

# Senate Navy Bean Soup

**SERVES** Serves 6 to 8

**TIME** 2 hours, plus 8 hours soaking

## WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS

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The origins of this mainstay of the U.S. Senate cafeteria may be up for debate, but its list of ingredients is simple and clear: navy beans, ham hocks, onions, celery, and (sometimes) potatoes. Since many of the versions we tried yielded bland, stodgy soups, we build layers of flavor by first brining the beans and then doubling up on the trademark smoked ham hock to infuse the dish with even more porky flavor (but not an excess of meat). We wait to add aromatics—in this case sautéed onions, celery, and garlic—to the soup near the end of cooking so that they retain their savory punch and texture next to the tenderness of the fully cooked beans. And while mashed potatoes are traditionally used to help thicken the soup, we found that cooking diced potatoes in the soup worked just as well, especially after a few strokes with a potato masher.



## INGREDIENTS

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- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound (2 1/2 cups)  
navy beans, picked over  
and rinsed
- 1 tablespoon vegetable  
oil
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 2 celery ribs, chopped  
fine
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 whole cloves

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

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**\*** The finished texture of the soup should be creamy but not too thick. We use whole cloves because ground cloves turn the soup an unsightly gray color.

## INSTRUCTIONS

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**1** Dissolve 3 tablespoons salt in 4 quarts cold water in large container. Add beans and soak at room temperature for at least 8 hours or up to 24 hours. Drain and rinse well.

- 2 (12-ounce) smoked ham hocks
- 8 ounces russet potatoes, peeled and cut into 1/4-inch pieces
- 1 tablespoon cider vinegar

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**2** Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion, celery, and 1 teaspoon salt and cook until softened, 8 to 10 minutes. Stir in garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer onion mixture to bowl.

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**3** Insert cloves into skin of 1 ham hock. Add 8 cups water, ham hocks, and beans to now-empty pot and bring to boil over high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, covered with lid slightly ajar, until beans are tender, 45 to 60 minutes, stirring occasionally.

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**4** Stir potatoes and onion mixture into soup and simmer, uncovered, until potatoes are tender, 10 to 15 minutes; remove pot from heat. Transfer ham hocks to cutting board and let cool slightly. Discard cloves, then shred meat, discarding bones and skin.

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**5** Using potato masher, gently mash beans and potatoes until soup is creamy and lightly thickened, 8 to 10 strokes. Add 1/2 teaspoon pepper and shredded meat and return to simmer over medium heat. Stir in vinegar. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.

#### **Backstory: Soupy Start**

The origins of Senate Bean Soup are muddy, according to Senate Historian Don Ritchie.

"Some accounts attribute it to Idaho Senator Fred Dubois (b. 1851), who . . . pushed a resolution to require the bean soup on the menu every day. The other story attributes it to Minnesota Senator Knute Nelson (b. 1843), who got the Rules committee to adopt a resolution in 1907. It's possible that both stories are true."