

Saffron

Written by Becky O.

*I must have saffron to colour the Warden
Pies; Mace; dates none, that's out of note;
Nutmegs seven; a race or two of Ginger, but
that I may beg; four pounds of prunes, and as
many raisins as the sun.*

- A Winter's Tale by William Shakespeare

A funny thing happened to me at the Devonshire Faire. Not wanting to mess with footwear, I grabbed my sweetheart's moccasins. Under them, I was wearing a new pair of white tights, which although were machined, had a pattern which could have been done by hand. As the temperature increased, and the amount of perspiration also increased, I noted a lovely brown tinge to these previously white hose. Since this was only the second time I had worn them and they were too expensive to toss and just "chalk up to experience", I decided to play with some of my saffron and dye them to the authentic Celtic color of Saffron. While none of this has anything to do with the remainder of this article, it did rouse my interest further in the spice, which is where I discovered the following.

Saffron is a spice derived from stigmas of the crocus flower, *Crocus sativus*. It is a member of the Iris family and a perennial fall-flowering plant. It is thought to have originated in the Eastern Mediterranean, around Turkey. It is now principally grown in Iran, Kashmir and Spain. Although expensive, saffron has been in demand for centuries as a food seasoning, a medicine, a perfume and a source of yellow dye. Used today mostly as a spice, it gives a slightly bitter flavor & yellow color, and is most commonly used with chicken, fish or rice.

Modern cultivation in Spain is thought to have introduced approximately 900 AD by the Arabs, who also planted the first rice in the Spanish lakes. Both spread through Europe and saffron became the principal medieval spice. For a period, it was planted in Germany, Spain and at Saffron Walden, in Essex, England. However, with the arrival of the eastern spices, only La Mancha continued to cultivate and harvest the crocus. Saffron is still cultivated on the rocky hillsides of La Mancha. The blossoms flower for two or three weeks each fall. During that time, entire families spend daylight to dark picking the flowers. These same families then spend their nights separating the petal from the stigmas, one by one, all by hand. After drying, an entire field may yield only a handful of the spice. It takes 225,000 stigmas, all handpicked, separated and dried to make one pound of saffron.

One final note of warning: if you find what you think is an amazing deal on Saffron, beware. Safflower, also known as Mexican or false saffron, is often used as an inexpensive substitute. The stigmas from safflower has the dye properties of saffron, but the taste is very different. If it is in a powdered form, it may also be Turmeric. Sometimes it is a blend with some saffron, but mostly other spice. In 15th century Germany, there was a special tribunal called the Safranschau and their entire purpose was to do away with such dastardly deeds. If convicted, the penalty was instant death. Today, we have no such protection. Just remember, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.