

cannellini beans, also known as white kidney beans. Tasters found these oval-shaped beans to be sweet and creamy and most like cranberry beans. Smaller white beans (navies and Great Northerns) did not have quite enough heft for this soup but are certainly fine if that's what you have on hand.

Although a taste test (see right) revealed some good choices among canned beans, I wanted to find a way to boost their flavor. My first thought was to add the beans to the tomato mixture, a step that might infuse them with the flavors of the pancetta, oil, and vegetables. I prepared two batches of soup—one with beans and broth added simultaneously and one with beans added to the tomatoes and cooked for 10 minutes prior to adding the broth. The results were black and white. The beans added to the tomato mixture adopted its flavors readily, easily beating out the bland beans added later in the recipe.

The makeup of the broth was also critical. Although chicken broth is standard in many recipes, tasters felt that the resulting pasta fazool tasted like chicken soup. I tried water instead of chicken stock, adding some Parmesan rind to boost flavor. This test was a success, but I went on to try a 60/40 combination of broth and water, retaining the cheese rind. This soup was the winner: good body, good flavor, and not too "chickeny."

Oregano and red pepper flakes were included in some of the recipes I had seen, so I added a teaspoon of oregano and a mere 1/4 teaspoon of pepper flakes to the pot with the aromatic vegetables; tasters approved. Parsley is typically added at the end of cooking, and it took just one test to show that it brightened the flavor and color of the soup. The last flavor-enhancing idea—a long shot, perhaps—was a teaspoon of minced anchovy fillet. I was delighted to discover that this worked its own unique magic. Tasters could not identify what was different about the batch with anchovy, but everyone agreed that it was more complex and fuller in flavor.

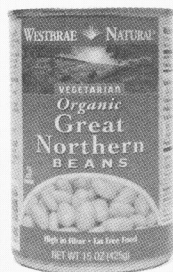
Final Tests

My tests showed that pasta with relatively small shapes are best in this soup. Larger shapes, like elbows and shells, crowded out the other ingredients and soaked up too much broth. Tiny pasta, such as stars and pastina, were lost next to the more sizable beans and tomatoes.

Now came the moment of truth. I prepared two soups—in one pot my 45-minute canned bean version and in the second pot a three-hour version using the same recipe but with dried beans that had been precooked. (I substituted the cooking water from the beans for the plain water in my recipe.) The result? A bit to my surprise, there was a split vote among tasters. To me the choice is clear: 45 minutes or three hours—you may not be able to tell the difference in your mouth, but you will be able to tell the difference on the clock.

TASTING: Canned White Beans

We sampled four canned white beans in our search for the best beans for this soup. Because so few brands of canned cannellini beans (our favorite for this soup) are distributed nationwide, we broadened our taste test to include alternative white beans with widespread distribution. We tasted each contender twice: straight from the can (after being drained and rinsed) and prepared in our recipe for pasta e fagioli made without the pasta. Brands are listed in order of preference from left to right based on combined scores from the two tests.



CLEAN & SMOOTH

WESTBRAE Organic Great Northern Beans

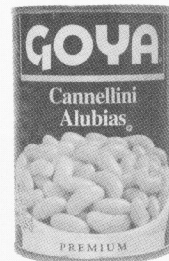
Tasters liked the "earthy" flavor and "creamy" texture of these beans. A bit small for this soup.



CREAMY BUT FIRM

PROGRESSO Cannellini Beans

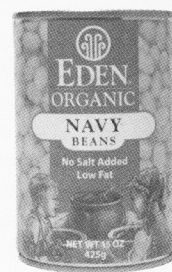
These "plump" beans were second in the plain tasting, first in the soup. Tasters praised their "sweet, slightly salty" flavor.



MEALY TEXTURE

GOYA Cannellini Beans

Tasters liked neither the "weird" gray color nor the "tough skins" of these beans but approved of their "good bean flavor."



BLAND & MUSHY

EDEN ORGANIC Navy Beans

Comments such as "too small for this soup" and many "broken beans" put this brand in last place.

ITALIAN PASTA AND BEAN SOUP

(PASTA E FAGIOLI)

MAKES ABOUT 4 QUARTS, SERVING 8 TO 10

This soup does not hold well because the pasta absorbs the liquid, becomes mushy, and leaves the soup dry. The soup can, however, be made in two stages. Once the beans are simmered with the tomatoes, before the broth and water are added, the mixture can be cooled and refrigerated for up to 3 days. When ready to complete the soup, discard the Parmesan rind (otherwise it will become stringy), add the liquid, bring the soup to a boil, and proceed with the recipe.

- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
- 3 ounces pancetta or bacon, chopped fine
- 1 medium onion, chopped fine (about 1 cup)
- 1 celery rib, chopped fine (about 2/3 cup)
- 4 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 1 heaping tablespoon)
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 3 anchovy fillets, minced to paste (about 1 teaspoon)
- 1 can (28 ounces) diced tomatoes with liquid
- 1 piece Parmesan cheese rind, about 5 inches by 2 inches
- 2 cans (15 1/2 ounces each) cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
- 3 1/2 cups canned low-sodium chicken broth
- Salt
- 8 ounces small pasta shape (see "Four Best Pastas for Soup" on page 20)
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley leaves
- Ground black pepper
- 2 ounces grated Parmesan cheese (about 1 cup)

1. Heat oil in large Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering but not smoking, about 2 minutes. Add pancetta and cook, stirring occasionally, until beginning to brown, 3 to 5 minutes. Add onion and celery; cook, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are softened, 5 to 7 minutes. Add garlic, oregano, red pepper flakes, and anchovies; cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add tomatoes, scraping up any browned bits from bottom of pan. Add cheese rind and beans; bring to boil, then reduce heat to low and simmer to blend flavors, 10 minutes. Add chicken broth, 2 1/2 cups water, and 1 teaspoon salt; increase heat to high and bring to boil. Add pasta and cook until tender, about 10 minutes (refer to package instructions to better estimate pasta cooking time).

2. Discard cheese rind. Off heat, stir in 3 tablespoons parsley; adjust seasoning with salt and pepper. Ladle soup into individual bowls; drizzle each serving with olive oil and sprinkle with a portion of remaining parsley. Serve immediately, passing grated Parmesan separately.

ITALIAN PASTA AND BEAN SOUP WITH ORANGE AND FENNEL

Ditalini and orzo are especially good pasta shapes for this variation.

Trim 1 medium fennel bulb of stalks and fronds; trim bottom 1/2 inch. Halve bulb lengthwise and, using paring knife, remove core. Slice bulb lengthwise into 1/4-inch-thick strips, then chop fine. Follow recipe for Italian Pasta and Bean Soup, cooking fennel along with onion and celery and adding 2 teaspoons grated orange zest and 1/2 teaspoon fennel seeds along with garlic, oregano, pepper flakes, and anchovies.