

BLACK-EYED PEAS

Black-eyed peas are a type of bean, native to Africa and introduced to the American South through the West Indies. A staple in African-American cooking, they have also been eaten for years throughout the South as a good-luck food for the New Year.

That tradition began after the Civil War, when Union troops burned most of the Confederate crops in an effort to starve the South into submission. But the Yankees considered the black-eyed peas only good for animal fodder, and didn't destroy that crop. That piece of good luck gave the Southerners something to eat during the following winter. As a result, the Southern tradition of eating black-eyed peas to bring good luck for the New Year began.

Here's how I like to cook black-eyed peas. Soak half a pound of dried black-eyed peas overnight in a large bowl of water and then drain. Take about two pounds of smoked ham hocks, cut into roughly 2-inch chunks, and place the ham hocks into a covered kettle or Dutch oven and add just enough water to barely cover. Cover the kettle with a lid and bring to a boil. Turn the heat down and simmer the ham hocks for about 2 hours, covered, or until they are tender. Add the drained peas along with two stalks of chopped celery, a yellow onion, peeled and chopped, a green or red sweet bell pepper, seeded and chopped, and about ½ teaspoon crush red pepper flakes. I also like to add about ¼ teaspoon of garlic powder or a couple of cloves of finely chopped garlic.

Cook, covered until the black-eyed peas are tender, at least 45 minutes or probably longer. You may want to remove the lid and turn the heat up and boil off some of the liquid before serving. Some people like their peas firmer and whole—I like mine softer and a little mushy. It's all a matter of taste. Check the seasonings and add some more salt or pepper if needed. You shouldn't need to add too much salt as the ham hocks are already salty.

I like to serve this with some thinly sliced red onions that have soaked in some cider vinegar and a little salt as a garnish. I prepare the onions first of all, so they'll have time to really marinate in the vinegar before serving. Add a green salad and some corn bread, and you have a wonderful supper.

Traditionally, greens were also served along with the black-eyed peas and corn bread. The black-eyed peas stood for coins, and the greens represented green folding money—meaning you were going to have prosperity in the coming year.

To make a big mess of greens, you'll want about 6 pounds of greens, such as collard greens, mustard greens, kale, or turnip greens, or a combination, rinsed well, picked over, and stripped off the stems. You start by frying up about half a pound of chopped bacon in a large heavy pot over medium heat until slightly crisp. Then add about 3 cups of sliced onions and cook, stirring from time to time, for about 7-8 minutes, until the onions are golden. Then add about a teaspoon of salt, ½ teaspoon of cayenne pepper, a tablespoon of chopped garlic and about ¾ teaspoon of freshly ground black pepper.

Cook these ingredients for a couple of minutes, then add a can of beer, a tablespoon of molasses, and ¼ cup of vinegar, like white or cider vinegar. Start adding the greens, about a third at a time, pressing down on them as they wilt. The greens will wilt and cook down a lot as they cook. Then stir it all well, and cook the greens, uncovered, over medium heat, for about an hour and 15 minutes, stirring often. When the greens are done, check for salt and add more if necessary. This will serve 8 hungry diners.

Hopin' y'all are eatin' some truly scrumptious dishes to bring good luck in the coming year, this is Chef Steve for the Hometown Kitchen.