

Traditional Southern Stuffings

Nutty cornbread or mellow rice serves as a base for two perfect complements to roasted poultry

BY SCOTT PEACOCK

While the mashed potatoes made my sister swoon, and the drumsticks provoked a tug of war among the others, the stuffing is what I liked best when my family had roasted turkey for the holidays. Stuffing is still the first thing I go back for when it's time for seconds.

Whether based on bread, cornbread, or rice, most stuffings start with chopped aromatic vegetables cooked until soft and slightly caramelized. The vegetables are tossed with the starch base, more seasoning is added, and the whole thing is moistened with a little stock before filling whatever bird you're roasting. If you plan it right, you'll have extra stuffing to bake in a casserole so there's plenty for everyone.

The first steps to good stuffings



Slowly render bacon to get flavorful fat for cooking. "Bacon fat's rich for sure, but olive oil just won't do," says the author.



Sauté vegetables just until tender. They'll undergo a second cooking in the bird's cavity during roasting.

MILD BIRDS NEED MILD STUFFING

Choose a bread stuffing for a milder bird like turkey. I like cornbread because of its nutty flavor, but good-quality white or whole-grain is fine, too. Stay away from anything Wonder Bread-ish or the stuffing will be mushy. Use day-old bread for better absorption and texture; if you must use fresh bread, dry it briefly in the oven.

Grain stuffings, usually denser than bread-based ones, are a better match for darker, richer birds like duck and goose.

WELL-SEASONED PARTS MAKE A DELICIOUS WHOLE

As your bird roasts, its juices flavor the stuffing, and the stuffing's seasonings are



Red Rice, Sausage & Oyster Stuffing is a spicy South Carolina specialty. A hearty grain-based stuffing like this one works well with duck.

in turn absorbed by the roaster. It's important that the final combination of flavor be balanced, so season the bird's cavity before you fill it and season the stuffing generously while you prepare it.

Coarsely chop your vegetables and cook them just until tender: they'll be cooked a second time inside the bird's cavity. I cook the vegetables in bacon fat for the extra flavor.

Earthy, robust herbs, such as sage, thyme, and rosemary, are the best accents for stuffing. I think dried herbs are just fine (I like Spice Islands) but if you prefer fresh, you'll get good results as long as you stick to the hearty varieties I've mentioned. Anything fragile, such as parsley or basil, will wilt and turn bitter during the stuffing's prolonged cooking.

For moistening, use mild broth so you don't overpower the bird's flavors. I sometimes add a little egg, too, which acts as a binder. Moistened the stuffing just until it holds together. If you're baking

Photos: Alan Richardson



the extra stuffing outside the bird, baste it with the roaster's pan juices.

Figure on $\frac{3}{4}$ cup stuffing per pound of bird. Always cool stuffing completely before you fill the bird's cavity, and never let a stuffed bird sit for any length of time, whether it's raw or cooked. Fill the bird about three-quarters full, leaving space for the stuffing to swell during roasting. Be sure the stuffing in the bird reaches an internal temperature of at least 160°F.

Red Rice, Sausage & Oyster Stuffing

Once you've added the rice, don't stir or the stuffing will get gummy. *Yields enough to fill two 5-pound ducklings or one 10-pound goose, plus leftovers.*

6 Tbs. unsalted butter
 $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups shucked, drained fresh oysters, liquor reserved
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
 $1\frac{1}{4}$ lb. spicy smoked sausage, pricked with a fork
5 slices country-style bacon, cut in $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces
1 cup chopped onion
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. dried thyme

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped green bell pepper
2 small hot green chiles, seeded and minced
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. coarsely ground dried chile pepper
2 Tbs. finely chopped garlic
Pinch cayenne
2 Tbs. tomato paste
 $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups drained, peeled, and finely chopped high-quality canned tomatoes
1 cup mild chicken stock
2 cups raw long-grain rice

In a large sauté pan, heat 4 Tbs. of the butter until foaming. Quickly sauté the oysters, seasoning lightly with salt and pepper, just until the edges begin to curl. Transfer to a colander set over a bowl to cool and drain. If the oysters are large, cut into 1-inch chunks. Add the reserved oyster liquor to draining juices.

In a heavy skillet filled with $\frac{1}{2}$ inch water over medium heat, cook the sausage, uncovered, until the water evaporates and the sausage is deep brown and firm, about 15 min.; add more water if needed. Cool, cut diagonally into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch slices, and set aside. In a large, heavy skillet, brown the bacon slowly until crisp. Remove the meat; leave the fat and caramelized bits. Add the onion to the hot fat and sauté until translucent, about 10 min. Add the thyme, bell pepper, chiles, and ground chile. Cook until the vegetables are well cooked but not deeply colored, about 10 min. Stir in the garlic; cook 3 min., stirring often to avoid coloring. Add the salt, pepper, cayenne, tomato paste, and tomatoes; continue cooking about 3 min. Measure the reserved oyster juices; add stock to make $2\frac{1}{4}$ cups. Add this and the sausage to the vegetables. Cover and simmer gently, stirring frequently, 15 to 20 min. Adjust seasonings.

In a large, heavy, nonaluminum pan, melt the remaining 2 Tbs. butter. Add the rice and cook over medium heat for 2 min., stirring constantly to coat. Add the tomato mixture; stir well to combine. Cover tightly; cook over medium-low heat until the rice is tender, about 20 min. Toss in the oysters, adjust seasonings, and let cool completely before filling the bird. Bake extra stuffing in a greased casserole for about 45 min., basting occasionally.

Cornbread Pecan Stuffing

If you're baking extra stuffing outside the turkey and you like a crust, don't baste for the final 20 minutes. *Yields enough to fill one large turkey, plus leftovers.*

FOR THE CORNBREAD:

2 cups cornmeal
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt
2 tsp. baking powder
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. baking soda
2 cups buttermilk
3 eggs, beaten
4 Tbs. butter

FOR THE STUFFING:

4 Tbs. unsalted butter; more melted butter for moistening, if desired
5 slices country-style bacon, cut in $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces



Cornbread baked ahead and left out to get stale gives texture to Cornbread Pecan Stuffing. Keep the cornbread unwrapped—sealed up, it will spoil.

$1\frac{1}{2}$ cups chopped onion
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups chopped celery (including inner leaves)
2 large shallots, finely chopped
2 tsp. dried thyme
1 Tbs. dried sage
3 cups pecans, toasted
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup mild chicken stock; more to taste
3 eggs, beaten

Make the cornbread—Heat the oven to 450°F. In a mixing bowl, combine the dry ingredients. Add the buttermilk to the eggs and stir into the dry ingredients, mixing just to combine. Put the butter in a 10-inch cast-iron skillet and set it in the oven to let the butter melt. Swirl the melted butter around the pan and add the batter. Bake until golden on top and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, about 20 min. Cool and tear into coarse chunks over a large bowl.

Make the stuffing—Put 4 Tbs. butter in a large, heavy skillet, add the bacon, and brown slowly until crisp. Remove the meat; leave fat and caramelized bits. Add the vegetables and herbs; gently sauté, stirring often, until vegetables are just tender, 10 to 15 min. Toss the vegetables and pecans with the cornbread. Adjust seasonings. Combine the stock and eggs. Moisten the stuffing with the egg mixture, stirring just until stuffing holds together. Moisten with melted butter if desired. Cool the stuffing completely before filling the turkey. Bake extra in a greased casserole for about 45 min., basting occasionally.

Scott Peacock is a southern chef. He and his mentor, Edna Lewis, founded the Society for the Revival and Preservation of Southern Food. They're currently at work on a cookbook. ♦