

Easy, forgiving, healthy and economical, beans are a home cook's secret weapon. Yes, canned beans are convenient, but knowing how to cook dried beans gives you flexibility, and makes for a far more delicious meal. This guide will tell you everything you need to know about preparing beans and some of their relatives in the legume family, including lentils and split peas, both on the stove and in the pressure- or slow-cooker.

# How to Cook Beans

A guide by Melissa Clark

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## Before You Start

1. Check for a date on the beans; freshness matters. Dried beans last up to two years, but are best cooked within a year of harvest. Always rinse beans before cooking, and check for stray rocks, twigs and leaves.
2. Leave substantial time for bean soaking (either overnight or using our shortcut method) and cooking. If you are short on time, choose lentils or adzuki beans, which cook quickly and don't need soaking.
3. To add more flavor, consider cooking your beans in stock or broth instead of water (and see our chapter on seasonings for more ideas).

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## Choosing Your Bean

There are dozens of varieties of beans, but these are the ones you're most likely to encounter. Use this list to figure out what to buy when you want them to fall apart into a soup or dal (lentils, flageolet and split peas), or hold their shape for salads (adzuki, black-eyed peas, chickpeas, cranberry and kidney). As a general rule, 1 cup dried beans makes about 3 cups cooked.

1. *Above, from left: cranberry beans, lentils, black beans, chickpeas, red kidney beans, split peas, pinto beans and cannellini beans.*

**Adzuki:** These small, scarlet beans cook quickly, with a sweet flavor. They're often used in Japanese bean paste desserts, but are versatile enough for salads, soups and stews.

**Black:** Also known as turtle beans, these full-flavored beans are classic in Latin American cooking, usually for soups and stews.

**Black-eyed peas:** These small earthy-flavored beans, also known as crowder peas and cowpeas, are particularly cherished in Southern cooking.

**Cannellini:** These mild, starchy white beans are often used in soups and stews, particularly in Italian cooking.

**Chickpeas:** These nutty-tasting legumes, also known as garbanzo beans, are used all the globe in many guises:

soups, stews, dips and even fried or roasted as a snack.

**Cranberry:** These red-and-brown speckled beans have a rich, toasty flavor. They hold their shape well for salads, soups and stews.

**Fava:** Dried favas, also known as broad beans, have a very strong, meaty flavor and a somewhat thick skin. Beloved in Middle Eastern cuisine, they are made into soups, stews and salads.

**Flageolet:** These are a creamy, smooth, pale green-to-white-hued bean from France with a thin skin. They work well for soups and purées.

**Great Northern:** These large white beans with a firm texture and gentle, nutty flavor are great for stews and soups.

**Kidney:** These large red beans are often used in salads and chili. Some people find them particularly hard to digest, but soaking and rinsing before cooking can help, as does using a pressure cooker.

**Lentils:** There are several varieties of these tiny legumes, ranging from shiny black beluga lentils, which remain nicely intact for salads, to orange-hued “red” lentils, which collapse into a thick purée when simmered. In between, there are brown lentils (good all-purpose lentils) and more expensive French green lentils, also called Puy lentils, which take a bit longer to cook and have a nice sweet flavor. All lentils are relatively quick-cooking and don’t need any presoaking.

**Lima:** Large white dried lima beans take on a velvety, creamy texture after simmering, and hold their shape well.

**Navy:** These small white beans have a nutty flavor, and cook more quickly than other white beans. They are the traditional choice for Boston baked beans. Like red kidney beans, they can be easier to digest if you soak and rinse before cooking.

**Pinto:** These are small brownish-pink beans frequently used in Mexican and other Latin American cooking, particularly for refried beans, stews and chili.

**Split peas:** Green or yellow split peas are small legumes often used in soups, and in the case of the yellow ones, Indian dals. They do not need to be soaked before cooking.

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## Soaking

Soaking your beans helps them cook faster and more evenly, and it can also make them easier to digest. If you add salt to the soaking water (in other words, make a brine), your beans will cook even faster; the salt helps break down their skins. Here are a few methods; choose the one that best fits your schedule. And keep in mind that you never need to soak legumes like lentils or split peas.

### 1. OVERNIGHT SOAKING

To soak beans the traditional way, cover them with water by 2 inches, add 2 tablespoons coarse kosher salt (or 1

tablespoon fine salt) per pound of beans, and let them soak for at least 4 hours or up to 12 hours. Drain them and rinse before using.

## 2. QUICK SOAKING

Another option is quick-soaking, which allows you to make a pot of beans within a few hours flat without sacrificing flavor or texture. Put the beans in a pot on the stove, cover with water by two inches, add salt if you like, and bring to a boil. Turn off the heat and let them soak for an hour. Drain, rinse and proceed with your recipe.

## 3. OR, DON'T SOAK AT ALL

Here's a secret you may not know: You don't actually have to soak your beans at all. Just add them to your pot and plan on cooking your recipe for another hour or two beyond the usual cooking time. Keep an eye on the level of liquid, adding more water, broth or stock if the pot looks dry. There should always be liquid covering your beans as they cook.

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# Seasoning

You can simmer beans and other legumes in nothing but plain water with salt and get great results. But before you start cooking, take a minute to add the herbs, spices, stock and aromatics that make beans even better. Even a humble onion and a bay leaf works wonders.

### SALT & SPICES

1. There's a myth out regarding beans and salt — specifically, that you should never salt your beans before cooking because the salt keeps them from cooking through.

That's just not true. You can add salt to your bean pot at the beginning of cooking, and your beans will be better seasoned for it.

If you've ever cooked beans for hours without them softening, it's probably because you're using old beans, or you've got hard (mineral-rich) water, or there's an acidic ingredient in the pot, which can slow down cooking. Using distilled water solves the hard water problem. (And soaking your beans in salt water before cooking not only adds flavor, it can also help them cook more quickly.)

Don't stop at salt and black pepper. Spices like cumin, cinnamon, coriander, ground chiles and allspice add depth and complexity to your bean pot and are traditional additions in many cultures. To give spices a richer character, toast them in the pot for a few minutes until you can smell them, then add beans and liquid.

### HERBS

1. Fresh or dried branchy herbs — rosemary, thyme, bay leaves, oregano, sage — work best with beans when they

are added at the beginning of cooking. Tie them up with some kitchen string if they are still on their branches, or just throw them into the pot if you don't mind retrieving them later. For a good, all-around basic bouquet garni, tie 1 bay leaf (preferably fresh) together with a sprig or 2 of rosemary, a couple of thyme sprigs and some parsley and/or sage.

Loose dried herbs can be tossed directly into the cooking liquid.

Soft herbs — cilantro, basil, parsley, chives — can be scattered on top of cooked beans as a garnish, or added during the last 15 or so minutes of simmering.

#### **AROMATICS**

1. A few aromatics added to your bean pot at the beginning of cooking turns the pot liquor into a rich, heady broth. Add garlic, celery, carrots, chiles, ginger, onions, leeks — anything that you'd add to a stock will work well with beans.

Tie aromatics up in cheesecloth for easy removal, or just throw them into the pot and fish them out later.

#### **MEAT & STOCK**

1. Consider cooking your beans in stock instead of water. Vegetable, chicken or beef stock will add a rich depth of flavor; consider chicken stock for cannellini beans, or vegetable stock for lentils. If you use stock, you may want to adjust the amount of salt you add to your beans.

If you decide to add meat to your pot, put it in at the beginning of cooking. Bacon and ham (or a ham bone) will add wonderful smokiness that pairs deliciously with pinto, cranberry or white beans. After the beans have finished cooking, remove the meat, chop it up and add it back to the pot.

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## **Cooking**

You've soaked your beans (or maybe not) and they're ready for some heat. Simmering them on the stove is the time-honored method, and we'll tell you how to do it. But you can also cook them in a slow cooker or a pressure cooker — whatever you prefer.

### **1. STOVETOP METHOD**

Place your beans in your pot and cover them with at least 2 inches of water, and turn the heat to low. Stir them gently and occasionally, never letting them hit a strong boil; this can burst their skins and make them mushy or unevenly cooked. Depending upon the variety, dried beans will cook quickly (about 15 minutes for red lentils) or slowly (up to 3 to 4 hours for unsoaked chickpeas or lima beans).

### **2. SLOW-COOKER METHOD**

To use a slow cooker, cover your beans with 2 inches of water or broth and salt to taste, and toss any aromatics you like into the pot. Set your machine to the low setting and cook until the beans are done, usually 3 to 6 hours. If you are cooking kidney beans, you need to boil them on the stove for 10 minutes first before adding them to the slow cooker. This makes them much more digestible.

### 3. PRESSURE-COOKER METHOD

To cook beans in a pressure cooker, place your soaked or unsoaked beans with enough water to cover by 2 inches into the pressure cooker. Add salt, any aromatics you like, and a tablespoon of neutral oil to help keep the foam from clogging the vent. Make sure not to exceed the maximum fill line for your brand of pressure cooker. This is usually around the halfway mark for beans. Cook at high pressure for anywhere from 5 to 10 minutes for small beans such as black-eyed peas, lentils and split peas, to up to 35 to 40 minutes for larger beans such as chickpeas. Soaked beans will cook more quickly than unsoaked beans.

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## Testing for Doneness

How do you know when your beans are ready to eat? Read on for the signs that it's time to taste — and don't toss that cooking liquid.

1. To make sure your beans are cooked thoroughly, scoop up a couple of beans and blow on them. The skin should curl and wrinkle. Then taste. They are done when they're tender and cooked through to the center (but not mushy). Let them cool in their cooking liquid.

A tip: Don't throw out your bean cooking liquid, that tasty pot liquor. Salt it if need be, and save it. It's basically a rich vegetarian stock that freezes well for up to six months; use it as you would any other chicken or vegetable stock.

## Cooking

# Simple Pinto Beans

By David Tanis

**YIELD** 4 to 6 servings

**TIME** 2 hours, plus soaking time

Pinto beans are emblematic of the Old West — good cheap hearty fare. These plain ones are good with just about anything or as a meal in a tin plate, cowboy-style, with a chunk of cornbread. For the best tasting beans, cook at a bare simmer, and keep the liquid level just 1 inch above the beans' surface as they cook.

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## INGREDIENTS

**1 pound pinto beans**  
**1 small onion, halved**  
**1 bay leaf**  
**¾ pound slab bacon**  
**1 tablespoon kosher salt**  
**1 tablespoon paprika**  
**¼ teaspoon cayenne**

## PREPARATION

**Step 1**

Pick over the beans for small rocks or debris. Rinse well, then cover with cold water and soak for 6 hours or overnight.

**Step 2**

Transfer beans to a soup pot and add water to cover by 1 inch. Add onion, bay leaf and bacon and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to a bare simmer, partly cover pot with lid, and cook for 1 hour, stirring occasionally.

**Step 3**

Stir in salt, paprika and cayenne, then continue simmering until beans are soft and creamy and the broth is well seasoned and lightly thickened, about 1 hour more. Remove bacon and chop roughly, then return to pot. (Dish may be prepared up to 2 days ahead.)

## PRIVATE NOTES

Leave a Private Note on this recipe and see it here.

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## Storage

How and where you store your beans, lentils and more, both before and after cooking, can dramatically affect flavor and texture.

1. Store uncooked dried beans in a dark, cool cabinet for up to a year. They really go downhill after two years, so throw out all your old beans, especially if you can't remember when you bought them. If you can find a harvest date on your package of beans, all the better. Some beans may have been stored in a warehouse for months or even a year before they arrive at your market.

Cooked beans are best stored in their cooking liquid in the refrigerator for up to 5 days. Or drain the beans and toss them with a little oil, salt and pepper (or a vinaigrette) before chilling. This both preserves them and flavors them.

Beans can turn mushy in the freezer, but if you do want to try to freeze them, do so in their cooking liquid.