

CORNBREAD + SOURDOUGH STUFFING WITH APRICOTS, FENNEL, CINNAMON, CREAM and MANY HERBS

Serves 8-12

REMEMBER, BEST PRACTICE: READ THE RECIPE ALL THE WAY THROUGH BEFORE YOU START COOKING!

I love the texture and flavor combination of cornbread with a classic San-Francisco style sourdough. Best of both worlds here.

And speaking of cornbread: I like to make it from a mix, rather than purchase. Why? *So that I can add a big splash (a healthy ¼ cup) of cream to the batter before baking*, which makes the cornbread sooo delicious and all the more so for stuffing. Use 2 (8.5-ounce) packages of Jiffy mix (baked all together in one pan, for height) or 1 larger box (15-ounce) cornbread mix. (The Whole Foods brand is 15 ounces and quite good.) You may have a bit leftover to snack on after using what's called for in the recipe. (One more reason to bake it with cream.)

Assembling this dish one full day in advance is the ultimate way to save time on Thanksgiving. Plus, the bread will completely hydrate when left to sit overnight. Dry stuffing this is NOT.

One large round classic sourdough bread (about 1 - 1 ¼ pounds), or another rustic bread
1 pound cornbread, cut into 1 ½-inch cubes (about 5 heaping cups) *See headnote for cornbread tips

12 tablespoons (1 ½ sticks) butter, plus 4 tablespoons, melted, for drizzling stuffing before baking

¼ cup olive oil, plus additional for greasing

2 large onions (about 1 ¼ pounds), peeled and roughly chopped

1 very large or 2 medium fennel bulbs, roughly chopped, including all stocks and all fronds

5 stalks celery, thinly sliced

5 cloves garlic, peeled and roughly chopped

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

⅓ cup (packed) chopped sage (from 1 bunch)

¾ teaspoon ground cinnamon

½ teaspoon red pepper flakes

5 large eggs

1 ¼ cups heavy cream

⅔ cup brandy (substitute white wine or more chicken stock, if desired)

2 cups low-sodium chicken stock, plus additional as needed

Leaves from 1 large bunch parsley (about 2 packed cups), roughly chopped

Leaves from 10 sprigs thyme sprigs, chopped

10 ounces (about 1 ½ cups) dried apricots, quartered or halved if small

1. Heat the oven to 350 degrees with racks in the upper and lower thirds.

2. Prep and toast the bread: With a sharp serrated knife and leaving behind as much of the interior bread as possible, remove the bottom crust of the **sourdough loaf**. Discard or save for breadcrumbs. (The crust that you'll

get from the other parts of the loaf is plenty. A ton of crust in a stuffing? Not my favorite.) Doing your best not to smoosh the bread as you pull, gently rip the loaf into rustic 1- to 2-inch pieces and place on a baking sheet. (Using a fork for this step is helpful, so as to keep the bread pieces light and fluffy.) You should have about 8-10 (not packed) heaping cups.

3. Add the **cornbread cubes** to a second baking sheet. Transfer both baking sheets to the oven and bake until bread is dry and ever so slightly golden, about 25 minutes. The cornbread may need longer, depending on how fresh it is. (You can skip this toasting step if you have the forethought to dry out the bread bits in advance: leave uncovered on baking sheets at least 24 hours or up to 3 days in advance.)

4. Grease a 9" x 13" pan with **olive oil**. Place **12 tablespoons of butter** and $\frac{1}{4}$ **cup of olive oil** in a large Dutch oven over high heat. When the butter has melted, add the **chopped onions, fennel (plus chopped stocks and fronds), celery, garlic, 1 tablespoon salt**, and a very generous amount of **freshly ground black pepper**. Sauté, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are thoroughly softened, about 8-10 minutes.

5. Add the **sage, cinnamon, and red pepper flakes**. Continue cooking, reducing heat as necessary to prevent scorching, until the mixture has seriously shrunk and begins to take on a more jammy consistency, about 8-12 minutes more. (The vegetables should still retain their shape.) Remove from the heat.

6. Combine the **eggs, heavy cream, brandy, low-sodium chicken stock**, 1 tablespoon of **salt**, and a generous amount of **black pepper** in a large bowl. Whisk to combine.

7. Place the sourdough and cornbread cubes into the largest mixing bowl you have, along with the **parsley, thyme, and about three-fourths of the apricots**. Scrape the onion mixture into the bowl and use a large spatula to fold gently until the bread pieces are well-coated. Pour the egg mixture over the bread and continue tossing. Let sit for a few minutes, and then toss again. Repeat until the bread has absorbed nearly all of the liquid. If the mixture seems dry (each bread cube should feel nicely saturated), add a touch more chicken stock. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Transfer to the prepared pan, making sure to *mound* the stuffing rather than *pack* it into the pan. (If you have extra that's not fitting, you can bake it in a small baking dish.) Sprinkle the **remaining apricots** on top of the stuffing, tucking them in between the crevices. (Yes, this is purely a visual thing, so as to show off the orange gems.)

8. Let the stuffing sit for at least 1 hour. You can make the stuffing up to this point one day in advance. Keep covered in the refrigerator.

9. When ready to bake, heat the oven to **375 degrees** with a rack in the center. Drizzle the top of the soon-to-be stuffing with the remaining 4 tablespoons of **melted butter**. Cover with a lightly greased piece of tin foil and transfer to the oven. If baking from room temperature, bake 30 minutes, until heated through, sizzling on the sides, and somewhat puffed. (Add 10 minutes if baking from refrigerated.)

After this first phase of baking, you can hold the stuffing for a couple of hours if desired until nearly ready to serve, which can be helpful when negotiating precious oven space. When about 30 minutes away from wanting to eat, uncover the pan and increase the temperature to **425 degrees**. Continue baking until lightly golden on the top and the interior is completely baked through, about 20-25 minutes more. Serve.

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