

Rice and Beans

All cultures on the planet with access to rice have developed a version of rice and beans, but in the Americas and West Indies they take this dish very seriously. In the Caribbean there is a version specific to just about each island culture. On Anguilla they use dried pigeon peas and call it rice and peas. Jamaica is large enough to actually have regional variations, but they all generally prefer a wetter version using kidney beans. New Orleans is famous for their red beans and rice and Jambalaya is actually nothing more than an elaborate pot of rice and beans with copious amounts of pork fat and shellfish thrown in for good measure. Cubans can't go a single day without a bowl of black beans and rice. In many of these cultures a young woman shows her readiness for marriage by cooking a dinner of rice and beans for her would-be in-laws.

There are perhaps as many as 12-15 major variations world-wide and hundreds more slightly varied versions specifically unique to very small populations. This is a very basic West Indian-South American hybrid that seems to satisfy a wide range of people from many cultures.



Small red chili beans	1- 1 ½ lbs
Water	cover beans by 4 inches
Onion	2 med
Green pepper	1 med
Celery	4 large stalks
Garlic	1 bulb
Bay leaf	1 each
Hot pepper	1 each
Dry thyme	2 teaspoons
Cumin	2 teaspoons
Dry oregano	2 teaspoons
Chili Powder	½ teaspoon
Chipotle	2 teaspoons
Liquid	8+/- cups
Better Than Bouillon No-Chicken Base	2-3 tsp as needed
Bragg's Aminos	2 teaspoons
Marmite	1 teaspoon
Long Grain brown Rice	4 cups

This is a long process and requires some patience. The reward for the vigilant cook is a uniquely satisfying, and inexpensive staple that has been an indispensable component of human diets around the world for many hundreds - if not thousands - of years.

First; sort *carefully* through the beans and remove any foreign matter. You can't skip this step. All dried beans have small stones, bits of compressed dirt, and even sizable twigs in them. You may go through several bags without finding anything, but the price you pay for a guest chipping a tooth on a stone found inside your rice and beans isn't worth the small amount of time you save by skipping this part of the process. Seemingly small things like this differentiate really great cooks from average ones. Place the beans in a thick bottomed pot and add enough water to cover the beans with 4+ inches. Bring the beans to a boil and simmer until they are "al dente", firm to the bite, or not quite 100% cooked. In a pressure cooker this will take 25 minutes at medium pressure, without a pressure cooker it may take up to four hours of gentle simmering to cook the beans. Soaking beans in water prior to cooking can also reduce cooking time. Be patient, raising the heat to make the beans boil won't cook them any faster; it's the steady application of low heat that gets the even cooking results you need. If you don't have a pressure cooker or the time and patience to slowly cook the beans; don't make rice and beans! Resist the temptation to use any kind of stock or reserved liquid, just use pipe stock (water); we want to control all the flavors in the end product by limiting any creative additives to the second step in the cooking process. Simmering some ingredients for several hours can significantly alter flavor characteristics. When the beans are done (NOT overcooked), carefully strain them and *reserve the liquid*.

If you overcook the beans it will ruin the end product; cook another set of beans and save the overcooked ones for another purpose. For the same reason canned beans should never be used with this recipe. Canned beans may be used for rice and beans, but there is another method.

Second; preheat oven to 350°, use a remote thermometer to determine this, a lower or higher temperature, even by 25° will alter the recipe. Choose a thick bottomed shallow pot of at least 6 quarts volume with a tight fitting, but not sealing, lid. 8½ quarts is a standard size and is ideal for this recipe. 6 quarts will barely work, you may have to use tin foil as a lid and have a sheet pan underneath to catch drippings.

Rice and beans is basically a highly seasoned bean soup that is used to cook and infuse rice; keep that in mind in this stage. If at the end it doesn't look and smell like a great bean soup then something is wrong. The end product should be more seasoned than you would consider suitable for a soup.

Add all the ingredients to the cooking pot. The amount of liquid used is crucial and with all the variables it takes some experience to get right. You need to account for all the things that will suck up liquid and all those that will add liquid. The level to which the beans are cooked is an important factor. They can be firmer (less cooked), but we need to compensate with increasing the amount of liquid to account for the extra liquid the beans will absorb, beans that are more cooked require less or even no liquid. Remember to measure everything and keep records that you can refer to the next time. Unless you're going to make rice and beans every day for a few months (i.e. professionally) you will need this written record. The basic ratio for brown rice is 2:1 water to rice for long grain rice and 1½ :1 for medium grain rice. Uncle Ben's converted white rice is the most popular brand of rice used in the United States and is a consistent 1½ :1.

Bring the liquid to a rolling boil and then add the rice all in one shot. Stir briefly and cover, then return to a rolling boil. Cover and place in the oven for 45 minutes completely undisturbed. At 45 minutes remove the rice from the oven being careful not to let the heat out of the oven. Carefully lift the rice in one corner of the pot to inspect the bottom of the pot; don't break or disturb any of the steam channels you will see in the rice. The rice will be done when all the liquid is gone and it just starts to stick to the bottom of the pot. You want the flavor imparted by this initial scorching. *Listen* to the sounds emitted by the rice at various stages, with practice all you will need to do is open the oven door a bit and listen to determine its exact state of doneness, with even more practice just the smell from the oven will tell you where it is in the cooking process.

All things being equal, which they seldom are, the batch of rice described here with perfectly cooked al dente beans, long grain brown rice at 2:1, in a perfect 8½ quart thick bottomed pot, and an oven at a precise 350° it will take exactly 1hour. So you will need to place the rice back in the oven for 15 more minutes.

When the rice is done let it rest for a good - completely undisturbed - 20 minutes to half hour. This is a crucial step in the cooking process, the worst thing you could do at the end of cooking is the remove the lid and stir the rice; it will mash into rice balls rather than fluff into the desire finished product. A word of caution here; leave hand towels on the handles to remind all that this mother is ***HOT***. Professionals sometimes dust hot handles with flour which is not feasible in the home environment. Trust me here, if you don't do this you WILL burn your hands and probably BADLY! Another way to do this is to simply turn the oven off and leave the rice in the oven to rest, but if you do it this way first leave the oven door open for a long while to let the heat out or the rice will continue to cook. Experienced cooks will learn to just shut the heat off a few minutes before the rice is done and let it coast in and rest all at the same time.

The most basic recipe for rice and beans includes only onion, celery, sweet pepper, garlic, a local hot pepper, thyme, and then the rice and what ever dried bean is grown locally. Very often meat is added and some type of fat, often pork fat, is used to brown the vegetables at the start. Internationally the two most popular additions to this basic recipe are a tomato product and coconut milk. These seriously complicate the wet-dry ratio and although you might get lucky the first few times you make it, it's best to master the wet dry relationship with the basic ingredients before adding more viscous liquids that complicate the cooking process. A more than basic proficiency with making plain rice pilaf will also help you and is really something that should be mastered before attempting this recipe.

