

## Cornbread and Oyster Dressing Nonpareil

**Time:** 1 hour to dry the bread, 45 minutes to prep the ingredients, and 30 to bake the dressing (time does not include making the cornbread)

If you can imagine a basket of wild greens and mushrooms, a few dozen tidal creek oysters, a handful of hickory nuts, and a bag of new crop cornmeal, you can almost imagine this dressing, lush and complex, where wild greens meet the ocean at the edge of the marsh.

Those who have not experienced oysters in a forcemeat setting may be surprised. There is nothing fishy about them. Oysters impart frank sensuality to the dressing's texture and a haunting suggestion of wine to its taste. Oysters need shallots, so we gave them shallots. Oysters and shallots love celery, so celery it was. Oysters and mushrooms like nutmeg, so we threw in a pinch of that. Bits of torn kale speak volumes over parsley. Hickory nuts mean texture—and might, in translation, murmur pecans. And they all love cornbread.

### Equipment Mise en Place

For this recipe you will need 2 large sheet pans, a large skillet or baking dish, a very large mixing bowl or clean plastic tub, a medium mixing bowl, a pair of tongs, a couple of glass measuring cups, and a 15 by 10-inch Pyrex baking dish or comparable 4-quart casserole.

### Working Ahead

The multiple tiers of holiday cooking are daunting enough to require a day planner, a social secretary, or a prescription. So bake and dry the cornbread a couple of days out. Roast the mushrooms, toast the nuts, and clean and stem the kale the day before—if it suits you. The dressing can be made and assembled a day ahead, refrigerated, and baked "day of." Or it can be frozen a few weeks ahead and thawed overnight in the refrigerator before baking. Possibilities for advance work here are bountiful. Push comes to shove, it can all happen in one day. But you might think you've been through the hunt.

### Ingredients

1 recipe Anson Mills Black Skillet Cornbread, made with 2 cups cornmeal and 1/2 cup unbleached flour

1 (1-pound) country-style boule (round loaf) or other rustic white bread

1 pound small cremini mushrooms, brushed clean, stems trimmed slightly, and mushrooms quartered or halved, depending on size

1 tablespoons olive oil

### Stuffed or Dressed?

Though "stuffing" may be seen as the oldest way to create a side dish, "dressing" prevailed in the South, and dressing was never shoved into a bird. Why? Because Southern tradition dictated that holiday fowl be hunted and cooked the day of the feast itself—and attended by as many wild foraged things as possible. With pressure like this, kitchen speed became the prime directive, and a hollow bird cooked faster than a bird whose belly was full. Thus, the dressing, too, cooked alone.

### Cooking Remarks

The perfect dressing (or stuffing—see above) has a craggy varnished crispness on top—bread-cube contours visible—and a moist, luscious interior. These elements demand even hydration and, when mixed, a light hand—and we mean "hand" literally. When it comes to mixing the "very wet" and the "very dry," nothing works like a clean pair of hands.

Many recipes for oyster dressing recommend using the oyster liquor as a liquid ingredient. This is fine if you are hand shucking fresh, briny oysters. But packaged shucked oysters float in flavorless albumen. No point in adding that. So we didn't.

Fine sea salt  
Freshly ground black pepper  
3 garlic cloves, crushed  
1 tablespoon minced fresh thyme  
1/2 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg  
1/2 cup chopped hickory nuts or pecans (optional)  
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, plus additional for buttering the dish  
5 large shallots, minced (1/2 cup)  
1 rib celery, minced (1/4 cup)  
3 ounces clean, stemmed kale torn into small pieces (4 packed cups)  
3 large eggs  
2 cups whole milk  
2 1/3 cups chicken, turkey, or vegetable stock (yes, homemade if you can manage it)  
16 ounces fresh select oysters, drained and chopped (optional, see Cooking Remarks)

## Directions

1. Adjust the oven racks to the middle positions and heat the oven to 250 degrees. Cut the cornbread into 1-inch cubes and spread it on a sheet pan (there will be 8-plus cups). Trim off the bottom crust from the bread, cut the bread into 1-inch cubes, and spread it on a second sheet pan (there will be about 4 cups). Place the sheet pans in the oven for 1 hour to dry the cornbread and bread cubes. Remove from the oven and set aside.
2. Increase the oven temperature to 450 degrees and heat a heavy skillet or baking dish in the oven for 10 minutes (the aforementioned Pyrex will do nicely). Toss the mushrooms, olive oil, salt, pepper, garlic, 1 teaspoon thyme, and nutmeg together in a small bowl. Turn the mushrooms into the hot skillet or dish and roast, shaking the skillet occasionally, until the mushrooms have given up their liquid and are bronzed and fragrant, 10 to 12 minutes. Turn them into a very large mixing bowl or a clean plastic tub. Chop the crushed garlic and toss it back with the mushrooms.
3. Turn off the oven and toast the nuts with residual oven heat for 10 minutes. Turn them into the bowl with the mushrooms.
4. Melt the butter in a large skillet over low heat until it foams. Add the shallots and sauté, stirring frequently, until translucent, 5 minutes. Stir in the celery and sauté until tender, 1 minute. Add the kale and stir with tongs until the leaves wilt, 40 seconds.

If you can't bear the thought of using oysters in a dressing recipe, omit them, and add a couple of tablespoons of stock in there instead.

We roast the mushrooms in this recipe to extract their moisture and to put a new bounce to their step. It is a little extra effort, but worth it. The mushrooms have a fabulous presence in this dressing.

# Anson Mills

1922-C Gervais Street • Columbia, South Carolina 29201 • tel. (803) 467-4122 • sales@ansonmills.com

---

Season with 3/4 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon pepper. Turn the vegetables into the bowl with the mushrooms and stir to combine. Cool completely. Stir in the reserved cornbread and bread cubes and toss everything together lightly with your hands.

5. Crack the eggs into a medium mixing bowl and beat lightly with a whisk. Whisk in the cream and stock. Stir in the oysters. Pour the liquid ingredients into the large bowl with the other dressing components and toss lightly with your hands to moisten the bread evenly.

6. Butter a 15 by 10-inch Pyrex baking dish or comparable 4-quart casserole. Transfer the dressing mixture to the dish gently with your hands and pat it evenly into place. Should there be any liquid remaining in the bowl, pour it over the dressing. Cover the dish flush with plastic wrap and refrigerate the stuffing at least 1 hour and up to 8 hours before baking.

7. Adjust an oven rack to the upper-middle position and preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Bake dressing until it is golden brown and firm to the touch, about 40 minutes.

**Serves 12 to 15—or 6 to 8 with abundant leftovers**