

CHEFS COLLABORATIVE SUSTAINABLE FOOD REPORT

Working with Heirloom Beans

All over the country there are innovative chefs working with beans. When Michael Fitzhenry was the chef at South End Formaggio in Boston, MA, he looked to the bean-loving state of Maine (where every region has its own favorite bean variety and recipe) for inspiration when planning bean dishes for his menu. For “Up North” beans, Fitzhenry cooked Jacob’s Cattle beans with bacon and maple syrup, and for “Down East” beans he combined Maine Yellow Eye beans with salt pork, molasses and mustard. With these preparations, Fitzhenry made a connection to the region and the past that was delicious, economical, environmentally friendly and healthy.

At L’Etoile in Madison, WI, chef/owner Tory Miller loves to combine sausages and local beans, inspired by the state’s Germanic heritage. “I add beans to choucrout,” says Miller. “It’s great for us beer-loving Wisconsinites!”

But many chefs have yet to explore the virtues of the heirloom bean. When Steve Sando of Rancho Gordo, an heirloom bean farm in Napa Valley, CA, first brought his beans to the farmers market, the chefs he encountered were a little “freaked out,” because this was a “whole new genre of food they had to learn about.” But the genre is a promising one. This paper explores the versatility, flavor, food cost, sustainability and sourcing of a fantastic, under-utilized ingredient.

Ask the Questions

WHAT IS AN HEIRLOOM?

Heirloom beans are varieties that have been around for many years and whose seeds produce the same variety every season without any manipulation by farmers or scientists. Most of the varieties we know and use (kidney and pinto for example) are often heirlooms, but there are many more. Throughout history, many regions or families developed their own special bean, adding up to thousands of varieties—each with their own unique look, taste, texture and use. Cooking with these beans not only introduces



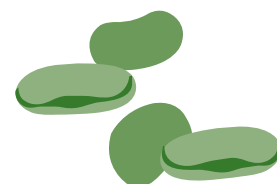
Types of Beans

MANY SPECIES, EVEN MORE FLAVORS – WORLD TRAVELING BEANS

The world of beans consists of multiple species, and within those, over 1,500 known varieties. When we think of the most common dried beans, we are thinking of **new world beans**, those such as pintos, black turtle beans and many of the best heirlooms (like Cranberry beans), too. These beans originated in Central and South America nine thousand years ago and are still mainstays in the cuisines of those areas. Black turtle beans, for example, are native to South America, and are iconic in dishes such as Brazilian Feijoada. Many new world foods were quickly integrated into the old world. Beans that we think of as classically European, such as the Italian Cannellinis and French Flageolets (a must for cassoulet) are actually European-bred derivatives of new world beans.

Fava (or broad)

beans are thought to be native to Africa and the Middle East. They are much more



new tastes to a menu, but evokes a sense of place, making them heirlooms in the deeper sense of the word: items of value, passed down from generation to generation.

A PLACE ON THE MENU

For Chef Ana Sortun of Oleana in Cambridge, MA, the remarkable versatility of beans inspires her creativity. She incorporates beans into her Middle Eastern/Mediterranean dishes all the time. In cold weather, beans can be a hearty, fueling food. When it's warm, they can star in a cold salad. A good protein source, beans make a vegetarian dish more substantial, but can also offer a creamy, starchy foil for meat dishes. In the areas of the country with a limited growing season, buying beans also allows you to keep local food on the menu when fresh produce isn't available.

FLAVORS

The most exciting aspect of heirloom beans is their array of shapes, textures and flavors. Heirloom beans come in many sizes, and their textures and flavors range from meaty to creamy and from sweet and nut-like to herbaceous,

Heirloom beans come in many sizes, and their textures and flavors range from meaty to creamy and from sweet and nut-like to herbaceous, mild and earthy.

mild and earthy. Depending on the desired effect, you can choose a strong-flavored bean or one that soaks up the flavors of other ingredients. Steve Sando of Rancho Gordo thinks beans exhibit terroir—that

the same bean variety grown in different areas tastes completely different—a good reason to know where your beans come from.

COST

One of the best aspects of beans is their relatively low price tag. Purcell Mountain in Moyie Springs, Idaho sells heirlooms for \$2.59 - \$5.95/lb. While pricier than pennies-a-pound beans from a generic supplier, they are relatively inex-

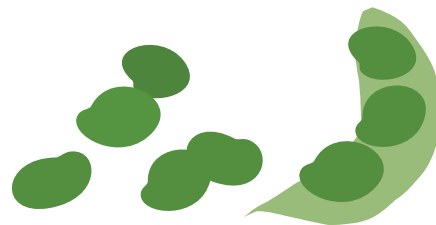
Flageolet beans from Seed Savers Exchange



widely grown and utilized in Europe than the United States.

Lima beans are another separate species originating in Central and South America, with many varieties. They come in two sizes and are integral to regional American favorites such as succotash. **Black-eyed peas (or cowpeas)** form their own category. Probably native to the East Indies, they became common in Africa and were brought with the slave trade to the U.S. They are now ubiquitous in Southern American food, common in such iconic dishes as Hoppin' John.

Tepary beans are native to Central America, but were grown in North America by Native Americans. Almost completely unknown today, they are a unique bean worthy of rediscovery. **Soybeans** are native to tropical Asia. In the US, most soybeans are genetically engineered and not meant for human consumption, but there are heirlooms worth seeking out.



Specific Bean Varieties

Of the thousands of varieties of beans, here are a few of the favorite heirlooms of some of the people we talked to:

MAINE YELLOW EYE BEANS

Maine Yellow Eyes (not to be confused with Stueben Yellow Eyes) are a small white bean with a yellow-brown "eye." A classic choice for baked beans, their texture is remarkably creamy and they absorb pork flavors particularly well. Matt Linehan at Sparrow Arc Farm grows lots of Maine Yellow Eye beans in his budding bean business. He says, "I haven't had anything better than yellow eyes. They really soak up flavors like molasses or whatever you are cooking with."

GOOD MOTHER STALLARD BEANS

Beautiful small burgundy and white speckled beans. Bean grower Steve Sando calls these

Christmas lima beans from Rancho Gordo



pensive compared to local meat and fresh vegetable ingredients. Heirloom beans can either be the centerpiece of a dish, or supplement a meat item, allowing you to use a smaller cut of meat.

BIODIVERSITY AND FOOD SECURITY

John Ash, California chef and author, says, “I automatically think I am doing something good for the planet when I eat beans.” He’s right. Heirloom beans can help protect agricultural productivity, decrease fossil fuel use and promote biodiversity and food security. How?

- Legumes (including beans) capture nitrogen from the air and trap it in the soil. This lowers or eliminates the need for added fertilizers while increasing soil fertility for future crops.
- Beans’ vast genetic diversity functions like a marketplace where growers can shop for the precise qualities they need on their farms—for bean varieties adapted to the diverse present and future environmental conditions on our planet.
- A broad selection of beans being grown means stronger genetic diversity. This hedges our bets against crop failure, thereby increasing food security.

Using heirloom beans promotes sustainability through many channels. But, as Ash points out, “There are thousands of varieties of beans, but only a few that get grown. The danger is that we’ll lose them if we don’t eat them.”

SOURCING BEANS

It’s great to get beans from a local farmer, but because the equipment for processing them is expensive and specialized, not many small farms offer dried beans. Because dried beans are non-perishable, transporting them has a relatively small carbon footprint. It’s often more convenient to purchase from a small supplier who aggregates beans from a few farms, like

one of his “You’ll-be-back beans” because they go over so well with folks new to beans. In his cookbook, *Heirloom Beans* he says, “Their pot liquor is almost like free soup.”

GIGANDES

Gigandes are very large, flat, white lima beans. Chef John Ash’s describes them as having “a little bit of that butterbean flavor, with a faint sweetness that reminds me of scallops and a really fleshy texture.” John Ash uses the association to inspire his preparations, often slipping them in dishes where scallops are common.

CRANBERRY BEANS

Cranberries are medium-sized tan bean with red lines and speckles. One of the most widely available heirlooms, they are very popular. Chef Tory Miller likes their texture, especially their tender skin. He says, as you cook them the rough exterior “all kind of melts away,” leaving just the “creamy, buttery” bean.

Additional resources:

INFORMATION

Beans: A History by Ken Albala

Elizabeth Berry’s Great Bean Book by Elizabeth Berry and Florence Fabricant

Heirloom Beans: Great Recipes for Dips and Spreads, Soups and Stews, Salads and Salsas, and Much More from Rancho Gordo by Steve Sando and Vanessa Barrington

MAIL ORDER BEAN SOURCES

Phipps Ranch www.phippscountry.com

Purcell Mountain Farms
purcellmountainfarms.com

Rancho Gordo www.ranchogordo.com

Seed Savers Exchange
www.seedsavers.org

Indian Harvest www.indianharvest.com



Purcell Mountain Farms. It makes sense to take a regional approach to purchasing, and find someone whose practices you can ask about and who offers interesting varieties.

Sometimes you can find a single farm that specializes in bean production, like Sparrow Arc Farm in Unity, ME or Baer's Best Beans in South Hamilton, MA.

Purcell sells beans from six Idaho farmers, offering a wider variety and more consistent supply than you usually find from a single farmer. Avoid buying beans from any source where you can't ask how old they are. The older the bean, the longer they take to cook and the less likely you are to get a consistent texture.

The most important thing is experimenting with heirloom beans. John Ash says, "The challenge in America, both with home cooks and restaurant chefs, is we haven't learned how to use beans as creatively or as inventively as we can... We make lots of soups and stews, but there are so many other ways to use heirloom beans. Those who are doing things on the plant side of the equation are really blowing people's minds."

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