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FENNEL AL FORNO

Time: about 40 minutes

- 4** medium fennel bulbs, about 2½ pounds, topped, a few green fronds reserved
- Salt and pepper
- 3** tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, plus more to oil the baking pan
- ½** teaspoon fennel seed, crushed or roughly powdered in a mortar or spice mill
- 3** garlic cloves
- ⅛** teaspoon red pepper flakes
- ½** teaspoon chopped rosemary, plus 2 teaspoons rosemary leaves
- ½** pound fresh mozzarella, sliced or shredded
- ¼** cup coarse dry homemade bread crumbs from an Italian or French loaf

- ½** cup grated Parmesan (about 1½ ounces)
- 2** tablespoons chopped parsley, or a mixture of parsley and fennel fronds.

1. Heat oven to 375 degrees. Remove a thin layer of the fennel bulbs' tough exterior with a paring knife or sharp vegetable peeler. Cut the fennel crosswise into half-inch-thick slices. Bring a large pot of salted water to boil. Boil the fennel for 1 minute, then put it in a bowl of cold water, drain and pat dry. Season with salt and pepper. Lightly oil an oven-proof baking dish. Layer in the fennel to a depth of 1½ inches (pushing down, if necessary).

2. In a small bowl, stir together 3 tablespoons olive oil, the fennel seed and the garlic, smashed to a paste with a little salt, the pepper flakes and the chopped rosemary. Drizzle 2 tablespoons of this mixture over the fennel. Sprinkle with the rosemary leaves. Cover with a layer of sliced or shredded mozzarella, then sprinkle with bread crumbs. Drizzle the remaining oil mixture, then sprinkle with Parmesan. (The dish may be prepared to this point several hours before baking.)

3. Bake, uncovered, for 20 to 25 minutes, until nicely browned. Garnish with the chopped parsley or a mixture of the parsley and fennel fronds.

Yield: 4 to 6 servings.