

Saffron

Saffron is a spice derived from the flower of *Crocus sativus*, commonly known as the "saffron crocus". The vivid crimson stigma and styles, called threads, are collected and dried to be used mainly as a seasoning and colouring agent in food. Saffron has long been the world's most costly spice by weight. Although some doubts remain on its origin, it is believed that saffron originated in Iran. However, Greece and Mesopotamia have also been suggested as the possible region of origin of this plant. *C. sativus* is possibly a triploid form of *Crocus cartwrightianus*. Saffron crocus slowly propagated throughout much of Eurasia and was later brought to parts of North Africa, North America, and Oceania.

Saffron's taste and iodoform- or hay-like fragrance result from the chemicals picrocrocin and safranal. It also contains a carotenoid pigment, crocin, which imparts a rich golden-yellow hue to dishes and textiles. Its recorded history is attested in a 7th-century BC Assyrian botanical treatise compiled under Ashurbanipal, and it has been traded and used for over four millennia. Iran now accounts for approximately 90% of the world production of saffron.

Why Is Saffron So Expensive?

The ancient Greeks and Romans used saffron as perfume, and saffron is mentioned in the Chinese *materia medica* from the 1550s. Today the herb is also used as a cooking spice and a clothing dye. It's now an essential part of some Eastern, Middle Eastern, and European dishes, such as the French bouillabaisse, Spanish paella, Moroccan tagines, and many more dishes. Saffron, however, is a very expensive spice. **Its costliness has to do with its harvesting. Only a small amount of each saffron flower is used, and all harvesting must be done by hand.**

Saffron is believed to be native to the Mediterranean, Asia Minor, and Iran, although Spain, France, and Italy are also now primary cultivators of the spice. The spice we think of when we hear "saffron" is actually only a small part of the plant itself. Saffron (*Crocus sativus*) is a purple flower. What we use for that distinctive yellow color, sweet-herb smell, and bitter taste is actually the stigma (plural *stigmata*)—the pollen-germinating part—at the end of the red pistil, the female sex organ of the plant.

There are only three stigmata in each saffron flower. Once the stigmata (and their red pistils) have been separated from the plant, they are dried to preserve their color and flavor. **Since such a small part of the flower is used, it takes 75,000 saffron flowers to make one pound of saffron spice.** The small amount of saffron spice per plant, along with the fact that harvesting must be done manually, leads to saffron's being majorly expensive.