

# Beans take center stage

Over generations, Chinese have developed ingenious ways of making plant protein taste good

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**T**o the Chinese, food is medicine. Every mouthful is beneficial in some way, and there are strict rules as to when to eat, what to eat and how to eat.

It is only in the past 30 years that animal protein has played an increasingly large role in Chinese diets, a departure from the traditional daily meals where meat was frugally used as flavoring. The fatted pig, cow and lamb were killed only for major festivities.

Take a classic Chinese stir-fry, with its base of aromatics like garlic and ginger, followed by vast quantities of neatly cut vegetables and a few slivers of meat. The meat plays a supporting role and serves only to enhance the sweetness of the greens.

So Chinese cooks have, over generations, developed ingenious ways of making plant protein taste good and compiled a whole encyclopedia of reasons to justify why these are good for you.

Just as Indian vegetarian food depends a lot on lentils and pulses, the Chinese pantry cannot do without beans.

Red beans, green beans, soybeans, black beans, speckled beans — even beans with “eyebrows”. We eat these so often that they have become forgotten, part of the background of everyday home-cooked food.

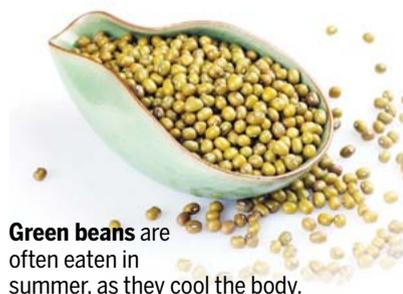
Yet they are indispensable. We use them when we braise a pot of fragrant stewed meats, we use them in a vast variety of soups. We mix them into rice, deep-fry them as crunchy garnishes for noodles, we make desserts from them. The list is endless.

They are enjoyed equally by vegetarians and carnivores.

The ubiquitous red bean, or adzuki, is what mothers turn to when the family seems a little under the weather. A few handfuls soaked in water and added to the rice pot will “boost blood”.

In cases of more severe anemia, a course of red beans, aged citrus peel and dried Chinese jujube brewed as a drink will do the trick.

Red beans are also widely used in desserts, after they are cooked down to a thick sweet paste that then goes into cakes and snacks.

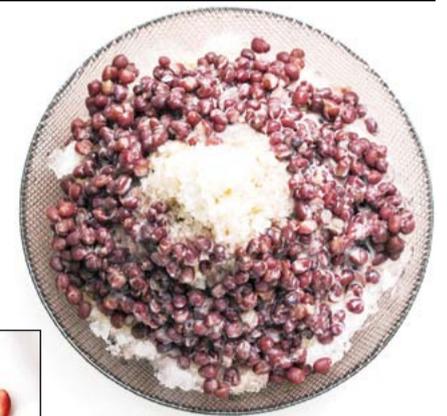


**Green beans** are often eaten in summer, as they cool the body.



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Red bean smoothie.

Their slightly smaller cousin, the green or mung bean, is used in as many ways, and often similarly. But while the red bean warms the blood, the green bean is believed to cool the body, so it is more often eaten in summer when the system easily overheats. Green bean soup, with a sprinkle of the appropriate dried herbs, will chase away thirst and sunstroke, as every Chinese granny will tell you.

Of course, sprouted green beans are probably the most familiar form, a favored micro-vegetable that is now equally beloved in international kitchens for its crisp sweet crunch, raw or lightly cooked.

And there is the soybean, upon which rests the foundation of all Chinese food.

We could probably run a separate series on this most famous of Chinese beans, but we only have space for a summary of its uses in Chinese cuisine.

Fresh, the bean is cooked in its pod and eaten as a vegetable. Dried, it becomes the miraculous starter to sauces, pastes, drinks, seasoning and a whole category of ingredients starting from the humble bean curd and its huge extended family of related products.

Ground soybeans cooked in water become soybean milk. Soybean curds become tofu, which is then made into soft, hard, semi-fermented, fermented, salted and preserved products. It is almost impossible to enter a Chinese kitchen and not encounter the soybean in some form.

One reason for the processing is the embarrassing effect whole soybeans have on the human gut. But this inconvenience does not affect its popularity. The whole beans are still widely used to sweeten stock, add body to braised pots of meat and cooked and deep-fried as a beer snack.

Apart from the soybean, other beans are equally popular in various regions.

For example, there is the black-eyed pea, which the Chinese call *meidou*, or the cream-colored bean with black eyebrows, referring to the dark scar where the bean connects to its pod.

There is a rainbow of beans, from grass-green broad beans to deep chocolate kidney beans to red and white speckled beans. And every one is treasured.

The best way to showcase creativity with beans in the Chinese kitchen is with some classic recipes, from staples to soups to desserts.

## Highlighting the creativity of beans

### Red bean rice

- 1 cup red beans
- 1 cup rice
- 1 small piece *chenpi* (dried aged citrus peel)

Pick through the red beans and soak them overnight. Drain and set aside just before cooking.

Wash and rinse rice and place in rice cooker with the red beans. Add enough water to cover the rice and beans by 1 cm. Place the citrus peel on top.

When the button pops, remove the piece of peel and fluff up the rice. If you like, now is the time to salt the rice.

Note: This is a warming dish often cooked in autumn and winter. The addition of the dried citrus peel adds to the warmth, according to traditional Chinese medicine principles.

### Fish soup with *meidou* (black-eyed peas)

- 2 small crucian carp, known as *jiyu*
- 1 cup black-eyed peas, picked

through and soaked

- 500g kudzu root or fenge
- 1 piece ginger
- A few thick chunks of Chinese ham

Clean the fish and fry them in a little oil with the ginger until golden brown on all sides. Add boiling water to the pan and keep the soup boiling until it turns milky white.

Peel the kudzu root and cut into thick slices.

Add the ham, kudzu root and black-eyed peas to the pan. When the soup returns to the boil, transfer to a large pot and continue simmering for another hour. Salt to taste before serving.

Note: Fish soup is always healthy, and the beans act as a slight diuretic, adding to the cleansing effect. The kudzu root, or *fenge*, helps to boost immunity.

### Mung bean smoothie sweet soup

- 1 cup mung beans, soaked
- 1/2 cup potato starch

- 100g rock sugar
- 1 to 2 pieces *youtiao*, or Chinese dough sticks

Soak the beans overnight until they literally burst through their skins. Gently rub off the skins and remove them. This is a tedious process, but the end result is definitely worth it.

Rinse the beans again and place in a pot with 4 cups water. Bring to a boil.

Dissolve the potato starch in water and slowly add to the beans, stirring all the time to get a translucent broth. Add sugar to taste.

Cut up the *youtiao* into small pieces and crisp them in the oven.

Serve the mung bean sweet soup with a scattering of *youtiao* croutons.

Note: This is an unusual mung bean dessert from southern China, popular in the Chaoshan region of Guangdong province. It is part of the immigrant food culture of Malaysia and Singapore, where it is called *tausuan*.