

JAMES WILLIAMS

On a Friday afternoon at Tarrant Area Food Bank, Chef James's energy matched that of someone ready to dive into a cherished tradition. As we walked into the kitchen, he was eager to share a special recipe passed down from his mother—Navy Bean Soup, a dish filled with memories, warmth, and a lifetime of culinary passion. As we stepped into the kitchen, Chef James immediately transported us back to his childhood,



telling us how this recipe was always reserved for the coldest days of winter. The colorful array of ingredients—dried navy beans, assorted bell peppers, onions, ham, and bacon—were prepped and waiting in neatly organized bowls. He explained that soaking the beans overnight was key, but in today's world, the convenience of an Instant Pot could save time without sacrificing flavor. This recipe, Chef James told us, originates from the 19th century when navy soldiers relied on beans for their protein during long expeditions. His version, however, is deeply personal, tied to holiday traditions. After Thanksgiving, his mother would always save the leftover ham bone, freezing it until winter arrived. It was then, from that special pot, that the familiar, savory aroma of Navy Bean Soup would fill the kitchen. "When that pot came out," Chef James said with a smile, "we all knew what was happening." But this dish isn't



The pre-measured ingredients are beautifully arranged in individual bowls.

just a family recipe; it's the cornerstone of Chef James's culinary journey. He recalls one winter when his mother, battling cancer, was unable to prepare the family's Christmas meal. He stepped in, taking on the role of head chef at just 16 years old. With his mom offering occasional pointers from the couch, Chef James prepared the entire holiday feast, earning his place as the family cook. "That was the start of it all," he reflected, remembering how cooking became his way of keeping his mother's spirit alive during a difficult time.



Chef James's love for cooking grew from there, eventually leading him to a career that would circle back to his roots in Fort Worth, Texas. As the lead chef at Tarrant Area Food Bank, he now cooks in a kitchen much larger than the one he grew up in, yet the sentiment remains the same—food as a bridge to family, history, and community. In the kitchen, Chef James worked with precision, sautéing onions,

bell peppers, bacon, and ham in olive oil. The smell of simmering vegetables filled the air as he explained how the combination of colors from the bell peppers—red, yellow, orange, and green—not only enhanced the dish's appearance but also brought out a vibrant flavor. Once the vegetables softened, the ham hock, which had been boiling in a separate pot to create the broth, was added to the mix, along with his secret ingredient, liquid smoke. He poured the broth into the pot, along with the pre-soaked navy beans, and let the dish come to a boil before reducing it to a simmer. Chef James, true to his mother's method, waited until the very end to season the dish, explaining that the salty ham could easily overpower the soup if seasonings were added too early. As he stirred the pot, Chef James shared more about his culinary journey. After earning a degree in computer science, he found himself unsatisfied with life behind a desk. Cooking, however, brought him joy, and soon he found a position that allowed him to combine his passion for food with a deeper sense of purpose. Over the past twenty years he has worked in various kitchens, before making Tarrant Area Food Bank his home. Chef James doesn't hold back when he cooks, because his mother never did either. "It's the way I show my love, appreciation, and affection," he explained, reflecting on how his mother always made sure their meals were the best of the best. The Navy Bean Soup, once just a family recipe, has now become a symbol of resilience, love, and dedication. With every bowl he serves, Chef James carries forward the legacy of his mother, the warmth of his childhood in a kitchen, and the deep connection food fosters between people. When the soup was finally ready, we were treated to a steaming, savory bowl paired perfectly with cornbread—a combination Chef James promised was the ultimate comfort food. As we took our first bites, we couldn't help but feel the history and love that had been poured into the pot. Chef James had not just shared a recipe; he had shared a piece of his heart.



You watch as Chef James pours the finished stock over the sautéed onions, bell peppers, bacon, and ham.

PREP TIME: 1 hour
COOK TIME: 45-1hr
SERVES: 8-10

INGREDIENTS:

- 1lb Dried Navy beans
- 1.5lb Ham hock/bones
- 1/2 lb Ham chooped into chunks
- 1/2lb bacon chopped
- 1.5Tbsp Olive oil
- 1 medium yellow Onion chopped
- 3 Bell pepper (assorted colors) chopped
- 1Tbps Minced garlic
- 2.5 tsp Ground cumin
- 1tsp Crushed red pepper
- 1tsp Liquid smoke
- 8 quarts of water

EQUIPMENT:

- 2 medium stock Pots
- Cutting surface/board
- Bowls for separating ingredients
- Sharp Knife
- Spatula
- Ladle
- Baking dish for cornbread
- Oven
- Stove top

Navy Beans and Ham Soup



-Keep In Mind-

- This dish takes time to develop and will need to have ham hock boiling in water for at least an hour to get your stock.
- Have navy beans soak in water overnight so they will be easier to cook the following day.
- This dish can vary in spice add as much or little of the crushed red pepper.
- Ham is a salty protein to consider when adding seasonings. Chef James suggests seasoning at the end, after the beans have softened, instead of during the cooking process.
- This dish is perfect for sharing, so feel free to freeze any leftovers and enjoy them another day!

Navy Beans and Ham Soup

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Soak all the beans overnight or use an Instant Pot for quick cooking
2. Drain the beans and set them aside.
3. In a stock pot, bring water to a boil and add the ham hock. Cook for 1 hour.
4. In a medium stock pot, heat olive oil.
5. Sauté the onion, ham, bacon, bell peppers and minced garlic for about 5 minutes.
6. Add the stock, cumin, red pepper, liquid smoke and the drained beans to the pot with the sautéed mixture. Bring to a boil and cook for 20-30 minutes.
7. Reduce the heat and let it simmer until the beans are tender.
8. Season to taste
9. Enjoy with a side of warm fresh cornbread