



Texas-Style Pinto Beans

BY SHERI CASTLE

Traverse the South from East to West and you'll notice a shift in the type of beans served with barbecue, especially after you cross the Mississippi. Up to that point, the word "barbecue" implies pork and you're most likely to be served sweet and sticky baked beans made from dressed up canned beans, even though the finished dish is deemed homemade.

These are not baked beans. Texas-style pinto beans are brothy, cooked from scratch with dried beans. Unlike most dried bean recipes, however, these turn out better when you don't soak the beans so that they can absorb the liquid as they cook, ensuring that they are deeply flavored. Part of that flavor comes from smoky, fatty, salty, meaty seasoning. Once you're in brisket country, the pintos are often seasoned with burnt ends, so I encourage you to use those dark and smoky bits if you can get them from a local barbecue restaurant, or from a brisket you smoke at home. Otherwise, smoky bacon is a good substitute.

The type of fresh, fragrant chili powder you use will determine the heat level of the finished dish. No matter your choice, don't go overboard; use only enough to flavor the beans without making them fiery hot.

Although dried beans last a long time, they are not immortal. At some point, they'll be so dried out that no amount of cooking can soften them up. Fresh-crop dried beans that are no more than a year old cook quickly and beautifully. (I order mine online from Rancho Gordo.)

A pot of pintos is impressive when you know what you're doing.

Makes 8 servings

1 pound dried pinto beans
1 medium yellow onion, chopped (about 2 cups)
2 cups coarsely chopped brisket burnt ends, divided
3 garlic cloves, chopped
1 tablespoon chili powder
1 tablespoon onion powder
1 tablespoon garlic powder
1 tablespoon ground black pepper
1 tablespoon salt
2 teaspoons dried Mexican oregano
1 teaspoon ground cumin (optional if your chili powder includes cumin)

Pour the beans into a large bowl and cover with water. Stir them with your fingers and discard any chaff or broken beans. Drain the beans and pour them into a Dutch oven or other similar large, heavy pot. Add enough water to submerge the beans by a depth of 1 1/2 inches.

Add the onion, 1 cup of the burnt ends, garlic, and all of the spices. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer gently until the beans are tender, 1 to 2 hours. The fresher the dried beans, the more quickly they will cook. Do not let the beans boil.

Remove the pot from the heat, stir in the reserved 1 cup burnt ends, let stand uncovered for 1 hour, and then check the seasoning. The rest gives the beans time to absorb more seasoning from the delicious broth. Reheat gently before serving. (You can prepare the beans up to 2 days ahead. Cool, cover, and store refrigerated.)

Variation:

To use bacon instead of burnt ends to season the beans, cut 8 to 12 ounces smoky, thick-cut bacon crosswise into 1-inch pieces. Cook in the large pot you'll use for the beans over medium-low heat until crisp and rendered, about 20 minutes, stirring often. Use a slotted spoon to transfer the bacon to a separate bowl and set it aside. Stir the beans to coat them in the drippings before adding the water at the start of cooking. When the beans are cooked, stir the reserved bacon back into the pot just before you check the seasoning. As with the burnt ends method above, let the finished beans rest before serving.