

WHAT'S COOKING: SPILLING THE BEANS

BY STEPHEN D'AGOSTINO

What can you make with beans? A soup with black beans, hummus with chickpeas, and chili with pinto beans. If you're clever and curious like Joe Bossen, founder and president of Vermont Bean Crafters, and Kelsey Baumgarten, founder of Hidden Bean Bakeshop, you take beans in entirely different directions, making burgers, falafel, sourdough bread, cookies, and cakes. But these two Vermont innovators have also found ways to use the bean to build and nourish communities.

VERMONT BEAN CRAFTERS, WARREN

VERMONT'S BEAN EVANGELISTS

If you've cooked with dry beans, you know the first step is to let them sit in water overnight. The next morning, when you uncover the pot, the beans that reached halfway up the vessel the night before are now close to the top, and the water that covered the beans has magically disappeared.

The bean is an overlooked source of protein and fiber, and as with soaking beans, these little gems grow in size and importance when you consider the varied ways they help the health of local farms and the people who make them part of their diet. And in Vermont, not many know beans as well as Joe Bossen, a self-described bean evangelist based in the Mad River Valley.

When you think of an evangelist, maybe you think of someone who experienced some type of conversion and now boldly proclaims what they believe to all who will listen. Joe does proclaim; but when we talked, he used mellow and measured tones to profess the varied benefits of beans and his devotion to them throughout his working life.

As for conversion, that came in two parts. As a young boy in southern New Jersey, he ate and enjoyed Italian and Mexican foods, common in that part of the Garden State, but he loved to grab a spoon and eat beans. "I found that taste and texture-wise, it was a really gratifying culinary experience," he says.

His second conversion came in 2008. The Great Recession tanked the economy shortly after he graduated from Green Mountain College, making for an uncertain future. Joe also began to witness the older generations in his family dealing with chronic health issues, some related to diet. On top of that, Joe was concerned with weighty issues such as economic justice, animal welfare, and energy use, especially related to transporting and storing proteins for consumption.

Such an eyes-wide-open view of the world could lead people to despair. Instead of succumbing, Joe set a path to try to make a living by creating a business that could increase soil and human health. There seemed few options for such a path, save for a life centered on the bean, the affordable, shelf-stable, locally growable protein.

There was only one problem: how do you get people to eat beans?

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COURTESY HIDDEN BEAN BAKESHOP



Beans baked into pies, cookies, whoopie pies, and breads hint at the name of Kelsey Baumgarten's Hidden Bean Bakeshop.

Experience beans like you never have—in burgers, falafel, sourdough bread, even cookies and cakes!



The varied world of beans. From left: Yellow Eye Beans, Marafax Beans, which star in the baked beans recipe below, and Soldier Beans. All the beans were grown by Morningstar Farms in Glover, Vermont.



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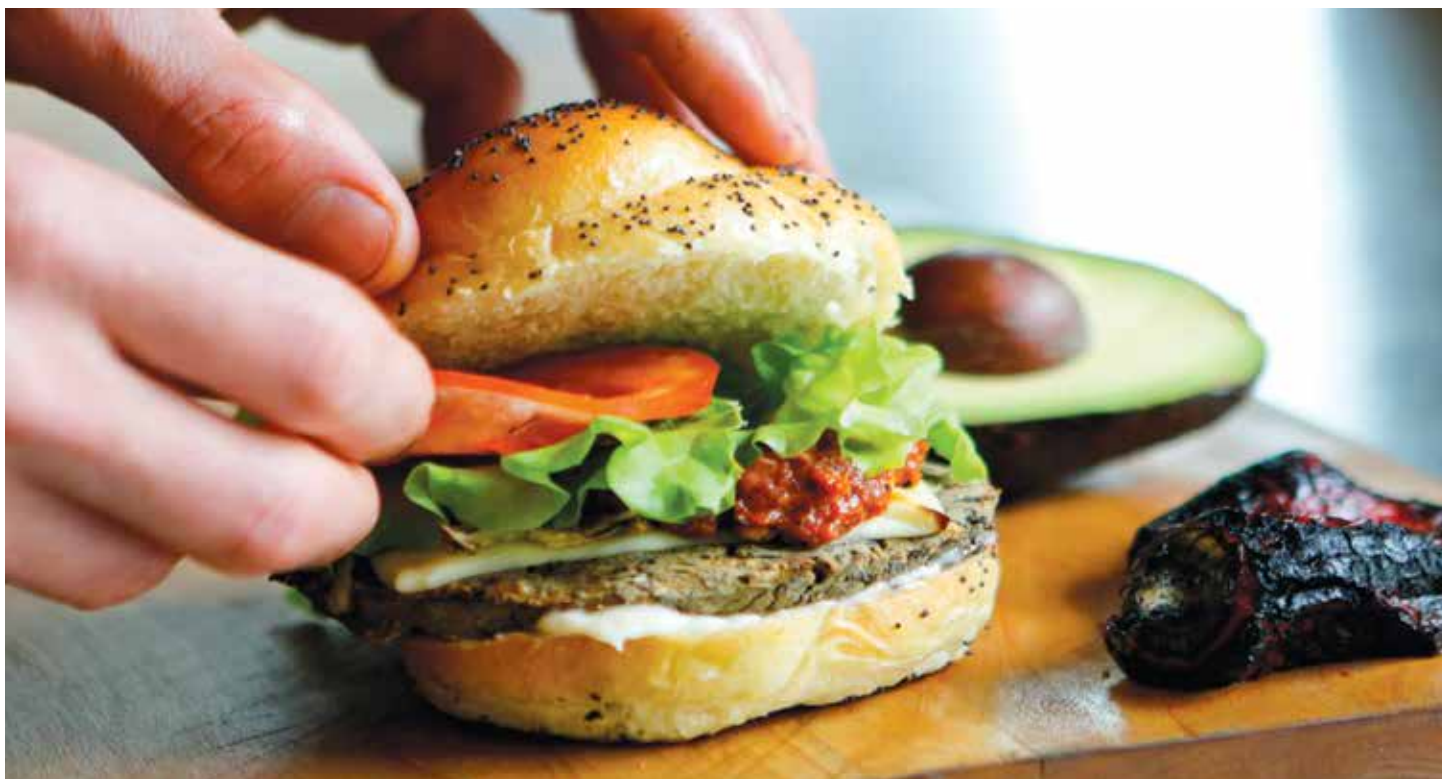


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Although delicious on their own, Vermont Bean Crafters' Black Bean Burgers piled up with fresh veggies and condiments make for a tasty, satisfying sandwich.

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Joe believed a burger made of black beans could become part of that ritual if it tasted great; he began crafting a better bean burger, and after lots of fine-tuning, which, Joe admits he still does today, he came up with a delicious alternative to a beef or turkey burger.

Black bean burger to the rescue

Joe landed a job at Boardman Hill Farm in West Rutland. Greg Cox, the owner, gave him an acre of land to grow black beans and to build out a commercial kitchen in part of a barn. Joe learned that although farming was something he wanted to pursue, the capital needed to start a farm was beyond him. That, coupled with the fact that he didn't want to be another small farmer competing for a piece of the finite organic vegetable farming pie, helped him focus on creating value-added products using crops already grown by local farmers—carrots, kale, and onions—and those he hoped to build markets for: beans, buckwheat, and oilseed crops. And he knew the spot in the broader food market he could penetrate.

Burgers play a big part in the American diet. They're on grills galore summer evenings, and many restaurants have sections on their menu devoted to them. Whether eating them with family at home or with friends on a night out, the burger can be viewed as the centerpiece of a ritual built around great food. He believed a burger made of black beans could become part of that ritual if it tasted great. He began crafting a better bean burger, and after lots of fine-tuning, which, Joe admits he still does today, he came up with a delicious alternative to a beef or turkey burger.

"Whether [the diner] cared about local organic agriculture, whether they care about organic at all, whether they care about soil building, crop rotations, or a high-fiber diet," Joe says, it didn't matter. By eating a black bean burger, "they could still be making the world one iota better, their own health one iota better."

If black bean burgers aren't your thing, Vermont Bean Crafters also crafts falafel; a second veggie burger; the cleverly named mockingbird nuggets; and cookie and muffin mixes. All the products are made in Warren and are gluten-free, organic, vegan, and sourced locally, with beans coming from farms in Vermont, Maine, and New York. The only exception is the falafel, which is made from chickpeas, a crop that does not grow well here. For those beans, Vermont Bean Crafters relies on Ramona Farms in Arizona, run by Karen Button, a member of the Tohono O'odham tribe, on 350 acres of ancestral land.

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BAKED BEANS

RECIPE BY JOE BOSSEN

Here's my take on baked beans. It works with navy beans, great northern, yellow eyes, or soldiers, but I personally love marafax for baked beans. The Lost Kitchen (a restaurant) in Maine somewhat recently put out a recipe with marafax beans, too, that created a temporary regional/national shortage of marafax beans!

Yields 8 servings per 1 pound dry marafax beans

INGREDIENTS

| | |
|--|--|
| 1 lb. dry marafax beans (2 lbs. cooked weight) | 1 tablespoon applewood smoked sea salt |
| 1½ quarts cooking water | 1 tablespoon tomato paste |
| 1 medium to large yellow onion, diced | ½ inch freshly grated ginger |
| ¼ cup maple syrup (double if you like 'em sweet) | ½ tablespoon smoked paprika |
| 2 tablespoons brown sugar | ½ tablespoon white pepper |
| 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard | 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar (after beans are soft) |

Soak your beans ahead of time. Drain, top with fresh water, and bring to a boil at medium heat inside a Dutch oven. Once brought to a boil, reduce heat to medium-low, keep a lid on the pot—slightly ajar—and stir in all your other ingredients, save for the vinegar.

Once your beans are beginning to soften and the skins peel off when removed from the cooking liquid, take a bean and taste it to make sure it's not chalky. If it's all set, you can stir in your apple cider vinegar. Make sure you have about ½ inch of water column above your beans, and transfer the Dutch oven to the oven with the lid on.

Warm up your oven to 300°F. Some recipes call for 1 hour on the stovetop or 2 hours in the oven, some for as much as 8 hours. And others for every point in between. The big idea is the longer they sit in the oven, the thicker and more cohesive the result will be. The sugars will have more time to interact with the amino acids present and caramelize by way of the Maillard reaction. So you ultimately could skip the oven step if you are in a rush. They will be good even then. But if you want them to be great, put them in the oven for at least a couple of hours, and up to 8. Be sure to check on them every hour or so to make sure they have enough liquid in there to keep them from drying out.

If you have a wood cookstove as your home's central heating—as was the case for most of the last few hundred years—it's easy enough to let the beans bake away all day. If you have a gas or electric stove, you have to balance out that desire to level-up your baked bean game with the indulgence of using that much energy for one dish. This meal is, after all, just a modern interpretation of bean-in-hole preparations, which passively cooked the beans 12 to 24 hours in a bed of coals, covered and insulated by a few feet of earth.



Vermont Bean Crafters also offers a subscription service called the Bean Box for those who wish to explore the wonderful world of beans with a guide. Every three months, subscribers receive a selection of beans and grains.


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The soulful bean, the humble evangelist

Joe is humbled that people trust Vermont Bean Crafters. “There’s a responsibility that comes with having this role in the community,” he says, “and wanting to do right by that. We use the word *soulful*, but I don’t know how to concisely speak to it. The word is wrapped up in that overall sentiment of wanting to do right by the ineffable and intangible parts of what makes a bean a bean, what makes a person a person.”

“In my perfect world,” Joe says, “everyone would be buying dried beans in bulk and cooking from scratch at home.” And although he delivers beans to people in different, approachable ways, he knows some folks take pleasure in the ritual of preparing dried beans and creating something special the next day.

Vermont Bean Crafters sells beans in bulk for businesses and people who know what they want to cook. The company also offers a subscription service called the Bean Box for those who wish to explore the wonderful world of beans with a guide. Every three months, subscribers receive a selection of beans and grains. Some may be familiar, but many, such as Jacob’s Cattle Beans, Sea Island Red Peas, or Yellow Eye Beans, may be new. But don’t fret about how to cook them. Along with the beans, eager and curious cooks also receive a recipe booklet that gives each bean a bio and a recipe for how to cook them. Plus, the thoughtful opening paragraphs in each booklet give Joe a chance to evangelize a bit on the bean.

Chefs and grocers can find Vermont Bean Crafters’ products through Black River Produce, Food Connects, Reinhart, US Foods, and Associated Buyers. Home cooks can purchase bulk beans and Bean Box subscriptions. 

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HIDDEN BEAN BAKESHOP, BRATTLEBORO

GOING SWEET ON BEANS

When Kelsey Baumgarten, owner of Hidden Bean Bakeshop, was 18, she had a revelation. “I had a friend’s chocolate cake at her party, and she had recently gone gluten-free. Her mom said, ‘There’s a secret ingredient in there that you’ll never guess.’” The mom was right; Kelsey couldn’t guess black beans. Nor could she guess the road that revelation would put her on.

She became enthralled with the idea of beans in baked goods, but she had difficulty finding recipes online. Not to be deterred, she spent countless hours modifying family recipes to incorporate beans, ultimately writing a bean-based cookbook as her honors’ thesis while studying to be a dietitian at UMass Amherst. She knew eating beans improves the microbiome in a person’s gut, controls blood sugar, and possibly reduces the risk of diabetes and heart disease. Writing the cookbook, Kelsey wanted to prove that you could add such a beneficial food to something sweet, something people would want to eat.

Let them eat beans

Instead of grinding dry beans to create flour, Kelsey adds cooked, mashed beans to her cakes, cookies, and breads. As you might imagine, their addition makes what she’s baking dense. They might also make them taste, well, like beans.

Some recipes lend themselves to bean substitution better than others. Pumpkin bread is more receptive because of the intense flavors of cinnamon, nutmeg, and allspice. Banana bread, on the other hand, relies primarily on bananas for flavor. Developing a bean-infused banana bread required more trial and error, but she succeeded.



COURTESY HIDDEN BEAN BAKESHOP

Hidden Bean Bakeshop’s Lemon Raspberry Cake is made with white beans. Kelsey has a dairy-free option using eggs as a binder and a vegan option that uses flaxseeds.

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The communities Kelsey has helped nurture and a life devoted to something she is passionate about are undoubtedly worth more than a hill of beans.

After Kelsey graduated, she worked as a dietitian in Boston for a while, moved to Vermont, and tried her hand at farming, but she found that she wanted to continue baking. She moved to the Brattleboro area and worked part time as a dietitian so she could devote more hours to perfecting her recipes for delicious sweets such as peanut butter brownies, maple walnut pie, sourdough multigrain bread, and tahini honey cookies and selling them at farmers' markets, particularly the market in Brattleboro.

Changing to meet her customers

"Are your baked goods gluten-free?" her customers asked. Most weren't, but Kelsey saw the benefit of moving all her recipes in that direction. She began experimenting, and in a few months, all of Hidden Bean Bakeshop's delicious treats became gluten-free.

"Are your recipes vegan?" they asked. Not all of them, but over time, more and more became so. Just a few of Kelsey's recipes use eggs. "Are they organic?" For the most part, Kelsey can say yes, although she admits that a few items she uses, such as salt, are not. Kelsey pegs her organic content to be around 95 percent.

Building communities

Inevitably, these customers, who have become ardent supporters of Hidden Bean Bakeshop, form a line at her booth at Brattleboro Area Farmers' Market before the market opens. Occasionally, someone comes to the head of the line looking for bread or cookies containing gluten. She directs the customer to the other baker at the market who can satisfy their needs. The other baker returns the favor when he receives the opposite question.

But those who flock to buy her delicious goodies help support Hidden Bean Bakeshop and Kelsey's mission to produce high-quality products from healthy ingredients. She, in turn, helps the local maple syrup producer by purchasing his maple products instead of getting it cheaper from a larger producer.

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Kelsey barter with a local mushroom grower—a loaf of bread for ingredients to put in her quiche—and perhaps with a neighbor who has chickens, 4 dozen eggs for a cake when her 11 hens lay fewer eggs in winter. The list continues to evolve as Hidden Bean Bakeshop continues to grow in a slow and measured way.

Kelsey may never get rich from doing this, but the communities she has helped nurture and a life devoted to something she is passionate about are undoubtedly worth more than a hill of beans.

You can find Hidden Bean Bakeshop at Brattleboro Area Farmers' Market every Saturday from May to October and at Brattleboro Winter Farmers' Market from November through March. 🌱

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