

A large, bold, green letter 'B' is the central focus of the image. In the bottom right corner, there is a small, detailed pink flower with green leaves. The background is a solid, light green color.

Beans : A Heritage Worth Preserving

The memory and revival of local bean varieties

Beans have long been a cornerstone of farming communities, nourishing people and landscapes for generations. By placing emphasis on bean ingredients and their purification and rejuvenation, we aim to restore the cultivation of local bean varieties. This will allow more people to enjoy high-quality, flavorful bean products in their daily diets.

Through the "Small Beans, Big Health" initiative, we hope that more people will recognize how preserving local bean varieties and adhering to traditional farming methods can significantly enhance agricultural biodiversity. This, in turn, helps communities become more resilient to climate change and sustain their livelihoods. We also call for deeper cross-sector collaborations to distill the wisdom of landrace preservation, healthy eating, land management, and ecological conservation, providing pathways to a more sustainable life for both urban and rural communities.



Project Background

Beans, a cornerstone of farming, nourish people and landscapes. In 2015, we launched "Save Small Beans for Big Health" to conserve neglected native bean varieties, collaborating with scientists and farmers to establish community seed banks, train farmers, and integrate bio-cultural knowledge, aiming to restore cultivation and provide high-quality, flavorful bean products.

In 2022, we partnered with the Vanke Foundation to launch the "Small Beans, Big Health" project (formally titled "Small Beans and Big Health: A Biodiversity Perspective in the Context of Climate Change"). This initiative focuses on soybeans, a native crop to China, aiming to revitalize local bean production and consumption across the country, connecting farmers to consumers through a sustainable "from seed to table" approach. It also examines the broader significance of bean-based foods in areas like nutrition, public health, folk traditions, and cultural identity.

Small beans

Rich diversity is essential for maintaining the resilience of food and agricultural systems, while also contributing to the protection of ecosystems and biodiversity on a larger scale. Rice, corn, and wheat provide 60% of our caloric intake, but relying solely on these three staple crops leads to a loss of crop diversity, limiting our diets and depriving us of the opportunity to explore and enjoy a wider variety of foods.

Through the "Small Beans, Big Health" project, we've gone into the elds, conducted on-site investigations, and cross-verified our findings to connect topics of local seed conservation and urban healthy diets. We've mapped out a healthy, sustainable food pathway for beans. By showcasing soybean—a native crop of China—and other diverse bean species and the delicious foods made from them, the project helps people realize that beyond the big three staples (rice, corn, and wheat), there are many more options to choose from. We must also remember that 75% of the world's staple crop varieties are still maintained by smallholder farmers. These farmers are the unsung heroes who protect the diversity of our food and agricultural systems.

Authors



Xiao Mo

A seasoned media professional and food writer with over 20 years of experience, has authored several travel and food books, including "Seeking the Delicious in Hong Kong," "Seeking the Delicious in Macau," and "Eating in Taipei with Xiao Mo." With a unique perspective, Xiao Mo not only introduces memorable dishes but also explores the intricate relationship between food, ingredient production, and local culture.



Liu Hanying

A staff member at the Farmers' Seed Network, a PhD candidate in plant pathology at Yunnan Agricultural University, and a passionate bean enthusiast, Hanying is based in Yunnan Province. She has conducted participatory ecological seed selection experiments and surveys in Stone Village, Lijiang, and Shiping, Honghe Prefecture. Her research focuses on the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.



Liu Yurong

A dedicated advocate of local foods, returned to her hometown in 2016 and served as Secretary General of the Dry Farming Terraces Protection and Utilization Association of Shexian County in Hebei. A passionate advocate for preserving heirloom crop varieties, she has been actively planting and promoting these traditional seeds in Wangjinzhuang Village. As an avid writer, Liu Yurong also focuses on raising awareness of old varieties from her region.



Sun Xiucan

Sun Xiucan grew up in a small village in Heilongjiang known for its landscape of "seven parts mountains, two parts water, and one part farmland." He earned a Master's degree from the College of Agriculture at Northeast Agricultural University in 2006. After working in technology promotion for foreign companies, Sun founded the Xiucan Tofu Workshop. He enjoys exploring the countryside and writing about his experiences.



Shen Ye

A former employee of the Beijing Organic Farmers' Market, Shen Ye relocated with her family to Kunshan in 2019. There, she began working on soil improvement and the conservation of heirloom crop varieties. Her personal experiences have led her to explore sustainable agricultural systems, from food production to soil health and seed preservation.



Li Guanqi

Director of the Eastern Office of Farmers' Seed Network, Guanqi oversees pilot projects focused on ecological variety selection and breeding, conservation of landrace varieties, and ecological culture in Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Shanghai.

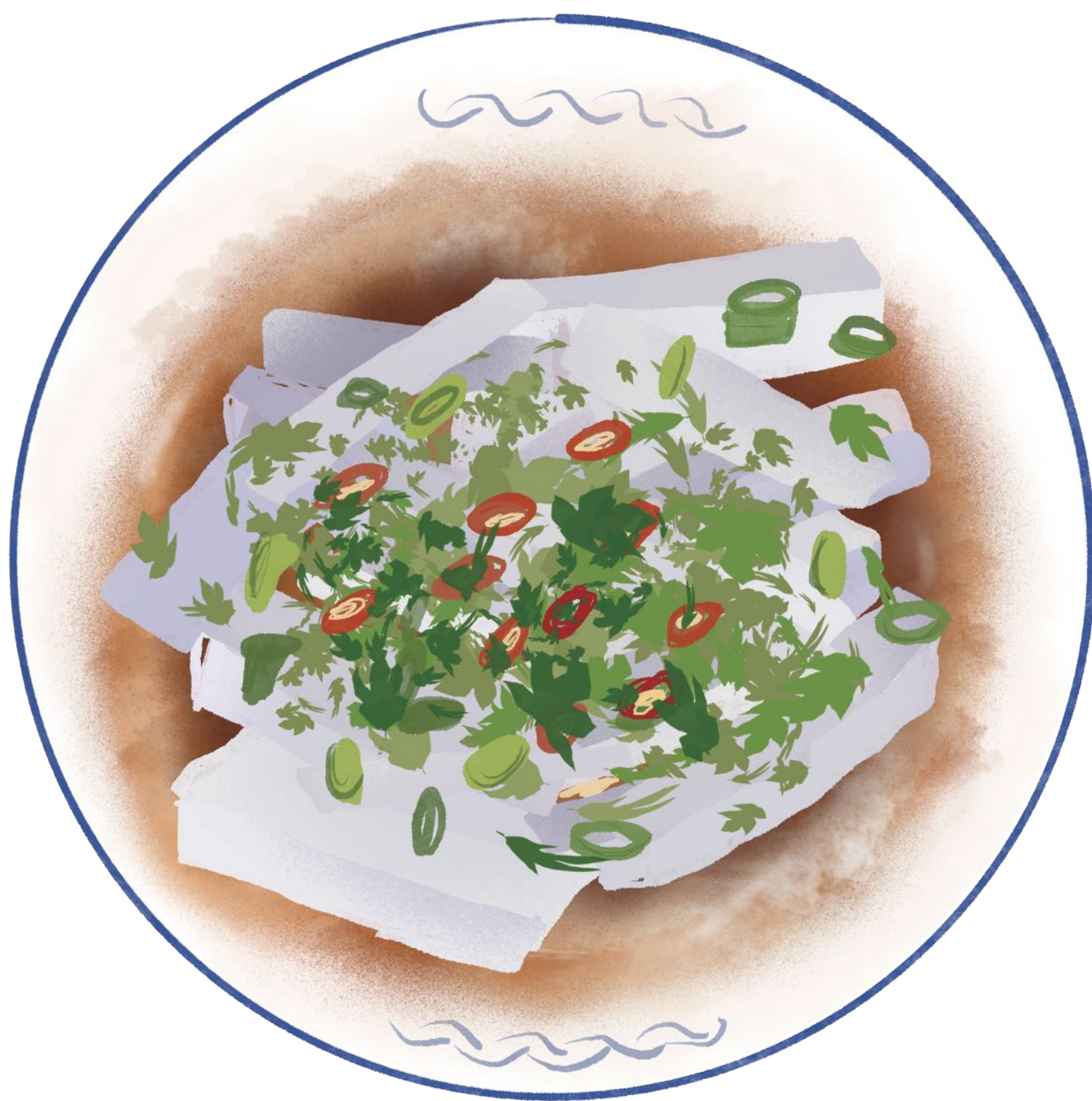


Chuang Yu-fen

As a Communication Specialist at the Farmers' Seed Network, Yufen is responsible for design, communication, and participatory research. She excels at documenting and promoting indigenous knowledge and local food culture through photography and videography.

Lijiang, Yunnan

Chickpea Bean Jelly



#Naxi cuisine

Traditional cultural belief



Chickpeas, known locally as "Er'chuchu" in the Naxi language of Lijiang, Yunnan, are the star ingredient in a traditional bean jelly. This jelly, made from chickpeas, is soft yet springy, with a rich, aromatic flavor. On hot days, it's sliced into long strips and tossed with sesame oil, chili oil, mustard, vinegar, soy sauce, and other seasonings to create a refreshing and flavorful cold salad. With its soft, chewy texture and bold, savory spice, it's the perfect dish for beating the heat while satisfying your appetite.



Stone Village, Yunnan

Safeguarding All Flavors of Small Beans

Stone Village by the Jinsha River

#Naxi dietary culture

#Traditional cultural beliefs

#A rich variety of beans

About 100 kilometers north of Lijiang lies a hillside village known as Shitoucheng, or "Stone Village" to the locals. Home to over 250 households of the Naxi ethnic group, the village has more than 1,000 mu (about 165 acres) of farmland—less than 2 mu (about 0.33 acre) per person. Despite the limited arable land, the variety of crops grown here is remarkably diverse, including wheat, barley, corn, rice, soybeans, broad beans, peanuts, sweet potatoes, and various legumes. These crops not only fulfill the villagers' dietary needs but have also shaped cultural culinary symbols that have been passed down through generations.

Stone Village has preserved the Naxi people's sacrificial traditions, where corn, wheat, baba (a type of steamed cake), and dried chickpea curds are essential offerings. The cultivation of these crops goes beyond basic sustenance; it is an integral part of their cultural heritage. Offering food to their ancestors reflects both their reverence for nature and their gratitude for the land, and embodies values of respect and appreciation for the natural world.



Discover more



Li Ruizhen, the manager of Stone Village’s Community Seed Bank, tends to her own vegetable garden



In the village's terraced fields, there are various bean types: soybeans, red beans, and mung beans, from left to right

Situated in the dry, hot river valley of the Jinsha River, Stone Village is deeply reliant on the rhythms of nature for both life and agriculture. The Naxi people, who have called this place home for generations, have inherited their ancestors' wisdom, and shaped a village that harmonizes with the mountain’s natural contours amidst the lush greenery. With limited land and water resources, they have crafted a way of life that exemplifies the beauty of living in tune with nature, perfectly adapted to the unique environmental conditions.

Accompanying Li Ruizhen to her cherished vegetable garden, we found her petite frame moving with agility. In no time, she has filled a large basket with fresh vegetables. The farm consists of small, narrow strips of cultivated land, each brimming with a diversity of crops that rivals the fresh produce section of a typical supermarket. From fruit trees and peppers to leafy greens, onions, and garlic, as well as an array of beans — including soybeans, chickpeas, broad beans, peas, kidney beans, and red beans — every plant flourishes here.

What is particularly valuable is that these beans are predominantly traditional landrace varieties rather than hybrids purchased from outside. Nearly 90% of the villagers save their own seeds each year and engage in seed exchanges within the community to enhance the quality and resilience of the beans. This practice allows a rich diversity of seeds to be preserved and passed down like treasures in this remote mountainous region, connecting the community to various culinary flavors.

Li Ruizhen is quite particular about her food as she often says, "there's nothing better than what you grow yourself—it's the only way to eat with no concerns." The various beans harvested from the earth are transformed into a bean feast from time to time, thanks to the skillful hands and culinary traditions of the people of Stone Village.



Dried chickpea curds are an essential food during the Spring Festival, a must-have for ancestor-worship ceremonies. Even amidst the abundance of festive dishes, a stir-fried chickpea sheet with pickled cabbage remains a favorite at the table

In the kitchen of Zhang Xiuyun in Muniuke, the indigenous breeder, dried chickpea curds are soaked in a large basin of water. Her sister plans to use them to prepare a famous Naxi dish: stir-fried dried chickpea curds with freshly picked chives from their small vegetable garden. Dried chickpea curds are a staple that every household knows how to make. The preparation process is similar to that of chickpea jelly: the chickpeas are ground into a paste, then the liquid is filtered out. The remaining mixture is spread into thin curds and left to dry for easy storage.

Xiuyun is the long-term partner of the Farmers' Seed Network. Along with Li Ruizhen and several other partners, she has become a leading expert and backbone in seed breeding in the village.

Stepping into Xiuyun's courtyard, you'll be greeted by a wall-sized "seed bank" that houses over 100 varieties of crop seeds, including more than 30 types of corn. She says that beans don't require very fertile soil, so there's no need for additional fertilizer; simply weeding is sufficient, making them relatively easy to cultivate. In her worldview, crops grown from old seeds (including corn and beans) have a higher starch content, resulting in food with a better taste.



Zhang Xiuyun, the indigenous breeder

The Path to Seed Conservation

With the support of the Farmers' Seed Network team and the consensus of the villagers, Stone Village established a seed conservation group to document traditional landrace varieties along with their associated dietary and cultural stories. The group is primarily composed of women, who play a crucial role in the protection and utilization of seed and food diversity. These women treat the diverse varieties of beans like treasures, carefully storing them in bottles within the community seed bank. When the planting season arrives, they take them out for exchange with others, ensuring that these precious seeds are conserved and cultivated year after year in this beautiful land.

Handan, Hebei

Stewed Rice with Beans

The pleasures in having bean cuisines

Cultivating variety, relying on ingenuity



Long bean and 'hongmeisi'

Wangjinzhuang Village, in She County of Handan, Hebei Province, is situated in the Taihang Mountain area with extensive terraced fields. In this small village, various long and broad beans are more valued than staple foods. Residents grind soybeans into flour to make "minjie," a local noodle-like dish, while boiled soybeans are mashed for soup. They sprout soybeans and mung beans for vegetables, add small peas to porridge, and stir-fry long and broad beans. Beans are deeply integrated into the local culture and cuisine, showcasing countless delicious preparations.

Wangjinzhuang Village, Hebei



Gifts from the Terraced Fields: Beans Outshine Meat

For the villagers here, long beans and board beans are more important than common staple food

Terraced fields for dry farming

Wangjinzhuang Village, nestled in the Taihang Mountains of Jingdian Town, Shexian County, Handan City, Hebei Province, offers stunning views of the surrounding peaks. The village spans about 200 hectares of dry terraced fields, where long beans and broad beans are valued more than staple foods. Residents incorporate dozens of bean varieties into their daily diets, with each household cultivating a diverse selection. While meat is rarely consumed, the villagers have a deep-seated love for beans. Fresh beans are often stir-fried or stewed with noodles, while sun-dried beans are soaked in warm water before cooking, especially in winter and early spring.

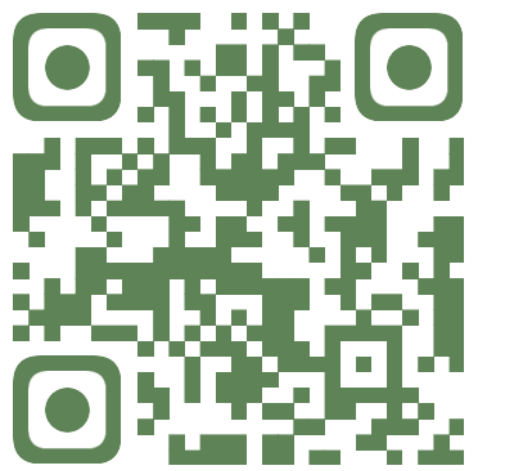
There are more than 40 varieties of beans planted in core area of dry farming terraced land in Wangjinzhuang Village, mostly are soy beans, peas and long beans. The reason that we can find so many different bean varieties in this small village is because different varieties adapt to different geographical environment and they have different growth cycles that can guarantee the villagers' need all year around, not even mention the different tastes and flavors of these beans. All together, they can guarantee that the villagers can have fresh beans in anytime of the year, providing them with diverse and abundant nutrition.

Traditional Bean-Based Diet: Regional Customs and Culture

Freshly picked purple and green beans, just harvested from the vine, are snapped into knuckle-length pieces. A couple of green onions are pulled from the ground, and a few ripe tomatoes are plucked from the nearby garden. Slices of marbled pork are tossed into a large iron pan, sizzling as they were cooked and filling the air with a savory aroma.

Once the meat is browned, the prepared beans, tomatoes, and potatoes are added to the pan. The cook seasons the mix and sprinkles in a bit of water, allowing the ingredients to meld together as they are stir-fried. The delightful scent of the vegetables and meat intertwines, wafting through the kitchen.

Before long, an authentic “Wangjinzhuang mixed vegetable dish” emerges from the stove, served alongside handmade noodles. This comforting meal is not just a feast for the stomach but also a profound source of joy, celebrating the spirit of community and the bounty of local agriculture.



Discover more



One Place, One Unique Bean



Liu Yurong, Secretary General of the Dry Farming Terraces Protection and Utilization Association and a lifelong Wangjinzhuang resident, is a devoted local foodie. Since returning home in 2016, she has focused on experimenting with traditional landrace varieties and is committed to preserving these local crops.

Retrieve the Small White Kidney Beans

The small white kidney beans have been lost in Wangjinzhuang for about seven to eight years. In June 2019, the Dry Farming Terraces Protection and Utilization Association organized its members to collect traditional varieties from over 1,000 households in Wangjinzhuang. At the home of the elderly Cao Ailuan in Sanjie, I found some little white kidney beans. I attempted to plant them in trial fields at Daoyangou in 2020 and 2021, but unfortunately, the seeds didn't germinate due to their age.

At the end of 2021, while visiting Li Shuliang's home in Wujie, I accidentally discovered that he still had some of the little white beans from eight years ago. I expressed my interest in borrowing the seeds for cultivation. Although the elderly man wanted to give them to me for free, I insisted on paying him, as I believe seeds hold significant value.

With only a few little white bean seeds left, I knew if they failed to sprout, the variety would be lost forever in Wangjinzhuang. So I treated these seeds with extra care. On April 22, 2022, I tried to germinate some seeds in paper cups, but the cold weather led to failure.

On May 1, I planted more in the garden, and five days later, three seedlings sprouted. I was thrilled, but sadly, sparrows plucked them, and the second attempt failed. On June 29, I tried again as I dug holes, watered the soil, and planted 10 seeds per hole, and put a dome over the seeds to protect them from sparrows. After light rain on July 2-3, several seedlings sprouted by July 6. By late August, the plants bloomed, but instead of soybeans flowers, they produced snap bean flowers. On September 14, the first pods appeared, confirming that they were indeed unique seed-bearing snap beans—the only one of its kind in the entire county. On October 18, I harvested smooth and white beans, ensuring the preservation of the little white bean for future generations.



Liu Yurong, deeply passionate about preserving traditional seed varieties, is also the author of this article



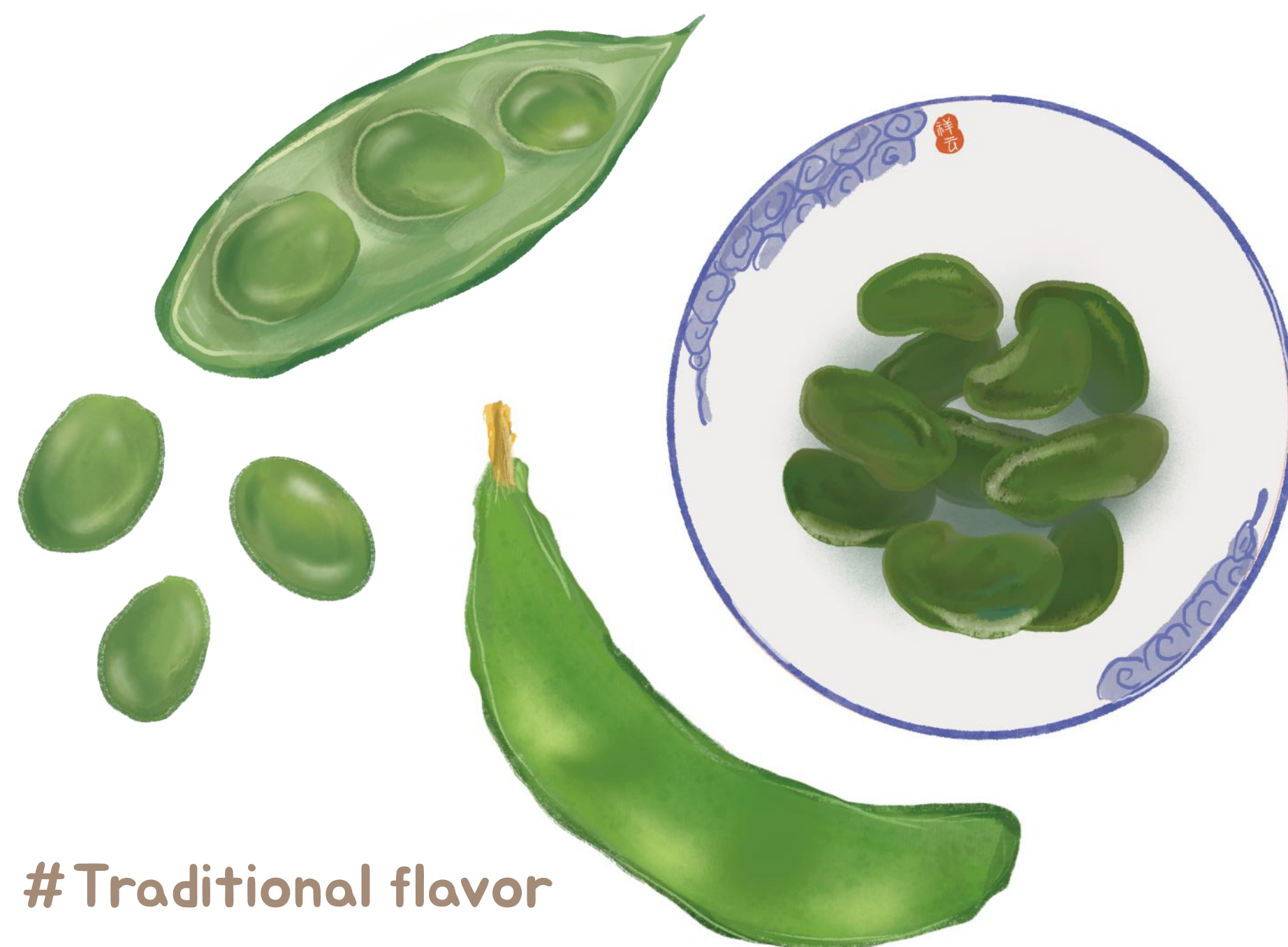
Terraced fields of Wangjinzhuang Village



Seeds of local landrace varieties stored in each household

Kunshan, Jiangsu

“Niutabian” Flat Soybean



Traditional flavor

Stewed soybeans

In Kunshan’s summer markets, nearly every stall sells edamame labeled "local soybeans" or "Taicang soybeans." A popular local variety, "Niutapian", is named for its longer and flatter shape, resembling a cow’s hoofprint. Once cooked, it becomes tender and richly flavored, making it ideal for both main dishes and sides, with an exceptional taste.

A close-up photograph of a soybean plant. The image shows several green, trifoliate leaves with prominent veins. A central stem is covered in fine, white, fuzzy hairs (trichomes). A small, developing flower bud is visible on the stem, showing the characteristic structure of a soybean flower. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting a field or garden setting.

Kunshan, Jiangsu

Replanting Traditional Soybean Varieties



Kunshan City, renowned as the "top county-level city in China," has built its strong economic foundation through rapid industrialization while also preserving a rich history of rice farming



Kunshan “Niutabian” flat soybean

In Kunshan, Jiangsu Province, eating beans is a common tradition. In the past, nearly every household would plant beans along the edges of their fields. Beans are easy to grow, requiring minimal land and no special soil or fertilizers. Their simplicity made them a staple in daily meals, with little effort needed for cultivation. A meal of rice mixed with freshly boiled soybeans and pork lard was considered a true culinary delight.

One of the most prized local soybean varieties in Kunshan is the “Niutabian”, named for its slightly elongated and flattened shape, resembling a cow's hoof print. When cooked, its texture becomes soft and tender, with a rich and fragrant flavor. It is suitable for both main and side dishes, and considered exceptionally delicious. As writer Shen Jialu once noted, “'Niutabian' is the finest of all soybeans—its fragrant and tender texture far surpasses other varieties.”

During times of limited food options, people made the most of what they had, using their creativity to craft varied dishes from simple ingredients. This "necessity-driven creativity" gave rise to distinctive local food cultures. The principle of “cooking with what’s available and in season” became the foundation for each region’s culinary traditions.



Discover more



Tang Yaozhong, a native that works in Yuefengdao Farm as a technician



Young people in seed experiment

The Seed Conservation Journey of Yufengdao Organic Farm

Yuefengdao farm promotes organic farming without chemical inputs, adhering to the principle of "eating in season and knowing the source." This approach supports local consumption, offers healthy food, and reduces non-point source pollution in the Yangcheng Lake wetland. Since 2015, Yuefengdao Farm has collaborated with Chaodunshan Village to grow organic rice, raising villagers' awareness of environmental conservation and local culture. This initiative underscored the importance of traceable and reliable seeds for organic agriculture. However, both the farm and village faced challenges: organic farms lacked safe and traceable seeds, and local heirloom varieties had been forgotten amid rapid economic growth. In order to find organic seeds and seeds of landrace varieties, Yuefengdao Farm set up its own

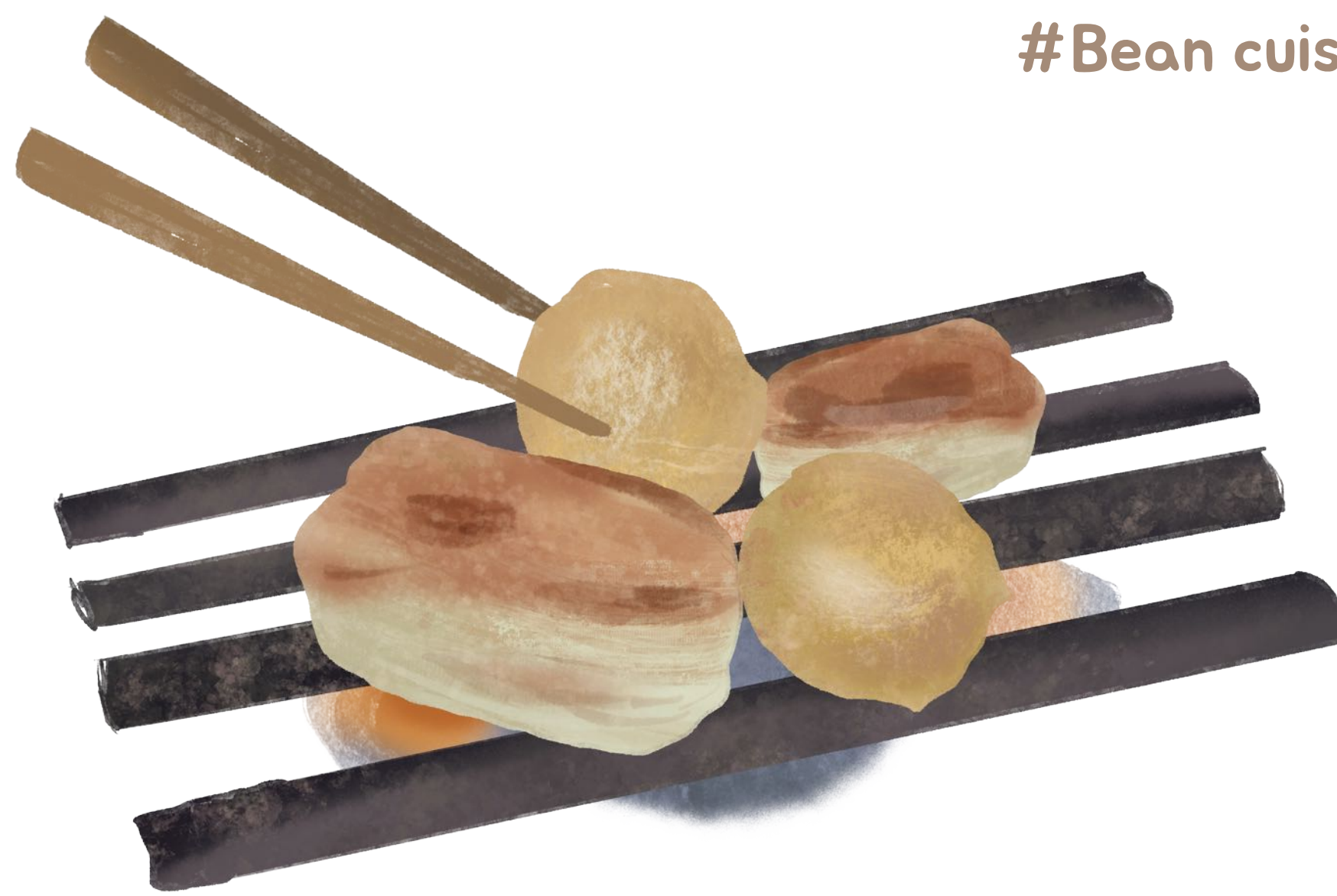
seed bank and stored some of the seeds from the farm and some others from experiment. Gradually, Yuefengdao Farm has become a conservation and breeding base for landrace varieties in Kunshan. With the support from the Farmers' Seed Network, a comprehensive conservation system that includes registration of seed information and seed activation test was constructed. Now, Yuefengdao Farm has collected 27 legume varieties, some of them would be produced for local consumption and some would be saved and stored in the seed bank. With more and more refined varieties produced, we hope that these seeds would not just be an ingredient for our meals, but maybe, in some day, seeds would not just be an ingredient for our meals, but maybe, in some day, known by the children in Kunshan. When they see "Niutabian" and "Black Goateye", they can easily tell the others the cultural stories behind these small seeds.

Honghe, Yunnan

Grilled Tofu

#New ways of eating tofu

#Bean cuisine



Sitting around the kang table and eating grilled tofu
is a lifestyle in Shiping people's blood

Shiping produces tofu and is very proud of its 600-year of tofu making history. Shiping people's pride is absolutely justified. Shiping tofu is made without brine; instead, it uses the unique "sour water" sourced from the wells in the ancient town. This well water is unsuitable for drinking but is ideal for tofu-making. Attempts to transport this water elsewhere have proven fruitless, as its special qualities diminish outside its origin. Thus, the foremost reason for Shiping people's pride in their tofu lies in its exclusivity: it can only be produced in Shiping.



Shiping, Yunnan

The Gift of Nature, Upholding Tradition

Shiping tofu: renowned worldwide

- #Bean products
- #New tofu cuisines
- #Reviving local landrace bean varieties

Shiping is a small and cozy county in Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan Province. When the name is mentioned, all people would naturally think of the tofu it produces. Hence, Shiping is also known as the “land of Tofu”.

Strolling through the streets of Shiping, tofu stalls and small shops specializing in grilled tofu are ubiquitous. Sitting around the kang table and enjoying tofu is a way of life deeply rooted in the local culture. For centuries, Shiping tofu has delighted the community with its variety, texture, and preparation methods, complemented by its signature dipping sauces. Whether served as cubes or whole pieces, tofu can be grilled, fried, pan-fried, boiled, or braised, and is enhanced by exquisite garlic oil with chili or dried chili sauces, highlighting the tofu's delightful flavors.



Discover more



Each place has its own way of supporting its inhabitants. Started from a small bean, processed with special natural water, tofu finally appears on table, nourishing the simple, enthusiastic, hardworking and kindhearted Shiping people with its unique taste and flavor

The traditional way to enjoy Shiping tofu is by grilling. Fresh tofu is air-dried for three days, allowing it to ferment before grilling, and can be cut into small squares or larger strips. If allowed to ripen longer, it transforms into stinky tofu, with a much stronger aroma. The chef, seated at the center of the kang table, skillfully turns the tofu with chopsticks to ensure even cooking and puffing. As diners take pieces, a kernel of corn is added to a separate plate for tracking. At the end of the meal, the corn indicates the total tofu consumed. This simple approach enhances the enjoyment of fragrant and perfectly grilled tofu.



Unlike the common methods of making tofu with gypsum or brine, Shiping tofu is made using natural underground water sourced from wells within the ancient town's 0.75 km² area. By pouring hot soy milk into this special “sour water” and letting it sit for just five minutes, a perfect jellied bean curd is formed. This tofu is soft, smooth, and rich in nutrients, without any sour or bitter aftertaste.

In Shiping, people would leave the freshly made tofu in room temperature for a few days and put a little salt over it so that it can be naturally fermented. Because of the high protein content, the fermented tofu would have a texture, taste and smell just like cheese, but with a flavor of beans and a more complex and delicate mouthfeel.

Reviving Landrace Bean Varieties

Shuaihong Tofu Factory has been operating in Shiping for over 40 years, with Director Wu now representing the second generation of the family. In addition to producing fresh tofu, the factory has expanded its offerings to include a range of packaged bean products and a proprietary snack brand. While the business is thriving, Wu remains unsatisfied.

He recalls that the tofu and bean products of his childhood, made from locally grown soybeans, had a much richer flavor and aroma. However, as the factory has grown, its demand for soybeans has increased significantly, while local landrace varieties have diminished, making them impossible to meet the factory's needs. Consequently, he has been forced to source soybeans from outside regions. Wu emphasizes that the unique taste of Shiping tofu relies heavily on both the quality of the soybeans and the local water. In order to retrieve the unforgettable taste in his childhood, and to improve the quality of the products of the factory, Wu spends a lot of time and energy to try on growing local landrace soybean varieties.

In 2021, Wu cooperated with the Farmers' Seed Network to collect more than 30 landrace bean varieties from Yunnan and other regions. Under his leadership, he conducted a bean introduction experiment at the home of Zhang Li in Yanwa Hill, Yilong Town, which is situated at an elevation of 1,976 meters. The terrain at the hilltop is relatively flat, allowing for one crop per year. The Zhang family had planted a few landrace bean varieties in small plots, while most of their fields were dedicated to a single type of landrace kidney bean. The local varieties tested included the big green soybean, local yellow soybean, and a kidney bean known for its edible seeds. The big green soybean is notable for its green seed coat and larger size, commonly used in Shiping for making fermented bean curd or green bean dishes.

Wu also plants some landrace soy bean varieties in his own field. Talking about this, he was proud and showed us some of the seeds he had stored. The planting experiment in Yanwa Hill is his first step for the revival of the landrace bean varieties.



Director Wu from Shuaihong Factory was selected as the intangible cultural heritage inheritor of the province because of his insistence in using the traditional Shiping tofu making techniques

Xiucan Tofu Workshop

Natto



The revival of the local beans

Know the source of food

A small plate of brown yellow soybeans may pull out long sticky silks if you use chopsticks to stir it. The fermented soybean like this is usually called as “Natto”. However, in China, it can also be called as the mold beans, “meidou” (as the fermented beans made in raining seasons), sticky beans, “labadou” (as the beans fermented in December of the lunar calendar) and wet/slat beans, according to the different methods used in making it. You can always find it easily in Hunan, Jiangxi, Anhui, Shandong, Jiangsu, Guizhou, Guangdong and other provinces China.



Beijing Tofu Workshop

In Pursuit of Perfect Soybeans

Xiucan longed to taste the braised tofu made from soybeans grown in his hometown, so he opened a bean workshop

Longing for the yellow soybean tofu from his hometown, Xiucan opened a tofu workshop in Beijing. His family name is Sun, and “Xiucan” is a title historically given to those who passed the county-level imperial examination in ancient China. He lives up to his name, having earned a master’s degree, with both his undergraduate and graduate studies focused on agriculture. Xiucan's father dedicated his life to seed selection and breeding, and after completing his studies, Xiucan followed his father’s footsteps, working in seed selection and trading. In 2015, after leaving a job at an organic vegetable farm, he sought a new career opportunity. It was then that a friend remarked that tofu in Beijing lacked the authentic flavor of their hometown's tofu, suggesting, “Why don’t you make tofu here?”

Xiucan fondly recalls the brine-made tofu from his hometown of Mudanjiang, a prominent soybean-producing region known for its high-quality soybeans. The simple tofu, made with nothing but brine, is something he deeply misses, even as someone with a discerning palate. With excellent soybeans available in his hometown and a personal love for bean-based foods, he decided to try making delicious tofu in Beijing using these quality beans. Having lived and worked in Beijing for many years, Xiucan set up his tofu workshop in the city's suburbs. However, creating truly tasty tofu with just good soybeans proved to be a challenge.



Discover more

Returning to Seed Breeding for Purity

A small piece of organic tofu is supported by an extensive agricultural supply chain. Xiucan explained that following China's accession to the WTO, soybean imports surged, significantly affecting domestic soybean production. Many regions that previously cultivated soybeans on a large scale have transitioned to planting other crops. High-quality tofu requires premium beans as raw materials, and those beans depend on superior seeds. The organic food industry is not solely about the final products; it involves every aspect of the supply chain. Without quality raw materials, individuals like Xiucan, who aim to provide excellent products to consumers, may find themselves in a situation similar to that of a "skilled cook unable to prepare a meal without rice."

Currently, the soybeans that Xiucan relies on for his tofu production primarily come from his hometown, where his father and local villagers adhere to traditional farming methods. In 2021, Sun Xiucan participated in training organized by the Farmers' Seed Network on the in-situ conservation of landrace varieties. This experience added another goal to his mission. Previously, he focused on using organic soybeans from his hometown to create additive-free bean products.

For the next five years, he aims to work on the purification and rejuvenation of the retained landrace varieties, starting from the beans he knows best, breeding and replanting these valuable old seeds. He also attempted to bring several varieties from his hometown to plant around Beijing, but climate differences led to failure. Despite challenges, Xiucan remains committed to his tofu workshop. To dedicate more time to seed selection and organic soybean cultivation, he encouraged his wife, Yu Xiaoyan, to join the business in 2017. Xiucan affectionately calls her "GM Yu," praising her talent in managing production, quality control, and sales, which has brought new energy to the tofu workshop.

Yu Xiaoyan mentioned that in recent years, only two restaurants remain on their customer list for organic ingredients. Fortunately, they have gained two new groups of Japanese clients living in Beijing, primarily purchasing tofu and natto. Additionally, in response to customer demand, they have started producing tempeh (a fermented bean product) and other new items. Although making tempeh is labor-intensive, it is gradually attracting more clients.



Soybean produced in traditional farming methods



Yu Xiaoyan making natto

One Place, One Unique Bean



Sun Xiucan grew up in a small mountain village in Heilongjiang, where arable land is scarce. He earned a master's degree from Northeast Agricultural University and initially worked in foreign companies focusing on technical promotion. Later, he founded the "Xiucan Tofu Workshop." In his free time, he enjoys walking in fields and writing.



An Encounter of Chaghanur Red Bean

In 2020, due to work requirements, I spent considerable time in Shangdu County, Wulanchabu League, Inner Mongolia. There was a breakfast bar that my friend Ma and I frequently visited, serving milk tea, mixed grain porridge, and steamed buns. We loved it from the very first time we tried their food.

The coarse porridge at the breakfast bar was delightful, featuring millet, barley, rice, red kidney beans, and corn grits. After a long simmer, it became smooth and aromatic, with a colorful mix of ingredients. I couldn't help but nod in appreciation with each bite. While I've always enjoyed porridge and beans, the small red kidney beans stood out for their remarkable tenderness—so smooth that I barely felt their skins. Curious about their origin, I asked the owner. He brightened and returned with a handful, saying, "These are local beans, but I don't know the name. We've been eating them since childhood, though they're rare now." Smaller than typical red kidney beans, they had a white hilum and a flattened shape. Ma mentioned he could find them in his village. The owner proudly offered us some samples. That breakfast felt like a treasure discovery, making the porridge taste even sweeter.

Despite inquiring with many locals, no one could identify the bean's name. Since it is native to the Chaghanur watershed, Ma suggested we refer to it as Chaghanur Red Kidney Bean.

Our village was located near the edge of a wetland. Over the years, the excessive extraction of groundwater had caused the lake to dry up, leaving only white intertidal zones and thick saline-alkali soil. The fate of this small red kidney bean may mirror that of the Chaghanur River, as both have witnessed the passage of time and the evolution of their surroundings. They have observed the gradual decline of rural life, the exodus of young people seeking better opportunities, and the diminishing returns of local agriculture, resulting in the gradual disappearance of many mainstream crops. Historically, traditional agriculture relied on self-sufficiency; however, this paradigm has drastically changed. Food is now abundant, and malnutrition is no longer a pressing concern. New high-yield hybrid varieties continually emerge, while the old, heirloom varieties that once played a crucial role in sustaining communities are fading from memory. In the years to come, who will remember the Chaghanur River and the once cherished small red kidney beans?



广西马山古寨上古拉屯
Shanggula Village, Mashan, Guangxi



云南丽江市蒺油米村
Youmi Village, Lijiang, Yunnan



河北张家口怀安县

Huaian county, Zhangjiakou, Hebei



内蒙古敖汉旗

Aohan Banner, Inner Mongolia

Photo: Qiubi

Daily Bean Consumption: Enjoying a Plant-Based Diet

7 quick bean recipes for urban consumers

Beans, besides being a great source of plant-based protein, can easily fulfill our nutritional needs without relying on meat. Meals with less oil and salt can still be flavorful, as the saying goes, "salt enhances taste, while subtlety brings out fragrance." By using local and seasonal fresh ingredients, we can create lighter dishes that promote better health, replacing, heavily seasoned meat and fish dishes.

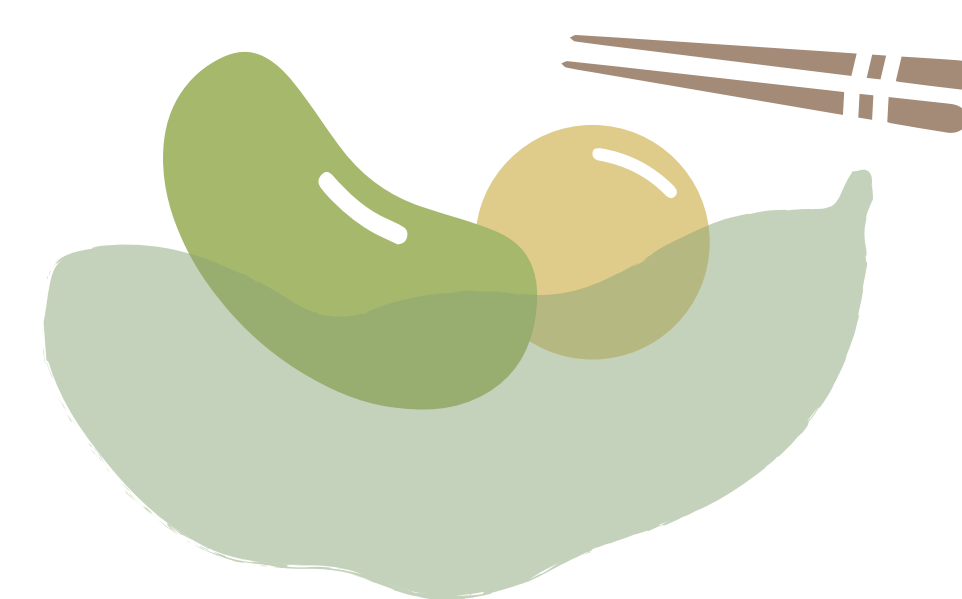
Incorporating beans into our daily diet isn't as complicated as it seems. Simple and quick recipes with minimal ingredients and seasonings can meet the demand for convenience, allowing bean dishes to grace our tables more frequently.

Following the ancient adage of "eating in season," some beans are best enjoyed fresh, while others can be dried and stored for later use. Whether fresh or dried, cooking with whatever beans you have on hand is always suitable and offers year-round versatility.



Scan to Cook

Small Beans, Big Health 小豆子，大健康



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