

PASTA FAGIOLI

(Pasta with Beans)

Makes a large pot

By Dennis W. Viau; adapted from my grandfather's recipe.

First of all, pronounce it correctly. It's fah-ZHOH-lee, not fag-ee-OH-lee. This is one of the earliest foods I remember from my childhood. My Italian grandfather used to make this and he would chop a block of hard pork fat down to the consistency of corn meal and toss it in the pot. It's no wonder he died of a heart attack at the age of 63. I remember his pasta fagioli being delicious, but I don't add pork fat to my soup.



Pasta fagioli (also pasta e fagioli or pasta fazool)¹ (see notes at end) is a peasant dish that uses beans when meat is expensive or scarce. I think of it as a comfort food. There is something exquisitely satisfying about a bowl of pasta fagioli on a winter evening. My grandfather pronounced it *pasta fazool*.

Ingredients:

2 cups (about $\frac{3}{4}$ pound (500 g)) dry cannellini beans or white kidney beans² (see notes at end)

6 to 7 cups (1.42 to 1.66 liters) vegetable stock; see recipe below or use store bought

1 6-ounce can tomato paste

$\frac{1}{2}$ large yellow onion (or 1 small); diced (optional)

2 to 3 cloves garlic; minced or crushed

Herbs to taste³, such as oregano, rosemary, thyme, marjoram, etc.

Pepper to taste

Salt to taste

Macaroni (salad pasta, tubetini, ditalini, elbow macaroni, any small pasta)

Parmesan, Romano, or Asiago cheese for garnish

Directions:

Soak the dry beans overnight in about 8 cups of salted water (1 tablespoon salt).

Drain and rinse the beans, discarding the water. Place beans in a large cooking pot (about 8 quarts or larger) with the stock. Bring to a boil and reduce heat to a simmer. The liquid should be at a very low simmer, barely moving. Cook about 45 minutes. The beans will not yet be tender.

Add the tomato paste, onion (optional), garlic, herbs, and pepper. Bring to a boil and simmer over low heat for 20 minutes, uncovered. Check the beans for tenderness. Cook longer if the beans are not yet tender. Taste for salt and adjust as necessary.

Cook the pasta according to package directions. Spoon some cooked pasta into bowls and ladle in some bean soup. Serve with grated cheese on the side for garnish.

This soup freezes well. If it becomes too thick in storage, water can be added when heating.

The recipe for homemade vegetable stock follows. You can use store-bought vegetable broth, but try to find a low-salt, low-sodium variety.

Vegetable Stock:

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 large onion, coarsely chopped

5 leafy celery stalks, cleaned and coarsely chopped

3 garlic cloves, coarsely chopped or crushed



3 large carrots, coarsely chopped
 1 leek, torn open and cleaned of mud
 2 bay leaves
 20 springs fresh parsley
 About 10 peppercorns
 Any additional vegetables, such as parsnip, rutabaga, etc., as desired, but nothing acidic (no tomatoes)

Place oil and vegetables in a stock pot heated over medium-low heat to sweat the vegetables for about 10 minutes. (The term *sweating* means the vegetables start to yield their juices.) Stir occasionally. Carefully add 1½ quarts (1.4 liters) of water and raise the heat to bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 30 minutes. Remove from the heat and allow to cool enough to handle safely. Use a slotted spoon or “spider web” strainer to remove the solids and place them in a colander or chinois (conical strainer) over a large bowl to drain. Press the solids to extract more liquid.* Discard the solids. Store the stock in the refrigerator until needed. The color might darken considerably in the refrigerator, but when the stock is heated, the color will return to a rich golden hue again.

*You can extract more liquid—as much as 2 cups—if you place the solids in a clean piece of cotton muslin and wring to squeeze out more liquid.

Can be made a day in advance. Freezes well.

STEP-BY-STEP

1



Some cooks save the trim (scraps) when peeling and trimming vegetables and freeze them. When they have a large collection of trim they make vegetable stock. I go to the grocery store. Here are the vegetables I am using to make this stock. I'll add peppercorns and bay leaves. I do not add any salt because this stock will be used to cook the beans. Salt in the cooking liquid can give beans a mealy texture. Adjust for salt after the beans are cooked.

2



You don't need to peel the carrots or the onion. Just chop stuff up. Put some oil in your stock pot and place it over medium-low heat and start tossing in chopped vegetables.

3



One vegetable you need to handle carefully is the leek, if you use one. They are notorious for having lots of dirt in them. Cut the leek open down the center and spread apart the leaves. Rinse thoroughly to remove all the mud.

4



I don't peel the garlic cloves, or the onion. I just place the clove on the cutting board and crush it well with my chef's knife. All these vegetables are going to end up in the trash (or compost heap). So there is no need to be fussy.

5



When all your vegetables are in the pot, “sweat” them over low heat for about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. This will cause the vegetables to release their juices for a more flavorful stock. Then add the water, bay leaves, and peppercorns and raise the heat to bring to a boil. Cover and reduce heat to low. Simmer 30 minutes.

6



Allow the stock pot to cool until safe enough to handle. Place a strainer or colander over a large bowl (I'm using an old pressure cooker pot that became unsafe to use) and pour in the stock and cooked vegetables. You can use a slotted spoon to transfer the vegetables to the strainer if that's safer for you. Allow to drain.

7



I squeeze extra stock out of my vegetables by using a square of cotton muslin that I keep especially for this purpose. Arrange the muslin in a large bowl and dump in the vegetables. Bring up the edges and start twisting and squeezing to force more stock out. You'd be surprised how much extra stock you can recover.

8



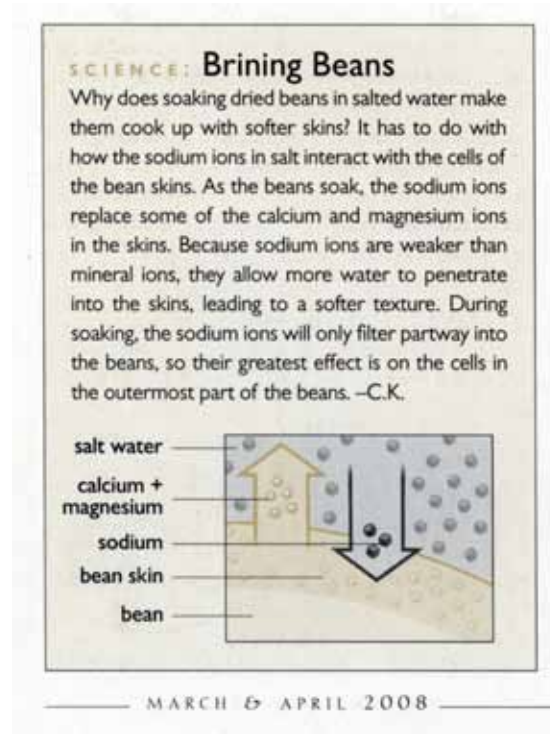
Here is my extra stock, 2 cups, squeezed from the drained vegetables. I might also add, the color is beautiful. This looks delicious already. It looks like chicken soup, but it tastes of vegetables. For this soup you could safely substitute with chicken stock, if that is what you have on hand.

9



If you are using dry beans you'll need to soak them overnight (or about 8 hours). There is some dispute about whether or not to use salt. My research informs me that soaking the beans in salted water is better because the sodium in the salt will penetrate the skins and tenderize them. Very little salt will get inside the beans. After soaking at least 8 hours, drain and rinse the beans well. Remove any debris that looks foreign. Some cooks insist on using the soaking water to make the soup. Cooking the beans in salted liquid will cause them to have a mealy texture. Discard the water.

10



Here is the research I found from a March/April 2008 edition of *Cook's Illustrated* magazine.

11



The ingredients for the soup are simple at this stage: Vegetable stock, soaked cannellini beans and tomato paste. I add a little extra fresh garlic. Sometimes I chop half an onion fairly fine and it.

12

Place the beans in a large cooking pot with the stock. Add some fresh garlic and onion (optional) and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low and simmer. The liquid should be barely moving. By reducing the agitation in the pot fewer beans will break open and the skin is less likely to come off. Cover and simmer 45 minutes.

13

Add 1 6-ounce can of tomato paste to the pot and stir gently to dissolve. It doesn't need to be completely blended in. The cooking will help. Simmer another 15 to 20 minutes, a little longer if the beans are not tender. Taste for salt and pepper and adjust as needed. The soup is done when the beans are tender. It can be cooled and stored in the refrigerator for later use, or cook pasta (see below) to serve immediately.

14



For each serving cook about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (dry) macaroni according to package directions. Tubetini is traditional. Salad pasta (little tubes), elbow macaroni, etc. will work just as well. Place the cooked pasta in a bowl and ladle in some of the bean soup. Serve with crusty Italian bread. The soup can be garnished at the table with a little Parmesan or Romano cheese, if desired.

Like many Italian dishes, this soup will taste even better when reheated the following day. I sometimes store the cooled soup in 1-cup portions sealed in ziplock bags and then freeze them. When I get home on a cold evening, nothing warms me up as enjoyably as a bowl of Pasta Fagioli. Simply cook a little pasta while heating the soup and sit down to a satisfying meal.

As I mentioned in the introduction, one of my earliest, and fondest, memories is of sitting with my Grampy and eating a bowl of *Pasta Fazool*. I think he would be proud of me for carrying on the tradition.

Notes:

¹ I attended a cooking class taught by an Italian chef and at the beginning of each quarter she asked her students if they had any favorite Italian foods for which they would like a recipe. I asked for pasta fazool. “Fazool?” she responded indignantly. “Fazool? There is no Z in the Italian language!” She could be a real Attila the Hen sometimes. I guess she never heard the Dean Martin song *That’s Amore*.

*When the moon hits your eye
Like a big pizza pie
That’s amore.*

*When the stars make you drool
Just-a like a pasta fazool
That’s amore.*

One student asked for a cioppino recipe and when the *chef* finally brought the recipe to class it was plagiarized word for word from the latest issue of *Bon Appétit* magazine. She did not credit her source.

Some of us quit the class after this incident.

The pronunciation *fazool* supposedly comes from a region in Italy where they pronounce the Italian word for beans, *fagioli*, as *fazoli* or *fazooli*. The word was quickly adopted into American slang. Both my grandparents on my mother's side were Italian immigrants. They both pronounced it *fazool*.

² White Northerns are okay. I buy my cannellini beans from an Italian market near where I live. They are imported from Italy and the flavor is the best. I also like the 15 bean blends for a "nouvelle cuisine" look. And, recently, the local grocery store started stocking them. They're expensive, but I like the flavor and texture.

³ This is a good opportunity to use up some of those old herbs that have been sitting in the cupboard since your college days. Don't overdo it.