

# SAFFRON

## The costliest condiment

The word 'saffron' conjures up the exotic aroma of the most luxuriant spice, rivaling, ounce-for-ounce, the cost of gold, and yet it is harvested from the dried stigmas of the Autumn crocus. *Shaheen Perveen* investigates.

The world's costliest condiment is the connoisseur's delight, lending the dish an aura of celebration, with a dash of colour. The word is derived from the Arabic Za'fran which refers to golden yellow – the ancient dye used to colour the bridal veils in the Arab world.

Beyond the culinary menu, the use of saffron was wide and varied. History stands witness to the opulent Roman and Greek halls and theatres enlivened with saffron. Greek courtesans perfumed their luxuriating baths with saffron while the Phoenicians dedicated it to their goddess Astarte. The streets of Rome were strewn with saffron when Nero entered the city. Saffron was King Solomon's fragrant delight.

The earliest use of saffron is credited to the people of Indus Valley civilization at Mohenjo-Daro, who used it as an edible herb and a dye. However, traces of saffron were also discovered in Egyptian mummies and some people attribute the Mediterranean area to be its place of origin. Its earliest cultivation is believed to have been in Cilicia, southern Turkey in the ancient town of Corycus where saffron was referred to as Crocus. An Indian legend attributes the spice to be a gift from the water god (Taksaka Naga) to Waghbhatta, the physician who cured the god's eye infection.

The enchanting saffron colour has always been identified with royalty and throughout its long history, saffron has remained almost unaffordable. It was a matter of pride to display one's self and power by wearing clothes dyed in saffron. In ancient India it was a popular fabric dye and later the Buddhist monks adopted it as the colour of their robes. In ancient Ireland, the king's mantle used to be dyed with saffron and a saffron dyed shirt was a status symbol. Mughal monarchs like Akbar and Jehangir were no less seduced by the charms of saffron. They mention it in their respective memoirs and describe the spectacle of saffron fields as the most enchanting and fastidious. Homer, Pliny, Hippocrates, Chaucer, Shakespeare, among others refer to this glorious herb, Saffron.

The physicians appreciated the properties of saffron and the rich condiment went well with various medical preparations. Saffron contains an essential oil (terpenes and esters) and constituents like crocin and picrocorcin.



The tiny stigma of *Crocus Sativus* exhilarates the spirits when taken in small doses, but if used in large doses, it induces immoderate mirth. It is believed to aid digestion, cure heart ailments, take care of hangover, serve as a sedative and has even proved to be a powerful aphrodisiac and an anti-spasmodic drug. Swiss children can be seen with bits of saffron tied to their necks in order to prevent diseases. The Germans once carried a pouch of saffron to ward off plague.

Above: **Saffron orzo with toasted pine nuts**

Opposite: **Saffron Crocus flower with red stigma**



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According to a study published in British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, women who suffered from premenstrual syndrome (PMS) experienced fewer symptoms when they used saffron extract. Most women experienced some degree of heightened emotional sensitivity in the second half of their menstrual cycles. However, pregnant women should avoid saffron in large doses as it may lead to abortion.

A good number of traditional remedies, therefore contain saffron, which is equally popular in the cosmetic world. It begins with the Song of Solomon, where the virtues of saffron are extolled. Next we hear of Cleopatra's make-up kit being rich in saffron. Ladies of the court of Henry VII, used saffron to dye their hair and as a cheaper alternative

they even used marigold flowers. The Irish slept between saffron coloured sheets to strengthen their limbs, while the English believed that drinking saffron tea made one quite jolly. Kalidasa's Raghuvamsa speaks of Kashmiri women painting their breasts with saffron. Chinese are also fond of rubbing themselves with saffron after a bath in order to acquire the golden sheen of Buddha.

Today saffron is recognised more as a popular culinary ingredient. French bouillabaisse, Italian risotto, Spanish paella and Indian pulao or biryani simply can't do without saffron. While saffron buns have long been popular in England, particularly in Cornwall, the English were said to be rendered sprightly by a liberal use of saffron in sweetmeats, broth, pastry and confectionery. Edward III introduced saffron among the farmers of Essex and soon it was cultivated in Saffron Walden where the growers were referred to as 'crokers.'

Come November and the saffron fields are worth a look. Even the clouds in brilliant blue sky seem to reflect the colour of the purple field below. Fragile saffron flowers bloom with sunrise and are destined to die by sunset. It therefore, becomes an arduous task for the cultivators to pluck the arrogant purple flowers before they wilt and render the precious stigmas useless. People remain at this back breaking job throughout the flowering season, where the entire household is involved in one or the other processing job that continues till late in the night.

Once the tiny flowers are plucked they are sent for indoor processing where the red stigmas are separated with considerable skill and the petals discarded. Without losing time the stigmas are dried in the sun or roasted over charcoal flame before being packed for sale. It is only after stripping around 150,000 flowers that one kilogramme of saffron is obtained. Each flower has only three filaments of the stigma of the *crocus sativus*.

One reason for saffron's great cost is that the spice is still untouched by industrial age and continues to be stripped, harvested and roasted by hand. Moreover its growth is confined to very few places in the world. Invading Arabs, who were the most shrewd spice traders, introduced *azafran* (a Spanish word for saffron derived from Arabic *zafran*) to Spain around the 10th century and four centuries later Spain became a leading producer (accounting for three quarter of the world production) and exporter of the precious spice. Kashmir ranks next and the saffron sellers sell it with a guarantee tag attached to their product. Most of them promise a thousand rupees to anyone who could prove their product to be impure or inferior.

Adulteration in saffron is deemed to be a serious offence, which invited severe punishments. Encyclopaedia Britannica mentions the regular inspection of saffron in 15th century Germany and there are descriptions of people being burnt alive in public along with their adulterated saffron. Saffron goes well with adulterations like turmeric, marigold, bits of coloured wax, silk, oil, glycerine or molasses, etc. Exhausted saffron, discarded parts of the flowers like style, antlers and stamens made to look like stigmas often go unnoticed.

Genuine saffron is best purchased from dealers of repute and the price is never bargained for fear of losing quality. Inexpensive saffron turns brown with age and does not exude the aroma retained in the fresh pack, which is dark but bright red. 🌷

