



# Saffron

Of all the exotic ingredients on the market, saffron, truffles, and vanilla are the funnest. Saffron is collected from the saffron crocus. Each purple blossom produces 3 red stigma or stems. These are collected by hand and dried to make the world's most expensive spice. Most saffron is produced in Spain, but it is collected throughout the Mediterranean, as well as France, England, India, Iran, China, and Turkey. Each country claims the superiority of its saffron. Saffron has a long history with being mentioned in ancient Greek and Roman writings.

Saffron is prized for its vivid yellow color as well as a subtle flavor. It does not take much saffron to color a sauce or dish. There are many recipes which feature saffron, including bouillabaisse, risotto, paella and Cornish saffron buns. It is best purchased as stems rather than powder. Powdered saffron may be easily adulterated with other yellow spices, such as turmeric and safflower, which add color but no flavor to the dish. It is readily available at better food stores. In a retail store it is sold by the gram, which costs about \$4.00.

To use saffron, it should be dissolved or added to a hot dish to expand the flavor. It may be then used for a sauce, added to a dough or to baste poultry. A good pinch is sufficient for most recipes. It should be kept in a sealed container stored in a dry location, not in the freezer or refrigerator, and may last for a year without losing flavor or color.

Certain ethnic groups use saffron to great extent. Iranians have saffron with most rice, couscous, shellfish and soups. To get the most intense flavor and color, however, Persians treat saffron a little differently. They mix a little salt and sugar with some saffron leaves in a mortar and grind into a fine powder. In this way, I am told, you use a much smaller amount of this expensive spice for the same result.

Saffron rice with the crimson threads floating on the grains and the bright yellow color is an especially beautiful garnish for a dinner table. The flavor of the spice, although delicate, is unique and blends well with certain dishes. A good menu should have courses that are unique to the meal, and do not share ingredients, so keep saffron to one dish that night. It will enhance the evening, impress your guests and be fun at the same time.

I like to use this spice for the vivid display with the whole petal. If placed in a sauce, rather than boiled, the stigmas will float to the top of the sauce and will arrange themselves decoratively, as in these next two dishes. The color can be brilliant. The flavor is subtle and much more pronounced if used in the Persian manner, but it is truly a fun ingredient to use.



*Recipe on next page!*



## MUSSELS & CLAMS WITH ONION & SAFFRON

For 8 appetizer servings

- 2 Tbsp. butter
- 1 medium onion, chopped fine
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1/2 gram saffron
- 4 oz sherry
- 2 lb. mussels
- 24 Littleneck clams
- Black pepper to taste

In a heavy pan, sweat the onion in butter until they are slightly brown. Add the heavy cream and saffron and bring to a simmer. Keep cooking, allowing to reduce. Be careful not to burn. Turn off if it starts to thicken.

Clean the mussels and clams carefully. Throw out any that are cracked, light or whose shells move. Put the sherry in a very large pan over high heat. Put the clams on the bottom, the mussels on the clams, cover and allow to cook. Have a platter ready on the side. Check in a few minutes, take the cooked (opened) mussels out with tongs and place on the platter. The clams will take little a longer than the mussels.

When all the shellfish are done, strain the juice into the saffron sauce. Bring to a boil and check for pepper, it should not need any salt. Separate the shellfish into a large dish or smaller bowls for appetizers and pour the saffron right on top. Serve with crusty bread, as the sauce is delicious.



## SAFFRON RICE PILAF

For 8 guests

- 2 Tbsp. olive oil
- 3/4 orzo pasta
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1 stalk celery, chopped
- 3/4 cup white rice
- 3 cups hot water
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 tsp. saffron

Find a heavy pan with a good lid. Heat the oil well over a medium flame, and add the orzo. Stir constantly with a wooden spoon, allowing the orzo to brown. When well browned, add the onion and celery, and pull off the flame. Stir well, and then add the rice. Stir some more; add some salt and pepper, the water, and the saffron.

Cover, and place in the oven or on the stove top with medium heat. Cook until the water has been absorbed or about 20 minutes.