

Hoppin' John

by
Kelly Shippey
FRESH HOT HISTORY

Hoppin' John has become a most loved Southern dish. The first recorded recipe is from the 1847 recipe book, "The Carolina Housewife" by Sarah Rutledge. It is my understanding that it was originally a dish of African origin, adapted to the available foods in America by the slave cooks and was considered an unrefined or "low country" meal made by all manner of cooks throughout the Southern region in these said, "low country" homes. I also understand that it is meant to be a "low boil dish" cooking everything in one pot and letting the rice boil in the cooking liquid and allowing all of the flavors to come together like a Jambalaya or like a Paella. The original bean was not a Black Eyed Pea and reportedly there were only three ingredients: The rice, the beans, and bacon.

Hoppin' John, or a variation of it spread widely throughout the South and is now considered a dish of "luck." This was largely due to reports that "cowpeas" sustained much of the South during the Civil War, and that if they had not had beans, then much of the South would have perished from starvation.

Apparently, the humble "cowpeas" (which is a bean, not a pea, just to be clear) was considered a crop for animal feed, and therefore, was not burned by the North during the Civil War. The grains and any other crops that were thought to be something that could go to feed an army was burned. Just to be clear, this war tactic was practiced by both sides, the South burned crops that they couldn't take with them, and by every other army. It's a well known tactic that if one side can starve the opposing side, then a surrender is more likely to happen. For examples of this, it was the primary tactic of castle sieges. (Well, causing disease inside the castle walls was also up there, but for this conversation, let's not focus on that...it isn't pretty, or appetizing!)

So, it became known as a "Lucky" meal in the South, as in, "Lucky they left the beans or we would have starved." They felt that they were lucky to be alive and lucky to have this crop of animal food grade beans. So, if you ever wondered why your grandparents, or great grandparents made Hoppin' John or Black Eyed Peas for luck on New Years, it's because for much of the South, it is a wish for you to never know hunger in the coming year.

Hoppin' John is still a favorite in the South, and since my Grandma's mother was from the South, here is my recipe for Hoppin' John.

Hoppin' John:

Servings: 8

Ingredients:

1 pound ham hock

4 cups chicken broth, or water

2 cups Black Eyed Peas (soaked overnight as per package instructions)

1 cup rice

1 large Onion (cut in half and sliced thick)

3 cloves Garlic (chopped)

2 Celery stalks (washed and sliced)

2 Tbsp. fresh Thyme (or 1 Tbsp. dried Thyme)

1/2 tsp. pepper

1 tsp. salt

dash of hot sauce for serving

more salt and pepper as needed for taste

Directions:

In large pot bring water and ham hock to a boil. Reduce to simmer and add drained peas, onion, garlic, celery, thyme, salt and pepper. Simmer for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add in the rice and simmer another 30 minutes. Remove ham bone from pot. Make sure that some of the ham has released from the bone and is now left in with the beans and rice, if you would like to add more ham then this is the time! When peas are tender, serve with a dash of hot sauce to taste. (I usually like about 5 dashes!) The total cook time may be a little more than an hour, it is all dependent on how long it takes for the beans to reach the correct softened texture.

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