

Beans: The Near Perfect Food

By Jayne Rosenbaum

Beans, also known as legumes because they are the seeds of plants that have pods, are one of the first wild foods to be domesticated thousands of years ago. They are a nutrient rich, energy packed staple that should be consumed daily for many reasons. Not only are beans high in protein, they are rich in complex carbohydrates, high in dietary fiber, low in fat, and contain virtually no cholesterol. In fact, they even help to lower cholesterol levels when consumed regularly. They also contain a chemical that helps fight the deposit of platelets in our veins and arteries.

Beans are brimming with vitamins and minerals. They are high in B vitamins, thiamine, niacin, B6 and folic acid. Everyone can benefit from adding beans to their diet, women especially. Just one cup of lentils, for example, offers a quarter of a day's supply of iron.

When combined with foods high in vitamin E such as broccoli, tomatoes, peppers, citrus fruits or juices, absorption of iron is much higher. Diabetics and hypoglycemics benefit because eating beans does not trigger a rise in blood sugar, thus conserving insulin. Release of insulin promotes fat storage. Carbohydrate foods like bread, potatoes and pasta causes the body to release insulin.

Great for weight watchers, beans actually help to flush away fat rather than allowing the body to store it for future use as fuel. Beans give you more volume and weight per calories ingested keeping you full longer, and their fiber content acts like an intestinal broom sweeping through the digestive tract and promoting regularity, which keeps colon cancer at bay. Best of all beans take longer to digest so that in effect we actually burn more calories than we ingest just to digest them!

All over the world beans are an ingredient in yummy dishes: Brazil's feijoado, India's dal, Spain's potaje del garbanzos, Mexico's frijoles refritos, France's cassoulet, Israel's hummus, Italy's pasta e fagioli, Japan's miso pastes and China's stir-fried tofu and pea pods. In the U.S., we have our own baked beans of New England and black eyed peas and Cajun rice and beans of the South. Beans are versatile, healthy and just plain good for you! Yes, I would say beans are the near perfect food, how about you?

Escarole and White Bean Soup

1 head of escarole, rinsed well and torn
8 cups of chicken broth
1 large onion, chopped
4 cloves garlic, chopped
2 cups of white beans, dry weight
¼ cup olive oil
Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Wash and tear the escarole, set it aside. In a large pot, bring to a boil the broth. Add the beans. Lower to simmer, cover and cook beans until they are almost tender adding broth/water as the liquid is absorbed. Saute the garlic and onions in olive oil and add to the beans.

Continue to simmer for about 15 more minutes. Lastly, add the escarole and cook until just tender about 10 more minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste. Serve with crusty bread for proper dipping. Enjoy!