- Prep time: 20 minutes
- Cook time: 45–60 minutes
- Total time: 1 hour 20 minutes
- Yield: Serves 8–10
- Course: Main Course / Side Dish
- Cuisine: American (Western/Tex-Mex inspired)

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Ingredients

For the Meat Base:

- 6 slices thick-cut bacon, chopped
- 1 lb (450g) ground beef (80/20 blend recommended)
- 1 medium yellow onion, diced
- 1 green bell pepper, diced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced

For the Beans:

- 1 can (15 oz) pinto beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 can (15 oz) kidney beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 can (15 oz) black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 can (15 oz) baked beans (do not drain—this adds sweetness and body)

For the Sauce:

- 1 cup (240ml) tomato sauce
- ½ cup (120ml) barbecue sauce (your favorite brand)
- ¼ cup (60ml) molasses
- 3 tbsp brown sugar, packed
- 2 tbsp apple cider vinegar
- 1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tbsp Dijon mustard
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- ½ tsp chili powder
- ½ tsp ground cumin
- ¼ tsp cayenne pepper (optional, for heat)
- Salt and black pepper to taste

For Garnish (Optional):

- Sliced green onions
- Shredded cheddar cheese
- Pickled jalapeños
- Fresh cilantro

Instructions

Step 1: Cook the Bacon (Intensity: Medium)

Heat a large Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat. Add the chopped bacon and cook for 6–8 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the bacon is crispy and the fat has rendered out. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the bacon to a paper towel-lined plate, leaving the rendered fat in the pot.

Step 2: Brown the Beef (Intensity: Medium-High)

Increase the heat to medium-high. Add the ground beef to the pot with the bacon fat. Cook for 5–7 minutes, breaking it apart with a wooden spoon, until it is browned and no longer pink. If there is excessive fat, drain all but about 2 tablespoons.

Step 3: Sauté the Vegetables (Intensity: Medium)

Reduce the heat to medium. Add the diced onion and green bell pepper to the pot. Cook for 4–5 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are softened and the onion is translucent. Add the minced garlic and cook for 1 minute more, until fragrant.

Step 4: Build the Sauce (Intensity: Low)

Add the tomato sauce, barbecue sauce, molasses, brown sugar, apple cider vinegar, Worcestershire sauce, Dijon mustard, smoked paprika, chili powder, cumin, and cayenne (if using) to the pot. Stir well to combine, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pot. Season with a pinch of salt and pepper—but go easy on the salt, as the bacon and canned beans are already salty.

Step 5: Add the Beans and Simmer (Intensity: Low)

Add all four cans of beans (pinto, kidney, black, and baked) to the pot. Stir gently to combine, making sure everything is evenly coated in the sauce. Bring the mixture to a gentle simmer, then reduce the heat to low. Cover partially with a lid and cook for 30–45 minutes, stirring occasionally. The beans should thicken and the flavors should meld together. If the mixture becomes too thick, add a splash of water or broth to loosen it.

Step 6: Finish and Serve (Intensity: Low)

Stir the reserved crispy bacon back into the pot (reserve a little for garnish, if desired). Taste and adjust the seasoning—add more salt, pepper, or a splash of vinegar if the flavors need brightening. Remove from heat. Serve hot, garnished with sliced green onions, shredded cheddar, pickled jalapeños, or fresh cilantro.

Recipe Notes & Tips

- Bean Variety: Feel free to swap in whatever beans you have on hand—navy beans, Great Northern beans, or cannellini beans all work well. The combination of pinto, kidney, and black beans gives a nice mix of textures and colors, but the recipe is flexible.

- Make It a Meal: Cowboy Beans are hearty enough to serve as a main course, but they also make an excellent side dish for grilled meats, burgers, or barbecue chicken.

- Slow Cooker Option: After browning the meat and sautéing the vegetables on the stovetop, transfer everything to a slow cooker. Add the remaining ingredients and cook on LOW for 4–6 hours or HIGH for 2–3 hours.

- Make It Ahead: This dish tastes even better the next day. Store leftovers in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 5 days. Reheat gently on the stovetop or in the microwave.

- Freezer-Friendly: Cowboy Beans freeze beautifully. Transfer to freezer-safe containers and freeze for up to 3 months. Thaw overnight in the refrigerator before reheating.

- Vegetarian Version: Omit the bacon and ground beef, and use a plant-based meat substitute or additional beans. Add a splash of liquid smoke to mimic the smoky flavor of the bacon.

Nutrition Information

Disclaimer: The following nutrition information is an estimate per serving (based on 10 servings) and will vary based on exact ingredient sizes, brands, and optional additions.

- Calories: 385 kcal
- Total Fat: 14g (5g Saturated Fat)
- Cholesterol: 45mg
- Sodium: 920mg
- Total Carbohydrates: 46g
- Dietary Fiber: 11g
- Total Sugars: 16g
- Protein: 20g
- Vitamin A: 10% DV
- Vitamin C: 20% DV

- Calcium: 10% DV
- Iron: 20% DV
- Potassium: 780mg