



## Edible Paradise: Fresh Picks at the Market

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■ **Featured Produce:** *Beans, Fresh Corn*

■ **Recipes:** *Braised Romano Bean, Corn Stock*

It's that time of the year I find myself at market buzzing like a bee. When I get there, I am so excited by the choices I can hardly decide where to go first. All the colors and the scents combine to create a heavenly chaos in my brain, and it is a great time to be at the farmers market.

When I select beans, I look for beans that have a silky feel to them, that do not show rust or shriveling. The beans should feel firm without feeling brittle or stringy; while at the same time avoid those that are limp and lifeless feeling. When flexed far enough, they should break with a “snap” and show a moist and solid interior. Haricots verts will not break with as distinct a snap, but they should still offer resistance and never be rubbery.

For “string” beans, look for beans that are fairly uniform in cross-section without prominent seed bumps. Same goes for the Italian flat beans. For yellow beans, I find they should always be a little tenderer than the green beans. When I buy really firm yellow beans, I am frequently disappointed by beans that are tough. When picking out Yard-Long beans (long beans, snake beans, Chinese long beans, asparagus beans) the criteria are a bit different. Look for thin- the thinner the better, really-beans, but especially avoid those with prominent seed bulges, as these will be tough. The beans will naturally be floppy due to length, but they should never be limp. Check that the beans are firm to avoid overly chewy or downright leathery specimens. For what it's worth, long beans are more closely related to black-eyed peas than green beans.

For “shellies” (beans that are peeled or shelled to get at the seed inside) I look for evidence of plump beans inside, avoiding those with long, empty tails. A little yellowing is okay, but if the whole pod is yellow, or showing brown, pass it by as the pod is overly mature and the beans can be mealy or tough.

I find different beans take to different methods of cooking to bring out the best in them. For haricots verts, blanching works best.

Interestingly enough, I find that when I think they are done and I drain them, they toughen up a bit as they cool, so always give them an extra minute if you want them tender. If you wish to use them cold, as in Tuna Nicoise, steam them or blanch them and then shock in ice water to arrest the cooking. Green beans take to blanching well, whereas I find that yellow beans do better with steam.

For roasting or grilling, I snip the tops and tails and soak them in some water for a while before introducing them to the heat. Whether you soak or not, if roasting or grilling, always use the plumpest, most moist looking beans you can find so the internal moisture cooks from the inside as well as the bean cooking on the outside.

For years I avoided Romano type beans because they always seemed to get the slippery, filmy, fuzzy feeling on the outside, even when I steamed the beans. I have since learned that braising these beans is the answer! This is currently a favorite here with the kids, and it is pretty simple.

### **BRAISED ROMANO BEANS**

*1 lb. large Romano beans, stems snapped*

*1 heaping tablespoon of soffrito (minced onion, carrot, celery-2:1:1- sautéed until tender and golden. Make a lot of it and store in the freezer)—OR— 1/4 of a brown onion minced*

*1 large garlic clove, germed and minced*

*2 tablespoons fruity olive oil*

*1/2 tablespoon bacon fat, optional*

*1/3 cup water or white wine*

*Salt and pepper to taste*

(1) In a pot just large enough to hold the beans that has a tight fitting lid, warm the oil over medium heat. When the oil is shimmering, add the soffrito and heat through. Add the garlic and gently cook until softened and aromatic.

(3) If using, add the bacon fat now. (Pork and beans have a history, for good reason. They go so well together. For a vegetarian version that will maintain this flavor, substitute 1 teaspoon of Spanish smoked paprika, AKA *pimenton de la vera* and a little extra olive oil.)

(4) Add the beans; toss to spread the aromatics around. Add the

*[Continued page 2]*

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liquid and put the top on the pot.

(5) When the liquid starts to steam, lower the heat as low as it will go. Cook like this for 1 hour, occasionally rattling the pot to stir it around. Check after a half hour to ensure there is still a little liquid in the pan. Cook until the beans are meltingly soft, but still holding their shape. Season with a little salt and pepper and serve.

For shell beans, I sauté some aromatics in flavorful olive oil, then add some stock and water and simmer the beans until tender. Avoid salting them until they are done as this can toughen the beans. I find the beans taste even better the next day after they have sat in the cooking liquid. To serve simply, just reheat some of the cooking liquid, then add the beans to heat through. I sometimes will flavor the cooking liquid and reduce it to use as the sauce. The beans can be used as is, added to soups and braises, or combined with a sauté of onions and tomatoes and topped with oiled and herbed breadcrumbs to make a gratin.

The yard-long beans actually do well with more aggressive cooking techniques such as stir-frying, deep-frying, and braising. This is not to say they can't be steamed or boiled, as this is a good first step for several recipes utilizing these. I have actually blanched the beans, then braided them before wok frying them with ginger, garlic, and sesame oil. They take well to strong flavors, and you will find that while you can use them as you would green beans, they will not be as sweet or tender. They retain their identity no matter what you do to them. By the way, these beans do not keep that well in the refrigerator, as do "regular" beans; so try to use them as soon after purchase as possible. If you must store them, wrap in paper towels in a plastic bag and store where you'd keep the lettuce.

#### CORN STOCK

Another thing that has me buzzing right now is corn. I love it either steamed, boiled, or off the cob and sautéed. This has the benefit of giving me the cobs to make stock with, which is now essential in my house for polenta. I like to compound flavors, and this is certainly a way to do that. Corn stock finds its way into soups, shellfish dishes, and a corn sauce I make for shrimp or lobster. To make the stock, simply put the cut up cobs from 4-6 ears of corn in a 4 qt. pot of water with a couple sprigs of thyme and marjoram, 10 fresh black peppercorns, and a bay leaf. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat to a simmer and skim off any foam. Simmer for 1-2 hours, then cool, strain through a fine mesh strainer.

You can then use corn stock as is, or reduce some of it for sauces. It will keep in the freezer for quite some time. The stock is what I use for making polenta now, and the family won't really eat it any other way. The corn I cut from the cob will go in the freezer (I hear screams of "Heresy!" I know it's not the same as fresh, but it is still really good...) to be used in sautés, cornbread, soups, and sauces. I also love to throw some in my breakfast, whether in scrambled eggs or on basted eggs with chiles and olives, I find it a great way to get more vegetables into my life.

When I select corn, I check the cut on the stem to see that it is fresh, and not dried out. The husks should feel moist, and not brittle. I use my fingers to feel the tip inside the husk to check that the cob is full to the end and to get an idea of what the kernels "look" like (large or small). As this corn is organic, I accept the fact that I may find a bug or worm on occasion, and just get rid of it if I do. If you must pull back the husks to check, be courteous and ask the farmer first--some of them really do not want people husking the corn.