



# Saffron, The Miracle Spice

**S**affron is one of the highly prized spices known for its colour, flavour and medicinal properties. It is the dried "stigma" or threads of the flower of a bulbous plant. While this exotic spice is cultivated in many countries, in India it is grown mostly in Jammu and Kashmir, and the lavender-coloured flowers are harvested during October-November every year.

Saffron has a distinct flavour that comes from chemical compounds in it such as picrocrocin. The active components have many therapeutic applications in traditional medicines as antiseptic, antidepressant, antioxidant, digestive, anti-convulsant.

This spice is a good source of minerals like copper, potassium,

calcium, and iron. Potassium is an important component of cell and body fluids that helps control heart rate and blood pressure. As readers may know, iron is essential for red blood cell production.

Additionally, it is also rich in many vital vitamins, such as Vitamin A, folic acid, and riboflavin.

Saffron is an expensive spice, because its cultivation and harvest is still performed, as it was since ancient times, by hand. Elderly village women are usually set on this task of removing the saffron "threads." It takes 4,500 crocus flowers to make up one ounce of saffron spice.

## Culinary Uses

Just a pinch of saffron is enough to enhance the flavour and colour of the entire recipe.

There are several methods to use it in the kitchen. Whole 'stigma' can be added directly to the preparations, or oftentimes, the threads are ground to paste using traditional mortar and pestle, and added to the recipes.

Popularly known as "kesar" in Indian subcontinent, saffron has been in use in the preparation of rice-pulav, rice pudding, *halwa*, and other sweet dishes. It is also used as a colour and flavoring base in the preparation of *kulfi*, ice-creams, cakes and drinks.

### Fragrant Saffron pulav

Ingredients:

450g basmati rice  
1 medium onion, finely chopped  
100 g butter  
4 cardamom pods  
4 cloves  
1 cinnamon stick  
One pinch saffron threads  
2 bay leaves  
600ml/ hot vegetable stock or water  
Salt  
Almonds and pistachios

### Method:

1. Make sure you get lovely fluffy rice, by rinsing it several

times in cold water, then leaving to soak for about 30 minutes.

2. Cook the onion in the butter for 5 minutes until softened. Add the spices, saffron and bay leaves and cook for two more minutes. The spices will impart a wonderful fragrant flavour to the rice. Add the rice and stir until the grains are coated in the butter before stirring in the stock and salt. Bring to boil and then cover with a tight-fitting lid.

3. Turn the heat down low and leave to cook for 10 minutes before turning off the heat. Don't remove the lid; just leave the rice to continue cooking in the pan for about 5 minutes until you are ready to serve.

4. The rice should have absorbed all the water and will just need fluffing up with a fork.

5. Serve garnished with flaked almonds and pistachios 🍴

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