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Beans and Red Wine: Party Hearty

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It started with a question from a friend.

“What budget-conscious, vegetarian dinner party dish can you think of that’s as impressive as beef Bourignon, can be made entirely in advance, doesn’t involve tofu and will be satisfying enough for meat eaters?”

After much discussion, the answer we came up with was: a big pot of beans stewed with red wine.

The rationale went like this: beans can be made ahead and get better after sitting a few days. The red wine, cooked down to syrup, adds intensity, complexity and that certain company-worthy fanciness to the whole thing. And even if you splurge on heirloom beans, it’s still going to be less expensive than beef.

The idea stuck with me for weeks before I decided to try it. To get the most intense flavor out of the red wine, I used a classic beef-stew trick taught to me by the chef Daniel Boulud when I was working on one of his cookbooks.

Instead of adding a bottle of red wine directly to the pot along with the meat, Mr. Boulud would simmer the wine down first in a little saucepan on the stove until it condensed. Then he would use the concentrated wine to braise the meat. This resulted in a richer, more intense sauce.

I fiddled with the method a bit to translate it to the bean pot. Instead of taking 30 minutes to reduce the wine before cooking the beans, which would then need at least another hour to soften, I simmered beans and wine at the same time next to each other on the stove. Once the beans were soft and the wine reduced, I combined them and continued to simmer for a few more minutes to bring the flavors together and allow the sauce to thicken. Then I served it all over polenta, though egg noodles or rice would have been nice, too.

The next time I craved the red wine beans, I completely ignored their vegetarian origin and added bacon to the mix. I liked it even better.

Since then I’ve made the dish several times, with smoky bacon, not-so-smoky bacon, with white wine instead of red, and once without any wine at all (just leave it out). I’ve also added extra water and thinned it down into a hearty soup. All of the variations work well, which goes to show what an adaptable recipe this is. So take it and have your way with it. Whether you’re vegetarian, meat eater, soup slurper, wine lover or none of the above, the only thing you need is a fondness for

beans. That part is nonnegotiable.