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# Saturday Night Baked Beans

BY MARGARET FRENCH

**Growing up,** we ate homemade baked beans every Saturday night—because my family was from New Brunswick, on the east coast of Canada. Lots of people in upstate New York, New England, the Maritime Provinces, and Quebec still have a bean pot tucked away in a kitchen cupboard.

After I moved to upstate New York, I heard others' stories about baked beans. My husband tells my favorite. As a boy, he worked on a farm near Stamford, NY, for a program that brought city kids to work on farms during World War II; he mostly ate hot beans for supper, cold beans from the bean pot for breakfast the next morning.

As a girl, I decided beans were a boring excuse for a meal. Adding hot dogs and biscuits or homemade bread didn't particularly help. It didn't matter—if it was Saturday, beans were what we were going to eat.

My mother insisted she made beans because it was convenient. She shopped on Saturday without worrying about cooking dinner. The beans were already in the oven.

But I knew the truth. It was tradition.

My mother was proud of her beans. Other people liked them, too. Now living in Western Canada where the only beans people saw came out of a Heinz can, our friends stopped by on Saturday afternoons, hoping to be invited for supper. My mother always cooked enough to feed a crowd. I silently wished they wouldn't encourage her.

I dreaded the years my birthday fell on a Saturday. Birthday cake—and beans!

Washing the bean pot was one of my most dreaded chores. My sister and I took turns washing the dishes, and each of us, day by day, decided the pot needed to soak a little longer. Saturday morning would come, and the bean pot would be full of smelly, funky water with a few of last week's beans still clinging to the sides. My mother was not happy.

When I grew up, I stopped thinking about baked beans, unless I was visiting my family and Saturday night rolled around. In my own home, I didn't make or eat homemade beans. Ever.

## Saturday Night Baked Beans

**Amount:** Makes enough for a small 6-cup bean pot.

### Ingredients:

- 2 cups yellow-eyed beans. Navy beans work, too.
- ½ cup molasses. Not blackstrap. You want the label to say “fancy” or “mild.” You can use pure maple syrup if money is no object.
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon dry mustard
- 1 small, whole onion, peeled
- 4 ounces salt pork. Your supermarket probably stocks this. In Saratoga, I buy it in a 12-ounce package, good for three pots of beans. It keeps forever in the fridge.
- ¼ cup ketchup, optional. My mother felt daring when she added ketchup, though I've seen it in quite a few old recipes.

### Method:

- Beans are not a last minute affair. Ideally, start the evening before. You can begin early in the morning. I'll explain how below.
- Spread the beans on a light-colored plate or tray, a handful at a time, to look for and discard stones, stems, or damaged beans. Cover beans with water. Throw away anything that floats. Swish the beans around to get them clean. Drain.
- Soak the beans overnight in plenty of water. (If you forget that, put them in a pot, add water to cover by 3 or 4 inches, bring to a boil, turn off the heat, and let them sit for an hour.) Drain and rinse.
- Put them in a saucepan, cover with water, bring to the boil, and simmer on very low heat for half an hour.
- In the bottom of the bean pot, put onion and the salt pork. Cut the pork down to the rind in 3 or 4 places. Add the beans, salt and pepper, molasses, mustard, and ketchup, if you're using it. The beans should be covered by about ¼" to ½" of water. If it's not, add a little boiling water. Put the lid on.
- Put in a 300° F oven. Cook 7 or 8 hours or until the beans are tender. From time to time, check the water level. If the beans are not covered with liquid, add a little boiling water. Don't add any liquid in the last half hour or so. You want the liquid to get dark and thick. By the time you serve the beans, they should be just barely covered with liquid.

### Notes:

You can cook beans in a crock-pot or a covered casserole instead of a bean pot, but the beans may not be quite as dark and delicious. The water will evaporate quicker in a casserole; you'll have to keep a sharp eye on it. It will evaporate more slowly in a crock-pot. Be careful not to add too much. Beans freeze beautifully.



The first time my mother visited, she made herself at home in my kitchen. I heard pots clanging. She came to me, puzzled.

“Margaret,” she demanded, “Where do you keep your bean pot?”

“I don't have one,” I replied.

My mother thought about that for several seconds. “Well, then,” she said, “How do you make beans?”

My answer left her flabbergasted: “I don't.”

Years passed. I reached the age of nostalgia. I began to long, just a little, for real homemade baked beans. I even began to long for a bean pot of my very own.

In an antique shop in western New York—one of those cluttered, junky, dusty, dirt cheap antique shops—I found a small bean pot. Chubby, brown on top, cream on the bottom.

The right colors, the right shape, the right kind of handles, the right lid.

Once in a long while, I now make baked beans. I know how. I'd watched my mother hundreds of times. I'd made them myself, too, reluctantly to be sure.

My mother never used a written recipe. But I've approximated her recipe, just in case you or my children or grandchildren develop a craving for homemade beans. ▼

Margaret French is a writer and storyteller in Saratoga Springs, NY. You can read many of her stories at <http://margaretfrench.com>.



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