

PINTO BEANS


- 1 lb (2 cups) dried pinto beans
 - 1 smoked ham hock
 - 6-7 cups fresh water
 - 1/2 medium onion, chopped
 - 1/2 TBS sugar
 - 1/2 tsp pepper
 - 1/2 TBS salt (to be added during the last hour of cooking)
1. Sort beans carefully — removing any pebbles, clumps of dirt, or defective beans — and rinse in fresh, cold water.
 2. In a large pot, cover with 2 inches of water, bring to a boil and boil for 10 minutes, uncovered. Then turn off the heat, cover with a lid, and allow the beans to soak for 1 hour.
 3. Meanwhile, in another large pot, place ham hock in 6-7 cups of fresh water. Add chopped onion, sugar, and pepper. Bring to a boil, then cover, reduce the heat, and simmer gently for 45-60 minutes while the beans are soaking.
 4. Drain the water completely and transfer the beans with a slotted spoon to the pot with the ham hock. Discard the water used for soaking the beans — do not add any of this to the cooking pot.
 5. Return the pot to a boil, then cover, reduce the heat, and simmer — very gently — for 3 hours, stirring occasionally.
 6. After 2 hours, add the salt and stir. (Adding salt earlier hardens the skin of the beans and increases the time needed to cook.)
 7. After 3 hours, remove the ham hock and adjust the seasonings to taste. Serve piping hot, with cornbread and chow-chow.

Notes

1. If you want a little more kick to your pinto beans, add 1-2 tsp of hot sauce, such as Tabasco, at the same time that you add the salt, during the last hour of cooking.
2. This basic recipe can be used with other kinds of dried beans. Other beans, such as navy beans and baby limas, have a more tender skin and require less cooking time, about 1.5 hours.
3. Baby limas can be seasoned with 4 oz of salt pork and 1.5 TBS brown sugar.

Comments

1. It goes without saying, pinto beans should be eaten with cornbread. Also a good relish, such as “chow-chow,” provides a good accent. In the summer, iced tea is the appropriate beverage, and in the winter, buttermilk.
 2. Many people also like to put chopped onions on their pinto beans at the table. Remember that we chopped only 1/2 of the onion to go in the beans as they cooked? Chop the other half also and serve it at the table.
 3. Should beans be eaten out of a bowl or on a plate? At restaurants, they are often served in bowls, with a good bit of the bean “soup.” At home, however, my preference is to pass the beans around the table in a serving bowl with a slotted spoon, so that guests can dip them onto their plate without getting too much of the liquid.
 4. Pinto beans are not only a great comfort food, but they happen to be nutritious and an excellent source of dietary fiber. Pound for pound, there is perhaps no other food that comes closer to being a complete source of nutrition. In fact, some cultures in the world subsist primarily on beans like these. If there is one staple food that I prepare on a weekly basis, this is it. When I am off the road and at home, I hardly finish one pot of beans (two or three days) before I make another. Pinto beans are the foundation upon which I build the rest of my weekly diet. The question is never “Shall I have beans?” — it is only “What shall I have *with* my beans?”
 5. It takes 4 hours to make a good pot of dried beans. (And, no, a Crock-Pot doesn’t count. If that is cooking at all, it is cooking *in absentia*.) I know 4 hours is a lot of time, and most of us have very busy lifestyles. I am fortunate in that my
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office is at home, so I can cook and work at the same time. But even if I could only do this once in a while, I would still do it. There is just something about a dish that has been simmered slowly over a long period of time, lovingly attended while the creation is reaching its perfection; the seasonings have time to blend together wonderfully, and the result is very, very gratifying. I believe we miss one of the simple, elemental pleasures of life when we forgo the work involved in *traditional food preparation*. So even if you can't do this very often, do it occasionally. If you're anything like me, you'll relish every bite of a dish that has taken half a day to prepare — much more than any can of pre-cooked “quick and easy” beans. End of sermon!

Gary Henry — SouthernCookbook.com
