

Hogtown HomeGrown

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The Great Green Bean Casserole Debate

Thanksgivings of my childhood could be a family reunion in rural Georgia, or just Granny, Granddaddy and I, together in their Miami Beach apartment. The most memorable “Turkey Days” were spent with Aunt Nita and Uncle Pat—there would be people sleeping all over the house—my favorite spot was under the dining room table. Lots of cousins, aunts and uncles gathered to enjoy a weekend of food and football (not in that order!) Among all the food, however, I do not remember any green bean casseroles.

I was born in 1957, so the time period was right—the Green Bean Casserole was invented in 1955 by Dorcas Reilly, an employee of the Campbell’s Soup Company. Yet Southern tradition ruled our family Thanksgivings, we always ate green beans, or their larger cousins pole beans, stewed limp with fatback—a salty, rich concoction all its own.

Fast-forward to 2008—among our children the Green Bean Casserole has become a subject of jests, contention and debate. One family member makes it only with whole, fresh green beans and Golden Mushroom Soup. The vegetarians of the family take issue with the beef stock in Golden Mushroom, so they use the regular or low-sodium versions of Cream of Mushroom Soup. And then there is the locavore, who insists the casserole can be made with healthier ingredients, and maybe even a vegan version as well.

A lot of my vegetarian life in the kitchen has been spent trying to recreate the flavors of my childhood in a healthy, non-meat, yet delicious way—Mushroom Tofu Stroganoff, BBQ Tofu with Onions, even Sloppy Joes and Beef-a-Roni made with TVP. Generally, if the seasoning and texture are right, the dish will work out great.

There are exceptions however and this green bean casserole challenge crosses into the land of junk food—can you recreate canned french fried onions? Well, I spent a week in the kitchen and I am sad to say, there is no healthy, baked substitute for fried onions in a can, but nuts make a crunchy, nutritious alternative. My family tried all the possible variations and finally agreed on one thing—no more green bean casseroles for a while—well, at least until Thanksgiving!

Vegan Green Bean Casserole

INGREDIENTS

4 cups fresh green beans, snip ends and either snap or leave whole, then steam lightly	
1 pound fresh mushrooms, button, portobello, shitake, or a combination, chopped	
4 tablespoons flour	3 tablespoons olive oil, divided
1 1/2 cups plain soymilk	1 teaspoon tamari
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper	1/2 cup pecans, chopped and toasted

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Place steamed beans in prepared casserole. Sauté mushrooms in 2 tablespoons oil. When mushrooms are cooked, add remaining oil and flour. Stir to combine, add tamari and soymilk, bring to a slow boil, stirring constantly until thickened. Pour mushrooms sauce over beans, top with nuts and bake about 30 minutes until bubbly.



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What's Fresh Right Now?

Basil—thai, Italian, bush, picola
Beans—green, pole, wing
Bitter Melon
Bok Choy—baby, regular
Chestnuts
Cucumbers—Kirby, traditional
Eggplant—purple Italian, white Italian, oriental
Garlic—chives, elephant
Greens—spinach, mustard, turnip, collards, rappini
Herbs—basil, mint
Honey—orange blossom, gallberry
Kale
Leeks
Lettuce—spring mix, leaf, arugula
Okra
Onions—yellow, Vidalia sweet
Papaya—green, ripe
Peas—white-acre (shelled and in pods), butter, black eyes
Peanuts—green, boiled
Pecans
Peppers—green/red/yellow/orange sweet bell, sweet banana, cubanelle
Persimmons—Fuyu, Hachiya and many astringent varieties
Potatoes—sweet, red new, white
Prickly Pear
Radish
Spearmint
Squash—yellow summer, zucchini, kabocha, green kabocha, calabasa, white patty pan, butternut
Tomatoes—beefsteak, grape

When you visit the markets, there are vendors with a large variety of produce who buy from all over Florida. Ask where items were grown—only you can define what is local and seasonal in your kitchen.

Local and Fresh— Green Beans

String beans, snap beans, runner beans—a bean by any other name... In the same family as shell beans (like pinto) green beans are actually picked and eaten in their immature state, before the full formation of the “beans” inside.

There's a new bean available at the farmers markets. Grown by Possum Hollow Farm from seeds with tropical origins, wing beans have three times the protein of green beans, but cook and taste the same.

Roasted Green Beans and Grape Tomatoes
Snip and snap green beans and mix them in a baking pan with grape tomatoes. Toss with olive oil, salt, pepper, and one dried herb—try basil or marjoram. Roast at 350 degrees for 45 minutes, until beans are tender.

Steamed Green Beans—4 Ways

INGREDIENTS

4 cups green beans, snipped and snapped

DIRECTIONS

Using a basket steamer or a colander over a large pot with a lid, steam beans until bright green, but still a bit crispy. Flavor one of the following ways and serve immediately.

Simple Spice—grate fresh nutmeg lightly over beans and toss to coat completely

Lively Lemon—mix cooked beans with the zest of one lemon and 1 tablespoon of juice

Nicely Nicoise—toss 1/4 cup chopped nicoise olives, 1 tablespoon of capers, and freshly ground black pepper with hot beans—serve hot or at room temperature

Classic Almond—sauté 1/2 cup sliced or slivered almonds in 1 tablespoon unsalted butter until browned, toss with beans, salt to taste

Save the World—One Holiday at a Time!

Green Stuffing

INGREDIENTS

1 recipe cornbread, made without sugar
6 ribs celery, chopped
1 bunch scallions, chopped
1/2 cup dried rubbed sage
1 quart no-chicken broth or vegetable broth
2 eggs, lightly beaten

15 slices whole wheat bread
1 large leek, chopped
1 bunch parsley, chopped
1 tablespoon marjoram
1/2 cup white wine or water
2 tablespoons butter

DIRECTIONS

The night before, break cornbread and bread into large bite-sized chunks. Place in a large bowl, cover with a towel and let sit overnight in a cool place—not the refrigerator.

Two hours before serving, mix the veggies and herbs into the bread mixture—clean hands work really well for this.

Stir liquids and eggs together, add to bread and veggies and stir lightly, but thoroughly, until all ingredients are moistened, but bread chunks are still intact. Do not stir vigorously or the breads will become too fine and make a gooey mush.

“Stuff” mixture in a very large buttered baking pan—a large roasting pan is about the right size. Dot the top with tiny pieces of butter. Cover the pan with foil. Bake at 350 degrees for 45-60 minutes. When fully cooked, the stuffing will be firm yet moist. If your baking pan is thin, place it on a cookie sheet so that the bottom does not get too brown.

Serve immediately or use towels over covered pan to keep it warm until the rest of dinner is ready. Tastes great served with mushroom or tamari gravy. Refrigerate covered leftovers.

Stuffing vs. Dressing
Some call it “stuffing” (English derivation circa 1538), some call it “dressing” (English derivation circa 1880.) In the South, if it is in the turkey, it’s stuffing, but if it is cooked separately in a casserole, then it’s dressing, but family traditions seem to rule. The real debate? Plain bread vs. cornbread, and sausage vs. oysters.

“No Soup for You” Green Bean Casserole

INGREDIENTS

8 cups fresh green beans, snapped into bite-sized pieces, lightly steamed
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, divided
1 clove garlic, smashed and chopped
6 tablespoons flour
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

2 pounds fresh mushrooms, sliced
1/4 cup onion, finely chopped
3 cups milk
Salt to taste

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Prepare a large, flat casserole. Sauté mushrooms in 2 tablespoons butter, stirring in garlic and onion after 2-3 minutes. When mushrooms are cooked and onions are soft, add reserved butter, then stir in flour until completely combined. Whisk in milk (warm it first if you are in a rush) and continue to stir until sauce bubbles and thickens. Add pepper and taste for salt—keep in mind that the topping may add a salty taste. Mix in green beans, pour into casserole and bake at 350 degrees for 20 minutes, add topping and bake an additional 10-15 minutes until topping is crunchy. Refrigerate covered leftovers.

Casserole Toppers
1 can fried onions—mix 1/2 into casserole, top with remainder
1 cup bread crumbs mixed with 3 tablespoons melted butter
1 cup toasted, chopped nuts
1 cup bread crumbs mixed with 1/2 cup finely shredded cheese

Hogtown HomeGrown

Local and Seasonal Recipes, Menus and More
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Cranberries for Dinner or Dessert

Tricks and Tips
Try this practical joke on the relative that won't give up canned cranberry sauce. Fill a can the size of a cranberry sauce can with the warm cranberry sauce mixture and refrigerate until completely chilled. Remove from can by opening the closed end and pushing out mixture with lid. Slice into rounds to serve.

Cranberry Sauce

INGREDIENTS

1 cup water
1 cup sugar (try raw or demerrara sugar)
1 pound cranberries

DIRECTIONS

Heat water and sugar in deep saucepan until mixture is boiling and sugar is dissolved. Add cranberries, stir to coat with liquid and simmer on low for 20 minutes, until all berries have burst and the juice is thickened. Cool for 30 minutes at room temperature before pouring into a covered container, then refrigerate overnight or longer. This is the fresh version of canned "whole cranberry sauce" and is served with Thanksgiving dinner. Try a spoonful on vanilla ice cream.

Cranberry Fool

INGREDIENTS

1 cup whipping cream
1 cup Cranberry Sauce
1 tablespoon powdered sugar
1 teaspoon almond extract

DIRECTIONS

Just before serving, whip cream into soft peaks, add sugar and beat only until sugar is mixed into cream. Stir almond extract and a spoonful of whipped cream into Cranberry Sauce, then gently fold resulting mixture into whipped cream. Serve in individual dessert cups, garnishing with a dollop of Cranberry Sauce either under or on top of the Cranberry Fool. Perfect with a cup of espresso and a crispy cookie.