**Narrator:** Even in the expensive world of spices, saffron stands out. And real saffron can cost you over $10,000 per kilogram.

Sought after for thousands of years as a spice, a dye, and a medicine, you need over 150 flowers to make just 1 gram of saffron. And the stuff you have at home in the cupboard could well be fake. So just what makes this spice so expensive?

Saffron is the red stigma of the Crocus sativus. Each crocus has three small stigmas that have to be picked carefully by hand. This minuscule harvest means that the amount you get from each flower is roughly 0.006 grams.

No machine can do the delicate work required to harvest these thin threads. And it can take 40 hours of hard manual labor to produce just 1 kilogram of high-quality saffron. Growing the plants isn't exactly easy either.

**David Smale:** They're actually called corms, but they're like a bulb, basically. Like, you know, a flower bulb. So, the more flowers per bulb you can get, and the bigger the flowers, really, and that all depends on how you look after it, how you grow it, the climate.

So, for example, if it rains just before harvest, we get bigger flowers. If it's very dry just before harvest, the flowers are smaller. So you look after the crop during the year by hand, and you pick the flowers by hand, and you process the flowers by hand.

**Narrator:** Once the crop starts flowering, harvesters have to work fast to make sure they can pick it all in time. Almost all of the saffron planted can flower within one week of the year. And to maintain the quality, the flowers are best picked first thing in the morning.

Quality is key when growing such a precise crop. And the taste of the saffron depends on the rainfall, temperature, and soil. Kashmir is famed for producing some of the highest-quality saffron in the world.

And that small strand of saffron that you harvest as a result of all of this work? Well, to get the highest grades, you might need to throw half of it away. The most expensive, highest-grade saffron is generally made up of just the very tips of the stigma.

In Iran, where over 90% of the world's saffron is produced, there are four grades. The lowest grade is the bunch. That's the entire strand that's pulled from the flower, from the dark red tips to the yellow base. In higher grades, the yellow strand is removed, leaving only a long strand of pure red.

That means a kilo of saffron could be made up of 450,000 strands. And to get that many strands, you need 150,000 flowers. And those flowers take up a lot of growing space. Cumin, for example, can yield 600 kilos per acre. Nutmeg gets you around 350 kilograms in the same space. Use that land for saffron instead, and you get a 1.8 kilogram harvest.

Despite the incredible amount of work and space this crop takes up, demand for the spice is increasing, and over 200 metric tons of saffron threads are harvested worldwide each year. That's the result of about 30 billion flowers.

Demand for the threads is so high that many adulterate or produce fake saffron. Threads that look real at first glance could actually be made of corn silks, coconut fibers, or even horsehair. Synthetic colorings are also used to dye the lower-grade stigmas and sell them as high-grade saffron.

In late 2019, a fake-saffron crime ring was uncovered in the UK, which led to a two-year international investigation. And back in 2010, Spain exported 190,000 kilos of saffron, worth $50 million, but the country's total production amounted to only 1,500 kilos. At the time, a local farmers union reported that up to 90% of Spanish saffron exports were fraudulent.

The industry has attempted to crack down on these fake and mislabeled products, but the problem still persists, and the market for fake saffron is closing many real saffron farmers down. So, what does real saffron actually taste like?

**Smale:** I've been asked that one by a lot of people over the years. [laughs] It's so difficult to describe, which is, I think, part of its fascination for people and why it ended up as an expensive product, because it is - it just adds something. It's a bittersweet flavor; it's an earthy flavor. Trying to replicate it is very difficult. And we've - you know, people have tried to do that, I know.

**Narrator:** While saffron is just as popular as ever, it's been sought after throughout history. In Greek mythology, Zeus sometimes slept on a bed of saffron. And Cleopatra was said to bathe in saffron and milk, using the dyeing properties of the spice as an ancient fake tan.

Every culture seems to have its own myth about the spice's powers, and in the 14th century, saffron's popularity skyrocketed across Europe when it was thought to be a possible cure for the plague.

But there's a recent looming problem for saffron and its price: climate change. In Kashmir, production has dropped significantly, and many farmers are selling their land instead.

**Sajad Rafeeq:** We had, you know, very few rains in the last, I think, four or five years. The temperature and the climate has completely changed in Kashmir.

When I was a kid, when we used to go to the saffron farms to pick up the saffron, it would at least take us two days to pick up the saffron from the same fields which, you know, nowadays you could just pick up in half an hour. I'm very emotional about the saffron, because this is a cultural identity of Kashmir and especially the people of Pampore. But the thing is that the production is declining, and the lands are being sold. Houses are being built on the saffron land. So it really disheartens me.

**Narrator:** Between 2017 and '18, saffron production in the region fell almost 70%, from 16.5 metric tons down to 5.2. And with continuing droughts and climate change, this harvest could become even more rare.