on New Year's Day with rice and sausage.

Chickpea (Garbanzo Bean) ●

With a nutty flavor and firm texture, the chickpea is central to Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cuisine, where it's used to make everything from hummus to minestrone soup. Chickpea flour (found at Indian markets) can be used as a partial substitute for baking.

Green (Split) Pea ● Most often used in split pea soup.

Pigeon Pea: Its strong flavor is popular in the South and in the Caribbean.

Yellow (Split) Pea: With an earthier flavor than green peas, it is used in Scandinavian soups and British Pease puddings.

Yellow-Eyed Pea: Similar to the black-eyed pea and popular in the South.

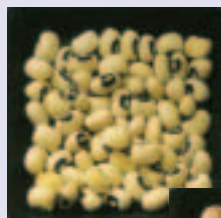
LENTILS:

Beluga Lentil: Often used in soups and salads, it glistens after cooking, making it resemble Beluga caviar.

Black Chickpea: Often used in Indian cooking, this rust-colored legume has a nutty flavor.

Brown Lentil: Familiar to most Americans as the lentil used in soups.

French Green Lentil: Also grown in North America and Italy, this salad favorite remains firm after cooking and pairs well with salmon.



Black-Eyed Peas



Garbanzo Beans

BEANS:

Anasazi Bean: Sweet heirloom bean that is terrific for refried or baked beans.

Appaloosa Bean: With markings like an appaloosa horse, this bean is often used for chili and soup.

Azuki Bean: Used by the Japanese to make sweet red bean paste, it's also good in rice dishes and salads.

Black Bean: Also called Turtle bean, this medium-size, black-skinned bean is a staple of Latin American and Caribbean cooking. It has a strong, earthy flavor and is perfect with strong seasonings in soups, bean dips and salads.

Cannellini Bean: An Italian bean with a smooth texture and nutty flavor that is often used in minestrone soup or bean salad.

Christmas Lima Bean: When cooked, it has a chestnut flavor.

Cranberry Bean: Also called Roman bean, it readily absorbs the flavors of spices. With a nutty flavor, this bean is often used in Italian soups and stews.

Bean

Counters...

- One pound dry beans = two cups dry beans
- One pound dry beans = six cups cooked beans
- One cup dry beans = three cups cooked beans

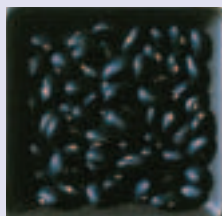
GASTRONOMICAL GASSES ●

Beans produce gastrointestinal gas because they have sugars that make them difficult for the body to digest. Many people avoid eating beans just for this reason. It's a chicken-and-egg scenario, though, because people who eat beans frequently experience fewer problems with gas. If you're concerned about gas, start slowly incorporating legumes into your diet, and increase the amount over time. You might want to start with lentils, as they are easier to digest. This will give your body the chance to adapt. Some other tips for breaking down the beans' gas-producing enzymes:

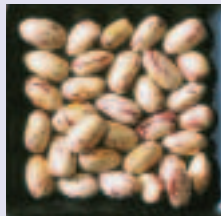
- Soak beans for at least eight hours before cooking
- Change the soaking water often
- Change the water during the cooking process
- Skim off the foam that develops during cooking
- Remove the skins from the beans using a food mill



Baby Lima Beans



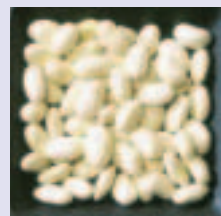
Black Beans



Cranberry Beans



Dark Red Kidney Beans



Great Northern Beans

Fava Bean: As Hannibal Lector can attest, this meaty, strongly flavored bean makes for a great side dish; in green form, it's perfect for pasta sauces.

Great Northern Bean: A medium-sized white oval with a mild flavor, the Great Northern is often used in cassoulets and stews.

Lima Bean: A flat-shaped, white bean with a smooth, creamy texture. Its buttery flavor makes it a great side dish or a delicious ingredient in soups, stews or casseroles.

Lupini Bean: Due to its slightly bitter flavor, this bean is often marinated and served in salads.

Marrow Bean: With a bacon-like flavor, it is often pureed in soups.

Navy Bean: Northeasterners use it in baked beans, but it's also good in soups, salads and chili.

Pinto Bean: This mottled beige oval turns brown when cooked. It's most familiar as the bean used in refried beans and chili.

Pink Bean: Used in Puerto Rican cuisine, this creamy bean is great for dishes that require slow cooking.

Red Bean: Louisianans use this for their classic red beans and rice dish, while Southwesterners often use it to make refried beans and chili.

Red Kidney Bean: Holds up well during cooking, making it great for chili, soups and casseroles.

Rice Beans: One of the few beans that cooks in just minutes, it is often substituted for rice when making risotto.

Soybean: The king of nutrition, the soybean is used to make everything from tofu and milk to soy sauce and cheese.

Tepary Bean: A staple of Native Americans in the Southwest, it's a great choice for refried beans and chili.

Tolosana Bean: Pairs exceptionally well with seafood.

Trout Bean: A German heirloom sweet bean that is good in soups and casseroles.

Large Red Kidney Beans



Navy Beans



Pink Beans



Pinto Beans



Small Red Beans



Photos courtesy of the American Dry Bean Board, www.americanbean.org.