

AtoZ World Food by World Trade Press

Spices: Saffron



Description

Crocus sativus, or the saffron crocus plant, produces four flowers from which the stigmata are harvested as the spice saffron.

Origin

Likely a descendant of the *C. cartwrightianus* plant native to Crete, crocus saffron originated in Southwest Asia and was first cultivated in Greece.

Varieties

There is some recognized regional variance in saffron cultivars. Iranian saffron is the most widely available and has some of the most intense flavor, while Spanish saffron is known for being mild. Indian Kashmiri saffron has limited availability and is particularly prized for its dark purple color and strong flavor. Italian saffron is known for its potency, especially crops grown in Aquila and Sardinia.

Flavor Profile

Saffron is earthy and spicy, with a metallic bitterness, but it can also taste like honey and hay.

Nutrient Profile

Saffron is high in manganese, iron, vitamin C, and pyridoxine. It has trace amounts of potassium, magnesium, phosphorus, copper, vitamin A, and riboflavin. Saffron has a number of aromatic oils, including safranal and picrocrocin that give it its characteristic properties. Saffron has more than 150 volatile aromatic compounds and is rich in carotenoids such as a-crocin, zeaxanthin, lycopene, and alpha- and beta-carotene.

Preparations

Saffron is typical in Iranian, Indian, Pakistani, and Spanish cuisine. It is an essential component of the French stew bouillabaisse and a number of Indian curries. Saffron is particularly popular in rice dishes, sometimes cooked only with white rice and bouillon, and other times part of elaborate recipes such as *paella valenciana*, *biryani*, and *risotto alla milanese*. Saffron-infused liquors, such as *Izarra*, and *Strega*, are particularly popular in Italy. Saffron is also used in baking, particularly the celebratory sweet saffron buns that are traditional in Sweden, Norway, and England.

Season

Saffron is available year-round. It is harvested from late October to early November.

Did You Know?

Although Iran has traditionally been the largest producer of saffron, the crop was once a popular and profitable US export. Pennsylvania Dutch farmers established trade with Spanish colonists in the Caribbean until the War of 1812 destroyed most of the merchant fleet and transportation became prohibitive. The crop is still cultivated in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where it is a major component in a variety of Amish dishes.

-Gretchen Hopkins for World Trade Press

Harira (Soup)

Harira is a hearty soup of meat, legumes, and herbs that Mauritaniens have adopted from their neighbor to the north, Morocco. Harira is a common Ramadan dish and appetizer. Make a complete meal by serving harira with bread, yogurt, and hardboiled eggs sprinkled with salt and cumin. Some recipes substitute lamb for chicken, and some omit the meat opting for a vegetarian version. Recipe Servings: Serves 4

☒ Gluten Free

☒ Dairy Free

☒ Kosher

☒ Halal

Prep Time: 25 minutes

Cook Time: 40 minutes

Ingredients

- 1/2 pound (480 g) chicken, cubed
- 1/2 cup (120 ml) red lentils
- 4 cups (960 ml) water or stock
- 2 tablespoons (30 ml) tomato paste
- 1 large chopped onion
- 4 saffron threads
- 1.5 teaspoon (7.5 ml) salt
- 1/2 teaspoon (2.5 ml) ground pepper
- 1/2 cup (120 ml) chopped celery
- 1/4 cup (60 ml) chopped parsley
- 1/4 cup (60 ml) chopped cilantro
- 1 cup (120 ml) cooked chickpeas
- 1/2 cup (120 ml) rice
- 2 hardboiled eggs, cut into wedges
- 2 lemons, cut into wedges

Directions

1. In a large pot, combine chicken, lentils, water, tomato paste, onion, saffron, salt, and pepper. Bring to a boil.
2. Lower heat to medium and simmer for 30 minutes until lentils are soft.
3. Add celery, parsley, cilantro, chickpeas, and rice. Bring to a boil.
4. Simmer covered on medium-low for 20 to 25 minutes until rice is cooked.

Halva (Dessert)

A favorite Azerbaijani treat, halva is common throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East. The name of the dessert is derived from the Arabic word for “sweet,” but an Azerbaijani proverb warns that “saying halva-halva won’t make your mouth sweet.” Halva itself can be made from a variety of bases—wheat flour, tahini (sesame seed paste), and semolina flour are the most common—but most Azerbaijanis prefer to make their halva with flour. Halva is often served with tea, after dinner, and on special occasions.

☒ Vegetarian

☒ Kosher ☒ Halal

Ingredients

- 1½ cup (185 g) wheat flour
- 1 cup (225 g) butter
- 1 cup (225 ml) water
- 1 cup (200g) sugar
- 1 Tbsp (20 g) honey
- Pinch of salt
- 3–5 threads of saffron

Directions

1. Combine water, sugar, honey, and saffron in a small pot.
2. Cook over medium heat until thoroughly combined and then set aside.
3. Melt butter in a small saucepan over medium heat.
4. Add flour and salt to pan and cook together over medium heat until mixture is golden-brown.
5. Pour sugar syrup into the flour mixture to loosen the consistency of the dough.
6. Cook for 15 minutes, stirring constantly.
7. Remove from heat when the mixture thickens into a paste.
8. Serve in a communal dish with spoons.