

Today, it is the most expensive spice in the world. It takes about 75kg of fresh flowers to yield just 1kg of stigmas, which are either sold in whole form or ground into the famous yellow powder. It is a painstaking process that is carried out entirely by hand.

Making the grade

Saffron is cultivated worldwide and, although its anti-oxidant qualities are well documented, today it is used primarily for cooking. Dishes made with the spice feature on the menus of only the most prestigious restaurants. However, not all saffron is equal. The Italian author Maurizio Maggiani writes in his award-winning novel *La Regina Disadorna* (*The Unadorned Queen*): 'The quality of the product naturally varies from one area to another. The saffron from La Mancha, for example, is not as good as Persian saffron, while that from Anatolia is even less so; Poitou saffron is more fragrant while that from Mendoza is very dark and pungent. The handful, or little more, of saffron gathered by the children of Zafferana is very rare and considered sacred. Best of all, though, is the saffron from L'Aquila.'

This much-prized variety is produced on the planes of Navelli, near the Italian city of L'Aquila. Situated in the Gran Sasso national park, the crocus fields are a dramatic sight; seas of purple engulfed by soaring waves of mountains. Pier Paolo Visione is a spokesperson for the Antica Azienda Agricola Peltuinum (a renowned saffron producer in the province). He says: 'If saffron had been a spontaneous plant it could not have grown naturally in the area because L'Aquila has a harsh climate, from very hot in the summer

to freezing cold in the winter. But it is just this climate, together with the soil and our careful cultivation, that make the characteristics of L'Aquila saffron unique.'

Visione explains: 'Every year in August the crocus bulbs are taken out of the ground, cleaned, selected and replanted. Any bulbs which are damaged, rotten or smaller than 2.5cm are eliminated.' Forty days later the flowers bloom. They are then hand-picked, opened and the stigmas are plucked out and dried over glowing embers of oak wood.

This method was introduced by a Dominican friar named Santucci seven centuries ago. He brought the bulbs back from Spain to his birthplace in Navelli. It was not the first time saffron had been cultivated in Italy – Sicily and Sardinia were already producers – but it was the first time the bulbs had been selected before planting. Santucci's successful technique created one of the most sought-after products in Europe, and with it came great wealth. Today, remains of L'Aquila's rich past are evident in its opulent palaces and grand churches. Says Visione: 'Travellers would come from all over Europe, especially Germany, by horse and carriage to collect the famous saffron from L'Aquila.'

Quality not quantity

Nowadays, high labour costs have forced production to dwindle and the spice does not account for prosperity in the region as it once did. However, existing cultivators take great satisfaction in upholding the area's famous tradition. Visione says: 'We don't think of quantity, it's all about quality.' It is for this reason also that the company Visione represents packages its product in stigma rather than 

