

## Sausage and Olive-Stuffed Roasted Peppers

8 large red peppers	2½ tablespoons tomato paste
2 teaspoons fennel seed	1 cup sliced green or black olives
¼ cup olive oil	¼ cup minced parsley
1 minced onion	1 tablespoon fresh oregano
½ teaspoon dried chili pepper flakes	½ cup shredded mozzarella
2 minced garlic cloves	Salt and pepper to taste
1½ pounds Italian sausages	⅓ cup panko crumbs
½ cup red or black Italian rice	¼ cup grated Parmigiano
1 tablespoon unsalted butter	

Cut off about 1½ inches from the stem end of the peppers. Remove the seeds and inner membranes. Line a large baking pan with aluminum foil. Broil the peppers and the cut-off tops in the pan about 4 inches from the flame, turning them frequently until they are blistered and somewhat blackened all over. Place the peppers and the roasted tops in a large covered pot to sweat for about 15 minutes. Carefully remove the blistered skin from the peppers. You may not be able to get every last bit, but be sure to remove the most blackened parts. Also, remove the skins from the pepper tops, discard the stems, and chop the flesh.

In a large skillet over medium heat, toast the fennel seed for about 2 minutes, just until it turns fragrant. Remove the seed to a side dish.

In the same skillet, heat 2½ tablespoons of the olive oil over a low flame. Add the onion and the dried chili pepper. Cover the skillet and cook slowly for about 10-15 minutes until the onion is softened, but not browned.

While the onions are cooking, bring a kettle of salted water to the boil, and stir in the rice. Reduce the heat to medium low and cook for about 25-30 minutes until the rice is tender. Drain the water from the rice, and add the butter, gently stirring until incorporated.

In the meantime, remove the casing from the sausages, uncover the skillet, raise the heat to medium, and add the sausage meat to the pan, breaking it up into small pieces. When it has turned pink, add the minced garlic. With a fork, further break up the meat into the smallest pieces possible. When all the color is gone from the meat, add the tomato paste, stirring to distribute it evenly.

Add the cooked rice, olives, fennel seed, parsley, oregano, and the chopped pepper-tops flesh to the sausage mixture. Taste for salt and pepper. Shred the mozzarella, and add it to the mixture.

Place a rack in the upper third of the oven, and preheat it to 350°. Lightly oil a baking dish. Using a spoon, carefully stuff the peppers with the sausage mixture, filling each one

to the top. Place them in the baking dish, balancing each pepper against the next to hold them upright.

Mix the panko crumbs with the grated Parmigiano, and spread it over the tops of each pepper. Drizzle a tiny bit of olive oil over the the crumb mixture on each pepper. Bake for about 15-20 minutes, until the filling is hot and the crumbs are lightly browned.

Serve the peppers over a pool of your favorite tomato sauce or a combination of tomato sauce and cooked polenta.