



Slow Cooker Green Bean Casserole



Our casserole starts with fresh beans and mushrooms for brighter, cleaner flavor.

MY KITCHEN CAN be a hectic, cluttered place in the hours leading up to a holiday meal. To take some of the last-minute stress out of the cooking this year, I decided to try making the green bean casserole in the slow cooker instead of the oven. You know the one I'm talking about: green beans swimming in a creamy mushroom "sauce" (it's usually a can of condensed cream of mushroom soup) and topped with canned fried onions.

Most slow-cooker recipes for this dish load frozen—or, yikes, canned—green beans into the cooker along with the canned soup. The mixture is left to slow-cook until the beans are tender and everything is hot, at which point the canned onions are sprinkled on top (any sooner and they'll turn to mush). I tested such a casserole and still shudder when I remember the results: My tasters looked like 5-year-olds, trying to push forkfuls of mushy, gray beans and watery sauce around on their plates to make it look like they'd actually eaten something. The mushroom flavor was wan (although the canned onion toppings were tasty). No question that I would have to start from scratch.

Using canned soup as a place holder for the sauce, I tested 2 pounds each of frozen beans, raw beans, and fresh beans

that had been blanched (canned beans were a nonstarter). The frozen beans were washed out and mushy by the time they were hot, so no thanks. We couldn't tell the difference between the raw and blanched beans after five hours in the slow cooker (at which point they were tender with just a bit of bite), so I went the easier route: raw beans.

For the sauce, fresh mushrooms were a must, but when I just dumped them into the cooker with broth and cream (the classic sauce components), they turned slimy. I'd have to sauté them in a skillet first. As I did so, I realized it made sense to make the entire sauce in the skillet, so I could concentrate its flavor and texture by cooking it down. I melted butter in a skillet and added a 10-ounce package of sliced button mushrooms (later tests determined that cremini work well, too). When the mushrooms were cooked, I sprinkled in a few tablespoons of flour to thicken the sauce, then whisked in 1¼ cups of chicken broth.

For the dairy component, I tested stirring in milk, half-and-half, and heavy cream in turn and simmering each sauce for about 10 minutes. I stirred the sauces into raw beans in each of three slow cookers, put the lids on, and set

Come holiday time, middling green bean casseroles monopolize valuable oven space. We wanted a better version—from the slow cooker. BY MARÍA DEL MAR SACASA

the cookers to low. Five hours later, the sauce made with cream was the only one that hadn't curdled. Unfortunately, though it had been thick and creamy going in, it emerged loose; blame it on the liquid released by the cooking beans. More flour made the sauce thicker, yes, but also pasty and nasty, while cornstarch made it slippery.

Could I use those tasty fried onions as a thickener? Stirred into the sauce whole, the onions were simultaneously chewy and crispy—not good. Instead, I ground a handful in the food processor and stirred the resulting powder into the sauce with the flour. The ground onions bound and flavored the finished sauce. With so much onion flavor inside the casserole, the topping tasted better balanced when I added homemade toasted bread crumbs (which I also made in the processor) to the standard canned fried onions. This green bean casserole was worlds better than the one I grew up eating—and preparing it in the slow cooker meant one less last-minute worry as my guests gathered round.

SLOW-COOKER GREEN BEAN CASSEROLE Serves 10

We suggest French's French Fried Onions and Swanson Certified Organic Free Range Chicken Broth for this recipe. Fresh green beans are essential—frozen beans will turn to mush in the slow cooker.

CASSEROLE

- 1 cup canned fried onions (see note)
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 10 ounces white or cremini mushrooms, cut into ¼-inch-thick slices
- Salt and pepper
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- 1¼ cups low-sodium chicken broth (see note)
- 1¼ cups heavy cream
- 2 pounds green beans, trimmed and cut into 1-inch pieces

TOPPING

- 2 slices hearty white sandwich bread, torn into pieces
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 2 cups canned fried onions

1. MAKE SAUCE Pulse canned fried onions in food processor until finely ground; set aside. Melt butter in large skillet over medium heat. Add mushrooms, ¾ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper and cook until mushrooms release their liquid, about 5 minutes. Increase heat to medium-high and cook until liquid has evaporated, about 5 minutes. Stir in garlic and thyme and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add flour and ground onions and cook until golden, about 1 minute. Stir in broth and cream and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until sauce is very thick and creamy, about 10 minutes.

2. SLOW-COOK Combine sauce and green beans in slow cooker. Cover and cook on low until beans are tender, 5 to 6 hours.

3. TOAST TOPPING Meanwhile, pulse bread and butter in food processor until coarsely ground. Toast bread crumbs and onions in clean skillet over medium-high heat until golden brown, 3 to 5 minutes. Top green beans with bread-crumble mixture. Serve.

MAKE AHEAD Sauce and topping can be refrigerated in separate airtight containers for 2 days. To finish, microwave sauce, covered, for 1 minute before proceeding with step 2. Crisp bread-crumble mixture in skillet before topping beans.

KEY INGREDIENT

Canned Fried Onions

It wouldn't be green bean casserole without fried onions on top. We increased their impact by grinding some of the onions and using them to thicken and flavor the sauce.



DOUBLE UP
Not just for topping