

Farro with Toasted Fennel, Lemon, and Basil

Serves 4–6

This is a very good and very polite grain salad recipe, maybe my favorite one in this book. It is not offensive to any other dish on the table and it'll get along with any other vegetable or protein you're serving. It has interesting things to say but doesn't dominate the conversation, and even if you think you have everything you need for dinner, you're always happy to see it because it makes excellent leftovers. Am I taking this metaphor too far?

This can also be made with any grain you please (except maybe rice), because, wow, what a polite and accommodating grain salad! Okay, I'll stop. But seriously, after making this, with the triple fennel (caramelized fennel, toasted seeds, and fresh fronds), softened slivers of garlic, and my favorite ingredient—whole lemon—there's no way you won't be this excited, too.

2 cups pearled or semi-pearled farro, barley, Israeli couscous, freekeh, or wheat berries
¼ cup olive oil
6 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
1 tablespoon fennel seeds
1 large fennel bulb, bulb and stem thinly sliced, fronds reserved
1 lemon, thinly sliced, seeds removed
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
Pinch of crushed red pepper flakes (optional)
1 cup fresh basil leaves, torn

1. Cook grains according to package instructions. Drain and set aside.

2. Heat the olive oil in a large skillet or pot over medium heat. Add the garlic and fennel seeds, and cook, stirring occasionally until garlic is just starting to brown, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the sliced fennel bulb and half the lemon and season with salt and pepper. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the fennel is totally tender and starting to caramelize, 8 to 10 minutes.

3. Add the farro to the skillet and season with salt, pepper, and a pinch of crushed red pepper flakes, if using. Toss to coat and cook a few minutes, letting the farro absorb some of that garlicky, fennel-y olive oil. Add remaining lemon slices and chopped fennel stem and remove from heat. Transfer to a serving platter or bowl and top with the basil and fennel fronds.

DO AHEAD: Farro can be cooked up to 5 days ahead, covered, and refrigerated. The whole dish can be cooked 2 days ahead, but wait to add the fresh herbs and fennel fronds.

NOTE: Since this grain salad is so accommodating, feel free to make it your own by adding more herbs (basil! tarragon!), a grating of salty cheese (ricotta salata or pecorino), or handful of toasted and chopped nuts for texture.