

KNOW YOUR LEGUMES

The legume family (plants that produce their seeds in a pod and sometimes have the ability to fix nitrogen from the atmosphere into the soil) is big and badass, and includes beans, peas, and lentils. These foods have been on our plates for thousands of years as one of the first cultivated crops, domesticated around 7,000 years ago according to the Northarvest Bean Growers Association. They're low in fat, cholesterol-free, cheap, and a good source of protein and fiber, and there is a huge variety to choose from. Here's a snapshot of what's out there; some of these legumes are common, others less so. For the hard-to-find beans, we went to Steve Sando, founder of Rancho Gordo bean company in Napa, California.

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Photographs by Chris Rochelle
(Images not actual size)



Mayacoba

This small bean has a very thin skin and a meaty interior. Sando swears it has a chicken flavor when you cook it simply with a vegetable mirepoix, and he says it makes one of the best refried beans out there.



Yellow Indian Woman

This is a fast-growing, incredibly creamy, small bean that keeps its shape during cooking like a black bean and can sub for black beans.



Vaquero

Sando believes this medium-sized, thin-skinned chili bean is a mix of the Anasazi and pinto beans. When cooked, it loses its white spots and creates an inky pot liquor. It's not superdense but won't fall apart when stewed.



Silvia Flor de Junio

This is a classic Central Mexican bean, great for cowboy beans or any kind of Texas-style ranch beans. It's medium-sized, light in texture, with a thin skin, and stays whole while cooking, then dissolves easily in your mouth. This variety doesn't age well though—if you find some, eat them within six to eight months of harvesting.



San Franciscano

Sando imports these beans from a small farmer in Hidalgo, Mexico, but believes they are nearly identical to another bean called Rio Zape. They are similar in size, flavor, and texture to pinto beans but richer, with a hint of chocolate-coffee flavor. San Franciscanos make a good stovetop bean (a.k.a. pot bean), producing a very dark, flavorful broth. When cooked, they lose their black streaks and turn dark purple-brown.



Cargamanto Cranberry

A variety of cranberry bean from Colombia, with a thinner skin than the more common Borlotti cranberry bean. Quite versatile, with a velvety texture. Its characteristic deep red streaks disappear when cooked. Cranberry beans are often used in Italian cuisine (sometimes referred to as a Roman bean) and are good in minestrone soup.



Pinto

A common workhorse bean in the U.S., the pinto is most frequently served refried. Pintos lose their streaks and turn solid brownish pink when cooked.



Split Pea

(a.k.a. Field Pea)
Ham's best friend in a hearty soup, this type of pea is specifically grown for drying instead of eating fresh, and cooks up very fast without soaking. You will find yellow and green varieties.



Black

(a.k.a. Turtle Bean)
An earthy, sweet bean small in size and often used in Caribbean and South/Central American cuisines. If you cook black beans in their soaking water, they will retain more of their dark coloring.



Santa Maria Piquito

This small, meaty, dense bean is traditionally served with tri-tip barbecue in Santa Maria County, California.



Lila

This small, round bean is very sweet, plump, and juicy when cooked, which makes it great as a simple pot bean. The pink color turns brownish when cooked.



French Green Lentil

A very tiny lentil with a speckled gray-green exterior and a yellowish interior. It is less starchy than the common flat green lentil and doesn't get mushy as easily, which makes it perfect for using in salad recipes.



Christmas Lima

From Peru, this large lima bean tastes like chestnuts when cooked and even has a similar texture. You can also cook it longer for a creamier texture. Sando says it's great prepared with garlic and lots of mushrooms. It is one of the few beans that retain their pretty markings when cooked, but the window is short—cook longer and the markings will disappear.



Vallarta

This medium-sized bean is so incredibly rich and creamy (almost peanut buttery when cooked) that Sando recommends cutting it with something like bitter greens. He says that it's a favorite of the French Laundry, but that it's a bean people either love or hate.



Cannellini

A medium-sized, subtly flavored white bean. Cannellini beans are versatile and work well in soups, stews, or even in a hummuslike dip, which makes them a good pantry staple. Like kidney beans, they need to be boiled for at least 10 minutes to remove toxins.



Adzuki

This small, round red bean has a sweet flavor and is often used in Japanese desserts. It is also a popular bean for sprouting because of its nutty flavor when sprouted.



Navy

A small, dense white bean named for its longtime service to the U.S. Navy. It's often the bean in a can of pork and beans and is a classic for baked beans. Allow plenty of time for navy beans to cook.



Scarlet Runner

This large bean is often grown ornamentally for its beautiful bright red flowers, and can be eaten young, pod and all, like a flat green bean, or shelled and dried. It is similar to a lima bean, with a meaty, starchy texture. Sando says scarlet runners create a "beef bouillon-like, dark and dense pot liquor" when cooked.



Fava

(a.k.a. Broad Bean)

A large, flat bean that has been cultivated since ancient times and is similar in shape to a large lima. Favas are a spring delicacy, when they appear fresh at farmers' markets, and can be shelled and lightly cooked in dishes like risotto. In their dried form (pictured), they are often stewed in variations of the dish *ful medames* throughout the Middle East.



Red Lentil

This lentil has a great color but cooks fast, as it is sold with its skin removed (unlike other varieties such as the French green lentil), and will disintegrate if you overcook it. Red lentils are used in many cuisines, from Indian to Ethiopian, and have a mild flavor.



Rosa de Castilla

A medium-sized, lightly textured bean similar to the *Silvia Flor de Junio*. Sando says it's great cooked with lots of vegetables.



Green Lentil

Probably the most common lentil on U.S. supermarket shelves (and sometimes labeled as brown), it is starchier than the French green lentil, and will fall apart with long cooking. It cooks fast, which makes it good for a quick weeknight lentil soup.



Giant White Lima

Lima beans are named after the Peruvian city of the same name where they were encountered in the 16th century by European explorers. Often sold frozen or dried (pictured), limas are starchy, buttery, and mild-flavored. They're sometimes called butter beans.



Black-Eyed Pea

This relative of the mung bean has been cultivated since ancient times but is probably best known for its role in Southern cuisine. It's said to bring good luck if eaten on New Year's Day.



Kidney

Commonplace, the kidney bean is great for chili or red beans and rice, and is also a go-to bean for classic picnic salads like three-bean salad. Never eat kidney beans raw, sprouted, or undercooked, as they contain a toxin that is destroyed during cooking.



Black Beluga Lentil

Similar to the French green lentil but black, this tiny pulse is named for its shiny resemblance to caviar when cooked. It has a mild-earthly flavor and a firm texture as long as it isn't overcooked. Try it in soups or as a bed for fish.



Flageolet

A narrow, small, French variety of bean. "People like it because you can cook the heck out of it and it still stays whole and creamy," says Sando. Try using it in a classic French cassoulet. Flageolets are great paired with lamb—Sando loves them as a bed for a braised lamb shank—and are often served with fish in France.



Soybean

Cultivated in China for thousands of years but only grown in the United States since the early 1920s, the soybean is now used in the production of many products, from tofu to miso, and is valued for its high protein content.



Yellow Eye

A small, dense bean that's creamier in texture than a standard navy bean and has a unique gold-and-white pattern. Use in place of other small white beans. Sando says the yellow eye is a classic East Coast "chowdery bean" that pairs great with pork.



Garbanzo

(a.k.a. Chickpea)
This round, nutty bean is common in Middle Eastern dishes like hummus and falafel and Indian fare such as chana masala. It has a firm texture when cooked and is most commonly seen in its beige form (shown), but there are also black, brown, and even green varieties.

For more information on legumes, go to www.chow.com/stories/12048.