



*The distinctive aroma, taste and colour of the genuine article are inimitable and chefs worth their salt would know the difference*

powder form. He says: 'This ensures the purity of the product. Less scrupulous traders have been known to add inferior yellow spices to bulk up the powder.'

The most common spice used for this purpose is turmeric. However, the saffron expert has faith in consumers. He believes the distinctive aroma, taste, colour and essential oils of the genuine article are inimitable and chefs worth their salt would soon know the difference.

Paolo Scipioni is the proprietor of the Tre Marie, a family-run restaurant in the city of L'Aquila. He concurs with Visione's distrust of the yellow powder and only buys saffron in stigmas. Scipioni recently collaborated with the Italian national television network Rai to produce a programme dedicated to L'Aquila's prized spice. For the show he created 20 dishes featuring the spice at his restaurant. He says: 'Saffron from L'Aquila is the best in the world, it is the only one I use.'

To cook with the spice he suggests making a stock. He says: 'Preparing saffron for cooking is like making tea. You have to brew the stigmas in boiling water.' Two or three tablespoons of boiling water poured on to one gram of stigmas is sufficient for a recipe serving eight to 10 people.

The Tre Marie has many dishes on its menu that include the local spice. Scipioni's favourite features small tubes of saffron-flavoured pasta with a ricotta cheese and bacon sauce. 'To make the pasta we mix the saffron stock with eggs and then add flour and water.' Surprisingly, he gives away the secret to the recipe's success: 'The ricotta must be made from sheep's milk and the bacon must be finely

**Cream of the crop:** although saffron is cultivated in many regions, the kind produced in L'Aquila is perceived to be the best



diced and fried. The bacon gives a subtle, underlying flavour, while the ricotta enhances the overall taste. Before serving it up mix the saffron-infused pasta in a pan with the sauce. And, of course, sprinkle parmesan on top.'

At €15 per gram, saffron from L'Aquila is a luxury product that continues to inspire passion and success in the region. Although horse drawn carriages no longer make their way from Germany exclusively to collect the spice, tourists transported by modern means, usually Mercedes, often now buy a gram or two to take home. □