

Stuffed Mushrooms

Funghi Ripieni

- 24 white or cremini mushrooms with caps about 1 1/2 inches in diameter
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for the tops of the mushrooms if you like
- 1/2 cup finely chopped scallions
- 1/2 cup finely chopped red bell peppers
- 1/2 cup coarse bread crumbs (see below)
- 1/2 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
- 1/4 cup finely chopped fresh Italian parsley
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1/2 cup Chicken Stock (page 74), Vegetable Stock (page 76) or canned reduced-sodium chicken broth
- 1/4 cup dry white wine, optional

Makes 6 servings

Serve these nice and hot, or let them cool to room temperature.

If you'd like to make this a little more contemporary, you can add a dash of balsamic vinegar to the red peppers and scallions as they cook. In true Italian-American style, these are topped with butter; but in Italy, we would use olive oil. Best yet, top them with butter, then "bless" them all with a little olive oil.

This wonderful stuffing is delicious in celery stalks baked with a light tomato sauce. You can also line up blanched asparagus on a baking sheet, sprinkle the bread crumbs over them, and bake them until the crumbs are crispy. I'm sure you can come up with a lot of uses for the bread crumbs. Remember, I give you the basics, but I want you to go and play.

Preheat oven to 425° F. Remove the stems from the mushrooms and chop the stems fine.

Heat 2 tablespoons olive oil in a medium skillet over medium heat. Add the scallions and cook until wilted, about 1 minute. Stir in the red peppers and chopped mushroom stems and cook, stirring, until tender, about 3 minutes. Remove and cool.

Toss the bread crumbs, grated cheese, 2 tablespoons of the parsley, and the sautéed vegetables until thoroughly blended. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Stuff the cavity of each mushroom with the filling, pressing it in with a teaspoon until even with the sides of the mushrooms.

Using 2 tablespoons of the butter, grease a 12 × 18-inch low-sided baking pan. Arrange the mushrooms side by side in the pan and, using the remaining 2 tablespoons butter, dot the top of each mushroom with about 1/4 teaspoon butter. Add the stock, wine, if using, and remaining 2 tablespoons parsley to the pan. If you like, drizzle the tops of the mushrooms with olive

oil. Bake until the mushrooms are cooked through and the bread crumbs are golden brown, about 20 minutes.

Serve the mushrooms on a warmed platter or divide them among warmed plates. Pour the pan juices into a small saucepan and bring to a boil on top of the stove. Boil until lightly thickened, 1 to 2 minutes. Spoon the juices over the mushrooms and serve immediately.

BREAD CRUMBS TURN UP A LOT IN MY COOKING – they are a truly essential ingredient in the Italian culinary culture and a good way to recycle old bread. I use bread crumbs to coat foods before frying or baking them; to toss into pasta dishes as the “poor man’s cheese”; to firm up ravioli fillings; to thicken sauces; and to add a crust to baked and gratinéed food. I even use them in desserts: to make a crust for cheesecakes; as a topping for baked fruit; and to absorb juices in strudels and tarts that would otherwise seep out and make for a soggy crust.

Italian or any kind of hearty white bread is best for making your own crumbs. Before you make bread crumbs, let the bread dry in an airy place, so mold doesn’t have a chance to form. (Or set the bread overnight in an oven with the pilot light on.) Once it is dry, grate the bread on a box grater or break the bread into chunks and process them in a food processor. Sift crumbs through a medium-size sieve and grind or crush the larger pieces that remain in the sieve. Store bread crumbs in a tightly sealed container. They will keep for up to 2 weeks in the refrigerator and up to 2 months in the freezer. Bread crumbs can be made out of all types of bread: whole wheat, garlic bread, and sourdough, to name a few. Keep in mind that each bread will have its own characteristics. For example, whole-wheat and garlic bread crumbs will give you a much darker and toasted effect, and sourdough bread crumbs will have a pronounced sour flavor.

If you buy bread crumbs, I recommend the unflavored ones. Starting from scratch like that, you can flavor them as you need, or as I call for in the recipes. Most of the seasoned-bread-crumbs recipes here call for fresh herbs. You might not have fresh herbs available, so use dry herbs. Just be sure not to overseason the crumbs. If you like the bulky, crunchy effect of foods coated with large bread crumbs, save some of the larger crumbs when you sieve them, or buy the very coarse Japanese bread crumbs called *panko*. Next time you thicken a sauce, like pan juices from a roast or braising liquid, I’d like you to try bread crumbs instead of flour or vegetable starch. Just stir the bread crumbs into the sauce and let them cook a few minutes so they release their starches. Strain the sauce, pressing all the liquid out of the crumbs. Bread crumbs will not leave a raw-floury feeling on your tongue. Until you get the feel of thickening sauces with bread crumbs, add them a little bit at a time, and remember it takes a few minutes before you can see the thickening effect.

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Bread Crumbs