



Bean There, Done That?

These tasty veggies are inexpensive and multi-purpose

Beyond the inevitable jokes that accompany them, beans provide the body with many necessary nutrients. In fact, the 2005 U.S. Dietary Guidelines encourages Americans to eat at least three cups of beans per week.

As people from high bean consumption countries have immigrated to the U.S. over the years, they have brought native dishes with them. Think Cuban rice and beans, Mexican refried beans, French cassoulet (a one-dish meal of meat and beans), pasta e fagiolo from Italy and hummus from throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East—all of which have become common offerings in many segments.

One of the easiest ways for foodservice operators to incorporate beans is through side dishes. Beans take on many flavors and introduce a hearty texture to meatless side dishes like side salads and pasta salad. They can be pureed as a low-fat thickener or dip and sprinkled on salads or in accompaniments like relishes and salsas.

“Beans are very reasonably priced so there is never a problem with food cost,” says Steve Lunin, director of culinary services at Mease Manor, an assisted living/retirement community in Dunedin, FL. “They come in many forms so they are always available and not subject (so far) to weather conditions. For sides, we make a three-bean and a four-bean salad. We use them in some of our signature salads such as our Southwestern Salad. We also use them in our Southwestern Wrap and we do a Health Salad with beans.”

These types of dishes are particularly popular with vegetarian customers, who often have difficulty incorporating enough protein into their diets. As well as protein, beans supply complex carbohydrates, but have a low-glycemic index value, which means they do not cause as quick or as steep a rise in blood sugar as many other carbohydrate-rich foods.

Beans are almost fat-free and completely cholesterol-free. They are, however, packed with fiber, which is filling, helps reduce coronary heart disease, prevents constipation and can help reduce fat levels in the blood.

These little nutritional powerhouses are also packed with B vitamins, including folic acid. They provide iron, potassium, selenium, magnesium and some calcium. Another important nutrient in beans is folate, which reduces the risk of stroke and cancer,

encourages proper cell division and overall good health, and is especially important in the early stages of pregnancy.

Beans come canned or dried, and both are easy to cook. Experts recommend inspecting dried beans before cooking, in case there's anything mixed in, such as small stones or twigs. They should then be rinsed. Dry beans should be soaked for up to four hours to return moisture to them and reduce the cooking time. Soaking also makes them more digestible and less likely to cause gas. During soaking, the size of the beans will expand two to three times, so use a large pot. Here are some additional tips from the Northarvest Bean Growers Association:

- Add a tablespoon of oil or butter to cooking water to prevent foaming and boil-overs.
- Gently simmer the water to prevent split skins.
- Stir beans occasionally throughout the cooking process to prevent sticking.
- Bite beans to test for tenderness. Beans should be tender, but not mushy.
- Onions may be added at any time during the cooking process. For a stronger onion flavor, add them during the last half-hour of cooking.
- Herbs and spices like oregano, parsley, thyme and garlic may be added at any time during cooking.
- Add salt only after beans are tender. If added before, salt may cause bean skins to become impermeable, halting the tenderizing process.
- Add lemon juice, vinegar, tomatoes, chili sauce, catsup, molasses or wine after beans are fully cooked. Wait to add these and other ingredients rich in calcium or acids, which can prevent beans from becoming tender.