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Saffron is the most expensive spice on earth, and for good reason. It takes more than 200,000 stigmas, picked by hand from about 80,000 crocus blossoms, to make just 1 pound of the spice. The cost is a whopping \$4,500 a pound.

Why bother with such a high-maintenance ingredient? According to Nirmala Narine, founder of Nirmala’s Kitchen and TV host of Veria Living’s “Nirmala’s Spice World,” there’s no substitute for the musty, honey-like taste saffron provides. “Just a few threads can color and flavor a dish beautifully,” she says.

A prized ingredient in Northern Indian, Spanish and Iranian cuisines—the largest saffron-producing regions in the world—saffron can only be harvested during a two-week flowering period, hence, the moniker “red gold.” Yet it has managed to permeate the culinary landscape in the U.S., appearing in everything from ice cubes and cocktails to ice cream and cake.

Saffron is loaded with disease-fighting nutrients, such as vitamin C, thiamin and carotenoids. “Its medicinal properties date back centuries,” says Monica Bhide, author of *Modern Spice: Inspired Indian Flavors for the Contemporary Kitchen* (Simon & Schuster, 2009). In fact, according to ancient medicinal texts, the legendary spice yields a range of benefits, from antidepressant to aphrodisiac.

Ask a chef, though, and you’ll learn that saffron’s greatest power lies in its ability to instantly transform an otherwise drab dish.

In the kitchen

Few ingredients have the visual or gastronomic effects of saffron. Like champagne, truffles and Kobe beef, saffron carries a certain cachet. Just a whiff can transport you to the mystical isles of the Mediterranean.



SAFFRON MUSSEL STEW

From *Modern Spice: Inspired Indian Flavors for the Contemporary Kitchen* (Simon & Schuster 2009), by Monica Bhide

YIELD: 4 SERVINGS

- 2 T. vegetable oil
- 1 medium red onion, finely chopped
- ½-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled, finely chopped
- 3-4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 20 fresh curry leaves
- 2-3 small green serrano chilies, finely chopped
- ½ t. ground turmeric
- 2 t. ground coriander powder
- 1½ cups chicken broth
- ¼ cup heavy cream
- 1 lb. frozen mussels on half-shell (or 1½ lbs. fresh)
- Table salt
- A few strands saffron

Method: In deep saucepan, heat oil over high heat. When oil shimmers, add onion, ginger, garlic, curry leaves and chilies. Sauté 4-6 minutes, until onion begins to change color. Add turmeric and coriander. Mix well; sauté for another 30 seconds. Add broth; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to a simmer; add cream. Remove from heat; cool to room temperature. Transfer to blender; blend to a smooth consistency. Return sauce to saucepan; bring to gentle boil. Add mussels; cook, covered, about 10 minutes, shaking saucepan occasionally. Add salt, to taste, and saffron threads; mix well. Serve hot.

Historically, saffron has been paired with inexpensive ingredients, for example, rice and potatoes. Traditional dishes such as Spanish paella, Moghul biryani and Persian polo can't be made without it. But today's chefs are plating unique combinations by infusing the spice into delicate appetizers, bold entrees and indulgent desserts.

Walter Pisano, executive chef of Tulio, Seattle, dresses trout with a saffron orange vinaigrette, whips up saffron creme fraiche and fashions croutons out of saffron-infused breadcrumbs. His approach is simple: Use saffron with ingredients that have a similarly vibrant color, such as butternut squash, carrots and oranges. Alternatively, let saffron's golden hue stain the white canvas of fish (scallops and halibut are good examples), milk, yogurt or cream, even sugar.

"Saffron has an interesting flavor profile," says Pisano. "The unique and the sweet balance each other out." His specialty is saffron cake with saffron zabaione and saffron syrup, a combination that allows him to feature one ingredient, in this case, saffron, in all three components of his signature dessert.

Other chefs go for bold. Bhide swears by marrying saffron with equally potent, flavorful ingredients. "People wrongly associate it only with seafood and chicken, but saffron is strong enough to carry its weight with meats and pairs terrifically with lamb and goat," she says.

No matter what you mix saffron with, experts agree, the recipe for success is in your technique.

Fine-tuning technique

Whether you're making sauce for scallops or syrup for sorbet, cooking with saffron requires constant monitoring. The oils have to be released at the right temperature and for the right amount of time. Some chefs recommend soaking a few saffron threads in hot (not boiling) water or milk to bring out the flavor. Others do a quick dry roast in a medium-hot skillet. Still others toast the threads in a dry pan for a few seconds before steeping in hot water.

The key with saffron is to release all of those oils, whether by crushing, toasting or steeping in liquid, explains Pisano, who often reduces the liquid and then folds it into yogurt. Most chefs recommend soaking for 2 to 12 hours. At a minimum, wait for the liquid (milk, cream, water or yogurt) to reach room temperature, suggests Pisano. The longer it sits, the more potent the flavor.

Like premium sea salt or high-grade olive oil, saffron is a luxury item where a little goes a long way, says Bhide. You can even reuse the threads by soaking them again, this time for a couple of weeks, to impart the flavor into a liquid you can later reduce or fold into dessert.



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A good measurement is three filaments (or threads) for 200 ml of liquid, though some chefs opt for the simpler formula: one pinch for one cup of liquid. Just be sure to fold saffron in at the end of the cooking cycle to maintain its color and depth. Otherwise, it may lose all its fragrance notes and flavor during the cooking process, and get lost in the dish, cautions Narine.

Keep in mind, too, that saffron colors and flavors everything it touches—mortars and pestles, wooden cooking utensils, even your hands. “As soon as you touch saffron, your fingers start releasing the oils,” says Pisano, who recommends wearing gloves and mincing or chopping the saffron on a piece of parchment paper.

Selecting the best

Saffron, especially the powdered variety, is the most adulterated spice in the food world. To stretch its value and outsmart unknowing buyers, swindlers cut it with ingredients such as turmeric, paprika, amaranth flowers, carmine and synthetic food dyes. “Some companies mix saffron threads with the hairy yellow portion of the flower, so rather than deep, solid, thick strands, lesser grades of saffron tend to be brownish and stubby,” says Narine.

The only global scientific standard for grading saffron is ISO 3632. The standard identifies three grades. Categories 1, 2 and 3 are based on principal properties of saffron—color, aroma and flavor. Want a high-performing spice? Category 1 is your best bet. Looking to provide value to your customers? Category 2 or 3 should be fine. The problem is that much of what’s on the market does not qualify for any of these grades.

How do you know if you have the real thing? “Look for deep-red, almost burgundy, thick strands, which are the stigmas of the crocus flower,” says Narine. Then, put your threads to the test by placing a small pinch in a glass of warm water. If the water bleeds right away, you probably have an imposter made up of food dye. High-quality saffron has a pleasant aroma and takes about 10 minutes to color the water.

Still, even “real” saffron loses its color, flavor and potency over time. Your best defense is to buy it at a spice shop where products move fast. That way, you know you’re getting the freshest spice. At \$15-\$20 a vial, saffron may move more slowly from a traditional grocer, warns Bhide.

Once you get back to the kitchen, stash the saffron in an airtight container (not a bottle or plastic bag) in a cool, dark place. Sure, saffron loses potency over time, but whole threads can last for two to three years when stored appropriately.

With myriad culinary creations waiting to unfold, though, few chefs can keep this golden spice in the kitchen that long. ■

SAFFRON AND COCONUT LOAF WITH CHERRIES

Nirmala Narine, Founder, Nirmala’s Kitchen, TV Host, Veria Living’s “Nirmala’s Spice World”

- 2 T. rum
- ¼ t. saffron threads
- 1 cup shredded coconut
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- ⅓ cup sugar
- ⅓ cup vegetable oil
- ½ cup orange juice
- 1 T. finely grated orange rind
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- 2 t. baking powder
- 1 cup sweetened dried cherries

1) Pour rum over saffron in small bowl. Let stand until rum is bright orange, about 2 hours. Pour saffron rum over shredded coconut in bowl. Toss until coconut is evenly colored.

2) Preheat oven to 350°F. Lightly grease 9 x 5-inch loaf pan.

3) Beat eggs until foamy. Continue to beat while gradually adding sugar until eggs are light and fluffy. Pour in oil in slow, steady stream. Beat in orange juice and zest.

4) Sift flour and baking powder into large bowl; fold into egg mixture. Fold in cherries and all but 2 T. saffron coconut. Spoon mixture into prepared pan. Sprinkle reserved coconut over top. Bake for 50-60 minutes, or until wooden skewer or pick inserted in center of cake is removed clean.