
THE TALE OF THE GREEN BEANS

With green beans, to tail or not to tail, that is the question.

As a child, I remember my grandmother shaking her head and saying that only lazy cooks wouldn't tail the beans. We'd sit at her grey-flecked, Formica kitchen table with a giant tin pan of string beans straight from the garden. In one fluid motion, she'd tear off half the tops of the beans, giving them a tug down the side to remove one of the fibrous strings. Then she'd twist off the pointed tail and pull the string from the other side. Only then, were the beans ready to bend into bite-size pieces with a satisfying snap.

Grandma would have been horrified, when years later as a young adult I encountered a bundle of green beans in a fancy French restaurant that still had their tails.

"For these prices," she would have tsk-tsked, "they could have removed the tails."

Looking closer, however, I noticed that these were not your ordinary garden variety of string beans. They were whisper-thin, delicate, French haricots verts with all of their pointy little ends perfectly aligned. When nibbled, the beans were crisp, yet tender, but definitely not stringy.

Grandma would have still shaken her head.

FRENCH BEAN SALAD

When you have tiny, tender beans, they need nothing more than a quick dunk in boiling water to set their bright green color and make them ready for the salad. For planning purposes, a pound of green beans will serve 4 to 6 people, but use however many you have on hand or feel like eating.

Put a large pot of water on the stove. Add a tablespoon of salt. While the water is coming to a boil, wash and remove the tops of your green beans. Then fill a big bowl with water and ice. Drop a couple of handfuls of the beans into the boiling water and then immediately fish them out with a slotted spoon or strainer and slip them into the ice water. Swish the beans around in the ice water to make sure that they are completely cool and then drain. Drizzle the beans with your best fruity olive oil, a little bit of cracked black pepper and some of that fancy salt you bought.

These beans are also fantastic accompanied by warm, little red potatoes boiled in their jackets and high-quality canned tuna or salmon. (Or if you are lucky enough to have a leftover piece of grilled or poached fish, use that.)

ROASTED GREEN BEANS

If your green beans are larger, but still not over-the-hill, they can be roasted.

Pre-heat the oven to 450 degrees. Wash, top and tail your beans (grandma would be proud, but if you skip the tailing part, we won't tell). Dry the beans and mound them in the

center of a cookie sheet large enough to later hold the beans in a single layer. Add about a tablespoon of good olive oil and sprinkle with kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper. Move the beans around the cookie sheet with your hands like a Las Vegas dealer mixing the cards on a casino table. When all of the beans are evenly coated with the oil, arrange them in a not-too-crowded single layer on the cookie sheet. Put the pan in the very hot oven for about 5 minutes. Check on the beans and move them around the cookie sheet with tongs, flipping some of them over to cook the other side. Keep checking on the beans every few minutes (but don't move them around too much more) until they are done to your taste; I like my beans to be limp with lots of dark roasted spots. (If you want to get fancy, you can toss the cooked beans with a little soy sauce or some finely minced garlic (or both), but I like mine just plain.) Serve immediately or at room temperature. If no one else is home, eat the beans with your fingers.

SLOW-COOKED MIDDLE EASTERN STRING BEANS

Sometimes you end up with beans that have seen better days. They may be large, tough, stringy or even starting to turn a little brown on the edges. When that happens, this is the green bean dish you need to make.

Wash the green beans and top and tail them using Grandma's technique to remove any fibrous strings that may be running down the sides of the beans. Snap or cut the beans into one-inch pieces. Finely chop one large onion and open a 14.5-ounce can of peeled tomatoes. Heat a pan with a tight-fitting lid over medium-high heat on the stove. With the lid off, add a good slug of olive oil to the pan. When the oil has warmed, add the onion and stir. Cook until the onion has turned brown, stirring occasionally, but don't let it burn. Add the green beans to the pan and swirl them around in the onion and olive oil. You want the outside of the beans to get shiny from the oil and even a little blistered. Turn down the heat to low, and smooch the canned tomatoes through your fingers to break them up into small pieces as you add them to the pan (or cut the tomatoes in the can with a scissors before dumping them into the beans). For a more exotic flavor you can add a couple pinches of cinnamon at this point, but the beans are also good without it. Stir everything together, season with salt, put on the lid, and cook low and slow, stirring periodically. Depending on the starting quality of your beans, it may take 45 minutes to an hour for the beans to be done. The beans will have turned that dark green, almost gray, color and will be extremely soft. Scoop the beans into a low, flat dish. You may want to season them with a little more olive oil and salt. Tear warmed pita (pocket) bread into pieces and use them to scoop up mouthfuls of the oily, oniony, tomatoey, beans.