

**Randall's Pasta Fagioli (Italian Bean and Noodle Soup)**

2-4 Smoked Pork Shanks

4 Smoked Pork Hocks (use 12 or 16 hocks if you do not have shanks)

2 Lbs. of dried Roman, Cranberry, or Pinto Beans (do not use canned beans)

7-8 Small Yellow Onions (kind that comes in the bags) or use 3 or 4 large ones

2 or more Heads of Celery (with lots of leaves)

Some Celery Flakes (dry spice), optional

1 Lb. or more Pasta (Ditalini, small shells, or other small pasta)

(TT) Imported Locatelli Romano or Reggiano Parmesan Cheese (freshly grated)

(TT) Freshly Ground Black Pepper

The soup is not hard or complex to make. It just takes a lot of time to do it right. This makes a lot of soup. If you do not have big pans, cut the recipe in half or whatever you have to do. This soup is more of a concept, than a true recipe.

**Things Learned Along the way:** The hardest thing about this recipe is getting the smoked pork shanks. I have to import them from where I grew up because I have not found a place to get them locally yet. The shanks add a lot of flavor and provide the meat for the soup. The pork hocks do not have much if any meat on them. They are for additional flavor and so you can get the skin or rind off them. You can make this soup with just the hocks if you have to, but you need a lot of them for flavor. The broth will come out OK, but not as good as if you have the shanks. You also will not have any of the meat in the soup if you use just the hocks. Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do if you want to make this. Vary the meat as you need. If you can get only 2 shanks, add a bit more hocks or vice versa. There really is no set recipe to this as far as the amounts of the ingredients. I have never tried using a good smoked ham in place of the shanks, but that might be worth trying. Sometimes trial and error is the way to go. Make this to your taste.

The next hardest thing about this soup is getting celery with many green leaves on them. The leaves add a lot of flavor as well. The inner yellow leaves are useless. Sometimes I have to buy 4 stalks of celery just to get the right amount of leaves. You only need 2 actual celery stalks. If you cannot get celery with leaves, either cook it without or add dry celery flakes.

The most important thing with this soup is the cooking time of the meat. You want the meat to slowly simmer for around 4 hours or slightly more. You have to watch the heat so you do not get a good boil going. Keep the heat to a slow simmer. The meat should cook until the shanks are literally falling apart and the meat is separating from the bone on the hocks. You also want to keep the water level just so it is only about 1" covering the meat. Do not overfill with water as it dilutes the stock. Pack the meat in the pan well and fill with water accordingly.

You can scale back on this recipe as you see fit. Normally this recipe makes a lot of soup. You can freeze what you do not use immediately. Do not add pasta to what you are going to freeze. Make fresh pasta as you take the soup out of the freezer. You can also make this soup all in one with exception of soaking the beans if you want to. If you cook the meat a day in advance and then let it cool, you can degrease it, but this is not a requirement. Usually there is not much grease. You can cook the meat the same day you assemble the rest of the soup. Just skim what grease you can off with a spoon and use it to sauté the onions and celery. If there is not much grease, use a bit of the broth off the top for sautéing. That works just as well. You can cut corners and use canned beans, but the soup will not come out as good. The canned beans get mushy in the soup since you cannot control how they are cooked. You can cook the dry beans to the proper texture before you add them to the soup. The canned ones are already too soft and will further soften as you heat them in the soup.

**Note.** The saucepan needs to hold all the ingredients, plus the little bit of extra water, and still have room to stir it. If you have only a 10-qt pan or the like, you are probably going to have to cut back. Maybe only use a pound of beans, one or two shanks, and cut back on the vegetables. I have a 20 quart pot and if I do this whole recipe it gets about 2/3 full.

## Day 1

Pour 2 pounds of beans out on a baking sheet. Scan through them and remove any that look bad or any rocks or junk. Put the beans in a colander. Rinse the beans well, and then put the beans in a large pot. Make sure the pot is big enough for the beans to expand and to have enough water in it. Fill the pot with water to cover the beans plus a couple of inches. As the beans soak up the water and expand, add more water. Stir occasionally. Let the beans sit overnight. You can change the water several times throughout the period to help clear the dirt.

Clean the smoked pork hocks and shanks. Wash them well and scrape them with a knife (all sides and top/bottom) to remove any bad stuff as best you can. Put them in a 16 or 20-qt stock pot (if you have a 12 quart stock pot you may have to cut back on the meat) and cover them with cold water to about 1" above. Bring to a boil, then cut the heat to a slow simmer and cook for 4 or 5 hours with the lid on. Stir occasionally. Add water as necessary to keep the meat covered. Do not overfill. Cook until the meat separates from the bones of the shanks well and until the hocks will come apart easily. Do not under cook, as this is where the flavor comes from. Longer is generally better. Keep the heat set on low simmer so the meat does not cook too fast. Once the meat is cooked, shut off the heat. Separate the meat from the broth and put it in a different pan or bowl. Set the meat and broth both a side to cool.

When the meat is cool enough to handle, remove the meat from the hocks and shanks and remove all the bones and skins. Keep some of the skins and throw out the bones, cartilage, and excess fat. Lay the skins flat on a cutting board and scrap the fat off the inside of the skins. Then cut or dice the skins into little pieces. You can skip this step if you want and throw away the skins if eating them grosses you out. I leave them in. Trim any fat from the meat. Break or shred the meat into bite size chunks. Put the meat and the skin pieces into a bowl, cover, and put into the refrigerator. Once the broth cools sufficiently put the pan in the refrigerator as well (if possible). Usually you cook this soup in the late fall or winter and can put the pan outside to cool also. This allows the fat to rise to the top and harden so you can scrape it off easily. Otherwise leave it on the stove and let it cool overnight (this is not a problem), then skim the fat.

## Day 2

Drain the beans in the colander and rinse well. Put beans back in the pot and cover with cold water to about 1 inch above the beans. Bring to a boil, then cut heat to a slow simmer and cook the beans until they are just a little *al dente* (firm). You don't want them to be too mushy. Remember, the beans also cook a bit when you warm the soup to serve. Add water as needed to keep the beans covered plus a little extra. Once the beans are cooked, remove from the heat and let the beans cool some.

While the beans are cooking, take the broth out of the refrigerator and skim any fat that has risen to the top and hardened. Keep some of the fat for sautéing the onions and celery. Once the fat is removed, start to reheat the broth. Remove the meat from the refrigerator and put in with broth to warm up. While the broth is heating (or before), dice the onions to a medium 1/4" or 3/8" dice. Wash the celery and remove any of the leaves on the stalks. Put the leaves in with the broth and meat for flavor. If the leaves are large, you can cut some more. If there are no leaves on the celery, use dried celery flakes for flavor, or do without. Take only the green part of the stalks of celery and cut the white part at the bottom of the stalks off. Do not use the light covered stalks or leaves. Cut back the tops as necessary. Slice the celery widthwise into 1/4" or 3/8" U-shaped pieces. If the celery is too wide to be a normal bite-size piece, slice lengthwise down the middle before slicing the width.

Put some of the fat from the broth in the bottom of a large skillet. Heat the pan until it is fairly hot, and then add the celery and sauté. Since the celery takes longer to cook, start it first. Add a pinch of salt to help with the sweating process. (Do not add too much.) Once the celery starts to soften, add the onions, and get them to sweat down. Cook until the onions are translucent and the celery is no longer hard to chew. You should end up having about a 50%/50% mix of onions and celery.

You also want a good amount of the diced celery and onion as this is one of only a few ingredients that add flavor. Add the mixture to the broth and meat when complete. Add the beans to the broth as well. Be sure to add most or all of the water that the beans cooked in to the broth/meat mixture. Bring back to a boil, then reduce heat and let simmer for a short time (just a few minutes so you do not overcook the beans or celery) to mix the flavors and finish cooking. Shut off heat once complete.

**Note.** There are a couple of ways to add the pasta. The best way is to keep the pasta separate from the soup until you serve it, but that is not always practical. It also depends upon if you are serving the soup right away or waiting. If you make this whole recipe, you will have soup for 2 or 3 pounds of pasta. Unless you are having a huge party, you have to break the soup up into what you will serve now and what you want to save for later. I will write this up that you will make the soup using one pound of pasta and that you freeze the rest.

Put on some water to boil in a pan for the pasta (one pound makes a good amount of soup). The pan should be big enough that you can add the soup broth, beans, and vegetables once the pasta is cooked. If you do the whole recipe, it makes about 3 pounds of pasta worth. The pasta needs to be small (Ex: Ditalini, small shells, or elbows). Once at a boil, add some salt to the water to flavor the pasta as it cooks. Cook as much pasta as you want to make soup for immediately. Cook the pasta until it is *al dente* (still a bit firm), then strain in a colander. Put the pasta or part of it (however much you want to use) back into the pan you used to cook it in. After you put the pasta back to the pan, start adding the soup mixture to it.

**Note.** If you keep some of the pasta aside to serve later, mix a little broth with it so it does not stick and put it in a separate container in the refrigerator. Adding a bit of broth to the pasta you keep separate keeps the pasta from sticking and allow it to continue to absorb some of the liquid. You can also use just a bit of olive oil.

If you use the whole pound of the pasta, you need to add some broth several times as the pasta absorbs a lot of it. If you do not put extra broth in the container before you store what is left, it will absorb it all and you will have dry soup. You want this soup to be a bit thick, so do not add too much broth. Make sure to get a good mix of the meat, beans, vegetables, and broth. Once the soup is in individual bowls, top off with grated Locatelli Romano or Reggiano Parmesan Cheese. Add fresh ground black pepper to taste and serve.

If there are leftovers from the pound of pasta, it can be put in the refrigerator in a sealed container. Doing this can cause some of the soup broth to be soaked up and turn it slightly starchy. Not a big deal, but it is not as good as if you only make what you need at a time. When in the refrigerator, the broth congeals a bit and looks like there is no broth, but when you heat it up again in the microwave or a pan the broth liquefies again.

Once you have made all that you are going to serve immediately, you can break up what remains of the soup mixture (broth, beans, onion, and celery) into containers to freeze. I break the mixture up into containers so that it is enough to cover about 1 pound of pasta. When you warm up the next batch and make the pasta for it, do not add all the pasta at once as you may not have enough broth and it will become too dry. Add the pasta a little at a time to ensure that you have enough soup mixture to go with it. Again, do not freeze the soup with the pasta in it. Make fresh pasta when you are ready to serve it.