

SPICES

Saffron lovers on red alert

Claims of food fraud have resurfaced around the most prized of ingredients, writes **Martin Hickman**.

PRIZED for centuries for its pungent aroma and golden colour, saffron commands the highest price of any spice. Shoppers may wish to query its purity and quality, though.

Food officials have begun an investigation into claims that the “red gold” is routinely adulterated with worthless parts of the crocus flower in a scam that is defrauding gourmards.

Britain's Food Standards Agency (FSA) has asked its counterparts in Spain to test the saffron exported from that country after being tipped off that supposedly “pure and genuine” saffron on sale in Britain is of poor quality and fails to supply the usual colour and aroma.

An amateur cook in Britain prompted the investigation by using his own money to buy large quantities of saffron to be tested at laboratories owned by the Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Commerce in Spain, one of the largest exporters of the spice.

His findings prompted the FSA to intervene.

Saffron should be painstakingly harvested from the stigma of *Crocus sativus linnaeus*, some 85,000 of which are needed to produce a single kilogram.

Some ‘top-quality’ saffron allegedly contains as little as 10 per cent of actual saffron.

Under international standards, the finest saffron should have only 0.5 per cent of “floral waste” and 0.1 per cent “extraneous matter”.

But the results of testing of 10 brands purchased and sent for analysis, passed on by the amateur cook to *The Independent*, suggest that the use of other parts of the crocus range from between 40 per cent and 90 per cent.

In other words, some “top-quality” saffron allegedly contains as little as 10 per cent of actual saffron.

Saffron is native to south-west Asia and traces of it have been identified in 50,000-year-old Iranian



Pure saffron, from the stigma of crocus flowers, is harvested between dawn and 10am to achieve maximum colour and aroma. PICTURE: AP

cave art. The industry thrived in 16th-century England, and it was introduced during that period to the Americas — when it was equal in price to gold.

Adulteration has been a problem for at least 600 years. Epidemic levels in the 15th century led to the Safranschou code, under which saffron adulterators were fined, imprisoned or executed.

Less dramatically, adulteration of saffron surfaced in Britain in West Yorkshire 11 years ago when trading standards officers launched an investigation into allegations that stigmas, the tip of the plant's pollen-

collecting buds, were being bulked out with worthless material.

Since then, the problem seemed to disappear but the anonymous saffron purchaser noticed a deterioration four years ago, when saffron started to become even weaker.

“I have a passion for cooking. I always use the best ingredients and lately I started to look at the quality and think there was a problem,” the cook recalled.

“There was something wrong with the saffron.”

On the basis of the laboratory reports he has received, exporters

Try before you buy, says Melbourne spice merchant

MOST saffron used in Australia comes from Iran, the primary grower of the world's saffron and producer of about 170 tonnes a year.

Fitzroy spice merchant Peter Watson says that while saffron is one of the world's most exotic and expensive spices, selling for \$6 to \$30 a gram, there is no question it is an increasingly “dicey commodity”.

“A lot of saffron that comes out of Iran and Iraq is highly suspect,” he says, adding that some lacks the heady aroma and gutsy flavour of the real deal.

Watson sources his saffron from a supplier in Spain who personally accompanies the precious crocus strands across the waters.

Australia's saffron industry is small but burgeoning, with Tas-Saff the umbrella body for about 50 growers here and in New Zealand.

Australia produces about 10 kilograms a year and there are comparable industries in New Zealand, Switzerland and Italy. Spain produces about five tonnes a year.

Spanish saffron is hard to find. City restaurant MoVida switched to Iranian saffron a couple of years ago because of inconsistent supply.

The problem with much of the Iranian saffron, according to Nicky Noonan of Tas-Saff, is that the Middle East lacks the stringent quality-control laws of Australia.

Australian saffron is graded Extra Category 1 but, she says, much of the saffron from Iran rates a much lower

grading of Category 3 or 4.

Authentic saffron is rich and sweetly pungent, with a distinctly earthy smell and flavour and brilliantly vivid golden or red strands.

MoVida chef Dave Roberts says it should be a long, single strand, uniform in colour and wiry to the touch. “It shouldn't be too fresh,” he says.

“The best saffron is about a year old from being picked.”

MoVida uses Novin saffron, which Roberts says is among the best he's seen.

Essential Ingredient's Syd Weddell says Spanish saffron has a sweet tobacco character, while the Iranian has an earthier flavour.

Watson recommends roasting the strands in a medium oven (about 180C) for five minutes to release the flavour. He also advises asking the retailer for a sample before buying.

Roberts says soaking the strands in water is not the way to go; MoVida's method is to fry them in oil to release the flavour.

NINA ROUSSEAU

Australian saffron is sold at Essential Ingredient for \$20.40 a gram; Fitzroy's Casa Iberica stocks Spanish Marosa for \$9.90 a gram and Iranian pure saffron for \$6.95 a gram; Leo's Fine Foods stocks Iranian Four Leaves for \$5.99 a gram; Peter Watson stocks Spanish saffron, which costs \$20 for two grams. See novinsaffron.com for online sales.

appear to be mixing in other parts of the crocus after dyeing them with artificial additives.

It would be much cheaper than using 100 per cent stigmas, which must be harvested between dawn and 10am, otherwise they lose colour and aroma. “They are making loads of money out of this,” the investigator said.

Confirming its investigation, the Food Standards Agency said: “The FSA takes all allegations of food fraud very seriously, which is why it is working closely with Spanish counterparts to discover whether there is any truth in the allegations

of fraudulent saffron being placed on the market.”

The publicly funded watchdog stressed the alleged problem was a “food fraud, not a food safety, issue”.

“There are specialised laboratories in Spain which are carrying out tests on alleged adulterated saffron,” it said in a statement.

“The agency is liaising closely with the Spanish authorities who are organising these tests. If fraud has taken place, the agency will alert consumers to the fact that they may be being misled.”

THE INDEPENDENT

OFF THE SHELF AUSTRALIAN EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL

Mount Zero extra-virgin olive oil

\$19.85, 375ml

Soon it may be better to have a tasting with oils made for all purposes and oils for finishing dishes. While you can use this rich, deep-golden oil in cooking, it seems a waste not to enjoy the peppery hit on the back palate and the herbaceous, savoury notes on the nose that lead into a mouthful balanced with some gentle fruit. It's expensive and would be great to finish a rich cannellini bean and garlic soup or, for summer, pour it over a Caprese salad of buffalo mozzarella, basil and plump, sweet tomatoes.

9/10

Raw Materials Everyday Australian extra-virgin olive oil

\$17.95, 640ml

In what looks like a longneck beer bottle, this is greeny-golden with slightly green herb character on the nose. Imagine the scent of mixed fresh herbs such as parsley, thyme, rosemary and chives — the smell is a toned-down version. This is sold as an everyday oil. It is mild with a little grassy, earthy character, finished with a gentle fruitiness on a lingering back palate. The mildness lends itself to use on salads, but cook with it if you want to — it's a good, balanced oil.

8/10

Cobram Estate extra-virgin olive oil

\$7.99, 375ml

A yellow-golden oil that is quite assertive in its fruitiness on the nose. The flavour is a little short on the palate but still has a lovely, fresh punch that doesn't overpower the sourdough bread that it's tasted with, rather it complements it. The fruitiness would go well poured over a plate of steamed green vegies, such as green beans or broccoli.

7/10

Red Island extra-virgin olive oil

\$10.64, 500ml

A pale, golden yellow oil, with a good, fruity nose. Designed as an all-purpose olive oil, its taste makes it the perfect all-rounder because it's very mild and would be good in gentle cooking, particularly delicate fish fillets such as King George Whiting or John Dory. It's not the best oil to use to finish a dish, being better suited to playing a support act than a leading role.

6/10

HILARY McNEVIN

