

The Art of Risotto

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Risotto is the most sumptuous of all foods. The creamy and still toothy Italian rice brought to a creamy, flowing cheesy puddle of joy through careful and non-stop stirring makes risotto, though simply rice, stock, butter and cheese, a world class dish of high art. It seems unpretentious enough. But it's not that simple.

The secret to great risotto is the rice. A short-starchy nub of a grain grown specifically for Risotto is the perfect and only choice for the dish. Such varieties of rices have the ability to absorb liquids and to release starch and so they are stickier than the long grain varieties. The principal varieties used in Italy are Arborio, Baldo, Carnaroli, Padano, Roma, and Vialone Nano. Carnaroli and Vialone Nano are considered to be the best (and most expensive) varieties, with different users preferring one over the other. Rice designations of Superfino, Semifino and Fino refer to the size and shape (specifically the length and the narrowness) of the grains, and not the quality. One of my favorite Italian rices is Riso Venero Nero which is a hybrid black rice produced by crossing a short grain Italian rice with an exotic Chinese black rice. The result is a short, starchy and very nutty flavored rice that smells like popcorn when cooking. This risotto is dramatic and makes a huge WOW when presented on a plate.

The other secret to great risotto is technique. All risottos, except sweet dessert recipes, start the same way. Fat, either butter or olive oil are heated gently in pan and then a *soffrito* (aromatic vegetables such as: shallots, onions, garlic, carrots, celery and fennel) are added and sweated until they are soft and very fragrant, but not browned. The rice is added and stirred very thoroughly until each grain of rice is coated with the fat. This is called *tostatura* and is an important step ensuring that the starch releases slowly and not all at once. Then red or white wine are added and cooked until absorbed. Hot broth is added to the mixture by the cupful and the rice is stirred gently, almost constantly until the mixture is very creamy and the rice grains are separate while still *al dente* or firm in the center" to the tooth". At that point it is taken off the heat for the *mantecatura* when diced cold butter and finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese are vigorously stirred in to make the texture as creamy and smooth as possible. It may be removed from the heat a few minutes earlier, and left to cook with its residual heat. Seafood and fish risotti generally do not include cheese.

Perfect risotto is fairly fluid, or *all'onda* ("wavy, or flowing in waves"), and is served on flat dishes and it should easily spread out and not hold a shape but not have excess watery liquid around the perimeter. It must be eaten at once as it continues to cook in its own heat and can become too dry with the grains too soft.

If all of this sounds confusing and like a huge *potchkey*, do not despair. Once you get the hang of it, risotto is only a wooden spoon and some stirring away from your table. I find making risotto very satisfying and cathartic. The raw rice transforming into a comforting and delicious dish all before my eyes is truly a labor of love and joy. Other than the technique, there are few rules for making risotto. Use your favorite vegetables, spices, herbs and garnishes. Learn the technique and then let your imagination run wild.

You need a few common tools: Two 3+ quart saucepans (one for the risotto and one for the hot stock), a wooden spoon, and a gorgeous serving platter. You will also need Risotto rice. Many grocery stores and specialty markets carry the Italian specialty rice. The rice can easily be purchased on-line. Homemade stock adds rich-intense flavor to risotto. While chicken stock is the classic liquid for risotto, I use homemade vegetable stocks and achieve amazing results that are full flavored and of course, kosher.

Risotto Primavera (Springtime Risotto)

Though risotto is usually served as a *Primo* or first course, this riotously colored concoction is a meal in a bowl. If you want to add roasted salmon to gild the lily, this luscious risotto will satisfy the heartiest of appetites. Serve with salad and crusty bread and smile with satisfaction knowing you have created art.

For the stock

8 cups water

3 medium carrots, roasted until golden brown and rough chopped

1 medium onion, roasted until golden and rough chopped

2 large leeks, roasted until golden and rough chopped

6 cloves garlic, roasted and chopped

½ cup mushroom stems, roasted and chopped

1 ounce dried porcini mushrooms

½ cup chopped tomatoes, fresh or canned

Several fresh thyme sprigs and parsley stems

1. Place all of ingredients for the stock in a large saucepan and bring to a simmer. Simmer, uncovered, for 45 minutes. Turn off the heat and allow the vegetables to steep for 1 hour.
2. Strain the stock through a colander. Discard the vegetables. Cool the stock before storing. The stock can be stored, covered, in the refrigerator for up to 5 days or frozen for 2 months.

For the Risotto

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

2 medium shallots, minced finely

3 cloves garlic, minced finely

2 cups Risotto rice

1 cup dry white wine

7 cups vegetable stock

6 tablespoons cold butter, cut into pieces

1 cup parmesan cheese, grated

Kosher salt and freshly cracked pepper

½ cup mascarpone cheese (optional)

1. Heat the stock to a simmer and continue simmering while cooking the rice.
2. Place a medium saucepan over medium heat. Add the oil, shallot and garlic and sweat the vegetables until they are translucent and very soft (about 5 minutes). Add the rice and stir to coat the grains with the oil. The rice will take on opaque sheen after 2 minutes.

3. Add the wine and increase the heat to medium high. Stir constantly until the wine has been absorbed. Once the wine has been absorbed, add one cup of hot stock and stir until completely absorbed. Continue adding stock and cooking until the rice is very creamy and flowing, you may not need all of the stock.
4. Remove the risotto from the heat and add the cold butter and cheese. Return the pan to the heat and vigorously stir the risotto trying to get a little air worked into to the mix (this makes the risotto creamier) until the butter has melted. Salt and pepper to taste.
5. Add the spinach puree and vegetables as desired. Serve immediately and garnish with a dollop mascarpone cheese if desired.

For the vegetables

The pureed spinach turns the risotto bright green and adds a sweet flavor. Use some or all of the spring vegetables for this risotto. They key is to use in-season produce for the best flavor.

There are no rules for making this delicious and versatile dish, use whatever you have in your pantry.

3 cups Fresh or frozen baby spinach, pulsed in a food processor to become a puree
1 cup baby or small carrots, blanched and shocked*and diced
1 bunch white asparagus, roasted and diced
½ cup petit English peas, fresh or frozen
2 cups sugar snap peas, blanched and shocked and cut into thirds
¼ chopped Fresh mint
¼ cup chopped Fresh parsley

1. Heat a large saute pan, lightly coated with evoo or butter and saute veggies, in batches, until lightly golden. Be sure to season each batch with salt and pepper.

Strawberry Dessert Risotto

This rice pudding is gorgeous and delicious. I have served this on dessert buffets for VIP events and have wowed my family at home with this creamy, sweet and care-free dessert.

I make this version dairy with butter, milk and mascarpone. If you want to make it pareve, eliminate the butter and use a neutral oil (such as canola) and coconut milk for creaminess and flavor.

1 cup Riso Venere Nero (black risotto rice)
4 cups whole milk or coconut milk for pareve preparation
1/2 cup sugar
1 vanilla bean scraped
¼ cup mascarpone cheese (eliminate this for pareve preparation)
Pinch of sea salt

Garnishes: chopped strawberries, mascarpone cheese, sea salt

1. Place the rice, milk, sugar, vanilla and salt in a medium saucepan. Simmer over low heat, stirring occasionally until the rice is soft and very creamy (about 20 minutes). Remove from heat and stir in the mascarpone cheese.
2. Chill the rice pudding completely. Spoon into dessert glasses and garnish with chopped berries, additional mascarpone if desired and sea salt.