

Sweet Black Beans

(Adapted from KANSHA, page 238)

Kuro Mamé 黑豆



Many of the items served to celebrate New Year's in Japan have symbolic meaning, expressed as wordplay. Sweet black beans are a good example: the word *kuro* means "black," but the meaning shifts to "hard work" when the calligraphy changes and the final vowel is extended. Similarly, the word *mamé* means "bean," but when written with different calligraphy, *mamé* becomes "sincere" or "earnest." Eating black beans in syrup on New Year's ensure that those who work in earnest will have a sweet new year.

The traditional method of preparing *kuro mamé* is a long (3 days from start to finish) and rather tedious procedure, though one that results in utterly delicious plump, glossy, tender beans in a light sugar syrup that can be kept for months. Over the years, observing many Japanese home and professional cooks and experimenting in my own kitchen, I have developed a modified version of the classic technique that I am sharing here.

The key to preparing luscious, wrinkle-free sweet black soybeans is patience: the beans must be completely tender before sweetening them (adding the sugar too early will cause the beans to seize and toughen), and the pot must be frequently watched, adding more water as needed to keep the beans barely submerged throughout the lengthy cooking process so they don't wrinkle.

Makes 3 to 3 1/2 cups

- 1 cup dried *kuro mamé* (black soybeans, dried)
- 3 cups water for soaking beans + several more cups water for cooking
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 cups sugar
- 1 and 1/2 cups cold water for syrup
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce

Rinse the dried beans. In a deep bowl, mix the 3 cups water and baking soda, stirring to dissolve the baking soda. Add the beans and let them soak, completely submerged, at room temperature for at least 8 hours or preferably 10 to 12 hours (if it is very warm in your kitchen, soak the beans in the refrigerator for 24 hours). As the beans soak, they will swell to several times their original size. To make sure they remain moist throughout the soaking, dampen a kitchen towel and place it directly on the soaking beans.

Remove the cloth, setting it aside. Transfer the swollen beans and what remains of their soaking water to a deep 3-quart pot. If the beans are no longer covered with water, add water as needed to cover them. Place over medium-high heat and bring to a boil.



Skim away any *aku* (froth, scum, or film) and add water as needed to cover the beans by about 1 inch. Adjust the heat to maintain a steady, but not too-vigorous simmer.



Place the cloth you used when soaking the beans on top of the simmering beans. The cloth will become discolored, but it can be reused for the same purpose several times.

Cook the beans for 2 hours, checking the intensity of the heat and the water level every 15 to 20 minutes. Ideally, the beans will gently simmer in water that barely covers them. Throughout, keep the surface of the beans moist with the cloth (and *otoshi-butai* or other lid that can act as a light weight if the cloth begins to balloon up – it sometimes does). As the beans cook, some skins may loosen and a few beans may split, but neither is a good indication of tenderness.



To check for tenderness: take a bean from the pot, and when cool enough to handle comfortably, hold it between your thumb and pinkie and press gently. It should yield easily. (This pinch test is accurate because the pinkie is usually a “weak” finger and can exert less pressure in the pinch. If a simmered bean can yield to this weaker pressure, you can be sure it is tender.) Cooking times will vary tremendously with the age and variety of the soybean. On some occasions, I have had to cook beans for 4 or more hours. Continue to cook the beans, checking the water level frequently and adding water as need to keep the beans barely covered, until they are completely tender.

At this point, the beans and their cooking liquid can be transferred to a glass jar, covered with the cloth, then with a tight-fitting lid, and refrigerated for up to 3 days. (Before closing the jar, make sure none of the beans are exposed to air.)

Make the syrup: Combine the sugar and 1 & 1/2 cups water in a deep, heavy, 2-quart saucepan over medium heat, stirring to dissolve the sugar. Reduce the heat slightly and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until the liquid is syrupy and reduced to about 1 cup. This should take about 10 minutes. During this reduction process the bubbles will become quite frothy.



When ready to combine the syrup and beans, remove the *otoshi-butā* and cloth from the beans in the saucepan or open the jar and peel back the cloth and transfer to a heavy pot. Add the syrup, replace the cloth, and bring to a boil. Reduce to a simmer and cook for 10 minutes, or until the beans are barely covered with the syrup.

Remove from the heat and allow the beans to cool to room temperature in the syrup. During the cooling process, the sweetness of the syrup penetrates to the core of the beans. Make sure the beans are covered with the cloth as they cool to avoid excessive wrinkling of their skins.



Peel back the cloth, add the soy sauce to the cooled syrup (it will mellow the intense sweetness), and stir to distribute well. Replace the cloth and place the pot over low heat. Bring the syrup slowly to a boil and cook for 2 minutes (the syrup is very frothy), then remove the pot from the heat. Allow the cloth-covered beans and syrup to cool to room temperature again. It is in this final cooling process that the flavors develop and meld.

Set the beans aside to cool completely before transferring them with their syrup to a clean glass jar. Seal with a tightfitting lid and refrigerate for up to 10 days. If you wish to store the beans for an extended time, use heatproof canning jars and process in a boiling-water bath as you would a jam or jelly, then store the cooled jars in the refrigerator for up to 2 months.



TECHNIQUES for HOLDING DEEP, BRIGHT COLOR

The technique described in the original Sweet Black Beans recipe (page 238) calls for baking soda to help hold the lustrous black color of the soybeans. That was primarily to accommodate readers living outside Japan. The classic Japanese “granny” method calls for rusty nails – not the drink, Rusty Nail, made with scotch and Drambuie garnished with a lemon twist – but actual rusted iron. The Japanese believe that using rusty iron when cooking certain foods not only improves color, but nutrition as well.



In the past few decades, “imitation” rusty nails have come on the market in Japan. These are specially fashioned chunks of iron, like the one pictured above, right. As you might have gathered from the shape, the primary use for these iron chunks is to hold the purple color on eggplant (when pickling, when stewing). I bought the one pictured here at Tokyu Hands (in Shibuya) several years ago in their *katei yōhin uriba* (housewares section). *Yaki myōban* (alum powder) and/or baking soda works similar chemical magic to rusted iron. Both alum and baking soda have the added advantage of speeding fiber breakdown, tenderizing beans more quickly. As the beans simmer, *aku* (froth, scum) is thrown off. This includes the unwanted bitterness generated by the alum or baking soda. If you skim diligently, as instructed in the original recipe, the beans will look beautiful, and taste divine.

Below, 2 brands of *yaki myōban* available in many Asian markets outside Japan. Within Japan, most supermarkets will sell one or the other.

