

THE SCARLET SPICE

Saffron, delicate and aromatic, is the most expensive spice in the world. But dedicated family-run farms are working against a tide of opportunistic commercial growers who are cutting corners to make a profit.

STORY APPLE MANDY



PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES

COURTESY CATALUNYA (RIGHT PAGE)

Inside the spacious surrounds of Catalunya, a contemporary Spanish restaurant in Wan Chai, executive chef Josep Casas walks us through the kitchen's five different stations. In the middle, near the food delivery area, he stops at where the rice station is. He points out a selection of spices used in preparing rice dishes, including the Spanish classic, paella. One of these spices, sitting in a small airtight container, is saffron. With its delicate appearance, attractive crimson colour and fragrant aroma, Casas tells us this spice is the most prized of them all.

"This spice is really important for me because it gives colour and aroma to the dishes I make," Casas says. "It's one of the most traditional spices used in Spanish cuisine, and it has such good characteristics that I want to use it in my cooking."

Unsurprisingly for a Spanish chef in a Spanish restaurant, Casas believes no saffron is as good as the Spanish variety. But he has a point. The saffron he uses – Valderrama from La Mancha in central Spain – has a DOP (Denominación de Origen Protegida or "Protected Denomination of Origin") label, which certifies the product to be of a quality recognised by European Union regulations. Derived from the feather-light, red-orange stigmas of the lilac coloured flower *Crocus sativus*, commonly known as saffron crocus, this saffron can only be picked in Albacete, Ciudad Real, Cuenca and Toledo. To ensure freshness, it can only be packed and sold in packets weighing a maximum 100g, and it expires within a year.

While Iran dominates the world's supply of so-called 'red gold', accounting for about 90 per cent of global production, Casas points out that many gourmands prize Spanish saffron for its "intense aroma and colour." But with great quality comes a hefty price tag. The price of saffron harvested in La Mancha has risen in recent years, reportedly costing 3,000 euros (approximately HK\$26,392) per kilogram.

With demand for the world's most expensive spice remaining high, Spanish growers are trying hard to keep up with the supply in the face of some mendacious competition. Nicky Noonan, owner of award-winning Tasmanian saffron producer Tas-Saff, says in 2010, Spain produced 1.5 tonnes of saffron yet managed to export 190 tonnes – a difference that netted 52 million euros (HK\$4 billion). It's widely accepted that some unscrupulous growers have been re-packaging cheaper



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01 At Catalunya in Wan Chai, saffron is used in preparing rice dishes, including paella

02 Josep Casas, executive chef of Catalunya

“SAFFRON GROWING IN ENGLAND STOPPED PURELY DUE TO CHEAPER IMPORTS FROM OVERSEAS”

– David Smale, English Saffron

saffron imported from Iran, Morocco and Greece, and exporting it as Spanish produce.

A TRADE PLAGUED BY PROBLEMS

This fraudulent trading not only misleads consumers, but it also affects Spain's saffron farmers. “Some growers re-label their products to get a profit out from it,” concurs Casas. “The best way to avoid fake saffron is to buy from authorised retailers or source through suppliers who keeps a relationship with farmers. Also, make sure they have quality control.”

Underpayment of farmers is another issue affecting the saffron industry. Every autumn, during harvest time, workers go through a backbreaking process of handpicking flowers and removing the stigmas one by one. The high cost of saffron is partly due to the number of flowers needed to harvest even a derisory amount of the final product. The amount of saffron crocus needed to yield a pound of the dried spice is enough to cover an entire football field— an amount that can take up to 20 hours of labour to harvest.

“I don't believe farmers [in some countries] pick saffron every day at dawn, so the quality is often being compromised [by the heat from the sun],” says Noonan, whose family company was founded in 1990. “It's down to that poor farmer who probably makes a kilo of saffron. He is probably paid something like US\$200 (HK\$1,550). The sale price here in Australia is around US\$3,000 a kilo and that saffron has probably been handled by three middle people. My husband (and Tas-Saff co-founder, Terry) believes many farmers are making about US\$2 a day. It's slave labour.”

“Some aspects of saffron growing, such as flower picking, cannot be undertaken by machine,” says David Smale, founder of English Saffron, which reintroduced the crop to the UK in 2001. “Thereby the main ongoing cost of producing saffron is the cost of



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COURTESY ENGLISH SAFFRON



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COURTESY GETTY IMAGES (05), TAS-SAFF (06 & 07)

03-04 David Smale, owner of English Saffron, reintroduced saffron to England in 2004; Smale says saffron as a crop is best moved onto new ground every few years

05 The cost of saffron usually depends on weight, grade and quality

06 Saffron is also used in making chocolates

07 Nicky and Terry Noonan of Tas-Saff, a company that started its operation in Tasmania

the labour required to produce it. Saffron growing in England stopped purely due to cheaper imports from overseas. This in turn is due directly to labour costs.”

And the problems with poor quality saffron don't stop there. According to Noonan, saffron can be impregnated with dyes such as coal tar, sunset yellow or tartrazine. Some countries, she says, use mercury-based fungicides such as Vitavax or Ceresan to combat fungal problems in their crops.

“I've even seen pieces of dyed red paper being sold as saffron,” exclaims Smale. “One quick look on the internet and it will show that you just can't buy a kilo of saffron for 10 quid. It's [going to be] something else.”

Fortunately, distinguishing good saffron from bad is pretty easy. Noonan suggests soaking the threads in warm water. If the colour immediately comes out, it's considered bad quality – the colour in good saffron usually takes 24 hours to be bleached out properly.

Family growers around the world are striving to maintain the quality of their products in the face of pressures from surreptitious tactics used by commercial producers. Nicolas Chevalier of Lou Safran, a family grower in south-west France, insists it is the farm's respect for very rigorous farming practices that allows them to produce French saffron of an exceptional quality. If he does not strive for quality, he says, his product would not have a market value considering the huge quantities produced in Iran and Morocco. Today, his farm is the third largest in France.

WHAT'S COOKING?

Chefs around the world are opting to use family-grown saffron as opposed to commercial varieties. David Coumont, chef and owner of Moxhe, a modern Australian restaurant in Sydney, prefers working directly with smaller producers like Tas-Saff. “As a chef, you pay more attention and respect the product,” Coumont says. “I like that my saffron doesn't travel much ... I try to stay as local as I can.” When asked about the differences between Tasmanian saffron and other kinds, Coumont replies, “The quality of Tasmanian saffron is beautiful. It is more expensive, but the flavour is much more elegant. It is so full flavoured and you don't need to use so much in a dish.”

Andre Kropp, executive chef at Wrest Point Tasmania hotel in Sandy Bay also prefers small growers because he thinks they have a more concentrated farming practice and a better control of



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“THE QUALITY OF TASMANIAN SAFFRON IS BEAUTIFUL. IT IS MORE EXPENSIVE, BUT THE FLAVOUR IS MUCH MORE ELEGANT”

– David Coumont, Moxhe

their production. A Tas-Saff user for a decade now, he says: “Tas-Saff produces some of the best saffron in the world with all of the measurements for saffron quality across three main criteria for international standards of crocin (colour), picrocrocin (taste), and safranal (fragrance) content, which gives a high quality result when using it in a variety of applications.”

Renowned English restaurants River Cottage and Café Royal use Smale’s limited produce of English saffron. Smale, together with a friend at River Cottage, recently launched an English saffron gin – the spice is distilled with sugar beet vodka base, juniper berries, macadamia nuts, citrus zest and coriander – at Gillray’s Steakhouse Restaurant & Bar in London’s Marriott Hotel County Hall. He says the gin went down “extremely well”.

Anecdotal evidence from a range of chefs in Hong Kong indicates that the use of commercially grown, cheaper saffron is pervasive in the city, as it is more accessible. Family grown saffron can reach up



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COURTESY MOXHE



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08 David Coumont, chef and owner of Moxhe restaurant in Sydney

09 Coumont’s version of bouillabaisse with saffron

10 Restaurant Petrus serves red mullet with zucchini, basil and saffron sauce

11 Ricardo Chaneton, the new chef de cuisine at Island Shangri-La’s Restaurant Petrus



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COURTESY ISLAND SHANGRI-LA (10&11)

to HK\$400 per gram, according to Antoine Piccolo, general manager of Gourmet en Provence Ltd, a purveyor of fine foods in the city since 2009.

“Saffron is expensive; most chefs prefer not to spend too much on it otherwise the dish will have a prohibitive price,” explains Nicola Canuti, executive chef at InterContinental Hong Kong. “Chefs generally prefer to work with suppliers who can offer multiple products.”

But it’s not impossible to enjoy the aroma of family grown red gold in the fragrant harbour. For example, Ricardo Chaneton, new chef de cuisine at Island Shangri-La’s Restaurant Petrus, gets his supply from a French couple whose saffron farms are located in the mountains of Sospel, a commune in the Alpes-Maritimes department in south-eastern France.

Chaneton uses the spice in a red mullet with zucchini, basil and saffron sauce dish.

We turn around to leave the kitchen at Catalunya, taking a last glance at the diminutive jar of saffron. It’s a product that carries an aroma, a price and a prestige that all transcend the delicate appearance of these tiny red filaments. “We live in a society that wants to have premium items at low cost,” says Casas. “Counterfeit brands know this and if they can get a profit from this they will do it.” This is certainly one addition to the spice rack that it’s worth investing in. 🍷

SAVOURING SAFFRON

- The saffron crocus traces back its origins over 3,500 years and it is believed to originate from Greece.
- Saffron crocus thrives in dry summers and in neutral calcareous clay or silty soil. In countries such as Iran, Spain, India, Greece and France, the autumn flower blooms in October, while in Australia and New Zealand, it blooms in April.
- Saffron undergoes a drying process, where 80 per cent of its moisture is extracted. This procedure prevents the threads from moulding. Different countries have different traditions for drying. Some growers use a dehydrator, while others use a low-temperature oven.
- It usually takes 70,000 to 250,000 flowers to make one pound of saffron.
- Depending on weight, grade and quality, saffron can cost between US\$500 and US\$5,000 per pound.