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Steeped In Tradition: The Story Of The Senate's Signature Soup



Lauren Ober



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The Senate's bean soup is a U.S. Senate tradition going back more than a century.

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Winter is almost upon us here in the District.
And that means it's soup season.

Metro Connection Segments

There are plenty of places in the region to warm up with a steaming bowl of corn chowder or minestrone. But there's only one place to get D.C.'s signature soup: the United States Senate.

"What we know is around 1904, 1905, Senate bean soup shows up and it's been on the Senate menu for whatever the eating facility may be ever since," says Betty Koed, the associate historian for the U.S. Senate.

It's Koed's job to know about the governing body's various traditions, from the fanciful seersucker Thursday to the somewhat more serious "maiden speech" — a new lawmaker's first address on the Senate floor.

"Tradition is very important to the Senate," Koed said. "The Senate as an institution is very respectful of its history, its tradition and its precedents.

The soup's origin story is a little murky. Koed says there are two tales of how the soup got on the Senate menu.

One has Sen. Fred Dubois of Idaho asking that a bean soup be put on the menu around 1902 or 1903. Apparently, he said the soup should be on the menu every day, and it's been on ever since.

The other explanation pins the bean soup request to Sen. Knute Nelson of Minnesota in 1904.

For what it's worth, Dubois was a Democrat. Nelson was a Republican. But the bean soup is clearly bipartisan.

Not to be outdone by the Senate, the House instituted its own version of bean soup. In 1904, House Speaker Joe Cannon demanded that it be put on the House dining room menu.

"Thunderation!" he shouted. "I had my mouth set for bean soup. From now on, hot or cold, rain, snow, or shine, I want it on the menu every day."

The major difference between the two chambers' bean soups is onions, Koed explains. The Senate iteration has them; the House version does not.

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"Thunderation! I had my mouth set for bean soup. From now on, hot or cold, rain, snow, or shine, I want it on the menu every day.

— House Speaker Joe Cannon, 1904

The original bean soup recipe is pretty basic — navy beans, ham hocks, onions, butter and water, with some salt and pepper to taste. An updated version also has some carrots, celery and mashed potatoes.

In some form or another, Senate bean soup has been on the menu every day but one for 110 years.

“There was one time in the 1940s during World War II that they actually went a day without bean soup because there was food rationing going on and they ran out of their ration of beans,” Koed says. “So it was a one-day departure from the standard menu.”

That’s what makes the soup a tradition — its reliability. And senators like reliability. The late Sen. Everett Dirksen of Illinois also thought the soup might be credited with helping energize the members.

“It has... become an inviolate practice and a glorious tradition that the humble little bean should always be honored,” he wrote in 1963. “I venture the belief that the marathon speakers of the Senate ... would agree the little bean had much to do with [their] sustained torrent of oratory.”

No story about this fabled soup would be complete without a trip to the Dirksen Senate cafeteria to find out what Senate staffers thought of the soup. It turns out, not much.

No one seemed to be getting the bean soup, instead going for the other offerings at the soup stations — chipotle sweet potato, chicken noodle and chili. One of the diners explained why none of the staffers were eating the bean soup.

“I think it’s for tourists,” she says.

Regardless of whether Senate bean soup is only ever eaten by tourists, it’s not going anywhere.

“Because the Senate has this deep respect for tradition, it’ll probably be there for a long time to come,” says historian Koed.

The recipe attributed to Sen. Fred Dubois includes mashed potatoes and makes a five-gallon batch. The recipe served in the Senate today does not include mashed potatoes, but does include a braised onion. Both Senate recipes are below.

The Famous Senate Restaurant Bean Soup Recipe

- 2 pounds dried navy beans

- 4 quarts hot water
- 1 1/2 pounds smoked ham hocks
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 tablespoons butter
- salt and pepper to taste

Wash the navy beans and run hot water through them until they are slightly whitened. Place beans into pot with hot water. Add ham hocks and simmer approximately three hours in a covered pot, stirring occasionally. Remove ham hocks and set aside to cool. Dice meat and return to soup. Lightly brown the onion in butter. Add to soup. Before serving, bring to a boil and season with salt and pepper. Serves 8.

Five-Gallon Bean Soup Recipe

- 3 pounds dried navy beans
- 2 pounds of ham and a ham bone
- 1 quart mashed potatoes
- 5 onions, chopped
- 2 stalks of celery, chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, chopped
- half a bunch of parsley, chopped

Clean the beans, then cook them dry. Add ham, bone and water and bring to a boil. Add potatoes and mix thoroughly. Add chopped vegetables and bring to a boil. Simmer for one hour before serving. Makes five gallons.

Music: "Bean Soup" by Coleman Hawkins from Jazz Giants



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Lauren Ober is the host of The Big Listen. Before creating this program, she was an award-winning producer for WAMU's weekly newsmagazine, Metro Connection.