

Fourth of July Baked Beans – Comfort du Jour

Bacon has always been one of my very favorite ingredients for baked beans, and I've paired it here with a favorite flavor of my Upstate New York home—maple. That combination of smoky-salty-sweet cannot be beat, and for me, it is as much a part of Fourth of July celebration as parades and fireworks. This time, I made my baked beans from scratch, having soaked the beans overnight and then cooking them until tender before adding the flavorful sauce. But you could absolutely take a time-saving shortcut and use cans of beans. Just be sure you drain and rinse them thoroughly before you begin.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb. dried beans, soaked and prepared for cooking* (see notes)
1 heaping cup thick-cut bacon, cut into cubes
1 sweet onion, sliced or chopped

Sauce:

6 oz. can no-salt tomato paste
1/2 cup real maple syrup
1/4 cup maple-infused balsamic vinegar*
About 20 grinds fresh black pepper
1/2 tsp. chipotle powder (optional)
3/4 tsp. kosher salt
1/4 tsp. dry mustard powder
3/4 cup cold water

*NOTES

My recipe was made with dried cranberry beans, rinsed and soaked overnight, then drained twice and cooked low and slow until tender. If you prefer, or if you are pressed for time, feel free to use 3 standard cans of cooked beans. Drain the beans and rinse under cold running water, to remove all the “goo” from the cans. Great Northern, navy or white kidney beans (cannellini) would be great.

The maple-infused balsamic is a specialty ingredient, purchased at one of the stores that sells flavored olive oils and balsamic vinegars. If you do not find this, substitute an equal amount of regular balsamic vinegar or a couple of tablespoons of apple cider vinegar.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Cook beans as directed or rinse canned beans.
2. Place a cast-iron skillet over medium heat. Add bacon cubes and cook until fat is rendered and bacon cubes are just crisp. Transfer to a paper towel-lined plate. Drain off all but 2 tablespoons of the bacon fat.
3. In the same skillet, sauté the chopped onion in the bacon fat until onions are tender and slightly golden.
4. In a large bowl or measuring glass, combine sauce ingredients. Adjust seasonings to taste before adding water.
5. Layer the cooked beans, bacon and onions in a glass 8 x 8-inch baking dish. Pour the sauce into the beans and give the baking dish a few gentle shakes to distribute the sauce throughout.
6. Bake at 350° F for about an hour, until sauce is reduced to a perfectly rich and sticky mess.