Cotechino Sausage with Lentils

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Symbolizing wealth and good fortune for the coming year, this hearty dish of sausage and lentils is traditionally served on New Year's Eve in Italy – though it's so delicious that we find ourselves reaching for this recipe year-round. Enjoy with mashed potatoes or lots of crusty bread for soaking up the juices.

Yields: 6 servings

3 pounds precooked cotechino sausage in casing (approximately 3 sausages)
2 cups lentils
6 garlic cloves, crushed
½ teaspoon red chili pepper flakes, or to taste
½ cup plus 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
½ teaspoon fresh sage, minced
½ teaspoon fresh thyme, minced
Fine sea salt, to taste

Freshly-ground black pepper, to taste

Heat 2 tablespoons of the olive oil in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Add the sage, thyme, rosemary, and bay leaf, and sauté until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Add the lentils and pour in just enough water to cover them. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Bring to a boil over high heat, and then reduce to a simmer. Cover, and allow the lentils to simmer very gently until they are tender and creamy, 35 to 45 minutes. Check occasionally, and add water in very small amounts if the lentils begin to stick before they are fully cooked.

Fill a large pot halfway with water. Prick the cotechino in several places with a pin. (Don’t use a fork: the holes will be too large.) Add the sausages to the water, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium. Simmer the sausages until you see the fat in the casing change from a solid to a liquid and the sausages begin to plump up, 15 to 45 minutes, depending on the size of the sausages. Remove the sausages from the water, and place them on a dry towel.

Pour the remaining ½ cup olive oil into a large pan, and set over medium heat. Scatter the garlic cloves in the pan. Cook until light brown, then remove with a slotted spoon and discard. Scatter the chili pepper flakes in the infused oil, increase the heat, and immediately place the sausages in the pan. (The oil may spatter; stand back!)

Cook the sausages, rotating them frequently, until they’re lightly browned on all sides, 5 to 6 minutes. Remove the sausages from the pan, allow them to rest for a few minutes, then slice them into ¼ inch rounds. To serve, place some of the lentils in individual serving bowls, and top each portion with a few slices of cotechino.

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