

ingredient: SAFFRON



ORANGE GOLD

Its brilliant color, alluring fragrance and delicate nature have made saffron one of the world's most coveted spices.

BY SANDRA ROSY LOTTI PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARYLOU CROWLEY

Saffron is said to be the most precious and most expensive spice in the world...even though when we cook with it we need so little that it is actually cheaper to use than many other spices. All we need is one pinch of saffron to create a colorful and amazingly flavorful dish.

For thousands of years, saffron's unique flavor has been highly prized—a mixture of bitter and slightly metallic qualities, combined with notes of chestnut honey and a fragrance of dry hay. For just as many millennia, its coloring and perfuming properties have been equally esteemed. It is said that in India, after the Buddha died, his priests made saffron the official color of Buddhist robes. In ancient Greece and Rome, saffron was used to scent the baths and public halls.

So what is saffron, exactly? In its whole form, it looks like silky red threads. These delicate filaments are actually the dried stigmas from the saffron flower, *Crocus sativus*. Each flower contains only three bright orange-red stigmas, measuring about one-half to three-eighths of an inch. These threads must be picked from each flower by hand, and more than 14,000 stigmas are needed to produce just one ounce. The blue-violet flowers bloom for about two weeks in the fall, and only at dawn. Harvesting must be done quickly, before the flowers wilt.



Sandra Lotti welcomes questions and feedback. Email her at info@toscanasaporita.com.

Choosing saffron

Saffron is available both in whole filaments and as a powder. Generally, the powder is of lesser quality than the threads, and may contain fillers.

We recommend only buying whole saffron threads. The threads should be uniformly deep red, without white streaks or light patches.

Using and storing

Saffron appears in both Mediterranean and Asian cuisines. Its most common and recognizable function is to color rice a brilliant shade of yellow. It goes well with fish and seafood and is a key ingredient in Spanish *paella*, French *bouillabaisse* and the Italian *risotto alla Milanese*.

Because of its intense flavor and bright color, very little saffron is required in cooking. The key is to distribute it evenly throughout the dish being prepared. It can be crushed to a fine powder in a mortar and pestle or it can be left as threads.

Store saffron in a cool, dry place in a light-blocking container. When properly stored it will last six months or more.

Buying saffron

A great source for quality saffron is Vanilla, Saffron Imports at www.saffron.com. Owner Juan San Mames has twenty-eight years of experience as a saffron importer and supplies his saffron to about 1,500 chefs and restaurants in the U.S. He is passionate about educating consumers about this too-often misunderstood spice.



L'Aquila's Pride

Today, saffron is produced all over the Mediterranean and Asia, including Iran (by far the biggest producer) Greece, Italy, Spain, Turkey, India and Morocco. In Italy, the most sought-after saffron comes from the town of L'Aquila, the capital of the centrally located *regione* of Abruzzi. Legend has it that saffron has been cultivated in L'Aquila since the Middle Ages, thanks to a Dominican monk who had seen it growing in Spain and thought it would do well in Abruzzi. At that time L'Aquila was considered the most important saffron producing center in Europe, attracting merchants and helping the region to grow and thrive. Today, this picturesque town still produces saffron, which is prized by many gourmets as the best in the world. To learn more or to purchase L'Aquila saffron, visit www.peltuinum.it (English version available).

All we need is one pinch of saffron to create a wonderful and amazingly colorful dish.

CHICKEN THIGHS WITH SAFFRON

(Cosce di pollo allo zafferano)

SERVES 6

- 12 chicken thighs (about 3 pounds)
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Flour, for dredging thighs
- 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 5 tablespoons cognac
- 1 clove garlic, thinly sliced
- 1 red chile pepper, finely minced
- 1 medium carrot, finely minced
- 1 celery stalk, finely minced
- 1 large red onion, finely diced
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1/2 teaspoon saffron threads

1. Season chicken thighs with salt and pepper and then dredge in flour. In a large heavy-bottomed pot, heat oil over medium-high heat until smoking. Add thighs and brown on all sides. Pour in cognac and let it evaporate. Transfer thighs to a plate, leaving oil in pot.

2. Add garlic, red chile pepper, carrot, celery and onion to pot and sauté for about 10 minutes. Add 1 cup of chicken broth.

3. Return chicken thighs to pot and add remaining broth and saffron and cook for 15 minutes, covered, on medium high heat. Remove lid and keep cooking for another 10 minutes or until chicken meat is very tender and sauce is reduced. Serve thighs hot with sauce poured on top.



POTATOES WITH SAFFRON

(Patate allo zafferano)

SERVES 4

- 4 large potatoes, peeled and sliced into 1/4-inch thick rounds
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 8 ounces Emmenthaler cheese, shredded
- 2 tablespoons fresh thyme
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter cut into pieces, plus 1 tablespoon for greasing baking dish
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 1 1/2 teaspoon saffron threads

1. Preheat oven to 400°F. Butter a medium baking dish.

2. Arrange a layer of sliced potatoes on bottom of buttered dish, being sure to cover bottom completely. Sprinkle with salt and pepper, half of cheese, half of thyme and one-third of butter. Repeat, making another layer using same ingredients listed above.

3. Combine broth and saffron in a large bowl and allow to infuse for about 3 minutes. Pour infused broth over potatoes. Sprinkle with remaining butter and bake 50 to 60 minutes, or until broth has evaporated and a golden crust has formed. Serve hot.

CLAM SOUP WITH SAFFRON

(Zuppa di Vongole allo Zafferano)

SERVES 4 TO 6

You may substitute fish or vegetable stock for part or all of the wine.

- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 red chile pepper, minced
- 3 baby zucchini, julienned
- 2 pounds fresh baby clams, rinsed under cold running water and drained in a colander
- 1 bottle dry white wine
- 10 saffron threads
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 8 thick slices of toasted peasant-style bread

- 2 tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley

1. In a medium heavy-bottomed pot place oil, garlic and red chile pepper and cook on medium for just a few seconds, making sure garlic stays white. Add julienned zucchini and cook for 2 minutes.

2. Add baby clams. Cover and allow clams to open completely. Pour in wine and saffron and season with salt and pepper. Simmer for 8 to 10 minutes, covered.

3. Place toasted bread in each soup bowl and pour soup on top of toasted bread. Sprinkle with fresh parsley and serve.

SAFFRON COOKIES

(Biscottini allo zafferano)

YIELDS ABOUT 40 3-INCH COOKIES

These delicate cookies are good with tea.

- 2 large egg yolks plus 1 large whole egg
- 1 1/8 cups sugar
- 2 sticks unsalted butter, softened to room temperature
- 1 teaspoon lemon zest
- 1 1/2 teaspoons saffron threads
- 2 tablespoons warm whole milk
- 3 2/3 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 whole egg beaten with 1 teaspoon water
- Confectioners' sugar, for dusting

1. In bowl of a stand mixer fitted with paddle attachment, beat eggs with sugar until creamy. Add softened butter, lemon zest, saffron and milk and blend until all ingredients have been completely incorporated. Add flour and baking powder and beat to combine.

2. Transfer mixture to a floured board and with floured hands, form a log and wrap it with plastic wrap. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.

3. Preheat oven to 375°F. Butter a large baking sheet.

4. Return dough to floured board and roll it out into a 1/3-inch thick rectangle. Using a 3-inch round cookie cutter, cut dough into cookies. Place them on buttered baking sheet and brush them with egg wash.

5. Bake 10 to 15 minutes or until surface turns golden. Transfer to a rack to cool, then dust with confectioners' sugar.