



colour me yellow, orange, red

WHILE MOST OTHER SPICES WHICH USED TO FETCH A KING'S RANSOM IN THE PAST ARE MORE OR LESS WITHIN EASY REACH NOWADAYS, THIS ERSTWHILE DYER OF MONKWEAR IS STILL ACCORDED DUE REVERENCE.

Saffron, with its rich golden colour and even richer price tag, has long been a spice used to symbolise power, wealth, and the sacred, and to mark festive occasions. It is the most expensive spice in the world; gram for gram however, much less is needed as compared to other spices—half a teaspoon (one fifth of a gram) will colour and flavour one litre of saffron pudding, so a little goes a long way.

It is the dried stigma (the pollen collecting part of the plant) of a violet-coloured crocus (*crocus sativus*), a member of the lily family. The dried spice consists of long, brittle, wiry, densely entwined filaments, narrow at one end and fanning out at the other, ranging in colour from burnt orange to a deep red, almost burgundy, depending on the quality.

Its precise origin is unclear, with some experts acknowledging Greece and others, central or western Asia (particularly Persia, now called Iran)



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as its source. It has certainly been cultivated in the Mediterranean since ancient times and plays a role in cuisines throughout the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. It grows best in harsh climates and is the only spice to have been exported from Britain to the East.

The origin of the name by way of Moorish traders who brought the spice to Spain in the

tenth century comes from the Arabic word *za'faran*, meaning yellow.

Turmeric is sometimes referred to as Indian saffron and is the most common of a number of saffron substitutes, none of which can duplicate saffron's rich, pungent aroma and delicate, warm, bitter-sweet flavour. Its bitterness is particularly pronounced if too much is used (uncommon given its price), when it takes on an almost medicinal flavour.

PRODUCTION AND HARVEST

The total annual world harvest of saffron is only 300 tonnes, with 80 per cent coming from Spain and Iran. The annual harvest takes place in autumn and is very labour intensive, with everyone available working around the clock to harvest and process the precious crop. Each saffron crocus produces a maximum of three flowers on consecutive mornings within a three-week period. The flowers are picked at dawn before the heat of the day, and as the plant is only about 15 centimetres tall, picking is back-breaking work.

Indoors, the style, with its three red stigmas attached, is removed from each flower. As with some other spices, such as vanilla, the flavour and aroma are absent in the fresh state—the stigmas and styles must be dried, usually in a drum sieve over charcoal embers, for the spice's characteristics to appear. Between 250,000 and 160,000 flowers produce 5 kilograms of stigmas, which when toasted, become 1 kilogram of saffron.

HOW TO BUY

Dried stigmas are also called filaments, threads, strands, silks, fronds, stems, blades, chives and pistils. There are two main grades: the pure stigmas



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separated from the styles, and the stigmas mixed with 20 per cent styles. Spain is the largest producer and saffron grown on the Spanish plain of La Mancha, with its very hot summers and freezing winters, is considered by many to be the best, although others argue for Iran or Kashmir.

Spain and Kashmir use the same terminology for their grades. Coupe is the best quality, recognisable by its deep red, almost burgundy, colour, and long, firm, smooth (almost waxy looking) stigma. Mancha is the second grade containing 20 per cent styles—the thicker, pale yellow threads that connect the stigma to the base of the flower (one style holds the three stigma). Styles don't contribute colour but do still impart the classic saffron flavour. Mancha saffron contains thinner, shorter, wirier stigma, more orange in colour, with the yellow threads of the styles apparent.

Iran is the other major world producer of quality saffron. It is less expensive, with shorter and more brittle stigma, however it is

comparable in terms of the colour it imparts to dishes. Sargol (or sargol) is the term for best quality Iranian saffron (purse stigmas), and some say a distinct floral note differentiates it from other types. Poshal (or kayam) is the second grade of Iranian saffron (the equivalent of Spanish mancha, with 20 per cent styles included).

Greece (whose top grade is called stigmata) also produces some good saffron, as do Italy and Turkey. A saffron industry has been established in Australia (in Tasmania where the climate is suitably harsh), but it is only in its infancy stage.

Lower grades of saffron are available; they are identifiable by their brownish colour and stubby, scruffy threads and are best avoided. As with anything so valuable, there is an abundance of impostors, including marigold petals (which are very yellow in colour), safflowers (which have some colouring agents but lack the essential oils to carry aroma; sometimes called bastard, or false, saffron), corn silk, dyed coconut fibres, and even extruded strands dyed red! Ground saffron is the most suspect, as it can most easily be adulterated. Although some quality products are available, it is best avoided unless you are certain of your supplier. The best advice for avoiding fake saffron is: there's no such thing as cheap saffron!

As with all spices, saffron is best purchased in small quantities. It will remain in good condition for two to three years if stored in an airtight container and kept in a cool, dark space. It should not be refrigerated.

USES

Evidence from Sumerian burial grounds from 5000 BC suggests that saffron was already in use as a dye at that time. It has since been used as a dye for fabric, carpets, and the robes of Buddhist monks. It has also been used in perfumes and cosmetics. The Ancient Greeks and Romans scattered it on the floors of theatres and public halls to perfume the air and also used it to scent bath water. Cleopatra is said to have used a face wash of saffron to prevent blemishes. It has been attributed many medicinal qualities: the Persians used it as a heart tonic and to induce sleep, while

Indians believe it aids digestion, as well as treats urinary tract disorders and certain skin problems. The Ancient Greeks and Romans also considered it an aphrodisiac (perhaps the ability to afford it had certain aphrodisiacal qualities!). English Herbalist Nicholas Culpepper on the other hand warned that it had been known to cause "heaviness in the head, a sleepiness... immoderate convulsive laughter, which ended in death."

Its primary use though has long been as a flavouring agent for food and beverages. As a rough guide, four to five threads per person is enough to flavour, colour and scent an entire dish. For maximum effect, some chefs recommend dry roasting the threads for about 30 seconds over a moderate heat before infusing them. Crocin, the dye found in saffron, is soluble in water and alcohol (but not oil). It infuses quickly, releasing around 70 per cent of its colour within 10 to 15 minutes. Once infused, the threads can be strained from the liquid with just the liquid added to the dish. I find, however, that the orange strands throughout the dish, like the tiny black specks of vanilla seeds, add a certain veracity and leave your guests in no doubt as to the quality of the produce you are using. For maximum colour, it is best to add the saffron infusion early in the cooking; however, for maximum aroma it is best to add it towards the end. It may therefore be worth adding some early and reserving some to be added later. In dishes calling for saffron



BY ANY OTHER NAME

Bengali - jafran or keshar; Chinese - fan hung hua; French - safran; German - safran or safrangewürz; Greek - krokos, safrani, or zafora; Hindi - kesar or zafraan; Indonesian - kunyit kering; Italian - zafferano; Japanese - safuran; Malay - koma koma; Portuguese - açafraão or açaflor; Russian - shafran; Spanish - azafrán; Tagalog - kashubha; Tamil - kungumapu; Thai - ya faran; Vietnamese - nghe or qui nghe.

powder, threads should be dry roasted for a minute or so to release their aroma then crushed in a mortar and pestle, or with the back of a spoon, and stirred into the dish. Like any spice, saffron retains its characteristics best if ground just before being used.

Due to its price and beautiful colour, saffron is often used in festive dishes; its bright colour makes it a natural for colouring and flavouring absorbent starches such as rice and potatoes. In the European Middle Ages and early Renaissance, it symbolised wealth and the privileged because of its expense and the glorious colour it imparted to food; for maximum effect, it was used in a dish also flecked with gold leaf. It provides the characteristic flavour and aroma of a number of classical Mediterranean dishes including fish soups and stews such as bourrides and bouillabaisse, Spanish paella and zarzuela, and Italian risotto alla Milanese. It is also an ingredient in the French liqueur, yellow Chartreuse. It has a starring role in many Middle Eastern and Indian rice dishes including Iranian polo (or polow) and Moghul biryani, and also appears in Indian kulfi (ice cream), kheer (sweet milk rice pudding) and a special saffron-flavoured butter lassi (makhaniya lassi), a speciality of Jodhpur.

Further from its ancestral customs, it turns up in Swedish saffron buns and cakes made especially for the Festival of Light (St Lucia's Day on 13 December) and Cornish saffron cakes and breads (spicy, yeasted cakes made with dried fruit).

In contemporary cooking, it is often partnered with seafood, potatoes, rice, chicken, rabbit, breads, pastries and eggs (especially in desserts such as custards, brûlées and ice creams). It combines well with anise, cardamom, cinnamon, fennel, and ginger, nutmeg, orange and rosewater. **WD**



ORANGE BLOSSOM WATER &
SAFFRON ICE CREAM

recipe by Franz Scheurer

1/4 tsp mastic, pounded
1 1/2 tsp cornstarch
1/2 cup castor sugar
500ml milk
300ml cream
1 tbsp orange blossom water (see note)
1 tsp saffron threads, soaked in a little warm water

1. Mix mastic with cornstarch and 1 tablespoon of the sugar and stir into 1/2 cup of the milk. 2. Put remaining milk and sugar in a saucepan, stir in cream and heat slowly. 3. When milk is almost boiling, add mastic mixture, stirring constantly until mixture thickens. 4. Remove pan from the heat, add saffron water and strands and stir well. 5. Sit pan in ice water to cool, stirring often. 6. Add orange blossom water and churn in ice cream machine.

Note: Rosewater can be substituted for the orange blossom water for a different taste.

RISOTTO ZAFFERANO

recipe by Roberta Muir

This is my take on the traditional Risotto alla Milanese, which is made with beef stock and bone marrow. I like this lighter version using chicken stock and some olive oil as well as the traditional use of butter. In another break from tradition, I don't heat the stock before adding it to the rice; unconventional, but it works!

serves 6 as a first course or accompaniment

1 large white onion, peeled and chopped
2 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped
50ml extra virgin olive oil
2 cups carnaroli rice
125ml white wine
750ml chicken stock (you may not need to use all of this)
1/2 - 1 tsp saffron threads, soaked in a little chicken stock
75g butter
1 cup grated Parmesan cheese

1. Heat extra virgin olive oil in a wide, high-sided frypan. 2. Sauté onion and garlic until soft but not coloured. 3. Add rice and stir for a minute or two until well coated in the oil. 4. Add wine and stir until most of it is absorbed. 5. Add saffron and soaking liquid. 6. Add stock a ladleful at a time and stir constantly, ensuring that each ladleful is absorbed before the next is added. 7. When all of the stock has been absorbed, remove from heat, stir in the butter and Parmesan, cover and allow to sit for a moment before serving.