



The History of Saffron

Alexander the Great pitched his camp on a plain covered with rich pastures upon his arrival in Kashmir. At dawn, he found his army in the middle of a sea of purple flowers that blossomed at night even in the tents. The flower threads colored his clothes golden-yellow. He attributed it to witchcraft and returned without a fight, as the legend goes.



Another legend relates that the Greek god Hermes was in love with a beautiful boy who he killed by mistake. The blood of the young boy Crocus spilled on the ground and that is where the first crocus flower started to grow. The name Crocus definitely originates from Greek and means thread.

A pinch of best quality saffron like Mongra or Lacha creates an aroma of faraway places that makes us think in Persia, Crete, feasts and scents that can be experienced in the wind of Calcutta. Add rice, dissolve it in bouillons and stocks and it develops a complex, bitter, metallic flavor containing iodine, with a taste of hay and bark and a amazing golden-yellow color. Saffron must be bought as broad, red and soft threads with a highly aromatic taste, according to the encyclopedia. This is a wise advice because there are tons of powder substitutes and good brands such as Zafferano dell'Aquila or Pennsylvania Dutch Saffron are rare.

The purple threads are dried parts of the crocus sativus, a type of iridaceae. The flower does not blossom in spring like the majority of other crocuses, but it blossoms in October and has to be picked rapidly by hand at dawn in order to avoid damaging the pistils.

Despite being sensitive and delicate, this blessed crocus fulfilled its mythological chronicle. It is told that Zeus slept on a bed made of saffron, that the Phoenicians used saffron as a medical substance and seasoning and that Persian aristocrats colored their clothes golden and rich Romans scattered saffron threads on their bridal beds. It was the tradition of many cultures to use Saffron to color their bridal veils yellow.

Saffron as a pharmaceutical is said to have "digestive, pain-killing and antispasmodic" effects. In the Middle Ages, it was misused for abortions. Be careful: the universal remedy is fatal if consumed in large quantities (approx. 10 grams).



Saffron was already a luxury good in the ancient world. Adulteration and blending of saffron was severely punished. It was an important task of the respectable Saffron Guild in the medieval Basel to control the purity of saffron. A reasonably accurate chemical verification can be carried out by adding natron to a saffron powder solution. If it is pure saffron, the solution remains yellow, if it contains curcuma, it will become turbid and turn red. The test is based on the different chemical properties of the colors of saffron and curcuma. Another method consisted in adding plaster, flour or talc in order to make the powder heavier.



According to the history, an assault by the baron of Bechburg in the year 1374 unleashed the “Saffron War”. He assaulted traders shipping saffron from Lyon to Basel. The thefts got hold of approximately 400 kg of saffron threads. Bern deployed troops and Basel appointed one



hundred riflemen with a catapult in order to besiege the castle during 14 weeks. The fortress was finally conquered and partially destroyed.

The two large mural paintings in the Guild Hall of the Safran Zunft document the siege and the victorious home coming of the Basel mercenaries.

Safflower (bastard saffron) is the common name for carthamus tinctorius which was used to dye silk in the past. Even nowadays, safflower is used as cheap saffron substitute in the oriental cuisine and sold to tourists more or less fraudulently in the bazaars. The condiment colors the food less than genuine saffron and does not add a real flavor. The tubular flowers of the safflower can be distinguished from the threadlike stigma lobes of saffron with the bare eye. Genuine saffron has a crimson stigma of 2 to 3 cm in length that is rolled up, funnel-shaped and notched at the upper side.

80,000 to 150,000 flowers on a cultivation area of 1000 square meters are necessary to obtain one kilogram of saffron. Picking is done manually; one picker reaches 60 to 80 grams per day. One gram of saffron threads costs from 6.00 to 12.00 CHF.



Iran and Spain are still the main saffron growing regions. The expensive condiment is also grown in other Mediterranean regions. Mund in the upper part of the Canton of Wallis is the only region in Switzerland where saffron is grown.

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