

Rodrigo Elias

Feijoada: a short history of an edible institution

“**P**alate is not as universal as hunger”, said Luís da Câmara Cascudo in 1968. The famous ethnographer, and the most important folklorist in the country, was referring to a Brazilian dish, maybe the most typical one: Feijoada. In his view, it was necessary to have a special predisposition in order to savor the flavors of the dish, similar to the one needed to appreciate all the nuances of certain wines. In other words, cooking – and even the “simple” appreciation of it – requires the education of an important sense, the palate. Therefore, it would be interesting to follow the evolution of this national institution which, besides being one of the most permanent, has the advantage of being edible.

It is conventional wisdom that Feijoada was invented in the slave quarters. The slaves, in their brief breaks from the crops, would bake beans, an ingredient set aside only for them, and would add the meat leftovers from the manor house, parts of the pork which were not suited to the masters’ palate. With the end of

slavery, the dish created by the black slaves migrated into all social levels, reaching the tables of very expensive restaurants in the 20th Century.

But it wasn't exactly like that.

The history of Feijoada – if we want to study its *historical sense* – takes us first to the history of beans. Black beans, those used in the traditional Feijoada, have their origin in South America. Chroniclers from the first years of colonization already mentioned these delicacies in the natives' diet, called by the Guarani groups *comanda*, or *comaná*, or *cumaná*, even identifying some varieties and subspecies. French traveler Jean de Léry and Portuguese chronicler Pero de Magalhães Gândavo, back in the 16th Century, described beans and their use by the Brazilian natives. The second edition of the famous *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae*, by the Dutch Willen Piso, revised and enlarged in 1658, has a whole chapter dedicated to the noble seed of the common bean.

The name by which we call it (“*feijão*”) is Portuguese. When the Europeans arrived in America, in the beginning of the Modern Age, other varieties of this vegetable were already known to the Old World. The word *feijão* was written for the first time in Portugal in the 13th Century (that is, some three hundred years before the discovery of Brazil).

Only after the second half of the 16th Century, were other varieties of beans introduced in the colony, some from Africa, and also beans from Portugal, known as *feijão-fradinho* (cream colored, it is still very popular in Brazil for salads and as a dough for other dishes, like the famous *acarajé* – black-eyed beans). The chroniclers of the period compared the native varieties with the ones brought from Europe and Africa, and were categorical, following the opinion of Portuguese Gabriel Soares de Souza, expressed in 1587: the beans from Brazil, the black ones, had more flavor. It became popular among the Portuguese.

The native populations obviously appreciated it, but preferred another vegetable, manioc, a root eaten in several forms – and even transformed into a fermented drink, *cauim* – and which also came to be appreciated by Europeans and Africans. Manioc was the main food for Portuguese-Americans of the province of São Paulo. The *paulistas* mixed their flour with cooked meat, making a type of mush that sustained them on their endless trips hunting Indians to be enslaved. But they also ate beans. Black beans.





Beans. Delfim Martins / Pulsar Imagens

The bean plant, in all of its varieties, also contributed in settling populations on the Portuguese-American soil. It was an essentially domestic crop, kept by the women and their daughters, while men were busy with the other crops and cattle raising. The simplicity of its maintenance and the relatively low costs of its production spread bean cultivation out among the settlers in the 18th Century. According to Cascudo, the existence of small vegetable gardens became common among the simple housings in the interior of the country, where it was the women's almost exclusive task to "gather" or "pluck" the beans. Due to livestock in the Northeast, to gold and diamonds in the Midwest, or to border disputes with the Spanish domains in the South, the spreading of the population during the 18th and 19th centuries was extremely facilitated because of the prestigious vegetation (until then colonization had been limited to the coast). The beans followed the settlers. Along with the manioc, the beans would settle the men on the land and be part of the duo that "ruled the menu of old Brazil", with the manioc in the form of flour.

In the beginning of the 19th Century, absolutely all travelers that passed through Brazil and described the habits of Brazilians of the times mentioned the central importance that beans had as a national food. Henry Koster declared in Recife, in 1810, that beans cooked with coconut were delicious. Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied ate beans with coconut in Bahia, in 1816, and loved it. The Frenchman Saint-Hilaire said, in Minas Gerais in 1817: "Black beans are an indispensable dish on the rich man's table, and this legume is almost the only food of the poor". Carl Seidler, a German soldier, narrating the Rio de Janeiro of the First Reign, described, in 1826, the manner in which it was served: "accompa-

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nied by a morsel of meat (beef) dried in the sun and bacon at will", repeating next a motto that would travel through that century and which is still today, for the common Brazilian, an unquestionable truth: "there is no meal without beans, only beans satisfy one's hunger". But, disagreeing with other chroniclers, he gave his opinion: "the taste is rough, unpleasant". According to him, only after a long time could the European palate get used to such a dish. Spix and Martius, naturalists that accompanied the first Empress of Brazil, the Austrian archduchess Leopoldina, on her trip to her new homeland, made reference to the "coarse meal of black beans, maize flour and bacon" in Minas Gerais. They also refer to beans as being the basic food of the people in Bahia, including the slaves. The North-American Thomas Ewbank, in 1845, wrote that "beans with bacon are Brazil's national dish".

However, the most vivid picture of the common preparation of beans – it is not yet the Feijoada – was painted by French artist Jean-Baptiste Debret, founder of the academic painting in Brazil, nephew and disciple of Jacques-Louis



Dried meat store. J. B. Debret (1825). Source: Castro Maya Museums – IPHAN/Minc – MEA 0178

David. Depicting the family dinner of a humble Carioca merchant during the permanence of the Portuguese Court in Rio de Janeiro, he affirmed that “it consisted only of a miserable piece of dried meat, of three or four square inches, only half an inch thick; they cooked it with lots of water and a handful of black beans, whose grayish flour, very substantial, has the advantage of not fermenting in the stomach. To the plate filled with this broth, where some beans float, a large pinch of manioc flour is added, which, mixed with crushed beans, forms a consistent meal which is eaten with the tip of a wide, round knife. This simple meal, which is invariably repeated daily and carefully hidden from the passersby, is prepared at the back of the store, in a room that also serves as a bedroom”. Besides being a professor

at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Debret, who remained in Brazil from 1816 to 1831, became notable for carrying out a true pictorial chronicle of the country in the beginning of the 19th Century, specially of Rio de Janeiro, in which pictures like the *Armazém de carne-seca* (Dried meat store) and *Negros vendedores de lingüiça* (Black vendors of sausage), besides the mentioned meal scene, are included.

Nonetheless, men did not live on beans alone. The Native Indians had a varied diet, and beans were not even their favorite food. The slaves also ate manioc and fruits, although beans were the basic food. However, there is the issue of food combination, also brought up by Câmara Cascudo in his beautiful *História da Alimentação no Brasil* (History of Nourishment in Brazil).

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There were, during the Modern Age, among the inhabitants of the Colony (mainly those from native and African origin), eating taboos that did not permit a complete mixture of beans and meat with other vegetables. Among Africans, by the way, many of Muslim descent or influenced by this culture, it was forbidden to eat pork. How could they, therefore, have come to make our well-known Feijoada?

In Europe, especially the parts with Latin and Mediterranean heritage, there was – and there still is, informed Cascudo – a traditional dish that goes back at least to the Roman Empire. It consists basically of a mixture of various meats, vegetables and leaves. There are variations from one place to another. Nevertheless, it is a very popular, traditional meal. In Portugal, *cozido*; in Italy, *casoeula* and *bollito misto*; in France, *cassoulet*; in Spain, *paella*, this one made with rice as the basic ingredient. This tradition came to Brazil, especially with the Portuguese, creating in time – as they adapted their taste buds, mainly those born in Brazil - the idea of preparing it with the omnipresent black beans, unacceptable for European standards. Feijoada is, therefore, created.

According to Câmara Cascudo, “Beans with meat, water and salt, is only beans. Thin

beans, for the poor. Everyday beans. There is a big difference between Feijoada and beans. The first implies the procession of the meat, vegetables and leaves”. This combination only occurs in the 19th Century, and very far from the slaves’ quarters. The priest Miguel do Sacramento Lopes Gama, known as the “*Carapuiceiro Priest*”, published in the newspaper *O Carapuiceiro* (The Hint Factory), in Pernambuco, on March 3rd, 1840, an article in which he condemns “Feijoada as a murderer”, scandalized by the fact that it was mainly appreciated by sedentary men and delicate urban ladies – this in a society profoundly marked by the slavery ideology. It is worth recalling that salted pork parts, like ears, feet and tail were never leftovers. They were appreciated in Europe, while the basic food in the slaves’ quarters was a mixture of beans and manioc flour.

What is concretely known is that the oldest references to Feijoada have nothing to do with slaves or slave quarters, but with restaurants patronized by the urban slavocratic elite. The oldest example is found in the *Diário de Pernambuco* of August 7, 1833, in which the Théâtre Hotel in Recife, informs that on Thursdays the menu was “Feijoada à la Brazilian” (a reference to the adapted aspect of the dish?). In Rio de Janeiro, the reference to Feijoada served in restaurants – patronized by the “good society” - appears for the first time in the newspaper *Jornal do Commercio* of January 5, 1849, in an advertisement under the title *The excellent Feijoada à la Brazilian*: “In the restaurant next to the bar *Fama do Café com Leite*, we have decided to serve every week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the excellent Feijoada, due to many customers’ requests. In the same restaurant, lunch, dinner and supper for take out are still prepared, with the utmost cleanliness possible, and there is a daily variety of food. In the evening, we serve an excellent fish for supper.”

In the memoirs of Isabel Burton, wife of the English adventurer, traveler, writer and diplomat Richard Burton, published in 1893, she refers to her period in Brazil, from 1865 to 1869, with an interesting description of this delicacy. Speaking of life in Brazil (her husband gained Emperor Dom Pedro II's friendship, and she shared the refined social circle of the Marquise of Santos, the notorious lover of Dom Pedro II's father, Dom Pedro I), Isabel Burton said that the main food of the people of this country – according to her comparable to potatoes for the Irish – was the savory “*feijão*” dish (the author uses the Portuguese word) accompanied by a very thick “*farinha*” (she also uses the Portuguese word for “flour”), usually sprinkled on the plate. The Englishwoman's judgment is rather positive, after having savored, for three years, what she called “*Feijoada*”, and regretting not being able, for more than two decades, to smell its scent: “It is delicious, and I would be content, and I almost always was, to have it for dinner.”

The Imperial House – and not slaves or peasants – bought in a butcher shop in Petrópolis, on April 30, 1889, fresh meat, pork, sausage, blood sausage, kidneys, tongue, heart, lungs, intestines and other meats. Dom Pedro II maybe did not eat some of these meats – his preference for a good *canja de galinha* (chicken broth with rice) is well known -, but it is possible that other members of the family did. The book *O Cozinheiro Imperial* (The Imperial Cook), of 1840, signed by R. C. M., brings recipes for pork's head and feet - besides other meats – with the indication that they should be served to “high authorities”.

Today there is not just one recipe for Feijoada. On the contrary, it seems to be a dish still in creation, as stated by our greatest folklorist at the end of 1960s. There are variations here and there, adjustments to the climate and local pro-

duction. To Câmara Cascudo, Feijoada is not a simple dish, but a whole menu. In Rio Grande do Sul, as we are reminded by researcher Carlos Ditadi, it is served as a winter dish. In Rio de Janeiro, it is served from summer to summer, every Friday, from the most inexpensive bars to the most sophisticated restaurants. What really matters is the occasion: a commemoration, a friendly gathering, the anticipation of the weekend at the Carioca financial center, or a simple Sunday lunch with friends.

A Brazilian chronicler of the second half of the 19th Century, França Júnior, even said that Feijoada was not a dish on its own, but a small feast, a party where they ate all those beans. As in Chico Buarque's song *Feijoada completa* (Complete Feijoada): “Woman / You are going to like that / I'm taking home some friends to chat”. The flavor and the occasion, therefore, are the guarantees for a successful Feijoada. Besides, of course, a certain historical (or mythical) disposition to understand and appreciate it, as Brazilians have been doing through the centuries.

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