

8-Hour Beans:
U-Tena Blog Post #1
By Emilia Sowersby

My alarm went off, and my first thought was: I need to change my ringtone. My second thought of the day was that *today was the day*. We were going to cook the beans.

A couple weeks prior, the day after we had landed the two-day flight from Boston to Nairobi, we had bought the beans at an overpriced Tusky's just a few matatu stops away from our guest house. It was a medium-sized bag -- not too large, but not too small. Black beans. Hard -- not like the canned ones I had been used to in college.

It was supposed to be a simple procedure: soak the beans for two hours in water, then boil for one additional hour. Of course, there were many other factors to consider, but we had covered all the bases. The water had to be boiled (to spare our *muzungu* immune systems); we had to pour the right amount (one cup of dry beans yields almost three cups cooked); and it was a national holiday (the last day of Ramadan) so we didn't have work. That meant we had the whole day to ourselves -- the perfect opportunity to cook the beans.

I got out of bed a couple hours after my first alarm went off, ate my breakfast, then put a cup and a half of beans in water. It was already 1 pm.

In Kenya, working on national holidays is optional, so I opened up my laptop and tried to access the U-Tena website ... with little success. WiFi was down again. I shrugged, and flipped open a Brandon Sanderson book I'd taken with me from Brown to tide me over for the next month, but ... two hours soaking time was a long time.

Two hours.

I checked the clock: 1:08 pm.

"Renita?"

My roommate peered out of the small living room, one earphone hanging over her shoulder. "Wanna do something?"

I nodded. "Except the weather says it's supposed to rain all afternoon."

"The weather app is always wrong."

So we decided to go to the Arboretum. It was nearly a forty-five minute drive from our place, but Uber prices were actually reasonable in the city -- more than reasonable. We confirmed our four-dollar ride, and left the beans to soak.

Twenty minutes out, we could already feel the respite in our lungs from the pollution in our area. We'd blow our noses, and our snot would come out black. Too much? So was the carbon content in the 'Industrial Zone.'

When we finally reached the Arboretum, it was all pine and bamboo and decorative flowers. That such a place could even exist amidst the density of the capital was unbelievable ... we quickly bought our favorite package of chocolate-chip cookies to snack on, and stepped onto the mud path. The dirt stuck two inches on our shoes, but we got over it as we stood in awe of the greenery, still glistening after the previous night's rain showers.

The Arboretum was larger than expected, and by the time we'd walked the perimeter, we'd grown used to the fresh, natural smells of the forest -- as well as the chanting of the many groups of people who had apparently gathered to celebrate the national holiday (Remember: Ramadan?). Both events were memorable.

It was a serene place. Tucked away in the center of the bustle, it transported to a nostalgic era while simultaneously forced to remain in the present. And what was better: our beans had gotten to soak for an extra two hours past the recommended time.

We were hungry. And now, our beans would take less cooking time.

It was a good day.

We hopped back into a chap chap, the remnants of the Arboretum manifesting itself in the form of a couple of new welting mosquito bites, though they had been well worthwhile. Slowly, the smells of the city began to overwhelm our memories of the flora, until the trees disappeared altogether, and what remained was a jumble of concrete buildings, colorful market stalls, and the controlled chaos of Nairobi traffic.

But this was beautiful, too, in its own sort of way.

By the time we had gotten back to the guest house it was nearly 5 pm. Before taking off our shoes we transferred the beans onto the stovetop, and cranked up the flame. It wouldn't be long until they were soft, and tender. We'd pile them over long-grained rice, and we'd even have left-overs for tomorrow.

The water was boiling. The sun was setting.

I slouched onto the couch and picked up my Brandon Sanderson again. Work was, to remind you, *optional* on national holidays. I had tried in the morning. It was too late to try again.

An hour passed. The savory aroma of the beans was beginning to waft throughout the living room ... considering the four-hour soaking time, they should be ready by now.

I tapped into the kitchen, took a towel off its rung, and lifted the cap from the pot. Crimson and black beans. I stirred them. Brought one to my mouth to taste and ...

Hard. The beans were still hard.

I dropped the rest of them back into the pot.

Four hours soaking. One hour boiling.

My stomach growled. *What the hell?*

I suddenly felt a great dissonance for the world. All the recipes I had googled had said in bold: **Max cooking time, one hour. Two hours soaking.**

The beans had had more than enough time. *Hours longer ...*

I replaced the lid and returned to the couch.

"Renita?"

She removed an earphone. "I'm hungry."

"The beans are still hard." The internet had lied, and so had the laws of physics. The simple fact that any foodstuff could sit in boiling water for well over an hour -- hour and a *half* now -- and still remain hard was completely unfathomable.

We ended up waiting for another two hours, with little success. Boiling water can kill off cholera bacterium in under three minutes; it can destroy wall paint in less; it can even burn *us humans*. But not the beans.

It was nearing 8 pm, and I was feeling faint. After a somber conversation with Renita, we decided to call it. We poured in a depressing bowl of leftover tomato soup from the night before, and stirred it in to flavor.

Then, we ate them.

It was a cramp waiting to happen -- if the stovetop couldn't break down the beans, I doubted my digestive system would be able to -- but it was food, nonetheless.

We ate them, finished them, and distracted ourselves with the newest Black Mirror episode.

That night, there were many thoughts running through my head. For one, we should have just bought the canned beans. They were cheaper, more familiar, easier on the stomach.

Two, Nairobi was a city of many faces. Our spontaneous trip to the Arboretum had revealed a hidden green-space in an otherwise tan and grey maze. On one end of the city was Mukuru, what used to be the largest slum in Nairobi, and on the other end was large compounds of homes, expansive parks, and high-rise universities. Whatever I had expected coming into Kenya, it hadn't been such complexity.

We associate cities (along with most memories) with a single characteristic, perhaps because that is all our brains can handle. It's easier that way, and slightly appealing, in a voyeuristic sort of way. But in truth, a city is multiplicity. Hidden avenues, dynamic streets, pockets of *deja-vu* here and there ...

We found out a couple of days later from a friend from the organization that we needed a special kind of pressure cooker to properly soften the beans. Of course we hadn't known that, because we hadn't asked.

The eight-hour beans were different from anything we'd had before -- both in taste and process. But you appreciate things more when you put more time into them.

So I retract my previous statement: I'd give the beans a second chance.