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Swiss spice is worth its weight in gold

Cheese, milk and chocolate are the foodstuffs most closely associated with Switzerland. Swiss saffron, grown exclusively in canton Valais, however, is fast making a name for itself. Saffron from the village of Mund was the first Swiss spice to receive certification guaranteeing its origin and quality, but the costly Swiss saffron almost never reaches the shops, since demand far outstrips supply.

The best way of tasting it is to head to the village where the aromatic spice is the key ingredient in a variety of specialities - ranging from rice dishes and bread to alcohol - served up in restaurants.

Saffron arrived in Mund a long time ago, probably brought back from Italy or Spain by pilgrims or mercenaries. Just when is not clear, but records show that the spice has been harvested in canton Valais since the 14th century.

Stories tell of mercenaries smuggling saffron plants into Switzerland under their hats. Death was often the penalty imposed on those who stole the plant from its homeland, countries such as Iran, Turkey, Greece and Spain.

Saffron was grown in other areas of Switzerland, but gradually came to be produced only where conditions were dry and the soil poor. The plants are frost tolerant and don't need fertiliser. Today, Swiss saffron is only produced in Mund, where it almost died off in the 1970s. It was the parish priests who encouraged people to keep up the tradition. Thirty years ago, the saffron guild was founded when twenty-two producers decided to get together. Since then, the guild has been promoting the plant.

Saffron from Mund is rare and more expensive than gold. The village's treasure is stashed away at the moment. The flowers will not appear until autumn, when they will be harvested. It takes 120,000 flowers to produce one

kilogram of saffron. Entire families go out and harvest the precious flowers. When the harvest is over, the fiddly work begins. Three small dark red stigmas containing the spice are extracted from the flower. This is also a job for the whole family. In a good year, four kilograms of filaments are harvested. The guild hopes that one day the harvest will reach six kilos.

Mund saffron is only sold as threads. Selling it any other way would entail some risk, such as people falsifying the product or adulterating the original. The Swiss saffron is recognised as being a top-of-the-range product. The price is 28 francs per gram.

Mund has a Saffron Museum, open in October on Wednesdays and weekends. And there's a signposted 90 minute Saffron Walk called the Safranlehrpfad.

from swissinfo

Saffron Risotto from Mund

1Tbs butter	heat in pan
1 finely chopped onion	sweat slowly in the butter
350 g Arborio rice	add, stir on low heat until translucent
1 tin peeled tomatoes	dice, add
1 tsp thyme leaves	add
1 tsp saffron threads	add, mix
800 ml beef stock, hot	stir in gradually, keeping the rice covered at all times. Simmer for about 25 minutes, until rice is creamy and al dente.
50 g bacon, diced	fry slowly in a frying pan until crisp
400 g stir-fry beef	fry in small batches for about three minutes, season with salt and pepper; stir into the risotto with the bacon - and serve!

En quetel

Swiss reluctant to confront glacier-less Alps

Swiss alpine communities are aware of the importance of glaciers for tourism, water and energy, but are ill-prepared for a glacier-less future.

According to the survey, around 90% of communities living near glaciers benefit from them via tourism, or meltwater used for hydropower or drinking water, but only 13% of the 131 communes questioned said they had drawn up future action plans as glaciers retreat.



Extending over 1000 square kilometres, Swiss glaciers have a huge influence on the environment, habitat and local population and it is hard to imagine they might one day disappear.

Swiss glaciers are retreating at an accelerating rate and the large majority could vanish this century, say glaciologists.

According to research by Zurich's Federal Institute of Technology some ten cubic kilometres of ice were lost from 1500 glaciers over a nine-year period from 1999-2008 - or 13%.

Since 2000 the average loss rate recorded over the two previous decades has doubled, and the 1998 annual record for melting glacier ice has been beaten three times.

As a realistic future scenario, three-quarters of the glaciers will disappear this century. Hazards for villagers living in the shadow of disintegrating glaciers are rock and icefalls and new glacier lakes.

from swissinfo