

The Herb of Joy

Persia—the land of fire temples, great Sufi poets, Zarathustra, and saffron. In present-day Persia, now Iran, a veritable saffron cult exists. Iranian culture is permeated with poetry, and saffron plays an important role in this. Whereas in many other countries poetry is seen as an enthusiast's means of expression, everyone in Iran can recite some poems by Hafiz, Rumi, or Ferdowsi, and grandparents use them to teach their grandchildren as wise lessons for life.

According to Belgian professor of ethnobotany Marcel de Cleene, in the ancient herbal manuals and poetry, saffron was referred to just as often as the rose, but saffron was easier to use in the kitchen and medicinally. In ancient times, saffron was attributed magical and medicinal properties. The spice is also mentioned in the Egyptian *Ebers Papyrus* (1550 BCE).

Saffron is the most expensive spice in the world, due to its labor-intensive harvesting process. Each crocus only forms three stigmas. Saffron is related to the tulip, which also originated in Persia and Turkey. One kilo (2.2 lbs) of saffron costs 30–40,000 euros (roughly, 25,000–33,000 British pounds or 31,000–42,000 US dollars) and contains some 180,000 stigmas, which, when the saffron crocus flowers, are each picked manually with tweezers from the purple-lilac flowers.

Saffron is now grown worldwide, but Iran still controls 90 percent of global production. Other producers of the

red gold include Afghanistan and Spain.⁷⁷ It is an essential ingredient of Spanish paella and the French fish soup bouillabaisse. A well-known dish has the poetic name of *morasa polow*, which means “Persian jeweled rice.” It has a brilliant color palette and is a veritable explosion of all kinds of spices and special flavors that contrast and reinforce each other and make you dream about the treasures of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Jeweled rice contains small red berberis berries (barberry), flaked pistachio kernels, candied orange peel, and saffron. The bottom of the rice dish is hard and caked due to a special baking process. It is often eaten with the walnut-pomegranate-juice dish *fesenjān* (see page 104).

Use

Saffron is a medicinal plant with many therapeutic effects. Phytochemical studies have shown that saffron contains at least four active ingredients, including crocin, crocetin, picrocrocetin, and safranal.⁷⁸ Two of these remarkable saffron antioxidants, crocin and crocetin, have antidepressant properties, enhance mood, and may help combat burnout, protect brain cells against progressive damage, reduce inflammation, and help with weight loss.⁷⁹

Saffron is also known for its memory-enhancing and its anxiety-reducing properties. In Persian medicine, saffron is traditionally used for gastrointestinal problems,

PROPERTIES

- Antidepressant
- Aphrodisiac
- Sharpens the memory
- Anxiety-reducing
- Anti-inflammatory
- Flavoring
- Dye

SOURCING

Available in supermarkets but often cheaper in Middle Eastern and Asian supermarkets or online.

CAUTION

Do not use saffron in large amounts—just 10 grams (0.35 ounces) is a lethal dose. Saffron is used to induce laughter, sometimes with fatal consequences; according to many testimonies in old herb manuals, you can laugh yourself to death with it.

asthma, insomnia, depression, and memory problems.⁸⁰ Saffron was a component of the psychoactive magic salves that allowed European witches to make contact with other dimensions in the spirit realm.

Since ancient times, saffron has been thought to enhance women's libido—you could make women swoon with it.

Saffron is widely used in Asia as a fabric dye. Robes worn by Buddhist monks and Hindu ascetics, for example, are dyed yellow-orange with saffron.

In India, saffron water is often used to write down *mantras* (a specific word or sound repeated to aid in concentration during meditation). Just one thread of saffron is enough to turn a liter (34 ounces) of boiling water deep yellow in an hour.

Appearance

The saffron crocus blooms in autumn for eight days. It is a bulbous plant with a green smooth stem alongside which thin, elongated, green leaves grow to approximately the same height as the flower. The stem bears a purple flower, which houses the three red-orange stigmas that are harvested. The stamens, also located in the center of the flower, are not used and have no culinary value.

Extracting and Dosing

Saffron threads are traditionally ground into powder in an Iranian-style mortar. A splash of hot water is poured over this precious powder to dissolve it and make saffron water. This liquid is sprinkled over rice, among other things. I myself find it easier to rub a few saffron threads between my thumb and index finger, and dissolve these in a glass of water.

I find the taste of saffron a bit like honey or pollen: earthy and somewhat dull but full of flavor ending in a bitter twist. In short, the taste is unique. I love it and, therefore, always have saffron in the house. One of my favorite breakfasts is oatmeal with saffron.



WOUTER'S OATMEAL WITH SAFFRON

serves 4 people

■ INGREDIENTS

- about 400 ml/13.5 fl oz whole milk
- 10 strands saffron
- 100 g/3.5 oz rolled oats
- 100 g/3.5 oz papaya
- 15 g/0.5 oz (1 T) chia seeds
- 15 g/0.5 oz (1 T) ground flaxseed

method

In a saucepan, bring the milk to a boil. Add the saffron, followed by the rolled oats. Simmer until the porridge has reached the desired thickness; keep an eye on it, because this does not take long. If you want it creamier, add a little extra milk.

Meanwhile, dice the papaya.

Ladle the oatmeal into bowls or deep dishes. Spread the papaya on top, and sprinkle with the chia seeds and ground flaxseed.