

FULL OF BEANS

One of the best things about being a TV-food producer is that you get to meet all sorts of passionate people whose lives revolve around food and ingredients. That's all they think about. One of the more delightful people I've had the pleasure of interviewing is Steve Sando, the founder of Rancho Gordo, a producer of heirloom produce, seeds, and beans.

When he first came to Napa, he couldn't find a decent tomato, which was surprising since Napa is supposed to be one of the best agricultural regions in the country. All he could find in the local markets were those hard hothouse tomatoes from Holland. So, since he liked to cook with fresh ingredients, he decided to start growing his own. Eventually that led him to grow his own heirloom beans. He was attracted to them because they are indigenous to the Americas and he feels it's important to keep that heritage alive.

As he's talking, I'm thinking what's the big deal about a bean? Isn't a bean just a bean? After another half-hour of my interview with him, I realize – no – a bean is not just a bean. There are hundreds of varieties with different flavor profiles and textures. They are almost as ubiquitous as rice, being a critical crop that offers sustenance and nourishment to most of the world. Think about it, what would chili be without kidney beans? Or cassoulet without flageolets? Or even Fava beans without a nice Chianti?

His enthusiasm turned me into an heirloom bean convert. After the shoot, he loaded me up with a few pounds of his top sellers to bring back home, including my favorite, Christmas Lima Beans. As a kid, I used to gag on the canned lima beans my mom served. They had that pukey green color and were mushy and slimy. But these beans have a gorgeous purple and white swirl and are firm enough to use in a chili or stew. They taste a little nutty, almost like chestnuts. They are just the

right bean to turn a lima bean hater into a lima bean lover.

Ingredients matter and good ingredients make a difference. Once you start using quality dried beans, you'll never go back to canned again.