

Lentils, for Molly

This started out as what I thought would be a relatively simple task, to articulate in writing a dish that I now cook from memory. What it turned into, perhaps not surprisingly, was a spiral through cookbooks, grocery stores, and the depths of the internet in search of the elusive origin of truth. Clearly lentils are much more complicated than I had imagined. So the recipe below is not, in fact, using the beluga lentils we had at Laundrette, but something different.

If you are interested in cooking something like we ate that afternoon this summer, I will direct your attention to [this recipe](#).

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this other one, that I find most comforting on days when I need sustenance. Ana has endorsed it as a “diez” on the scale of lentils, and as a Spaniard I feel like she is expertly qualified to evaluate such dishes.

Cooking time: about 2 hours start to finish, with about half of that requiring your active attention

Serves: 4 for dinner, 1 person lunch for the week, or 22 undergraduate rhetoric students as a taste test.

Special Equipment

A heavy-bottomed pot. This is important because for a slow-cooking dish like this you want the heat to be evenly distributed along the whole surface of your pot, without hot spots where the beans will burn or dry out.

How to make it

In your chosen pot, start to heat up on medium low
2 T pork fat, OR 3-4 oz. bacon¹

Add to the pot and cook until translucent, stirring regularly, the following vegetables. All of these should be minced very fine, cut into pieces that are smaller than the size of uncooked lentils. This has the effect of blending all of the flavors together into a harmonious balance where individual aspects of the ingredients are subsumed in the mixture of the three.

1 ¼ c onion
½ c carrots
½ c celery

Add in and cook for 2 min.

2 cloves of garlic, peeled and minced very fine
1 bay leaf
½ t Dried thyme
½ t dried oregano

Add in and stir.²

¼ c sherry
1 t pimentón

Add in, bring to a boil, then reduce heat to very low

1 c Lentilles du Puy³
1 T parsley leaves, minced fine
3 c chicken broth or water, as available

Cook with the lid on for about 90 minutes, tasting periodically to see when the beans have become tender and monitoring the amount of liquid (add more if it sinks below the level of the lentils). When things taste good, turn off the heat and remove the bay leaf.

Stir in the vinegar and salt to taste, adding more pimentón if you desire (I like to add another teaspoon at least). Sprinkle with extra fresh parsley and olive oil just before serving.

1 t sherry vinegar or cider vinegar
salt
1 T good quality olive oil

Variations

If you're feeling extra fancy, put a dollop of whole-milk yogurt or crème fraîche on top when you serve it as well.

Makes a full meal if you add in a grain or starch. Some options

1 c potatoes (add after 30 min of cooking the lentils)
¾ c rice + 1 ½ c water (add at the same time as the lentils)
½ c pearled barley + 1 ½ c water (add at the same time as the lentils)

¹ Cooking animal products on low heat to extract the fat is a technique called rendering. It's common for the beginning of stews and soups, as well as braised dishes.

² Adding a liquid, particularly one with acid or alcohol, to a pot that has had things browned in it is called deglazing. This isn't always necessary, if you are paying careful attention to your pot and don't let it get too dry, but sometimes your attention wanes and you end up with some fond, or browned bits that are the result of the Maillard reaction: when starches and proteins convert into tastiness under heat. Sometimes I end up with fond when cooking lentils, sometimes not! In either case, the sherry tastes nice.

³ Lentilles de Puy are a domain-controlled food product, meaning that according to international law, ingredients labeled as such must originate in the French region of Puy. They are firmer and smaller than other kinds of French, German, and Spanish lentils, and really nothing at all like the flaky red or slightly slimy white Indian lentils. Most Austin grocery stores carry them; Whole Foods and Central Market have them in the bulk section.