

# What is SAFFRON? | Recipes plus Information on the Most Expensive Spice on Earth

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## All about Saffron and How to Use It



Saffron is a spice which is used as a dye for textiles as well as lending its signature golden yellow colour to many different meals and desserts.

### Saffron Crocus Flower



Saffron is a spice derived from the flower of the saffron crocus (*Crocus sativus*), the stigmas of which are dried and used in cooking as a seasoning and coloring agent.

Saffron gives food a lovely sunshine yellow colour and the taste cannot be replicated with any other man-made or natural product - it's completely unique. It's also the most expensive spice in the world (by weight) and can cost £3000 per lb - but the price depends on the grade (quality) of the saffron.

The relatively high price is due to the difficulty of manually extracting the saffron threads (stigmas) from the flowers, and because the flowers only bloom for less than one month a year. Just a kilo of saffron threads is produced from around 85,000 flowers, so it's very time consuming to harvest. However, don't let the price put you off as the amount used in recipes is very small and a good amount for household use is certainly very affordable - remember a little goes a long way!

Saffron, botanical name *crocus sativus*, is the most expensive spice in the world. Derived from the dried stigmas of the purple saffron crocus, it takes anything from 70,000 to 250,000 flowers to make one pound of saffron. Moreover, the flowers have to be individually hand-picked in the autumn when fully open. Fortunately, only a little needs to be added to a dish to lend it colour and aroma; too much makes the food bitter and as the quotation from Culpeper (below) suggests, large quantities of it can be toxic.

Records detailing the use of saffron go back to ancient Egypt and Rome where it was used as a dye, in perfumes, and as a drug, as well as for culinary purposes. It reached China in the 7th century and spread through Europe in the Middle Ages. The town of Saffron Walden, where it was once grown commercially, takes its name from the plant. Now, however, most saffron is imported from Iran (southern Khorasan) and Spain which are recognised as producing the best quality, but it can also be found in Egypt, Kashmir, Morocco and Turkey.

## Harvesting Saffron

<http://suffolk.gov.uk>



Saffron is an anti-oxidant (so is good for your health), and research has shown it has anti-cancer properties, anti-depressant properties, and it could apparently help your eyesight too. (However, pregnant women are advised to avoid it in their food due to the risk of taking too high a dose.)

Saffron is available as dried 'threads' and as powder, with both types being used for cooking. Saffron is most often found in Spanish, Indian, Iranian, Turkish, Moroccan and Asian dishes.

- Information source - [click if you would like to read more.](#)

Approx. 300 tons of saffron are harvested each year, which includes around 50 tons of top-grade 'coupe' saffron (as of 1991). Iran is by far the largest producer of saffron, followed by Spain, India, Greece, Azerbaijan, Morocco and Italy.

## Recipes Using Saffron

**NOTE:** Don't put too much saffron in your dishes because this will cause your food to taste soapy.

### Easy Saffron Rice Recipe

This easy recipe for saffron rice hails from the south of Thailand, where it is often eaten with roast chicken. Saffron rice makes dinner extra special, and is nearly as easy to make as regular rice. You needn't own a rice cooker to make this recipe - it's boiled in a pot on the stove, but tastes very similar to steamed rice. And unlike most saffron rice recipes, this one is fat-free. Note: Because saffron is so expensive, I only use a little bit, then enhance the color by adding turmeric - a spice which also has incredible health benefits (in Thailand, turmeric is known as 'poor man's saffron'). Enjoy!

**Prep Time: 2 minutes**

**Cook Time: 20 minutes**

**Total Time: 22 minutes**

**Yield: SERVES 4 as a Side Dish**

**Ingredients:**

- **SERVES 4**
- **2 cups white Thai jasmine-scented rice, OR substitute white basmati rice (Note: brown rice is not successful with this recipe)**
- **3 1/2 cups good-tasting chicken or vegetable stock**
- **1.5 to 2 Tbsp. fish sauce, OR 1/4 to 1/2 tsp. salt if vegetarian/vegan (to taste)**
- **1/2 tsp. turmeric**
- **1/2 tsp. saffron threads**
- **1 clove garlic, minced**
- **1/4 to 1/2 tsp. dried crushed chili (from the spice aisle)**
- **squeeze of lemon juice**

**Preparation:**

For saffron rice made in a rice cooker, see: [Easy Saffron Rice Recipe \(rice cooker version\)](#).

For a richer saffron rice recipe, see my: [Delicious Coconut Saffron Rice](#).

1. **Pour stock into a medium-size pot (you will also need a tight-fitting lid). Place pot on the stove over high heat.**
2. **While stock is coming to a boil, add the turmeric, saffron, garlic, chili, and a squeeze of lemon juice. Stir well.**
3. **Add the rice, plus 1.5 Tbsp. fish sauce (or 1/4 tsp. salt) and stir. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low (just above minimum) and cover tightly with a lid. Cook 12-15 minutes, or until liquid has been absorbed by the rice. Tip: Insert a fork or knife straight down into the pot and push the rice aside. If you see liquid, it still needs more time to cook.**
4. **When most of the liquid is gone, turn off the heat and place lid on tight. Allow the pot to remain on the burner another 5-10 minutes, or until you're ready to eat. The residual heat inside the pot will finish steaming the rice. The rice will stay warm in this way for 1 hour or more (great if you're having guests!).**
5. **Before serving, remove the lid and fluff rice with chopsticks or a fork (some of the chili may have risen to the surface - just stir it back into the rice). Taste-test for salt, adding 1/2 Tbsp. more fish sauce or a little more salt if needed (how much will depend on the saltiness of your stock). If too salty, add another squeeze of lemon juice. See below for links to curry recipes and other Thai food that goes well with saffron rice. Enjoy!**

**Note: Along with the flecks of red chili, you may notice a few splashes of reddish-orange coloring throughout your rice - this is from the saffron, and is desirable.**

## **Chard and Saffron Omelette**

These tender omelettes are filled with a mixture of lemon and saffron flavored Swiss Chard and Potatoe cubes. The omelette itself is very thin and made with lots of herbs. They can easily be made ahead of time, assembled, and reheated in a low temperature oven for a couple of minutes. This is the first recipe that I made out of my new book "Plenty" from Yotam Ottolenghi. The book is filled with easy, mouthwatering vegetarian recipes and beautiful pictures. Many of his recipes are available on the guardian website.

### **Chard and Saffron Omelette adapted from Yotam Ottolenghi**

(serves 4)

Swiss chard is a great substitute for spinach, and keeps its shape well. Serves four.

50g (net weight) (1 medium) waxy potatoes, peeled and cut into 1cm dice

200ml (1 cup) water

Pinch of saffron

350g (3/4 lb) Swiss chard, washed and shredded

Salt and pepper

2 tbsp lemon juice

1 garlic clove, crushed

5 eggs

60ml (1/4 cup) milk

20g mixed fresh herbs, chopped

Vegetable oil

100g/ 3 oz crème fraîche or sour cream

Put the potatoes, water and saffron in a big pan and slowly bring to a simmer. After four minutes, add the chard, season, cover and cook for 15 minutes, until the potato is soft and the water evaporated. Off the heat, add the lemon juice and garlic. Leave to cool.

For the omelettes, whisk the eggs, milk, herbs and some salt and pepper. Pour a teaspoon of oil into a large, hot non-stick pan, pour in a quarter of the egg mix and make a thin, round omelette. Transfer to a kitchen towel to cool, and repeat three times.

Spread half of each omelette with crème fraîche. Taste the chard mix, adjust the seasoning accordingly and spread generously over the crème fraîche. Fold the omelette over the covered half, then fold along the centre to get a fan-shaped case. Make sure the filling shows at the open side. Arrange on a lightly oiled ovenproof dish. To serve, preheat the oven to 170C/350F/gas mark 3, and bake for five to eight minutes, or until hot. Serve at once.

### **Saffron Steamed Rice**

Ingredients: (6 servings)

3 cups long-grain basmati rice

8 cups water

2 tablespoons salt

2 tablespoons plain yogurt

**1 teaspoon ground saffron dissolved in 4 tablespoons hot water**

**3/4 cup butter or olive oil or ghee**

**Directions:**

**Servings: 6**

**Prep time: 15 min.**

**Cooking time: 1 hour 10 min**

**Pick over the rice. Basmati rice like any other old rice contains many small solid particles. This grit must be removed by picking over the rice carefully by hand.**

**Wash the rice by placing it in a large container and covering it with lukewarm water. Agitate gently with your hand, then pour off the water. Repeat five times until the rice is completely clean. When washed rice is cooked it gives off a delightful perfume that unwashed rice does not have. If using long-grain American or Texmati rice, it is not necessary to soak or wash five times. Once will suffice.**

**After washing the rice it is then desirable but not essential to soak it in 8 cups of water with 2 tablespoons of salt for 2 to 24 hours. Soaking and cooking rice in a lot of salt firms it up to support the long cooking time and prevents the rice from breaking up. The grains swell individually without sticking together. The result is light and fluffy rice known as the Pearls of Persian Cuisine.**

**Bring 8 cups of water with 2 tablespoons salt to a boil in a large non-stick pot. Pour the washed and drained rice into the pot. Boil briskly for 6 to 10 minutes, gently stirring twice with a wooden spoon to loosen any grains that may have stuck to the bottom. Taste a few grains. If the rice feels soft, it is ready. Drain rice in a large, fine-mesh colander and rinse in 2 or 3 cups of lukewarm water.**

**In a bowl, mix 2 spatulas of rice, the yogurt, 1/2 cup butter or oil and 1/2 cup hot water, and a few drops of dissolved saffron water.**

**In the pot, spread the yogurt-rice mixture over the bottom of the pot. This will help to create a tender golden crust (tah dig) when rice is cooked.**

**Take one spatula full of drained rice at a time and gently place it on top of the yogurt and rice mixture, gradually shaping the rice into a pyramid. This shape leaves room for the rice to expand and enlarge. Poke one or two holes in the rice pyramid with the handle of a wooden spatula.**

**Cover and cook rice for 10-15 minutes over medium heat in order to form a golden crust. Dissolve the remaining butter in 1 cup hot water and pour over the rice pyramid. Place a clean dish towel or 2 layers of paper towels over the pot and cover firmly with the lid to prevent steam from escaping. Cook for 40-50 minutes longer over low heat.**

**Remove the pot from heat. Allow to cool on a damp surface for 5 minutes without uncovering it. This helps to free the crust from the bottom of the pot. Then put 2 tablespoons of rice in a dish, mix with remaining saffron water, and set aside for garnish.**

**Gently taking one spatula full of rice at a time, place it on a serving platter without disturbing the crust. Mound the rice into a cone. Sprinkle the saffron rice garnish over the top.**

**Detach the layer of crust from the bottom using a wooden spatula. Place into a small platter and serve on the side or arrange it around the rice.**

**Courtesy of Ms. Fahimeh Arya**

## Tah-Chin - Saffron Rice Chicken Dish

Ingredients: (4 servings)

chicken, 1 kg  
basmati or long grain rice, 500 grams  
yogurt (Greek if possible), 300 grams  
saffron, 1/2 teaspoon  
large onions, two  
3 eggs (yolks only)  
cooking oil  
salt  
black pepper

Directions:

Start by washing rice and soaking it in warm water (with added salt) for 2 hours. Then filter out the water.

Chop onions into thin slices and fry in oil until slightly golden. Wash and cut chicken, remove skin, and fry in onions until color changes. Add some water and bring to boil. Turn heat down and let boil slowly until cooked, adding more water if needed. Remove the bones.

While chicken is cooking, beat the yogurt until it is smooth. Dissolve saffron in half a cup of hot water. Add saffron, salt, pepper and egg-yolks to the yogurt and mix very well.

Pour a few glasses of water in a large pot and bring to boil. Pour in rice and cook while stirring occasionally until rice grows longer and slightly softens (Take care not to overcook the rice. It should still be too hard for eating). Again filter out the water.

Pour several spoons of oil and several spoons of the yogurt mix into a non-stick pot. Add a thin layer of rice and flatten using the back of a spoon. Add a layer of chicken on top followed by another layer of rice. Again flatten the rice. Spread several more spoons of the yogurt mix on the rice. Continue in this fashion until chicken, rice and the yogurt mix have been used up. Add some more oil on top. Put the lid on and cook for about 5 minutes over medium heat.

Place the pot in an oven (preheated to 250 F) and cook for 1.5 to 2 hours. Note that the longer Tah-Chin is cooked, the thicker the Tah-Dig (delicious crispy layer of rice at the bottom) will be. When cooked, remove the lid and let cool for a few minutes.

Place an inverted large dish over the pot and turn it over. Tap the pot in order to loosen the contents inside. The contents should fall on the dish in one piece with the Tah-Dig on the outside.

## Saffron Scalloped Potatoes

Ingredients: (4 servings)

- 1 pinch (.125 g) saffron threads
- 1 1/4 cups half & half
- 3 Tbsp. butter
- 1 Tbsp. virgin olive oil
- 2 Large yellow onions, sliced thin
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 4 large white potatoes, sliced thin

Directions

Heat half & half, remove from heat and steep saffron for 20 min. Saute and garlic until limp in olive oil and butter. Do not brown. Butter large pie plate and layer with potato and onion slices. Pour half & half over the top and bake at 350:(175: C), covered with tin foil, for an hour. Remove foil and bake an additional 15 min. or until top is browned. Serve in wedges. Serves 4.

## Saffron Parsnip Lemon Puree

Ingredients:

- 1 pinch (.125 g) saffron threads
- 2 tsp. lemon juice
- 4 parsnips, peeled & cubed
- 2 Tbsp. butter
- 1/2 cup half & half

Directions

Add saffron to lemon juice. Cover parsnips with water in sauce pan and cook until tender. Drain parsnips and combine with remaining ingredients in the bowl of a food processor. Blend until smooth, scraping down sides if necessary. Serve immediately.

## Orange Saffron Butter Cookies

Ingredients:

- 1 1/8 cups of flour
- 1 stick of butter
- 2 pinches saffron threads(.250 gr)
- 1/2 Tbsp. orange rind
- 1/3 cup sugar
- 2 large egg yolks

## Directions

Leave stick of butter out to soften. Butter should be spreadable by now. Work saffron and orange rind into butter. Blend in sugar, then egg yolks, one at a time. Add flour to form soft ball of dough. Cover and refrigerate for at least 3 hours. When ready to bake, remove dough from refrigerator to soften slightly. Preheat oven to 325: (165: C). Pinch off bite size pieces of dough and place on ungreased cookie sheet. When sheet is full, press dough flat with back of metal fork. Bake 10 min, or until edges begin to brown. Cool on rack. Store in airtight container.

**FOR OTHER THOUSANDS OF RECIPE PLEASE CLICK FOLLOWING LINK**

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