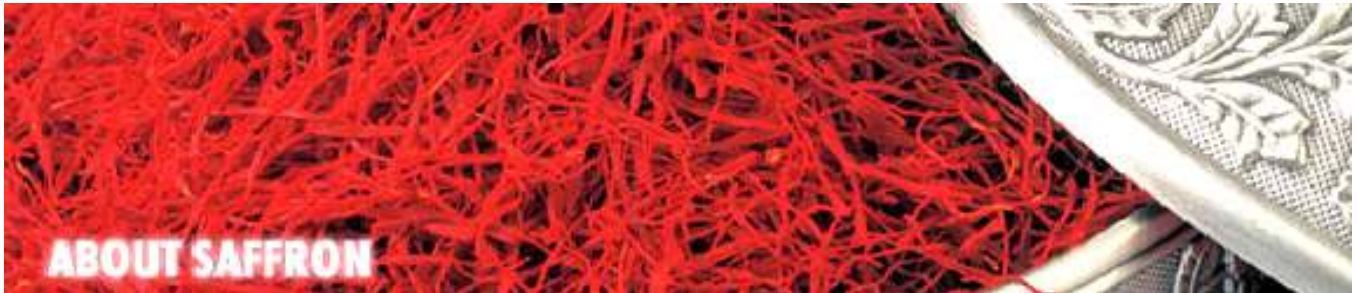




Zaafraan (Saffron)



What is Zaafraan (Saffron)

Saffron is the name given to the dried, red-colored stigmas and part of the white style to which they are attached of the purple-flowered crocus, a member of the Iris family. The dried stigmas or threads are re-hydrated or powdered to be used to give extraordinary color and flavor to many dishes.

Saffron is called azafran in Spanish and is a spice that has a special place in history, always being considered very valuable. In fact, at one point it was even used as currency. In ancient Greece women used it as a cosmetic; the Roman Emperor Nero had the streets covered with it for his parades; Phoenicians made veils of it for their brides and Buddhists used it to dye their robes.

Saffron originally came from Asia Minor. The Moors brought saffron or "az-zafaran" as they called it, to Spain in the VIII or IX century. Today almost three-quarters of the world's production of saffron is grown in Spain, specifically in the region of Castilla-La Mancha. There is a Denomination of Origin for saffron in La Mancha, which was established in 2001.

History of Saffron Spice

Saffron is believed to have originated – and is still produced – in Greece or Asia Minor, which is now part of Turkey. The Babylonians used saffron for healing and coloring purposes. According to Biblical tradition, saffron was one of the fragrant plants that grew in King Solomon's gardens. The ancient Greeks and Romans sprayed water incensed with saffron powder to perfume their banquet halls and theatres. The ancient Egyptians burned saffron powder during their religious ceremonies. Saffron was probably introduced to Medieval Europe by the Crusaders who brought it from Arabia and India, and is mentioned in an almost a third of the recipes of that era.

Saffron in Cooking

Saffron pairs marvelously with rice, and is an indispensable ingredient in many classical recipes: the Indian rice Palau, the Risotto a la Milanese of Italy, and the Spanish paella. Saffron is also great in fish and shellfish stews. Paella is often made with shellfish, and so is the French bouillabaisse. Saffron is also used in cooking by the Pennsylvania Dutch and Amish, who grow their own saffron in the Lancaster county area. Saffron also flavors Swedish cakes and breads made for special occasions.

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The Harvest and Drying of Saffron

Saffron is a very delicate spice that is actually the tiny red stigma in the center of the purple crocus flower. Each bulb produces 2-3 flowers. The plants bloom in October and November and must be harvested within a day or the stigma lose their flavor. The harvest is fleeting - lasting only about 10 days and is still done entirely by hand! The flowers are collected by the farmers and then, passed along to the women of the area, who sit at long tables to separate the red stigmas from the rest of the flower. Next, the stigmas are roasted to dry them.

It was traditional for the farming families to reserve some of the saffron, using it as a sort of savings account. Keep in mind that it takes about 200 crocus flowers to make 1 gram of saffron. Combined with the hand-picking of the flowers, you can see why it is so expensive! To give you an idea of how much a gram of saffron is, the small box pictured here is about 3 inches by 2 inches and weighs only 2 grams!

Zaafraan (Saffron) Health Benefits

In folk medicine, saffron has been attributed with various kinds of healing effects. It has been used for the treatment of measles. In Indian traditional medicine, it used for treating bladder, kidney and liver disorders, and also diabetes.

Evidence brought to light by modern research suggests that saffron may help fight tumors, alleviate some of the side-effects of chemotherapy and reverse the effects of brain degeneration due alcohol consumption.

The health benefits of saffron are not necessarily the first thing fans of the exotic spice think of. The spice is very difficult to harvest, making it an expensive ingredient. It takes more than 4,500 flowers to yield a single ounce of the spice.

The expense and painstaking efforts may be well worth the effort considering the possible health benefits the spice offers. Saffron is full of surprises, including its medicinal purposes. Health problems that have been treated with the spice include:

- Digestive problems
- Asthma
- Insomnia
- Menstrual problems
- Common colds
- Inflammation
- Depression



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