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Maple Baked Beans

Baked beans, like chili, is one of those dishes that ignites controversy. Almost every variable can be debated. At the risk of adding fuel to the fire, here is my own favorite maple version.

1 pound navy or pea beans
1/3 cup vegetable oil
1 cup chopped onions
1 green bell pepper, chopped
1 rib of celery, chopped
2-3 cloves of garlic, minced
1/2 cup pure maple syrup
1/2 cup tomato puree or crushed tomatoes
2 tablespoons blackstrap molasses
2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1-1/2 teaspoons salt
1/4 teaspoon pepper
1 bay leaf
1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley

1. Pick the beans over, removing any rubble such as sticks and pebbles. Rinse them well, then place in a large bowl with plenty of hot water. Let soak for at least 1 hour, or as long as overnight. Drain, then combine the beans with about 4 quarts fresh hot water in a large pot. Bring to a boil and reduce the heat. Simmer, partially covered, just until tender – 1-1/2 to 2 hours. Drain the beans, reserving the cooking water, into a large bowl.
2. While the beans cook, heat the oil in a large skillet. Add the onion, pepper, and celery and sauté for several minutes, adding the garlic at the end. Remove from the heat. Set aside. Preheat oven to 325°F.
3. Whisk together 1 cup of the reserved cooking water, the maple syrup, tomato puree, molasses, vinegar, mustard, salt, pepper, bay leaf, and parsley in a medium-sized bowl.
4. To the beans, add the sautéed vegetables and maple mixture; mix well. Pour the beans into a large, shallow casserole and cover tightly. Bake for 2-1/2 to 3-1/2 hours. Check periodically to make sure they have enough liquid, adding more of the reserved cooking water, if necessary.

Yield: About 6 servings.