# Beans

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*New Englanders had two reasons for eating their beans. Neither is relevant anymore. Puritans liked them for the same reason Orthodox Jews do—they can be prepared in advance and do not need cooking on the Sabbath, which, in the case of Puritans, was Sunday. The second one is the same reason for New England rum, Indian pudding, and numerous other specialties—New England was awash in molasses from their cod, slave, and molasses trade with Caribbean sugar-growing islands. The beans were baked in molasses.*

*Today, whenever the Red Sox are playing in Boston's Fenway Park, announcers reassert the nickname of Boston as "Bean Town," though the concession stands prefer selling clam chowder. Boston's claim to the bean title stems from a famous speech in Worcester at Holy Cross College in 1910 when John Collins Bossidy said, "This is good old Boston, the home of the bean and the cod, where the Lowells talk only to the Cabots, and the Cabots talk only to God." But it is unlikely that Boston was the home of the bean, the original "Bean Town." Among those who claim this dubious distinction is the North Shore town of Beverly, which by chance is also the real home of the Cabots, who made their fortune from cod.*

*Lucy Larcom, a well-known local poet of nineteenth-century Beverly, wrote, "In those early days, towns used to give each other nicknames, like school boys—ours was*

*called 'Bean Town'. . . probably because it adhered a long time to the Puritanic custom of saving Sunday-work by baking beans on Saturday evening, leaving them in the oven overnight."*

*The navy bean was preferred in southern New England and the kidney bean in the north. We have a choice of about five thousand beans, though in modern times the navy bean has been taking over. At the time of* America Eats, *both Puritanism and the slave trade had been abandoned, but baked beans remained in New England. Now with the modern quest for lighter food, baked beans are in decline in New England, though they still occasionally turn up in restaurants as a side dish.*

In many New England homes, to this day, baked beans—usually with brown bread—are a Saturday night ritual. The custom once was, and still is in some Yankee households, to serve them for both Saturday night supper and Sunday morning breakfast, and the reason for it was primarily religious.

All labor on Sunday was forbidden by the Puritans as Sabbath-breaking, and among the strict disciples of the Massachusetts Bay theocracy cooking was tabu; even the building of fires except when necessary for warmth was proscribed. What food was eaten on Sunday must have been wholly prepared on a weekday. On Saturday, in the great ovens built into the kitchen fireplaces, enough food was baked to last into the following week. This almost invariably included baked beans, which lost nothing in flavor by not being served immediately and by some are held to be even better when warmed over, and baked beans logically became the Saturday night and Sunday morning menu.

With the growth of relative liberalism came some slight modification of the rules as to Sunday domestic labor, but members of all

the Evangelical churches continued, until late in the nineteenth century, to interpret the matter of Sabbath-breaking strictly. From this developed a system of Saturday and Sunday meals which provided satisfactory food throughout the day of rest within the requirements of the householders' religious scruples.

Dinner at noon on Saturday was a roast or—most commonly—a corned beef "boiled dinner," and in either case enough vegetables were cooked to supply two hearty meals. Saturday supper was baked beans and brown bread—the kind that now is usually called "Boston brown bread" outside of New England (what people of some other sections call "Boston brown bread" is "graham bread" in Yankeeland). Indian pudding was also cooked on many Saturdays, especially in the winter when a banked fire would be left in the kitchen range overnight, and this only needs to be kept warm to be at its best in the morning.

Sunday breakfast was warmed over baked beans, brown bread, and perhaps Indian pudding. Sunday dinner was more of yesterday's roast or corned beef, cold, with the remaining vegetables heated up. Supper was cold meat, bread and butter, cake, cookies, and preserves. For these fully adequate and appetizing meals no cooking whatever had to be done on Sunday. The only domestic labor was heating up food, making coffee and tea, and washing dishes.

There are many recipes for baked beans, which have been handed down for generations, and the judgment of most New Englanders as to how they ought to be prepared is likely to be influenced importantly by what kind mother used to make. A majority of families have preferred pea beans (quite commonly called "California pea beans"), while others have used kidney beans or yellow-eyed beans—their choice in the beginning probably having been based on the kind that they found it easiest to raise. Mother's recipe, which her mother used, calls for sugar sweetening. Aunt Emily's—she is father's sister and got her rule from that side of

the house—calls for molasses. Cousin Walter's wife combines both sugar and molasses. None of them would think of adding any onion flavor, but a branch of grandfather's family always buries a whole onion in the bean pot contents. Opinions also vary as to precisely what cut of salt pork should be nearly submerged at the top of the pot, its rind left clear so that it will be brown and crisp, a majority of cooks leaning toward the kind that they describe as "a streak o' lean and a streak o' fat."

As there is nothing approaching agreement among New Englanders themselves as to which of these different-tasting preparations is the best, and the individual who enthuses over one may find little to praise in any of the others, what wonder that visitors from afar, prepared to judge all baked beans by the first serving they get, gain widely divergent views as to whether the dish is what it has been cracked up to be.

In large hotels it is seldom notable; such homely fare is unlikely to have been given much attention in the training of expensive chefs. In large city restaurants the baked beans have probably come out of the five-gallon cans of national manufacturers, the restaurateur's sound argument in favor of this being that customers who like his beans will return to order them and be disappointed if they find any difference in style and taste—and that as he has to change cooks from time to time and no two cooks are sure to bake beans the same way, it is better to use a brand that will not vary.

The stranger fortunate enough to be invited to eat Saturday night beans in a household whose feminine head is a good cook will not then and there learn how all home-cooked baked beans in New England taste, but if the recipe is one that he likes, he will like it very much indeed.