

Beans *A History*

by Jane Bowler

When my review copy of *Beans: A History* by Ken Albala arrived, I wasn't particularly excited. What's to know about beans? Handy little pellets of veggie protein, come in various colours, look pretty in jars on my kitchen shelf. But when at last I opened the book and read the author's introduction, I was immediately hooked.

'To really understand beans, to become one with my subject, I resolved to eat beans every single day, ideally a new species or variety with every meal. Soon my cabinets were bulging with heirloom appaloosas, delicate Spanish Tolosanos, football-shaped lablabs, specimens from the far-flung corners of the globe, from tiny teparies to mammoth Greek gigandas. There followed regular visits to ethnic grocery stores, especially Indian for every form of dhal, hours spent hulling and peeling fresh favas, and frenzied Internet bean forays in the middle of the night. I munched pickled lupines for breakfast, snacked on Japanese wasabi peas, frightened the children with sticky natto, and with nearly every supper I pulled out the brimming bean pot. Chickpea flour panisses, South Indian dhosas, African bean fritters followed suit. There was always a bowl or two of beans soaking with zen-like patience on the countertop. I made it about a year before giving up. I still try a new bean every week or so, but I am happy to say, my system is relieved to be done with this prolonged and sometimes gruelling experiment. No matter what anyone says, tolerance for the bean and its gaseous effects does not develop over time. You just get used to bloat. At least I can say I am full of beans.'

What a great combination of scholarly commitment and good humour!

Beans seem to grow everywhere. The book approaches the plethora of varieties by geography, with chapters about the lentils of the Fertile Crescent, lupines and limas of the Andes, Africa's black-eyed peas, Indian mung beans, and many, many more. There are, in fact, over 18,000 species of beans, with more being identified every day. Any plant that produces seed pods is classed as a bean – so that includes liquorice, tamarind, carob, jicama, fenugreek and peanuts – not nuts at all. Garden favourite like lupins produce peas that are, arguably, not completely poisonous, but please don't attempt anything with them it until you've read this book!

*'We shall not even dare to dwell on the most heinous of poisonous criminals, the Calabar bean (*Physostigma venenosum*) from West Africa, which is never used as food, but rather as an "ordeal bean" given to victims suspected of witchcraft. Only the rare few who survive its lethal poison are exonerated. It is also said that people "duel" with these beans, chomping one and seeing who survives, a kind of all-natural Russian roulette.'*



I don't want to cause any offence, but you can't write a book, or a feature, about the history of beans without mentioning the fact that they ... well... they make you... you know. Wherever beans are consumed, there is an associated folk remedy to prevent flatulence. The Mexicans use epazote, a herb. In India they recommend asafoetida ('Stinking Hay'), which Albala describes as 'a rank-smelling resin'. In Japan they use seaweed, in Europe, garlic, and in the Middle East, cumin. There's no evidence that any of these is much help. It looks as if this unfortunate property has added to the strange stigma attached to beans – there is a suggestion that those lucky enough to dine amongst polite society would never dream of eating beans, for fear of indelicate consequences. Byzantine author Michael Psellus claimed that even lingering in a bean field might send poisonous fumes into one's head, leading to confusion and lethargy.

'Eating fava beans was not merely a matter of slight discomfort and possible embarrassment, but a complete disruption of the whole physiological mechanism. Again, hot herbs and aromatics offer some

correction, but beans are inherently dangerous and best left to common folk with stronger stomachs and those less concerned with clear and rational thought.'

Pythagorus was a well-known vegetarian and before the word 'vegetarian' was coined, those abstaining from meat and fish were known as Pythagoreans. But Pythagorus imposed a strict ban on bean-eating. The reasons for this aren't clear – some say he may have suffered a genetic disorder which made it dangerous for him to eat beans. Others have suggested that he believed there was some association between beans and souls – beans contained souls.

In one Roman religious rite:

'the father of the household goes out barefoot at midnight and tosses beans over his shoulder saying nine times "shades of my ancestors, depart" while banging on pots. The beans and the souls they contain are meant to substitute for the family members whom the ghosts might snatch, or the ghosts consume the spirits contained in the beans and are sated. Remarkably this festival was later converted to All Saint's Day in the seventh century, originally May 13 and only later moved to coincide with the Celtic holiday which we celebrate as Halloween (All Hallows Evening), a pale shadow of its original role as an exorcism of angry ghosts.'

Beans were not shunned at Roman feasts, however. Here's a recipe from a manuscript attributed to Apicus, that must be worth looking into.

Peas or Fava Beans Vitellius

Cook peas and mash. Crush pepper, lovage, ginger and over the condiments hard boiled egg yolks, three ounces of honey, garum, wine and vinegar. All this put into a pot and with the crushed condiments, add in oil and boil. Season the peas and mash so they are smooth, add honey and serve.

Regular readers will know that I feel uncomfortable without a tin of baked beans near me, but even I am guilty of a certain prejudice about dried beans. When I contemplated their history, I thought: But beans are dull. What I really thought was: Beans aren't clever, or glamorous. What's special about beans? They're peasant food. Cheap food. What you eat when you're desperate.

It turns out that, at least in this country, there is an enduring 'class' prejudice attached to beans – they are associated with poverty, and there are good reasons for this. Beans are cheap and easy to grow, and in times of famine, dried beans may be all that remains to eat. In pre-industrial times, the wealthy ate meat; only the impoverished had to eat beans. Eating beans was an unmistakable badge of social inferiority.

Food historians sometimes call the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the 'Golden Age of Meat'. After the plague swept through Europe, so many people died that, initially, business and agriculture were thrown into confusion. There was plenty of land available, but nobody to work it. Survivors had often inherited land and money from less fortunate relatives. Even 'average' people could afford to eat meat. The interesting outcome was not that beans remained scorned as peasant food, but that, because nobody 'had' to live on them, the stigma attached to beans began to fade away. There was no longer much chance that you might be mistaken for a peasant because you ate a few beans.



The discovery of the 'New World' saw the beginning of a great movement of beans around the world. Once, each region had its own speciality. Now, beans were on the move! Easy to transport (and a boon to sailors on long voyages), all sorts of beans found their way back to Europe, where they were, for the most part, quickly assimilated into the everyday diet. Potatoes and tomatoes were strange new things to the Europeans – but they already knew what to do with beans.

But as Europe prospered, the population grew and there was pressure to produce more food. More animals were needed to help work the land, and they had to be fed. Crop rotation helped to maximise harvests and beans made a useful contribution to the process, helping revitalise the soil. But beans once again came to be viewed as fit only for cattle feed. By the end of the eighteenth century, dried fava beans were known as Horse Beans. Fresh fava beans, still in their pods, in contrast, were quite fit for the table, and known as Windsor beans. Cookbooks stopped even mentioning dried beans for two centuries.

In the 1800s, beans were popular fare for American pioneers, miners, cowboys and soldiers. Amongst the educated classes, there was some interest in beans as part of a frugal diet designed to help people escape the dangers of modern life. In a valiant attempt to escape modern civilisation, Thoreau took to the wilderness and, during his first year, sowed some seven miles of bean rows. Sadly, he couldn't muster up any enthusiasm for eating his harvest, and found that the beans he grew were not worth much to sell or barter with. Why he chose to grow them at all isn't entirely clear: he wrote "Why should I raise them? Only Heaven knows." To Thoreau, beans seemed to represent something more than food – a closer connection to the earth and the elements. He didn't grow beans in his second year at Walden Pond.



Meanwhile, working-class Brits, crammed into filthy slums to service the mills and factories, spent their pennies on bread, sugar, tea and potatoes. A new breed of cookery books for the working classes tried to rehabilitate beans as a cheap way to feed a family. But Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management, first published in 1861 and aimed at the middle-class female, contains nothing about dried beans.

It was the introduction of ready-cooked bottled, then canned, beans that made them popular again. Heinz marketed their baked beans aggressively in Britain from the 1880s, establishing their first factory in Peckham in 1905. The new age of bean eating had arrived. But there's still no getting away from the working class associations of beans.

'There is also a British tradition of the "bean feast": a celebration thrown by bosses for their workers. ... The bean feast did become a kind of working-class holiday spree or "beano" in which raucous behaviour and heavy drinking turned everything briefly upside down. This is probably why the popular British comic strip was called The Beano – it had a decidedly working-class appeal, with the villains usually upper-class twits and snobs.'

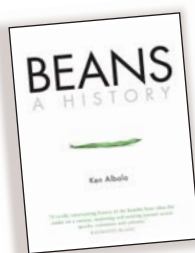
In America especially, there was another broad sector of the population for whom beans remained a staple: the immigrants. In the early years of the twentieth century, until quotas were established in the 1930s, an influx of willing workers from all over the world brought favourite dishes with them – pasta e fagioli from Italy, pea soup from Scandinavia, bean soups from Eastern Europe. Their children were anxious to adopt American ways and to become assimilated into American society, but future generations came to regard the old bean dishes as a valuable part of their culture, a taste of home.

More recently, some militant campaigners amongst the black community argued that black-eyed peas were 'slave food' and should be abandoned. Quite the reverse happened:

'The black power movement began to valorize traditional cooking and African-American culture. Especially among those who could afford to eat otherwise, this new Soul Food was a reassertion of a once denigrated cuisine as something authentic and binding for the community.'

What of the future? Albala predicts the rise of the designer bean, and points out that there is already a resurgent interest in 'heirloom' varieties, partly tied in with the Slow Food movement which seeks to reawaken interest in old-fashioned, slow ways of cooking. With their peasant-style credentials and extended cooking time, beans fit the bill well. For those less enthusiastic about soaking and boiling, dried beans could become a thing of the past, replaced by tinned varieties. Beans may become more valued as a biofuel crop, or once again sink to the status of cattle feed if the world demands more and more meat. Albala's postscript is thought-provoking:

'If our current meat-eating regime somehow collapses or we witness sudden unprecedented population growth, I do hope we remember beans.'



Beans: A History, by Ken Albala, yielded all the information for this article and I wholeheartedly recommend it (although it is not entirely vegetarian and does contain historic non-vegetarian recipes!). It was published in September 2007 by Berg Publishers, the ISBN is 978 1 84520 430 3 and the RRP is £14.99. www.bergpublishers.com