

SOUTHERN-STYLE GREEN BEANS

- 2-3 lbs fresh green beans (Kentucky Wonder or white half-runners are excellent)
 - 6 cups (1.5 quart) water
 - 2-3 oz smoked hog jowl
 - 1/2 TBS salt (more or less, depending on saltiness of the seasoning meat)
 - 1/4 tsp black pepper
1. Put the water, smoked hog jowl, salt, and pepper in a 5-quart cast iron Dutch oven and bring to a boil on high heat.
 2. Place the lid on the pot, turn the heat down to low, and simmer for at least 30 minutes.
 3. While the hog jowl is simmering, prepare the green beans. Remove the ends and strings, and snap into pieces of desired length, discarding beans that are blemished or wilted. Rinse the beans in cold water and drain.
 4. When the hog jowl has simmered for at least 30 minutes, add the green beans to the pot, turn up the heat, and bring back to a boil.
 5. Once the water has reached a good boil, reduce the heat to low and simmer the green beans — partially covered — for 2 hours. It's important to simmer the beans with the pot only partially covered. Between the pot and the edge of the lid, leave an opening of at least a quarter of an inch on one side, so that the steam can easily escape.
 6. Once or twice during the cooking time, gently turn the beans so that those on the bottom are brought to the top.
 7. In determining the heat setting on which to simmer the beans, the goal is to simmer them for 2 hours such that the water and the 2 hours run out at about the same time. And ideally, you want most of the water to be gone for the last 30-45 minutes of the cooking time. *This last period is the critical stage that makes Southern-style green beans taste so good.* But obviously, with the water down to just a little bit in the bottom of the pot, you will have to watch things closely during this period, simmering the pot at just the right temperature so that the water does not cook away completely and the green beans get scorched. So here is the goal: after cooking most of the liquid away during the first hour, you want to simmer the pot ever so gently (with the lid cracked open very slightly — or even closed completely) during the second hour *with only the least bit of liquid in the bottom of the pot.* During this last hour, you are not boiling the green beans — you are gently *steaming* them in a luscious, savory atmosphere. And the results are nothing short of amazing to anyone who has never had green beans cooked this way.
 8. When done, the beans will be a darker green than before being cooked. Adjust the seasonings, if necessary, with salt and pepper. Remove the beans from the pot and put them in a serving bowl.
 9. Serve with hot cornbread and, when in season, slices of fresh, homegrown tomatoes.

Notes

1. Some cooks like to add a teaspoon or so of sugar to the pot, or perhaps a red pepper pod. Others like to toss in a small onion, quartered, or a cup of chopped onions. Another recipe adds 1/2 pound of shelled October beans in with the green beans. It's also common in the South to cook potatoes with green beans. Just peel the potatoes, cut them into chunks, and add them to the pot during the last hour or so of cooking. Small new potatoes can be added whole or halved, without peeling.
 2. I use, and recommend, the porcelain-covered 5-quart Dutch oven made by Lodge in South Pittsburg, Tennessee. This pot combines the heat-holding characteristics of cast iron with the easy maintenance of porcelain. The lid is heavy enough that you can set it off-center and leave just the right opening for simmering green beans.
 3. For seasoning, you can also use salt pork, a small ham hock, a chunk of smoked ham, a meaty ham bone, etc. Experiment with seasoning meats like these to get just the right amount of pork seasoning without making the beans greasy.
 4. Salt-free green beans are a crime against humanity, in my opinion, but too much salt will also ruin them. Depending on the seasoning meat you use, you may find that adding a different amount of salt suits your taste. After experimenting with this recipe a number of times, you'll find exactly the right level of seasoning and salt for you and your guests.
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5. There is an alternate way of fixing green beans in the South: in an iron skillet, without water. In the words of John Egerton: “Put 2 tablespoons of bacon grease in a heavy iron skillet over medium heat. When the grease is hot, put in the beans, stirring until the grease is well distributed. Reduce the heat to simmer, put a tight-fitting lid on the skillet, and cook the beans slowly for 3 hours or so. They must be stirred frequently at first to keep them from sticking, and it may be necessary to add a little water now and then, but condensation in the closed pot should provide most of the moisture needed. Add salt if necessary” (*Southern Food*, p.296).

Comments

1. Two or three hours sounds like a long time to cook anything these days, but believe me, the last hour of cooking is when the real magic happens to green beans. A good pot of green beans, like pintos, is a work of art, so take your time and don't rush the process. (If your beans are larger and more mature, it may take you longer than 2 hours to cook them well.)
2. It's a common misconception that Southerners boil or seethe their green beans so long that they turn into mush. But any good Southern cook knows that either too much water or too much heat will prevent the beans from reaching their maximum flavor and texture. With the method recommended in this recipe, most of the beans actually rest above the water: they are steaming during much of the cooking time. If the beans turn out mushy, don't blame the 2-hour cooking time; you've used too much water or too much heat.
3. As with the various tenets of cornbread doctrine, debates rage among Southerners as to the most flavorful variety of green beans. It's generally agreed that pole beans are tastier than bush beans, but there the agreement ends. Many sincere people swear by the “Kentucky Wonder” variety, and they are good, but I still prefer the “white half-runners.” And then, what do you call this kind of legume: *green beans?* *string beans?* *snap beans?* In all likelihood, you'll call them whatever your mama called them.
4. “Stringing,” “snapping,” or “breaking” beans is a time-honored ritual that many of us remember from childhood. Ronni Lundy has a wonderful essay on the art of stringing green beans (*Butter Beans to Blackberries*, pp.57-59). Of course, most of the commercially grown beans you'll buy in grocery stores these days are almost stringless, but it's still a nostalgic treat to string a mess of homegrown, heirloom beans, and maybe it's my imagination, but they do seem to taste better. Opinions vary on how long the bean pieces should be after you snap them. Most people seem to prefer 1- or 2-inch pieces. Personally, I like to leave my beans a little longer. After removing both ends, I don't do much more than break the beans in half. Aside from individual preference, there is one practical consideration: if you don't break them into reasonably short pieces, three pounds of uncooked beans may not fit into your 5-quart pot. The shorter the pieces, the more compactly the whole amount will settle down into the cooking space.
5. And then there's the nutritional question. I can't say it better than Ms. Lundy: “I have heard all the arguments and I am tired of them. I know there is an army of nutritionists and nouvelle chefs lined up to swear that if you cook a green bean more than 20, 12, 6, or 2 minutes, you will have robbed it of all its flavor and nutritional value. Well, until they come by my house some late June, pick up a pot of white half-runners that have simmered for a couple of hours on the back of my stove with white bacon, cart it down to the lab, and run it through every test known to man to determine its content of both vitamins and minerals, I refuse to believe that old-fashioned, Southern-style green beans aren't as good for you as they taste. And as for taste, I have yet to put in my mouth a crisp and crunchy, neon-chartreuse, barely blanched green bean prepared by anyone, no matter how famous, and seasoned with anything, no matter how trendy, that can hold a candle to the flavor of green beans cooked the way my mother, and her mother, and her mother before her made them” (*Butter Beans to Blackberries*, p.56).
6. However green beans are cooked, if they're cooked so that they taste good, the proper name for the wonderful result is . . . “a mess of beans.” *What a rich, resonate phrase.*