

Beans add health to meals without adding cost

By Lois Ahrens RD, LD

They may prompt silly rhymes, but dried beans are perfect for adding flavor, texture, satiety, and nutrients to many types of cuisines and cooking styles. Whether it is New England baked beans, Midwestern three-bean salad, Southern red beans and rice, or Southwestern refried beans, this versatile food expresses diversity, ethnicity, and heritage through each distinct variety and regional cooking tradition.

Regardless of the many shapes, sizes, colors, textures, and flavors, beans are similar in nutritional value and offer an economical way to eat healthfully. An excellent source of protein, ½ cup of cooked dry, canned, or frozen beans can substitute for 2 ounces of meat. In addition, beans are saturated fat-free, a rich source of complex carbohydrate, fiber, antioxidants, and vitamins and minerals, such as calcium, folate, and iron. Research suggests that beans play a role in reducing cancer risk, improving heart disease, controlling blood sugar, and managing weight.

Prep time may make some cooks wary of incorporating dry beans into everyday meals. By soaking beans first, however, you reduce cooking time by up to half. In addition, the U.S. Dry Bean Council suggests soaking to soften and reconstitute the beans and enhance the beans' digestibility. One pound of dry beans yields about 5 to 6 cups cooked beans. Covered and refrigerated, cooked beans will keep for up to five days. Or freeze cooked beans to use later – just defrost and use like canned beans.

Canned beans retain as many nutrients as their fresh or frozen counterparts. Stock your pantry and freezer with a wide variety; then let your imagination create robust entrees, savory sides, or refreshing salads. Some options might include:

- Adding red kidney, garbanzo, or edamame to soups, stews, and casserole dishes.
- Including a layer of pinto, black, or fat-free refried beans to your Mexican dishes.
- Stirring beans into your favorite Italian pasta sauce.
- Combining lima beans or navy beans with corn and peppers for a Native American succotash.
- Adding Great Northern beans with potato salad or cannellini beans in a light pasta salad.
- Purchasing prepared bean dips or adding beans to salsa to serve with whole grain crackers and chips or raw veggies.

Because of their rich history, immense variety, and wide-ranging versatility, beans not only enhance our food supply and health but inspire originality. Chef and restaurateur Mark Miller says it best; “A reliable companion to have in today’s uncertain times, beans are an unassuming, honest food that make us feel as though we have eaten something real and that we are well fed. They are good fuel for shoveling snow on a winter night, riding across mountain ranges in the early morning or recovering from a stressful day at the office. You can depend on them (beans), just to introduce you to the

dizzying spectrum of colors, textures, and tastes that have captivated me and the patrons of Coyote Café for so many years.”

As we settle into a new year, consider including this authentic, but often overlooked, vegetable in your cooking inspirations. Bon Appetite!

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