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Beans and Greens: A Power Couple

By MARTHA ROSE SHULMAN

If you've been a longtime follower of Recipes for Health, you know how much I like combining beans and greens. They make a good, nourishing couple and every peasant cuisine in the world seems to know this. It's so easy to put together a hearty, high-protein one-dish meal rich in vitamins and minerals with these two foods as the focus.

One of my favorite dishes from the Veracruz region of Mexico is a delicious black bean soup that brings together the beans and a local green that's related to lamb's quarters, for which I substituted spinach when I [adapted it](#) for Recipes for Health. I love to add [greens to hearty minestrone](#) and [kale to slow-baked beans](#). One of my favorite dishes from the Southern Italian region of Apulia is bitter greens with dried favas, and I love a simple [mussel or clam stew with beans and greens](#).

Some of this week's recipes were inspired by the food in a new book called "The New Persian Kitchen," by Louisa Shafia. Every once in a while I pick up a cookbook and want to cook everything in it, which was the case with this one. The book doesn't have many bean recipes; rather, it was the flavors that inspired me, and they adapt perfectly to my theme of beans and greens. You'll find pomegranate molasses, lots of slowly browned onions and a garden of fresh herbs – mint, dill, cilantro – in several of this week's recipes.

Bean and Green Herb Stew

This is inspired by a famous Persian stew that is traditionally made with chicken and kidney beans. I came across a vegetarian rendition of the stew in Louisa Shafia's wonderful new book, "The New Persian Kitchen." Louisa uses tofu in her stew; I'm just focusing on the beans, herbs and spinach.

It's crucial to cook red kidney beans thoroughly, because they contain a naturally occurring toxin called phytohemagglutinin that causes extreme intestinal distress but is reduced to harmless levels when the beans are boiled for a sufficient amount of time (10 minutes is sufficient, according to the Food and Drug Administration, but of course beans require a lot more cooking than that to soften). You should not cook them in a crockpot because the temperature may not be high enough to destroy the toxin, and you should discard the soaking water.

1 cup red kidney beans (either the small or the larger, more elongated variety), soaked for 4 hours or longer in 1 quart water

1 bay leaf

2 large onions, 1 cut in half, the other thinly sliced

Salt to taste

3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil or grapeseed oil, plus additional olive oil for drizzling

4 garlic cloves, minced

1 generous bunch spinach (about 3/4 pound), stemmed, washed thoroughly and coarsely chopped, or 2 6-ounce bags baby spinach

1 cup tightly packed, coarsely chopped flat-leaf parsley

1 cup tightly packed, coarsely chopped cilantro

1 cup thinly sliced scallions (2 bunches)

2 dried limes (available in Persian markets), soaked in hot water to cover for 15 minutes (optional) (place a small plate over the limes to keep them submerged)

Freshly ground pepper

Fresh lemon juice for serving

1. Drain the kidney beans and rinse. Place in a large saucepan and add 1 quart fresh water. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat and skim off any foam. Add the bay leaf, halved onion, 1 of the garlic cloves, and salt to taste. Reduce the heat to low, cover and simmer 1 hour. Remove the bay leaf and halved onion and discard.

2. Meanwhile, heat 3 tablespoons oil over medium heat in a heavy soup pot or Dutch oven and add the sliced onion. Cook, stirring often, until it begins to color. Turn the heat to low, add a generous pinch of salt and continue to cook, stirring often, until the onion is dark brown and has melted down to about half its original volume, about 20 minutes. Stir in the remaining garlic and cook, stirring, until it is fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the beans with their broth and bring to a simmer. Simmer, partly covered, for 30 to 60 minutes, until the beans are tender. Taste and adjust salt.

3. Add the spinach by the handful, stirring until wilted before adding the next handful, until all of the spinach has been added. Stir in the herbs and scallions. Using a needle, pierce the limes in a few places and add them along with 1/2 cup of their soaking water (if you aren't using the limes, just add an additional 1/2 cup water). Simmer for 10 to 15 minutes, until the greens and herbs are tender but still bright. Taste and adjust salt. Add pepper. Remove the dried limes before serving.

4. Serve with lemon wedges and squeeze fresh lemon juice into each bowl.

Note: You can also add lemon juice directly to the stew, but the acid will dull the color of the greens in a short time.

Yield: 4 servings

Advance preparation: Make this through Step 2 up to 3 days ahead and keep in the refrigerator, or freeze for up to a month. For the most vibrant flavor, it's best to serve shortly after adding the spinach and herbs.

Nutritional information per serving: 280 calories; 11 grams fat; 2 grams saturated fat; 1 gram polyunsaturated fat; 7 grams monounsaturated fat; 0 milligrams cholesterol; 35 grams carbohydrates; 14 grams dietary fiber; 94 milligrams sodium (does not include salt to taste); 14 grams protein

Martha Rose Shulman is the author of "The Very Best of Recipes for Health."