

The Three Sisters: Corn, Beans and Squash

Chef Bill McPherson

To the Iroquois nation, a federation of seven tribes from New York to Ohio, corn, beans, and squash were known as the Three Sisters, and were the basis of their diet. Legend has it that they sprouted from the body of Sky Woman's daughter, granting the gift of agriculture to the tribes.

Iroquois agriculture evolved into an ingenious method of planting these three crops together, starting with the famous “Corn kernels in a hole with a fish for fertilizer” technique we learned about in grade school. As the corn grew, the earth was mounded around the stalk. Several weeks later, the women returned to plant bean seeds, which nitrogenated the soil. The corn stalks acted as living bean poles. Between the rows, they planted squash or pumpkin, the leaves of these ground-covering plants shading and retaining moisture for the whole system. The Three Sisters, when eaten together or in a stew such as follows, comprise a near perfect protein.

INGREDIENTS

1 Large Butternut Squash (about two pounds)

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 medium onion, chopped

1-1/2 pounds diced tomatoes, with liquid

2 cups cooked pinto beans (about 3/4 cup raw),
or 16-ounce can, drained and rinsed

2 cups corn kernels (from 2 large or 3 medium ears)

1 cup water

1 teaspoon each: ground cumin, dried oregano, or to taste

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

6 servings

(The Three Sisters can be prepared over an open fire or in its coals, but with our drought, we might want to stay in the kitchen.)

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Halve the squash and scoop out the seeds and fibers. Place cut side up in a shallow baking dish and cover tightly with foil. Bake for 40 to 50 minutes, or until just done but still firm. When cool enough to handle, scoop out the pulp, and cut into large dice. Set aside until needed. Heat the oil in a soup pot. Add the onion and sauté over medium-low heat until the onion is golden. Add the squash dice and all the remaining ingredients except for the condiments and bring to a simmer. Simmer gently, covered, until all the vegetables are tender, about 20 to 25 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. If time allows, let the stew stand for one to two hours before serving, then heat through again. The stew should be thick and very moist but not soupy. Add additional stock or water if needed. Serve in shallow bowls.