

Twice as Tasty

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Free the Seeds Workshop: Learn to Love Lentils

By Julie Laing

Lentils are the ultimate tiny seeds with a big impact. Like many legumes, these seeds come packed with protein and fiber and are rich in many nutrients. But unlike larger bean seeds, or dried beans as we call them when we bring them into the kitchen, they don't require presoaking and cook relatively quickly. They're affordable, versatile, easy to store for long periods, and a healthy addition to any diet.

In this workshop, you'll learn about some of my favorite lentil recipes and preparation techniques. We'll consider ways to incorporate lentils into your diet and cover how to sprout, ferment, and cook them. We'll look at ways to sneak them into meals or make them the focal point, from crispy snacks and salad garnish, to dips and dosas, to soups and meatless main dishes.

Types of Lentils

Montana grows almost 40% of U.S. lentils, making it the country's top lentil producer. This includes organic lentil growers Timeless Seeds and Natural Foods, which has been producing lentils for more than 35 years near Great Falls—and changing the way farmers grow and rotate crops along the way.

There are numerous varieties of lentils in a rainbow of colors. In the kitchen, they can be divided into two main categories: those with skins and those that have been decorticated or hulled, which means their darker skins have been removed, leaving just the seeds.

Lentils with skins retain their shape as they cook. These are some of the most common types:

- **Brown or green lentils:** These types can be found in most grocery stores. They are a bit larger than many other varieties, soften and separate as they cook, and have a mild, earthy flavor. They're often chosen for soups and baked dishes and for sprouting.
- **French or Puy lentils:** These blue-green lentils have a thick skin, so they keep their shape when cooked—although they take longer to do so. They're ideal for salads, side dishes, and garnishes.
- **Black beluga lentils:** Unlike the flat, lens-like shape of most varieties, black lentils tend to be nearly round and have the most flavor. They have a thicker skin, like French lentils, but can be cooked until soft, like brown ones. With a careful eye, you can cook them firmer for salads or longer for soups.

Hulled lentils lose their shape but cook the fastest. Two types are easiest to find:

- **Red or crimson lentils:** If you're a fan of Indian food, you're probably familiar with daal, which is often made with red lentils. They taste slightly sweet and soften quickly, making them ideal for dips, sauces, and purees. They become less colorful the longer they cook.
- **Yellow or golden lentils:** Like red lentils, these bright seeds are known for creaminess and cooking speed. They won't hold their shape long, making them best for soft foods like spreads and delicate soups.

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Simplest Stovetop Lentils

1 part lentils
2 parts water

In a fine-mesh sieve, rinse the lentils under running water. In a medium saucepan, combine the lentils and water. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat to a simmer. Stir them occasionally as they cook for 10–30 minutes, depending on the type of lentil. Cook until they are no longer crunchy and longer for a softer result.

Tips & Tricks

- As the lentils come to a boil, skim off any foam so that the pot doesn't boil over.
- Add salt and any acidic ingredients when the lentils are nearly done; these can toughen the lentils and slow their cooking.
- Lentils keep cooking a bit after you remove them from the heat, so err on the side of slightly undercooked if you want some texture.
- You can cook the lentils ahead of time and store them in the fridge for 3–4 days. They'll stiffen up the longer they sit, so reheat them over low heat with a bit of warm water.

Stovetop Lentil Recipes

Stovetop cooking is ideal for stews, soups, and dips. These lentils can be the featured ingredient or a supporting one to add protein.

- **Spiced Red Lentil Dip:** Red lentils cook quickly, so you can use less water than the standard 1:2 ratio if you want a dense puree or dip. They will lose their bright color as they cook, so I add turmeric to the recipe in my [Flathead Beacon column](#).
- **Harira (Moroccan Tomato Lentil Soup):** I typically use green or brown lentils for [Harira](#); they will cook as long as the chickpeas that dominate the soup and become ultrasoft. You can soak them with the beans (it won't affect the final dish) or add them later when you cook the soup.
- **Lentils and rice:** Red and yellow lentils cook in about the same time as white rice; green, brown, and black lentils take nearly as long as brown and wild rice. So you can cook lentil-and-rice pairings separately as sauce and base or together in one pot. I converted my favorite red lentil and rice soup to a version that can be gifted in a Mason jar, complete with a spice packet, much like this [Mixed Bean Soup](#).
- **Other stovetop lentil ideas:** Cook lentils into your favorite vegetable soup; they add protein and thicken the soup. Use lentils instead of chickpeas in hummus or as a dairy-free base for [Onion Lover's Dip](#). Mix lentils into a filling for [Sourdough Empanadas](#), perhaps with tomatoes or sweet potatoes and spices. Fold them into a pilaf with rice or bulgur.

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Baked Lentil Recipes

Lentils are typically baked from raw or a second time, after they've been cooked on the stovetop.

- **Lentil Loaf:** Baking lentils into a dish adds protein without advertising the bean component. I like the recipe in my article for [Taste of Home](#) topped with [Vegan Memphis-Style Barbecue Sauce](#).
- **Crunchy Baked Lentils:** For [bean snacks](#), I bake unhulled lentils and other legumes twice: once on the stovetop and again with oil and spices in the oven until crunchy. Larger beans are easily eaten out of hand, like nuts. Lentils work better as a garnish; I also like them tucked into street tacos with goat cheese and avocado and orange slices or pickled onions.
- **Other baked lentil ideas:** Soak and use raw lentils instead of chickpeas in [Baked Falafel](#). Sprinkle crispy twice-cooked lentils on a salad, like [Roasted Golden Beet and Garlic Salad](#), or any other dish that you might garnish with pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, chopped nuts, or croutons.

Sprouted Lentils

Some people find sprouted lentils and other seeds, legumes, grains, and nuts easier to digest. Sprouting can also increase the bioavailability of amino acids, proteins, and melatonin, according to recent studies. It takes longer to sprout lentils than to cook them but may be worth the wait.

Unhulled lentils are best for sprouting, such as brown, green, French, and black varieties. It may be possible to sprout red and other hulled lentils, but the results can be inconsistent and rather soft.

You can buy lentils specifically packaged for sprouting; these have been tested for a high germination rate. I've successfully sprouted dried, whole lentils sold in larger volumes for cooking. Avoid split lentils and old ones from the back of your pantry.

Lentils are easy to sprout in a jar with a sprouting lid: just rinse and soak them a couple of times a day until they break their hulls and their "tails" begin to show. You can eat them raw or cooked.

- **Crispy Sprouted Lentils:** The recipe I developed for [Clean Plates](#) starts with sprouted lentils instead of ones cooked on the stovetop and then bakes them until crispy. You can use them in the same way as twice-cooked Crunchy Baked Lentils.
- **Other sprouted lentil ideas:** The bean sprouts you see in the store are usually mung beans, which are as easy as lentils to sprout at home. You can use raw sprouted lentils anywhere you'd use larger bean sprouts: think stir-fry and pad Thai. Whether raw or baked crispy, they make a delicious garnish.

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Fermented Lentils

Like sprouting, fermenting makes lentils and other legumes easier to digest. I ferment raw lentils for dosas, a crepe-like flatbread popular in South India made of legumes and grains ranging from rice to semolina. I make mine with red lentils and basmati rice, fermenting them over just a few days.

Dosas take a little practice to master, especially in our cold winters and without the expertise of elders. I explain in detail the ingredients and techniques I use when making dosas in my NW Montana cabin and give my full recipe for Red Lentil and Basmati Dosas in [this blog post](#).

Plain dosas make a delicious snack, but the folded, taco-like shape is tempting to dip or fill. Here are some of the ways I like to serve dosas. (You'll find the full recipes for the homemade accompaniments on the blog or in my cookbook, [The Complete Guide to Pickling](#).)

- Smearred with avocado or covered in slices of Pickled Mango and topped with a basted or fried egg
- Dipped in Yellow Plum and Lavender Chutney mixed with homemade yogurt
- Alongside Taqueria Carrots and fresh homemade paneer
- Paired with Indian-Inspired Sweet-and-Sour Potatoes and Indian-Inspired Shrimp in Yogurt as a full meal

Food for Thought

If you soak them long enough with unchlorinated water in a warm place, any legume will naturally begin to ferment. Go too long, and they will smell, and might taste, like rotten beans, regardless of whether they are safe to eat.

To reduce the stink, some people recommend fermenting lentils after they have been cooked. You'll need to add a starter culture, since cooking kills the desirable bacteria naturally in beans and other vegetables. Cultured yogurt or milk kefir whey, kombucha or water kefir, and lactofermented pickle brine are common choices. Cooked and fermented lentils are typically used in salads and dips.

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