

Block Party Beans

Boston Baked Beans meet Sloppy Joe in this easy, crowd-pleasing dish. Could we take it from decent to delicious? BY DIANE UNGER



Ground meat makes this hearty dish different from the usual baked beans.

BLOCK PARTY BEANS, sometimes called calico beans or seven-bean casserole, are a perennial potluck and backyard favorite. They're a snap to make; they make enough to feed multitudes (hence the name); and they have definite crowd appeal. The recipe—a fixture in Junior League, community, and church cookbooks—is pretty basic: You brown lots of ground beef, stir in a pantry full of canned beans and condiments (mustard, sugar, vinegar, ketchup, or barbecue sauce), and bake.

Judging by the recipes I found, the dish seemed more like opening cans than actual cooking, but in fact the first few I tested won over even the skeptics. The best among them were meaty, very gently spiced, sweet yet tangy, and with a comforting Sloppy Joe-like texture. Having said that, both texture and taste were one dimensional, plus the sheer variety of beans made for a muddle. I wanted to freshen up and pare down the ingredient list.

First, I had to decide which beans to invite to my party, and which to show the door. Almost every recipe I found

started with canned baked beans (or pork and beans), as well as canned green beans and canned lima beans. Other typical additions were canned navy, great Northern, pinto, kidney, or butter beans.

Practically on automatic pilot, I set aside the can opener and reached for the dried beans. True, I'd have to soak them overnight, but the payoff—firmer, more flavorful beans—seemed worth the slight trouble of planning ahead. I tested several varieties, but in the end, tasters overruled me. They found the difference

between canned and dried minimal at best in this particular recipe, certainly not worth the additional time and bother it took to soak and precook them.

Most of the recipes I tested relied on sweet sauces from the canned baked beans combined with ketchup. Those sauces weren't bringing much to the party (they were uninteresting and tinny), so I decided to make my own sauce, but—in the spirit of the dish—I wanted to keep it simple. I mixed tomato sauce with brown sugar (for its pleasing hint of molasses), bottled barbecue sauce (which added a smoky note), and red pepper flakes and cider vinegar for a bright finish.

Next I turned to the meat. Ground meat is standard in party beans, but I hoped to improve things. I confidently tested combinations of ground beef, bacon, and Italian and breakfast sausage—and failed to win over a single taster. They nixed the sausage (it clashed with the sauce, they said) and the bacon (getting lost in the crowd, they said). The traditional choice was right here: straight-up ground beef it would be.

I browned the meat, seasoned it with onion and garlic, and stirred in my tomato-based sauce and the canned beans. I baked everything in a Dutch oven for about an hour, and I was pleased with the result. The flavors were excellent—beefy, sweet, tangy—and a big improvement over my initial tests. But party-worthy? I wasn't so sure.

Most recipes for party beans stir in canned green beans and canned lima beans as a final addition. I'd been stirring them in, but on reflection, I drew the line

at these. Instead, I cut fresh green beans into ½-inch pieces and then stirred them in partway through the cooking. At the same time, I tossed in a box of frozen lima beans, which—unlike canned—retain their creamy texture. Together, the two added crunch, freshness, creaminess, and visual pleasure.

BLOCK PARTY BEANS Serves 10 to 12

For a festive presentation worthy of its name, we recommend using beans of varying shapes and colors, such as kidney beans, navy beans, black beans, and pinto beans. Serve with hot sauce.

- 2½ pounds 85 percent lean ground beef
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 4 (15-ounce) cans beans, drained and rinsed (see note)
- 2 (28-ounce) cans tomato sauce
- ½ cup barbecue sauce
- ½ cup packed dark brown sugar
- ¼ cup cider vinegar
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- Salt and pepper
- 12 ounces green beans, trimmed and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 (10-ounce) package frozen lima beans

1. MAKE SAUCE Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Cook beef in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until no longer pink, about 8 minutes. Drain beef in colander, then return to pot. Stir in onion and cook until softened, about 3 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in beans, tomato sauce, barbecue sauce, sugar, vinegar, pepper flakes, ½ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper and bring to boil.

2. BAKE Transfer pot to oven and cook, covered, until sauce is slightly thickened, about 30 minutes. Stir in green beans and lima beans and continue to cook, covered, until green beans are tender, about 30 minutes. Season with additional salt and pepper, if necessary. Serve. (Beans can be refrigerated in airtight container for 3 days or frozen for 1 month.)

TEXTURE TIP Full of Beans

Block Party casseroles typically contain a hodgepodge of canned beans swimming in an ersatz Sloppy Joe mix. While canned beans were a good start, we found that the addition of meaty frozen lima beans and crunchy fresh green beans gave the casserole much needed textural contrast, plus some spark.



Fresh beans, frozen beans, and canned beans each brought something to the party.