

PLANET FOOD

July 2002

RICE

1. EDITORIAL – RICE

I have to admit that my enthusiasm for potatoes has meant that rice doesn't get much of a look in. Even worse, the scarcity of rice on our menu at home means that my children need to be coaxed when it appears.

I am amazed at how much rice people can eat. My husband and I hired two guides when trekking in Madagascar, on honeymoon. We stocked up with supplies at the local market. At the rice stall, we ordered about a kilo but the guides had other ideas. They got out a large grain sack and virtually filled it with rice. For every meal they boiled their water, cooked a large pan of rice and shared it between them. And this was virtually all they ate for the 3 or 4 days we were with them!

Often rice in England is not very well cooked and dolloped onto one's plate along with minute amounts of unappetising looking meat. But I have recently discovered that rice can be a treat if it's well cooked. For example, wild rice and basmati, risottos and brown rice.

A few weeks ago I went to a workshop on rice organised by the Guild of Food Writers. We were given the most delicious little bite-size appetisers, made with cheese and mushroom. Then a 'black glutinous rice dish' made with an abundance of vegetables, including asparagus, peppers and onions. It was prepared by Sri Owen, a top Indonesian cook and rice author – she called it paella. But best of all were the 'Tilda Rice Cakes' made by Roz Denny, a well known cookery writer, who is particularly keen about rice. The recipe is included below.



2. ABOUT RICE

Rice impacts

Did you know?

It takes 5,000 litres of water to produce one kilo of rice.

One of the reasons that duck is a popular Chinese dish is because these waterfowl thrive in rice paddies. Rice fields host three to five million ducks and geese on their annual migration along the Pacific Flyway. Frogs, snails and over a thousand predator species are also

widespread. But the ever increasing quantities of fertilisers used is affecting microbial life as well as the entire food chain that depends on them.

More chemicals are also being used to tackle pests. Many farmers are moving away from traditional rice varieties that may have had some pest resistance in favour of a single variety bred to increase productivity. One of the problems with increasing the use of pesticides is that animals fed with rice straw are being contaminated, so the practise is having to be restricted.

Getting rid of rice straw is a problem. It is slow to rot, can harbour diseases and burning it causes pollution. The most effective solution is apparently to use minimum tillage and to keep the water in ponds during the unproductive winter months. This also reduces soil erosion and maintains a habitat for wetland wildlife, particularly water birds.

The amount of water used for rice cultivation is also a major issue. It takes 5,000 litres of water to produce just one kilo of rice. And there are concerns about salination of water in rice-growing areas making the land infertile. But new systems have been developed that enable rice growers to conserve up to two thirds of the water requirements of 30 years ago.

Rice is a staple food for over half of the world's population. As populations increase so does the demand for rice. This means that more land is being cleared of rainforests and other rich habitats to make way for rice cultivation.

And one impact of rice growing that is not so obvious is in relation to climate change. About 10-15% of the total global methane emissions comes from rice fields. And methane is an important greenhouse gas. Although rice fields also absorb significant quantities of carbon dioxide, this is only a short term benefit because once we have eaten the rice the carbon dioxide will be released again. Overall rice would seem to have a negative impact on climate change.

Although rice cultivation has major environmental impacts, there are measures that can be taken to reduce them. We should be asking retailers to tell us more about what they are doing to minimise the impacts of rice growing, so that we can support good practices, rather than encourage bad.

GM rice?

At present no GM rice, as such is permitted in the UK. But it is high on the list of crops being trialled for widespread genetic modification.

Among research projects underway, one is concentrating on developing a new super-high-protein rice that contains genes from peas. The Japanese are working on rice strains that actively help lower cholesterol levels in the blood. And in China, scientists say they have developed strains that enable them to grow high-yield rice on the boundless stretches of the Gobi desert.

One variety of rice has been genetically modified with a gene taken from daffodils so that it produces higher levels of beta-carotene – Vitamin A. This has been particularly controversial, as the life science companies try to persuade us that this will save millions of children in the

Third World from blindness and other potentially life-threatening diseases, such as measles and chronic diarrhoea.

It is certainly true that Vitamin A deficiency is a real problem in the Third World, although there are other more widespread nutritional deficiencies. But for Golden Rice – as it has been called – to solve the problem and provide the recommended daily amount of Vitamin A, it would require people to eat vast quantities of it every day – way beyond what would be considered a normal diet. And opponents suggest that there are other simpler ways of achieving the same objective, such as fortifying salt or encouraging greater consumption of palm oil and green leafy vegetables, which are high in Vitamin A.

The boring truth is that we already have the tools to save many more than a million kids a year—all without irrevocably changing the genetic makeup of food staples. What we lack is the political will to mobilize those resources.

Naomi Klein, Globe & Mail, Canada

It seems almost inevitable that GM rice will become widespread in the future, but we should be hoping that the life science companies focus on sensible applications of the technology, rather than merely setting their sites on maximising profits for themselves.

Roz on rice

I talked to Roz Denny about her interest in rice – the fact that her Arabic name actually means ‘rice’ is purely incidental. She said that she was brought up as a colonial in the Yemen where rice was an integral part of the diet. Since then Roz has become particularly interested in the cultural importance of rice and the social cohesion rice growing promotes.

Roz says that at the beginning she was unable to tell the difference between rice varieties. But now she realises that it is like fine wine – the taste of rice is affected by the soil, climate and growing conditions. So, for example, she can identify what is basmati and what is



American rice. And says that generally the Japanese are not very keen on basmati or risotto rice because they prefer their sushi rice, which in the West was thought of as cold and gummy. Now sushi has become very popular.

Surprisingly Roz points out that we have eaten rice in this country for longer than potatoes. The Moors introduced it to Spain and spread it to other parts of Europe early in the second Millennium. Creamy rice pudding became so established that in some parts of Scandinavia, it is the traditional Christmas pudding. Another early dish was blancmange – literally ‘white eat’ – which was made with rice, chicken and almonds.

One issue that Roz was particularly concerned about was when the Americans tried to patent ‘basmati’ rice. If they had been successful it would have meant that the traditional Indian

and Pakistani basmati rice growers would have been banned from calling their rice 'basmati', a name they had used for hundreds of years. The American attempt to rob the traditional farmers of their brand, by replacing it with rice grown in a large, mechanical system, was called 'bio-piracy'. They were not successful because a number of rice trading companies, decided to fight the case on behalf of the thousands of small-scale farmers, who would not have had the resources to do so. And won the case.

Roz was keen to point out that rice growing in many places is still very much a cottage industry, done by thousands of farmers on a small scale. In fact over 90% of rice produced worldwide is eaten within 20 miles of where it is grown – it is a family cash crop.

Despite her interest in this, Roz had to admit that she has not yet been to a rice field. But she still managed to convince me to be a bit more adventurous with rice and to try out some of her rice recipes.

ROZ DENNY'S TILDA RICE CAKE

Turn a creamy rice pudding made with Thai jasmine or fragrant basmati into a classic French style gateau. Wickedly rice and great for celebrations.

Serves 8-10

200g Tilda Thai Jasmine or Basmati rice
1 litre milk
100-125g caster sugar
2 stems lemon grass, split
300ml double cream
6 free range eggs, separated

Topping:

500ml crème fraîche
grated zest 1 lemon
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
selection fresh soft fruits etc, to serve

1. Blanch the rice in a large pan of boiling water for 3 minutes then drain. Return to the pan with the milk, sugar (to taste) and lemon grass.
2. Bring to the boil, stirring and then simmer until the milk is absorbed and the rice grains soft. This should take about 20 minutes. The mixture should be creamy and not too stiff.
3. Cool then mix in the cream and yolks.
4. Heat the oven to 150 °C, Gas 3. Grease and line a 25cm round deep cake tin or moule manqué.
5. Whisk the egg whites until softly stiff and fold in. Spoon into the cake tin and bake for about 50-60 minutes until golden brown and just firm to touch in the centre. Cool in the tin then chill.
6. For the topping, whip the crème fraîche with the zest, sugar and vanilla. Turn the cake out of the tin then cover all over with the topping swirling to decorate. Top with fruits and serve in wedges.

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