

**THE HEIRLOOM BEAN TASTING BONANZA**  
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Taken at Traverse City, Michigan

It takes a lot to get me out of my house and the town where I live, on the road, and traveling an hour and a half to someplace else. After all, I am the kind of person that thinks for two or three days “Do I really want to go to the grocery store?” Just what did it take for me to leave Big Rapids where I live and drive up to Traverse City on lovely Lake Michigan?

The simple answer is “beans,” thirteen kinds of heirloom beans, rare varieties you and I probably have never heard of, much less tasted. But my wife Margaret knows beans, and in our family she is the champion of beans, especially rare and wonderful ones, and the moment she heard about the bean-tasting bonanza, she had her mind all set to go. I had little choice but to follow her lead, for I too like beans, especially the soupy/watery beans like you might find in authentic Mexican food, and these beans were just that: just boiled beans with a little salt. Yum.

The “Bean Bonanza” was part of a benefit fundraiser for the “Institute for Sustainable Living, Art & Natural Design” (ISLAND), and one of its founders, Brad Kik was on hand for the festivities. Of course, it did not hurt that my daughter (a well-known Michigan singer) and her fiancé Seth Bernard were going to perform music at this bean tasting event; If there is one thing I like is to settle in and hear May and Seth make music, so I was hooked. And off we went.

This Bean Bonanza was held at the lovely Neahtawanta Inn (Nee-ah-ta-wan-ta), a bed and breakfast located on Old Mission Peninsula, a 22 mile long finger of land that divides Grand Traverse Bay into East and West Bay. The inn, which is located right in the middle of Michigan cherry orchards and wineries, is owned and run by Sally Van Vleck and Bob Russell, friends of my daughter May and the Earthwork Music Collective she belongs too. Bob and Sally are involved with all kinds of forward-looking, environmentally friendly projects. I should write a whole blog about the Inn. Let me just say here: if I could own and run an Inn just like I always dreamed one might look and be like, this would be it. It is right on the water, has many rooms, nooks and crannies, can hold a lot of guests, and these two innkeepers make you feel like you already belong there and are just coming home for a visit. And then there were those beans.

Sure enough, the beans were there, each in their own crock pot and steaming away, all thirteen varieties. And in front of each pot was a jar of dried beans for that particular variety, something wonderful to see as well, so bright and colorful.

Did I try all thirteen varieties? Well yes I did, and the thirteen varieties of beans were not all I had. After that, I also tried the bean salad and the bean soup, just to finish things off. Those were some good beans, and I have not heard the last of them yet!

I should also mention the gourmet brownies, tray after tray them, each with a different flavor, but I can't say much about them personally because I am off sugar and ate not a one. The brownies were the food artistry of Erica Bourdon, and I am told they were wonderful indeed, and I will admit that I did cast some loving glances at those brownies as they passed me by, but I stuck with the beans.

These heirloom beans are the work of local chef, grower, DJ, and man of many talents Marty Heller, who researched, collected, grew, and harvested all these varieties on Michigan soil, quite a task. Just seeing great bags of these rare beans sitting on the floor was heartwarming. Beans are central to my diet and much loved.

I can't remember all thirteen varieties, but some of them were: Low's Champion, Black Valentine, Appaloosa, Anasazi, Coco Rubico, Orca, King of the Early, Steuben Yellow Eye, Red Calypso. However, I did eat them all, which was much easier than keeping track of their names.

And as those around me tasted and commented on each variety like an expert might comment on fine French wines, I (a mere neophyte) steadfastly moved from sample to sample trying to decide for myself which was the finest bean. But I reached the thirteenth variety before I could begin to decide. My bean taster, so it would seem, is just not all that refined. All the beans tasted great, but they also all tasted (IMO, which doesn't count) about the same, as in: really good beans. They all tasted like beans. I marveled at other more sophisticated palettes.

Later, after the bean-tasting frenzy died down, my daughter May and Seth Bernard treated us to two sets of wonderful acoustic music. I could see that for many a bean tasting is followed by the sampling of some fine local beers. When the music ended, the light was fading fast, and it was time for Margaret and me to hit the road for the drive back home. As we filed out the door, it was clear that the bean tasting, now with the introduction of a keg of beer, was just getting rolling on a whole new level. It was turning into a party, and a couple of decades earlier I would have had to stay. But we had one little dog anxiously awaiting our return home, so home we went. I must say in all candor that the ride home in the car was not without events.

Enclosed are some photos from the event.



Just seeing all these beans in jars was a visual treat.



This kitty is nineteen years old, and wondering what all these people were here for, and also checking whether feeding time was perhaps at hand and earlier than usual.



Erica Bourdon's brownie festival looked delicious. If only I was allowed to try them all!



Bowls of beans, but not cooked, abounded.



Thirteen crocks, all steamed up and ready. In front of each variety were the dried beans in a jar.



I don't think I have ever seen the aftermath of a bean tasting crowd before. There was a lot that somebody could take home.



Bean master Marty Heller (left) and Island director Brad Kik work out a plan before everyone arrives. — with Marty Heller and Brad Kik.



Here is the Bean Meister himself, Marty Heller, certainly not above tasting his own work, and educating folks like me on the fine points. — with Marty Heller.



And there were raffles and "Count the Bean" contests, as well.



The experts weigh in, while I take up a stance at the back. With my uneducated palate, I was just eating some beans and liking it. I hope no one recognized me as a gourmand and not a gourmet. — with Holly Jo Sparks.



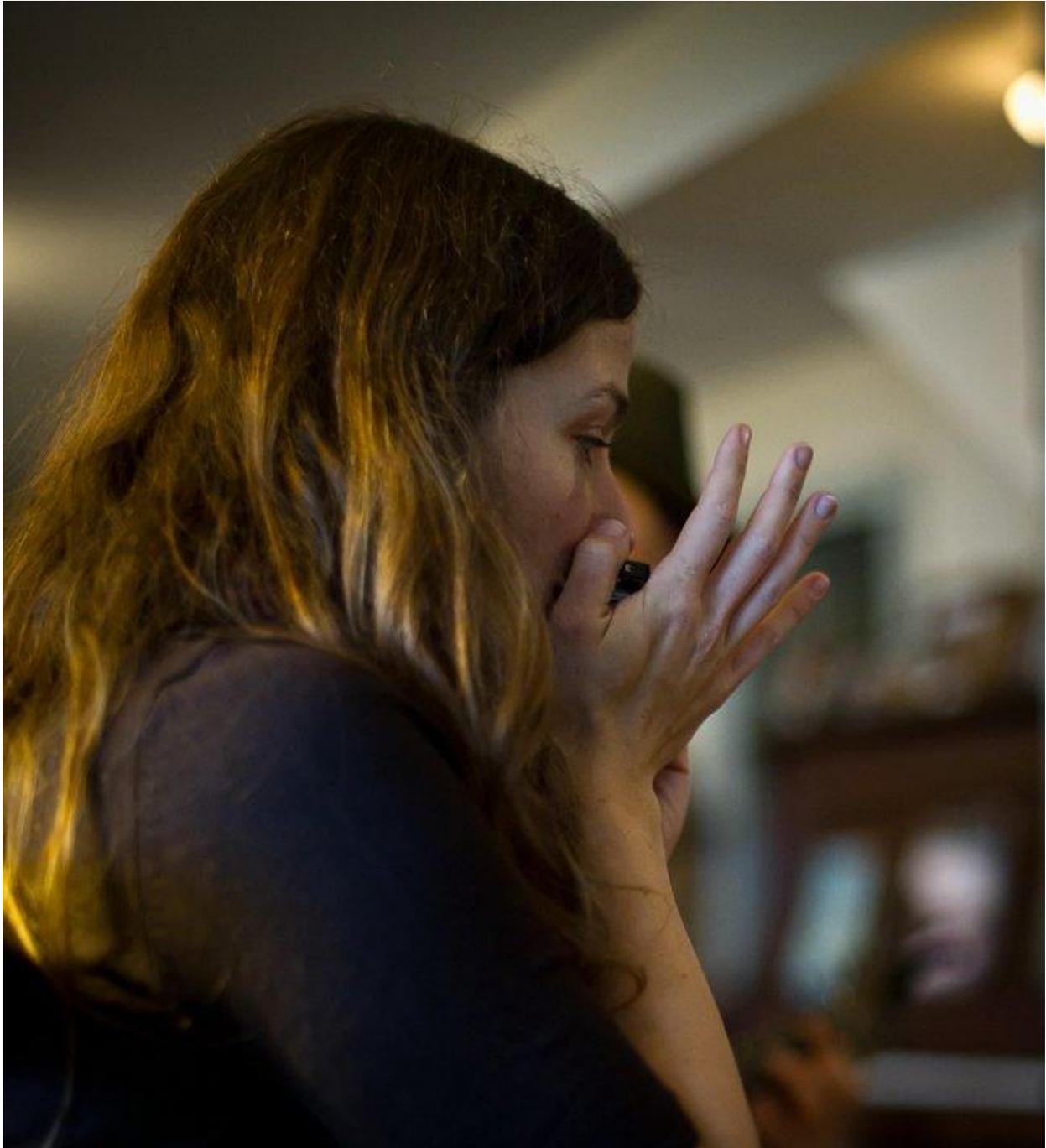
I have never stared into so many crocks before this.



Fifteen bean samples to be tasted means crock after crock to negotiate. My pleasure.



Music too. My daughter May's violin or viola; I can't see which this is in the photo.



And some tasty harmonica playing by May. She might have learned some time part of that from her dad.



Seth Bernard, my future son-in-law.



Bean aficionado Marty Heller and gourmet brownie creator Erica Bourdon enjoy the music. — with Marty Heller and Erica B Heller.



And Margaret was so way ahead of me in beans. She had bags of beans waiting with her name on them when we arrived. So much to learn for me about these beans.



Bean counters, if I can call them that, have different strategies for figuring out how many beans are in each jar.