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Rice in gourmet cooking – A small grain makes it big

Talk given by Ms Tanja Grandits, Restaurant Thurtal, Eschikofen (TG) Gault Millau Cook of the Year 2006

on the occasion of the réservesuisse general meeting on 21 June 2006 in Lausanne

Rice is a fascinating product. And it is more than just a staple food. The UN declared 2004 International Year of Rice: this was the first time that a year was dedicated to a single food. But if we take a closer look at the rice plant, we quickly discover just how important this plant is for our planet and its inhabitants. In Asia alone, more than 2 billion people derive 60 to 70% of their caloric intake from this grain. Not only does the diet of more than 1 billion people in developing countries consist largely of rice, their livelihood, too, depends on rice production, processing and trade.

Sustainable cultivation of the paddy fields worldwide can make a significant contribution to preserving the environment. Rice also contributes to cultural life. The cultural importance of rice is reflected in its symbolism: it stands for fertility, happiness, and wealth. The Chinese character for “peace” translated literally means «sharing out grains of rice equally to each mouth». More than anywhere else, this cultural wealth is reflected in the dishes that are served with this grain.

Which brings us to today’s topic:

Rice in gourmet cooking – A small grain makes it big A culinary dialogue between Asia and Europe

The way we cook today is changing. The different cuisines of Asia, and with them rice, are experiencing a boom. The thousand-year-old history of rice, which originates in China, is as old as the wholesomeness of Asian cooking with all its valuable nutritional properties. Through our travels, we Europeans have gotten to know and appreciate the native cuisines of these countries, and through our economic ties, many restaurants serving authentic cuisines have sprung up in Europe as well. The variety of Asian foods available in shops and markets today is enormous. The many new and exciting products tempt and inspire the palate.

California was the first place where Eastern cooking traditions were combined with Western tastes. Asian principles and ingredients have enriched our customary European cooking and this has created a modern, wholesome, savoury, exciting and elegant way of cooking: a culinary combination of the scientific knowledge of the West with the traditional wisdom of the East. Not to mention a cuisine that does not value expensive luxury products at the expense of first-rate everyday fare.

And one such first-rate food is rice.

There are several reasons for the subordinate role of rice in haute cuisine: for a long time, rice was thought to be too simple, even boring and plain-tasting. Furthermore, rice is not amenable to fanciful presentation and loose grains can ruin the artistic arrangement of a dish. Therefore, rice was often served as mere accompaniment – “à part”.

The varieties of rice available in Europe used to be rather limited: mainly risotto rice, ordinary long-grain rice and rice pudding. We only knew a few rather banal rice creations like risi bisi, cabbage stuffed with rice and the “rice ring”. The association with light diets and hospital diets further deterred nouvelle cuisine fans from giving this small grain a try.

Then, some years ago, things began to change. The varieties of rice available increased drastically and along with them the ways of preparing it. The “cook + experiment” trend also raised interest in the rice as a product.

The fact that more and more people are following a vegetarian diet also plays a role in the new more „noble“ status rice enjoys as the main ingredient in a variety of imaginative dishes. The versatility of rice makes it a perfect match for all types of vegetables, mushrooms and herbs, even in combination with sauerkraut – sauerkraut and rice ravioli is delicious.

Eating healthy is becoming ever more important to a growing number of people, and gourmet cuisine, too, cannot afford to ignore this trend when creating new dishes. Rice is easy to digest, contains a number of nutritional vitamins and minerals and, what’s more, a particularly effective combination thereof. In fact, this small grain “packs a real punch” in its husk. However, the more of the husk is removed, the more rice loses its nutritional value. Rice is also a low-allergenic food. People with food allergies can substitute it as a staple to compensate for other foods. Rice is an ideal grain for coeliac sufferers, as it does not contain gluten. Rice is rich in complex carbohydrates and very low in fat.

The fact that organic cooking is also on the rise and many aromatic and exotic types of brown rice are now available may be another factor contributing to the increasing popularity of rice.

However, as far as I’m concerned, the main reason why rice is the perfect product is that it plays a key role in crossover cooking. It forms a bridge between Asia and Europe. It is a product that can be introduced creatively to any cuisine.

Let’s take a closer look at these different cuisines and their rice delicacies:

First, there is the southern European or Mediterranean cuisine. Here the obvious star is risotto rice with its three main varieties of arborio, carnaroli and vialone nano. Risotto dishes range from the classic saffron risotto to black squid risotto to strawberry risotto with aged parmesan. Paella, crispy-fried rice croquettes and Greek rice soup with lemon also figure prominently in southern European cuisine. Special varieties of rice from southern Europe include red Camargue rice and black Venere rice from Italy.

In Japanese cuisine, every meal is served with a bowl of rice. Japanese rice is a short-grain rice, and the Japanese are very particular about “their rice”. A Japanese friend of mine swears that rice is best when harvested in autumn. Rice dishes include sushi, onigiri (small stuffed rice balls), cold marinated rice and mochi – the traditional rice cakes found at every Japanese New Year celebration.

Basmati rice, Jasmine rice, and aromatic rice: These are the names we associate with the fresh, richly spiced Thai cuisine. These delicate rice varieties are used in curries and stir-fries or serve as a main course in fried rice dishes.

And let's not forget the white or black glutinous rice dessert in coconut milk or all the wonderful rice noodle and rice paper recipes.

In Indian cuisine, aromatic rice is enhanced with spices like cinammon, cardamom and coriander or refined with other additions such as raisins, pine nuts or lentils.

These are the regions and countries that have been the greatest influence on how we cook today. Now, if we want to get a taste of all these different flavours, we quickly find ourselves back in the realm of the crossover cuisine I am such a fan of, with all its contradictions of both the familiar and the exotic.

In addition to the many varieties of rice - there are thought to be more than 8 000 – we should also consider the products made from rice, which also have much to offer modern cooking.

Finely ground rice flour works well to thicken sauces and soups as well as to make special noodle and dumpling dough. The variety of rice noodles ranges from centimetre-wide ribbon noodles to paper-thin soup noodles.

Rice paper is also made from rice flour. These wafer-thin sheets are best known as the wrappers of spring rolls and other crispy delights.

In organic cooking and desserts, it is rice flakes that play an important role.

To make rice milk, water is added to rice flour: this causes an enzymatic reaction, turning starch into maltose. One use of the naturally sweet rice milk is to make specialty pastries.

The variety of rice and rice products is so great that of course the cooking pioneers of our time, the representatives of the so-called "laboratory cuisine" make use of it as well. The Spanish cook Ferran Adrià, for example, creates masterpieces like aromatic puffed rice, chocolate rice powder and rice foam in his restaurant "el Bulli" near Barcelona using gas capsules. Rice in shapes and consistencies, that is, as you've never seen before.

My own favourite rice recipes from my personal repertoire include sushi rice burgers, Thai curry risotto, wild rice galettes and rice ice cream. The most exciting creation I had the pleasure of trying recently was rice tiramisu with green tea – simply heavenly.

As you can see, for me, rice plays a major role in modern gourmet cooking. For this is a kind of cooking that gives your creativity free rein: East-West crossover cooking – the cuisine of the future – where a small grain finally makes it big.

(translation from german)