

March 26, 2006
Food

Eat, Memory: Bean There

By TUCKER CARLSON

I bet we were the only people in my neighborhood growing up who ate B&M baked beans. We lived in La Jolla, Calif., 25 miles north of the Mexican border, where the only beans you saw were refried or served in salad. B&M beans came in a can, suspended in molasses with a chunk of salt pork. They seemed like the sort of thing you'd eat by the wood stove if you were snowbound in the mountains. They were a little heavy for La Jolla.

That was doubtless the appeal for my father, who came from New England and ate things like shepherd's pie, rhubarb and other mysterious foods that baffled guacamole-stuffed Southern California natives like my brother and me. But we ate the beans anyway, partly out of respect for my father, but also because they were delicious. In the summers, on the way from the Boston airport to vacation in Maine, we'd salute as we drove past the immense brick B&M plant in Portland. I remember wondering who worked there.

One summer during college, I found out. My roommate and I were living in Portland, though not very successfully. I'd applied to Denny's; he'd put his name in for a bartending job. Neither of us heard back. We sold car insurance door to door for a day. Finally we tried a temp agency. The next afternoon we found ourselves wearing white uniforms and hairnets and reporting for duty at the Burnham & Morrill baked-bean factory.

B&M was a strict union shop, closed to all but members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International, local 334, and possibly their sons and nephews. But for some reason that summer the union allowed an exemption for temporary help. We went to work on the second shift at \$6.60 an hour.

The B&M plant was built in 1913 and, from what I could tell, hadn't been updated since. Outside, the building was dominated by a towering brick smokestack that belched bean fumes into the salty Portland air. Inside, it was a time capsule. True to advertising, B&M's beans (white pea and red kidney) were cooked as they had always been, in enormous cast-iron pots that were lowered into brick ovens. The pots hung from chains and moved across the plant floor on steel rails suspended from the ceiling.

It looked to me as if someone must have bribed the safety inspectors. Each bean pot was the size of a Fiat. They whipped across the floor at surprisingly high speeds, often pushed by workers who looked as if they could have used a nap. (When your shift starts at 4 in the afternoon, there's ample time to drink before work.) Occasionally a pot would slip the rails and come crashing down. I saw it happen once. The impact sounded like a massive explosion. During our next smoke break, one of my gossiping co-workers claimed that the Burnham & Morrill plant had the highest rate of work-related injuries in all of Pet Inc., then the corporate parent. I believed him.

Most of my jobs were safe enough. One week I scraped charred beans from the insides of the ovens. The next I ran a machine that stacked cans onto pallets. For two weeks after that, I extracted the hot cans in which B&M baked its brown bread. They were made in enormous pressure cookers that looked like missile silos and were called reefers, for some mysterious reason. By the end, I got curious about the bread and tasted some. Surprisingly, it was pretty good.

By July I'd been assigned to a pot-saucing station, mixing ingredients for 16- and 18-ounce containers of

barbecue-flavored pea beans. For each pot we combined 21 gallons of hot water with 4.3 ounces of mustard slurry, a portion of ground bacon and 8 ounces of liquid hickory-smoke flavor. I was the liquid-hickory man.

Until that day, I'd naïvely imagined that food ingredients resembled food. Not so with barbecue sauce (i.e., liquid-hickory flavor). The flavor came in white plastic 50-gallon drums, shipped from a chemical plant in New Jersey. I learned right away that you didn't want to get the flavoring on your skin. It was the consistency of oil-based deck sealant and harder to remove. Within an hour every one of my fingers was dyed a deep yellow, the color of nicotine stains. I looked like a wino with a bad Pall Mall habit.

But at least I wasn't bored. The women on the pork line clearly were. I walked by them several times a day as they stood silently at a conveyor belt, dropping pieces of salt pork into cans of beans, one piece per can, eight hours a day. The monotony was enough to make you hope for a falling bean pot.

One day toward the end of my short career at the plant, a supervisor sent me to a storeroom on the third floor. Inside there was a pile of hundreds of bean cans, all of them full. Apparently some of these cans had bad seams. It was impossible to know exactly which ones were defective, but the company wasn't taking chances. Leaky seams meant spoiled product, maybe even botulism. You couldn't just throw them away, for fear that someone would retrieve them from the trash, eat them, get sick and sue. They had to be destroyed. My job was simple: puncture every can.

The assignment came with a special tool, fabricated in the millwright's shop. It looked like a framing hammer with a steel spike welded to the end. It made a satisfying sound as it pierced the cans.

I had a great time for the first hour. Then I came to a bad can. I should have known what it was. It looked different than the others, misshapen and bulging in the middle. If you've ever shot a can of shaving cream with a BB gun, you know what happened next. A plume of fermented beans burst forth like a geyser. The liquid was brown and bubbling and smelled like sewer gas. It hit me directly in the face, spraying into my eyes and mouth, and running down the inside of my collar. I felt like screaming, but there were people watching, so I just kept whacking cans. My uniform stuck to me for the rest of the night.

On my final day of work, I stopped by the company store to pick up some beans, which B&M sold to employees at cost. Cheap beans were considered a key perk of the job, and in fact they were. The labels were often flawed and the cans dented, but the beans were fine, and incredibly inexpensive. For \$3, I bought a case of pork-free pea beans in sauce. I threw it on the back seat of my car and drove off.

Last year I was rooting through a cabinet in the laundry room of our summer house looking for Fourth of July fireworks. There, next to a leaky container of Tide, were the beans. I'd bought them fully intending to cook them for dinner. Tastes change over time, though. I worked there in 1989. I haven't had a baked bean since.

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