

NEW ENGLAND'S FOOD AND WINE MAGAZINE

# FLAVOR

Northeast

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MAGAZINE  
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DELICIOUS  
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*plus:*

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Explore World Cuisine in New Haven

Savor a New England Classic:

**BOSTON BAKED BEANS  
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## Spilling the Beans on a Northeast Favorite

BY SANDY OLIVER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY GLENN SCOTT

HANDWRITTEN HISTORY TELLS US that Saturday in New England during the late 1700s and in 1800s was baking day, and brick ovens were fired to bake bread, pies, and cakes. In her memoir of the 1830s and 1840s, Mary Emma Weaver recalled her childhood Saturdays in New London, Connecticut, where baking included, in addition to cake and pies, “in cold weather baked beans and brown bread, with Indian pudding.” Later, on a

New Year’s Eve in 1864, Julia Gates wrote from Mystic, Connecticut, to her sailing-ship captain husband at sea, “I wish you were with us this stormy night, we would treat you to pork and beans for supper.”

Lingering, low oven heat was perfect for a pot of slow-baked beans with freshly baked brown bread to accompany them. By the 1800s, the combination locked in as a Saturday night supper for nearly all of New England.

New England’s baked beans, as migratory as the cooks who made them, cropped up wherever Yankees settled, even to the South and West. *The First Texas Cookbook*, published in 1883 in Houston, shows Boston baked beans and three versions of Boston brown bread. *The Webfoot Cookbook* from Portland, Oregon, (1885), shows Boston baked beans by name and four recipes for brown bread.

## The Baked Bean Story

The early English settlers brought kidney beans and broad beans with them to New England, which they stewed to make a thick dish called pottage, probably the ancestor of baked beans. Yankee farmers adopted Native American beans (along with squash and corn), which were native to the climate. A huge variety of beans with names like Cranberry, One-Hundred-and-One, Tiger's Eye, Sulfur, and Bird's Egg have nearly disappeared, as fewer households farmed and gardened and saved their own seed.

In the 17th and early 18th centuries, beans were long-simmered with a piece of salt meat to add flavor and lend calories from fat which our ancestors needed to provide energy for clearing, building, farming, gardening, and, in winter, keeping warm. New England's abundant forests provided plentiful fuel for oven baking, and cooks gradually moved beans down from the hearth to the oven.

It did not occur to the Colonials or even the early Victorians to sweeten the beans, and no documentation exists to support the popular mythology that Native Americans used bear fat and maple syrup in the dish. Certainly, molasses poured into New England in the 1700s, but none was diverted to bean pots. Even in the early 1800s, neither molasses nor sugar appears in documented sources among baked bean ingredients in period cookbooks. From roughly 1875 on, however, cookbooks reveal that molasses was added to baked beans, only by a few tablespoons at first; then the beans were increasingly sweetened in the 1900s, quite possibly with industrial canned baked beans leading the way.

An old-timer in my island community of Islesboro, Maine, once told me his boyhood memories of the 1920s and about the savory beans his mother made, and then of the canned beans he ate at a friend's house. "Oh, we pestered my mother to buy those sweet beans; we loved them." Gradually his mother relented and sweetened her beans, too.

Boston's famed Durgin Park restaurant, in business under that name since 1827, is where foreign visitors often go to sample traditional Yankee food, particularly Boston

Baked Beans. Chef Melicia Phillips reports that she uses a ton of pea beans annually. She bakes her beans in two dozen medium-sized pots, and reports, "That way, I can break the crust on the top of the beans and stir the browned beans in." The recipe they use now, generously sweetened, was perfected in the 1950s. Patrons order codfish cakes, franks, or knockwurst to accompany the beans. Chef Phillips makes brown bread, too, but only for holidays.

*New England's baked beans, as migratory as the cooks who made them, cropped up wherever Yankees settled, even to the south and west.*

## The Brown Bread Story

Rye and maize (corn) thrived in early New England. Corn was the native crop, and earliest settlers introduced rye along with wheat. After the mid-1600s, however, wheat became susceptible to a disease called rust. What wheat flour that was available was prized for pastry and not used for daily bread. In most of the north-east, "rye and Indian," a yeast-raised, flavorful, but very dense, bread, sustained generations. ("Indian" was the name colonials gave to what we call corn meal. The word "corn" was a generic English term for "grain;" therefore, the grain from the Native Americans was called Indian.)

As settlement spread into western New England and New York state, more wheat-growing land opened up, and a version of bread called brown bread, which included rye, cornmeal, and wheat, often in thirds, became more common by the early 1800s. The wheat's gluten did a good job of holding the rye and cornmeal together.

Once the Erie Canal opened in the 1820s, western wheat filled the New England markets and Yankees preferred to make wheat bread over the old rye and Indian. Thankfully, they never lost their traditional taste for the three-grain loaves, and by the 1870s' the old recipe had been

transformed into a steamed pudding with the addition of molasses and milk.

Pea beans are probably the most commonly used bean for baking in New England and nationally. Brick Oven Baked Bean products, made in Portland, Maine, by the B&M Company, are nearly all made with pea beans, and apparently this has been true ever since B&M began canning baked beans in the 1920s.

In Downeast Maine, however, home cooks favor and still bake larger, old-fashioned beans like Yellow Eyes, Jacob's

Cattle, and Soldier. For a long time, big bean loving Mainers could buy Vasselboro-based Kennebec Bean Company's State of Maine beans, but the company went out of business in 2008.

The old New England habit of baked beans and brown bread on Saturday night continues today at churches, Masonic Halls, Granges, and other service organizations all across the region, with suppers replete with ham or hot dogs, cornbread, and pies for dessert.

The recipes on the following pages feature several kinds of beans: the smaller beans favored by Boston-style recipes, and the larger beans preferred in Maine. While the sweetness level varies, you can always adjust the sweetening to taste. And you can make any of these recipes vegetarian by omitting the meats and using vegetable stock. Remember to soak your beans overnight, or bring them to a boil, allow them to soak in the hot water for an hour, then finish cooking them for baking. Baked beans seem to be a New England tradition that won't be fading away anytime soon.

**Recipes on the following page.**



### Maine Baked Beans

- 3 cups of dried Yellow Eye or Jacob's Cattle beans**
- 2 quarts of water**
- ¼ to ½ pound lean salt pork**
- 1 small onion, optional**
- ¼ cup molasses, or more to taste**
- 1 tablespoon dry mustard**
- 1 teaspoon salt**
- 1 teaspoon ground pepper**
- Hot water**

1. Soak the beans in the water overnight.
2. In the morning, preheat the oven to 225°F. Bring the beans to a boil, and cook for 15 to 20 minutes or until the skins burst. Test by removing some and blowing on them; if the skins peel back, they are ready for baking. Drain and reserve the liquid.
3. Slash the pork to (but not through the rind) in half-inch cubic sections. Put the pork in a 2-quart pot with onion and cooked beans. Add the molasses, mustard, salt, and pepper, and add enough of the reserved cooking water to the pot so that you see it barely below the surface of the beans at the top.
4. Bake for 5 to 6 hours at 250°F. Check occasionally to see that the liquid remains; add a little boiling water as needed. Do not drown the beans. For the last hour, use a fork to pull the pork to the surface of the pot and bake with the lid off to allow the pork to brown.

Serves 8 to 10

### The Blue Room Baked Beans

*Chef Robert Grant of The Blue Room in Cambridge, Massachusetts offers this slow-cooked gourmet version of the New England classic. Before he came to The Blue Room kitchens, Grant was one of youngest ever to be offered a sous chef position under Chef Thomas Keller. Check out his menu at The Blue Room at [www.theblueroom.net](http://www.theblueroom.net).*

- 4 cups coco beans or other small white beans, soaked overnight**
- 1 yellow onion, small diced**
- 2 cloves garlic, minced**
- ½ pound guanciale (pork jowls), cut like lardon (from Salumeria Biellese) or pancetta, cut into matchstick sized pieces**
- 4 quarts brown pork stock, or 2 quarts each of top quality beef stock and vegetable stock**
- 1 cup milled tomatoes or canned tomato puree**
- ½ cup molasses**
- 1 teaspoon piment d'espelette or hot paprika**
- 2 whole cloves**
- Salt**

1. Begin by rendering the guanciale in a large braising pan. Once the fat coats the bottom of the pan, add the onions and garlic. Season with salt and sweat them until soft and translucent.

2. Add the tomatoes and cook them slowly until they thicken and develop a darker deeper color, about 15-20 minutes.

3. Stir in the molasses and spices and finally the stock. Place the whole pan in the oven uncovered at 225° F and cook for 4 to 5 hours. It's done when the beans are meltingly tender and the sauce is silky and thick.

Serves 10 to 12

### Brown Bread

*B & M makes canned brown bread for those who do not wish to make their own. With or without raisins, it is still an excellent accompaniment to the beans and ham or franks.*

*Traditionally, brown bread was made with sour milk, easily created by adding a tablespoon of vinegar to the milk, or you can use half milk and half yogurt. Probably the easiest way to steam the bread is to use a greased double boiler with enough boiling water in the base to come about half an inch up the sides of the top section. Otherwise, use a pudding mold, or the traditional tin coffee can in a pot with boiling water in it.*

- ½ cup whole wheat flour**
- ½ cup corn meal**
- ½ cup rye meal**
- 1 teaspoon baking soda**
- ¼ teaspoon salt**
- ⅓ cup molasses**
- 1 cup sour milk**
- ½ cup raisins (optional)**

1. Put a large pot on the stove to get water boiling. Grease the mold or double boiler top.
2. Whisk together the flour, meals, baking soda, and salt. Add the molasses and milk and mix with a few swift strokes to moisten the dry ingredients. Fold in the raisins if you use them.
3. Pour the batter into the mold or double boiler; cover, and put to steam over the boiling water. Allow to steam an hour and a half, checking to see if more hot water needs to be added to keep the steaming water part way up the sides of the mold.
4. Test as you would for a cake by inserting a tester. When it comes out clean and the bread is firm to the touch, take it out of the steaming water. Let it cool for a few moments, then unmold it.

Serves 4 to 6

### Boston Baked Beans

2 pounds of pea beans  
2 quarts of water  
½ pound of lean salt pork  
Boiling water  
1 medium onion, peeled  
¾ cup molasses  
¼ cup light brown sugar  
2 teaspoons dry mustard  
2 teaspoons salt  
½ teaspoon ground pepper

1. Soak the beans in the water overnight.
2. In the morning, preheat the oven to 225°F. Bring the beans to a boil, and cook for 10 to 15 minutes or until the skins burst. Test by removing some and blowing on them; if the skins peel back, they are ready for baking. Drain and reserve the liquid.
3. Pour boiling water over the salt pork, and let it sit for 2 minutes, then drain. Slash the pork to, but not through, the rind in half-inch cubes. Cut the onion into quarters, but do not cut through the base so that the onion holds together.
4. In a 2-quart pot, put the pork, onion, and cooked beans. Add the molasses, sugar, mustard, salt, and pepper, and add enough of the reserved cooking water to the pot so that you see it barely below the surface of the beans at the top.
5. Bake for 5 to 6 hours at 250°F. Check occasionally to see that the liquid remains; add a little boiling water as needed. Do not drown the beans. For the last hour, use a fork to pull the pork to the surface of the pot and bake with the lid off to allow the pork to brown.

Serves 10 ✱

