



Drunken Beans

From *America's Test Kitchen* Season 16: Mexican Mole and Drunken Beans

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS:

To give our Drunken Beans a rich, complex flavor without imparting booziness or bitterness, we used a mixture of beer and tequila. To ensure creamy, intact beans, we brined them overnight, cooked them gently in the oven, and held back the acidic beer and tomatoes until they were tender. We used bacon for its smoky, meaty flavor, but to preserve that flavor, we removed the bacon from the pot after crisping it (to use as a garnish). Sautéing onion, garlic, and poblano chiles in bacon fat creates a flavorful base.

Serves 6 as a main dish

You'll get fewer blowouts if you soak the beans overnight, but if you are pressed for time, you can quick-brine your beans. In step 1, combine the salt, water, and beans in a large Dutch oven and bring to a boil over high heat. Remove the pot from the heat, cover, and let stand for 1 hour. Drain and rinse the beans and proceed with the recipe. Serve with rice.

INGREDIENTS

- Salt
- 1** pound (2 1/2 cups) dried pinto beans, picked over and rinsed
- 30** sprigs fresh cilantro (1 bunch)
- 4** slices bacon, cut into 1/4-inch pieces
- 1** onion, chopped fine
- 2** poblano chiles, stemmed, seeded, and chopped fine
- 3** garlic cloves, minced
- 1/2** cup tequila
- 2** bay leaves
- 1** cup Mexican lager
- 1/4** cup tomato paste
- 2** limes, quartered
- 2** ounces Cotija cheese, crumbled (1/2 cup)

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1.** Dissolve 3 tablespoons salt in 4 quarts cold water in large bowl or container. Add beans and soak at room temperature for at least 8 hours or up to 24 hours. Drain and rinse well.
- 2.** Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 275 degrees. Pick leaves from 20 cilantro sprigs (reserve stems), chop fine, and refrigerate until needed. Using kitchen twine, tie remaining 10 cilantro sprigs and reserved stems into bundle.
- 3.** Cook bacon in Dutch oven over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until crisp, 5 to 8 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer bacon to paper towel-lined bowl and set aside. Add onion, poblanos, and garlic to fat in pot and cook, stirring frequently, until vegetables are

softened, 6 to 7 minutes. Remove from heat. Add tequila and cook until evaporated, 3 to 4 minutes. Return to heat. Increase heat to high; stir in 3 1/2 cups water, bay leaves, 1 teaspoon salt, beans, and cilantro bundle; and bring to boil. Cover, transfer to oven, and cook until beans are just soft, 45 to 60 minutes.

4. Remove pot from oven. Discard bay leaves and cilantro bundle. Stir in beer and tomato paste and bring to simmer over medium-low heat. Simmer vigorously, stirring frequently, until liquid is thick and beans are fully tender, about 30 minutes. Season with salt to taste. Serve, passing chopped cilantro, lime wedges, Cotija, and reserved bacon separately.

TO MAKE AHEAD: The finished beans can be refrigerated for up to 2 days. Before reheating, thin beans slightly with water.

TECHNIQUE

PERFECT BEANS—AND BROTH— START SLOW AND FINISH STRONG

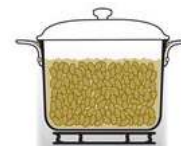
We like to cook beans in the oven because its heat is more even and gentle than that of the stovetop. If we're using the cooked beans in other recipes, we drain off the cooking liquid, but that liquid is a key component in dishes like our Drunken Beans. In these cases, we follow up the stint in the oven with a hard simmer on the stove. The higher, more direct heat jostles the beans, causing them to release starches that give the cooking liquid pleasant body.

You'd think that this vigorous simmer would also cause blow-outs—exactly what we'd been avoiding by moving the initial cooking to the oven. But it didn't, because the beans fully cook in the oven—their flesh becomes saturated and their skins softened and flexible—and are therefore less vulnerable to blowing out. Just as you can simmer canned beans in a pot of soup with minimal blowouts, we found that our oven-cooked beans could be simmered without breaking down.

START IN OVEN: Gentle cooking softens skins, saturates interiors.



FINISH ON STOVE: High heat causes starches to release into liquids.



TECHNIQUE

WHY LOTS OF ALCOHOL DOESN'T MAKE BEANS BOOZY

Adding 1/2 cup of tequila and a cup of beer to our Drunken Beans lends the dish subtly bright, complex flavor—and doesn't make the final product as boozy as you might think. That's because we add the tequila before—rather than with—the other liquids and allow it to evaporate completely before adding first water and then beer. This allows all the tequila's alcohol to burn off while leaving its flavor compounds behind.

Here's why: When alcohol and water cook together, they form an azeotrope—a mixture of two different liquids that behaves as if it were a single compound. Because alcohol and water have a strong affinity for one another, it's not possible for alcohol molecules to evaporate without some water molecules present, and vice versa. This means that even though alcohol's boiling point is lower than water's, it will never fully boil off unless all the water does, too. The upshot: As long as there is water in the pot, there will also be alcohol.

We demonstrated how more alcohol ends up in a dish when it's cooked with other liquids by making two batches of our Drunken Beans. In one batch we incorporated the tequila together with the other liquids; in the other it was added on its own (as per our recipe). We then sent samples to an independent lab to measure the alcohol content of the final dishes. The batch in which the tequila had been added on its own contained 0.35 percent alcohol (from the beer, which we added partway through cooking to avoid having its acidity toughen the beans before they were sufficiently cooked), while the alcohol in the batch in which all the liquids were added

simultaneously was 0.77 percent, more than double the amount.

BOOZE IN THE BACKGROUND: One cup of beer plus 1/2 cup of tequila may seem like a lot, but since we add the alcohol in stages, the beans taste complex, not boozy.



TECHNIQUE

MEXICAN BOUQUET GARNI

Cilantro leaves are a classic garnish for drunken beans, but since the herb's stems are also a source of aromatic flavor, we tied up 20 plucked stems and 10 more whole sprigs with twine and simmered them with the beans. Just as with a traditional bouquet garni, the spent bundle is easy to fish out of the pot before serving.

FLAVOR BUNDLE: Cilantro sprigs plus extra stems flavor the pot.

