

# The Saffron Trail

"In saffron-coloured mantle, from the tides of ocean rose the morning to bring light to Gods and men."

*Homer*

The golden trail of saffron that spread across the globe began on the plains of Sumer, the legendary location of the Garden of Eden now geographically known as southern Iraq, over five thousand years ago. Whoever in those sun-baked hills first paid attention to the curiously late-flowering, pure purple *crocus sativus* plants discovered in the three delicate red stigmas an alchemical miracle: the potential to colour up to 10,000 times their own volume a powerful and almost hypnotic shade of golden yellow. But those delicate threads, once dried, proved capable of more than the transformation of colour; they imparted a pungent, tenacious aroma to food and provided dishes with a gloriously subtle bittersweet flavour. Still more, they proved capable of soothing injuries, restoring spiritual equilibrium, inducing passion. Is it any wonder that the lively Sumerians, robust traders of most produce, never traded saffron during the two millennia of their empire? They found so many uses for it, many employed in sacred rituals to honour their Gods, that they preserved their scant treasure.

The divine Sumerian King, Gilgamesh, who ruled the city-state of Uruk at some point between 2800BC and 2500BC, employed a perfumer named Tapputi-Belatekallim who recorded how she gathered the crocus flowers in order to make a medicine to heal her monarch's weary bones: *At dawn I gather balsam from the forest and saffron hidden in the dry grass...for seven sunrises and seven sunsets the mixture purifies and then is rubbed upon the limbs while singing the praise which is appropriate for the God.* At other times, burnt saffron was mixed with pomegranate seeds, myrtle, oak, sumac, cumin and aloe and was added to the strong Sumerian beer in order to cure the King's stomach ache. The Arabic words *sahafarn*, meaning thread, and *za'faran*, meaning yellow, would seem to have been combined at this time to create the descriptive word for the revered spice.

The eventual collapse of the Sumerian civilisation around 2000BC, caused by agricultural failures and aggressive neighbours, allowed other peoples to benefit from the sophistication of that determinedly isolated group. The Persians, the Phoenicians, the Minoans, the Greeks learned both to cherish the *crocus sativus* flower and to cultivate it, for as the Sumerians discovered, without human intervention, the flower could not propagate itself. These Levantine regions, often mountainous, always baked by the sun, shared the same kind of loose, loamy soil that the flower required to flourish and now, its value becoming known and envied in a growing number of countries, we can see it become a much-desired trading component.

The Phoenicians' trading vigour saw them extend to both East and West and it is believed that the saffron fields of Kashmir in north India, still today one of the key growing regions, arose from the trade in *crocus sativus* corms by enterprising Phoenician traders; the flower is certainly not indigenous to the region and therefore would have had to be

imported. Far away in the opposite direction, saffron became a staple of the diet of the Cornish people of West England – still enjoyed by them in the traditional Saffron Cake – after the Phoenician traders began to exchange saffron for Cornish tin.

The Minoans of ancient Crete were known to value saffron and in the frescoes which were found in the ancient palace of Knossos on the island, young girls and monkeys are depicted harvesting the flower. Not far away, on the Aegean island of Santorini, other frescoes showed a Minoan goddess supervising the plucking of flowers and the picking out of the red stigmas. Historians believe that the Minoans, learning from the Sumerians, developed the use of saffron as a drug and one fresco from the period shows a woman bathing her wounded foot in a saffron bath.

The Persians incorporated Sumerian skills and developed them to master the art of dyeing with saffron and the brilliance of their intricate carpet designs soon depended upon the yellow dye to achieve their lustre. Millions of crocus sativus corms were planted in huge farms across the country both to meet the homegrown demand for luxury carpets, and to supply the rapidly growing export market in dyed carpets and cloth. The early Persian *Zend* texts refer to *kunkuma*, a word which may have had links with the Sanskrit regions of western India, where the Persians were known to trade. Other variations of the word appeared as *karkom*, a Hebrew term, and *kurkuma* in Syria.

Other nations took up the idea of using saffron to achieve such a startling colour transformation and saffron dye came to be associated across Europe with notions of luxury. Before long, the brides of ancient Rome were covering their faces with a veil they called the *flammeum*, a luxury saffron-dyed lace which literally meant 'flame-coloured', while the most select cadre of Ancient Greek courtesans, the *hetaerae*, were identified by their saffron-dyed dresses.

In Ancient Greece, saffron really took hold as a symbol both of wealth and of culture. The growing fields of Crete, Cilicia and Rhodes were supplemented by the saffron from around the town of Krokos in Macedonia, where saffron is still grown today and whose name still echoes with the ancient myths. Two tales are told of the name: the first tells of the handsome youth Crocus who stumbled upon the beautiful nymph Smilax dancing in the forest. Inevitably he fell in love and pressed his ardour upon the beautiful creature who, eventually, returned his favour. But as nymphs so often did, she soon lost patience with the lovestruck young man and forbade him from approaching her. When he ignored her command, she had him turned into a small purple flower with a beating red heart. The other story concerning the name describes Krokos as a young Spartan and friend of the God Hermes. One day, while playing, Hermes struck his friend on the head by accident and he died. At the place he died, a blue flower grew and in the centre of it, three red stigmas to symbolise the blood shed by poor Krokos.

Saffron became inextricably linked with wealth and power in Ancient Greece and Rome. Zeus himself was said to sleep on a mattress stuffed with saffron, while frescoes still survive showing young women gathering the flower in the fields outside Athens. The poet Homer famously described the dawn during Odysseus's journey as "a saffron-coloured mantle". Saffron was scattered about the halls and amphitheatres of both civilisations as a delicate odouriser, while the nobility took to soaking themselves in hot baths infused with the red stigmas of the flower. The wealthy townspeople of Rhodes took to wearing pouches containing saffron around their necks to cover up the smell of their unwashed fellow citizens at the theatre.

It was both the Persians and the Egyptians who took the refinement of saffron to giddy heights of sensuality, both as an aphrodisiac and as a perfume to inspire love. The Persian recipes were held as a warning by the more warlike Greeks, who believed that their military strength could be sapped by the aphrodisiacal qualities of Persian saffron. The pugnacious Alexander the Great, however, became so enamoured of the sybaritic Persian traditions around saffron that he regularly bathed his injured limbs in saffron water and insisted on a cocktail of wine infused with saffron before his dinner. Wherever he travelled later in life, he always took with him his Persian cooks who were well stocked with saffron.

The Egyptians meanwhile became experts in aromatics, bottling perfumes infused with saffron which to this day inspire the luxury perfume houses of Europe. Cleopatra was so enamoured of the spice that she would have a quarter of a cup emptied into her bath before she was due to meet one of her paramours. Egyptian alchemists would prepare potions to be used as romantic scents, while medicinal bottlers would prepare recipes to ease the strains on the stomach. The Egyptian compendium of medicine, the Ebers Papyrus of 1600BC, detailed the use of saffron as both perfume and cosmetic.

By the time of the Middle Ages, the courts of Europe were not slow to make use of saffron as an indicator of power and prestige. Henry II of England attempted to ban the use of saffron amongst ordinary people as a colourant, so that he could restrict its use just to the Royal Court. Later on, Henry VIII went further, outlawing the use of saffron by the people of Ireland and stating by Royal Decree that pure saffron could only be used by the Court and the nobility of England. English Royal ladies would stain their fingernails with saffron, even use it to tint their hair and to give their lips the appearance of gold. The city of Basle in Switzerland adopted the saffron crocus as part of the city's coat of arms. The Crusaders returned from the Middle East in the 12th and 13th centuries with examples of saffron cloths and other dyes and soon even a fairly unambitious English noble household, that of Eleanor, Countess of Leicester, was showing saffron as a regular account item.

The trade guilds of medieval Europe were not slow to regulate the business across the Continent. Saffron was included amongst other spices to be controlled in England by the Guild of Peppers, which was established in 1180, and in 1316 the Guild ordered that ordinary people should not be allowed to bathe in saffron-infused water, nor could they use it as a perfume. A new standardised ticketing system was introduced to identify the highest quality saffron bales entering Europe from the Levant and the Far East.

When the plague virus of the Black Death of the 14th century began to be treated by apothecaries with saffron, the price of the spice escalated even higher and inevitably, it became the source of conflict. In 1374, a group of Austrian nobles, down on their luck after successive harvest failures, the effects of an earthquake and the devastation of the plague, decided to intercept a horse-pulled train of cargo heading for the city of Basle. It turned out that the train bore 800lb of saffron, valued at today's prices at approximately half a million US dollars; it was particularly good saffron, picked from the hilltops of Rhodes. The citizens of Basle, outraged, declared war on the nobles and, by implication, the king of Austria himself, Leopold, who supported his kinsmen. For fourteen weeks the nobles held on to their precious booty as skirmishes raged until eventually the Bishop of Basle agreed a truce by which the saffron was returned and King Leopold was given the town of Kleinbasel as recompense. The Saffron War demonstrated just how valuable a commodity the spice had become.

During the Middle Ages, Nuremberg became the focal point for European saffron trading, with arrivals of fresh saffron coming into the city from all over. So busy was the trade that the rulers of the city, one of Europe's most vibrant trading cities, inaugurated the Safranschou in 1358, a new regulation for the inspection and approval of saffron quality as it came into the city and then left it. It was a difficult task, as with so many sources of the spice, the quality level varied enormously depending on the growing conditions. But the new Safranschou law was also brought in to deal with the inevitable increase in tampering with the quality. Unscrupulous traders would be accused of storing their sacks of saffron in a damp basement in order to increase the weight of their product. Some suppliers were discovered to have dipped their saffron in honey before drying the stigmas over coals, thus increasing the weight. Sacks of saffron in the huge central market hall of Nuremberg were minutely examined to see if a trader had mixed in other red-coloured materials such as the stigmas of lilies in order to bulk up the order.

The new law was no empty threat. Those traders who were found to have adulterated their saffron stock were jailed in the notorious dungeons of the city, awaiting trial. If found guilty of tampering with their saffron, they could face the kind of terrible retribution which met saffron trader Hans Kolbele, whose bones were broken by being dragged through the streets behind a horse. Once killed, his mouth was stuffed with the impure saffron he had been hawking, and he was buried. The Safranschou meant business.

The golden trail of saffron continued to spread around the world. Having been introduced to Kashmir in the north of India by Phoenician traders, the spice spread into China and became a favoured application of Buddhist monks. The early Chinese medical text Shennong Ben Cao Jing makes reference to Saffron while the Chinese doctor Wan Zhen wrote several pieces about the Kashmiri origin of Chinese saffron and how its aroma could be used to liven up wine.

It is also said that a diplomat from the northern Indian territory of Gapi first presented saffron as a gift to the court of Tang in China in 647AD. The plant was called "yu jin xiang", or "yu gold aromatic". Soon it became a staple of polite diplomatic exchanges between India and China, with the spice being used not just to flavour wine but by the eighth century being noted as an excellent material to dispel bad odours and to eliminate demonic possessions in the body. Soon it was being used in China by the wealthy elite as a perfume too.

The official memoir of the seventeenth-century Kashmir emperor Jahângîr described the saffron harvest in detail:

"As the saffron was in blossom, His Majesty left the city to go to Pâmpûr, which is the only place in Kashmir where it flourishes. Every fields, as far as the eye could reach, was covered in flowers. The stem inclines towards the ground. the flower has five violet petals, and three stigmas yielding saffron are found within it. This is the purest saffron. It is the established custom to weigh the flowers, and give them to the manufacturers, who take them home and extract the saffron from them, and upon giving the extract, which amounts to about one-fourth weight of the flower, to the public officers, they receive in return an equal weight of salt, in lieu of money wages."

There are alternative views, however, on the spread of saffron to the East. Other Kashmir legends say that saffron first arrived in the country in the eleventh century AD when two Sufi ascetics named Khwaja Masood Wali and Hazrat Sheikh Shariffudin arrived and immediately fell sick. When the local Kashmir chieftain had his women revive them, the

two men gave him a saffron bulb in gratitude and in some parts of Kashmir, the two Sufis are still praised every saffron harvest and in the Indian town of Pampore, where the spice has traditionally been traded, there is a golden-topped shrine in their name. Other legends say that saffron arrived in Kashmir with an Indian Buddhist missionary called Madhyântika who was said to have brought saffron bulbs with him to plant.

Spain and Portugal, both countries sharing at higher altitudes the same favourable conditions for growing as Greece and Persia, began to cultivate the saffron corm from about the end of the tenth century. The Umayyad conquest of Spain had begun in the eighth century and there was to be a dominant Muslim presence in the Iberian peninsula until the final victory of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain over the Moors in 1492. It was the high plains of La Mancha in Spain where saffron growing became so embedded, at its heart the town of Consuegra where the famous saffron pickers, the *mondadori*, would spend their days in the shaded kitchens during the late picking season plucking the red stigmas from the purple flowers.

Other regions of Europe cultivated the spice during the Middle Ages. In Italy, the farmers around San Gimignano began to grow *crocus sativus* from the 13th century on and soon became so renowned for the quality of their dried product that they issued a currency for the town based purely on the value each year of the saffron yield. The famous towers of San Gimignano were built upon the profits of the saffron growers.

Legend has it that England became a grower of saffron first in the 14th century when a pilgrim returned from a crusade to his home town of Walden in Essex with a single saffron corm hidden in the handle of his staff. He must have been advised by growers in the Middle East how to care for the bulb, because within a few years that single corm had spread to become fields of the purple crocus flowering in late autumn. It turned out the chalky earth of East Anglia was perfect for the combination of drainage and sun required to sustain the crocus corm. So significant was the impact of this one defiant act of agricultural smuggling that the town of Walden officially changed its name to Saffron Walden during the 1540s.

The town of Saffron Walden made much of its newly appreciated status as the home of saffron. The petals of *crocus sativus* were carved into the church wall, while the profits of the industry paid for the complete rebuilding of the Church of St Mary The Virgin. A tax was imposed on the trade in saffron and soon there is evidence of Saffron Walden's spice fields being included in the Wills of wealthy nobles. Henry VIII officially approved the change of the town's name in a charter which was decorated with crocus petals. In 1594, John Norden, an amateur historian of the town, described in detail how important the spice was: "About the town of Walden growth great store of saffron whose nature in yielding her fruite is verie strange and bideth the labourer to greate travaile and diligence, and yet at length yealdeth no small advantage to re-comforte him agayne." Measwhile, the Reverend William Harrison in the 1580s talked of how "the floure beginneth to appear of a whitish blue and hath in the midst there of three chives, verie red and pleasant to behold."

Later on, in the eighteenth century, English writers such as William Clark were still hailing the superiority of their saffron compared to European imports. He wrote: "Saffron produced and brought from Spain is greatly inferior to ye English on account of ye oylls the Spaniards use in drying it loose and not pressed cakes as the English do." However, his patriotic support of English saffron was not enough to stop the eventual collapse of the industry in Britain, and by the start of the nineteenth century the saffron fields of Saffron Walden and Eastern England were no more.

Saffron finally made its way across the Atlantic in the 17th century when various groups of those persecuted in mainland Europe for their religious beliefs decided to seek safety and a new life in the New World. Anabaptists, who not only disagreed with Roman Catholics but also took exception to Luther's teachings, span out into the Mennonites who in turn bred the Amish and the German Dunkards and Schwenkfelders – step by step, these Protestant families deliberately sought out what they considered to be the pure life. In 1683, the first families landed in the New World, founded the town of Germantown and began to live alongside the English Puritan settlers. Soon, the families who became generally if inaccurately known as the Dutch Settlers were planting the crocus corms they had brought with them in order to grow the flowers which produced the spice on which their cuisine depended. The English had never taken to saffron as a cooking ingredient in the same way their Continental cousins had, and before long the fields of Philadelphia glittered in late summer with the splendid late arrival of the purple crocus. And before long, the Dutch merchants were sending some of their crop down to the Caribbean in order to supply the Spaniards who were established there, so many miles away from the crocus fields of La Mancha.

Saffron has spread all over the globe, as some the variations of its name attest:

Portugal	agafráo
Spain	azafran or safra
Holland	saffraan
Turkey	zaferen
Russia	shafran
Malaysia	safárum
France	safran
Hungary	sáfrány
Poland	szafran
Iran	kurkum
India	kesar or zafran
China	fan-nung-hua
Japan	safuran
Italy	zafferano
Germany	saffran
Armenia	khekhrum
Kashmir	kongs
Greece	krókos
Wales	saffrwm
Croatia	šafraan
Vietnam	nghe tây

Today, saffron is cultivated the world over in varying quantities and qualities. Some of the most luxurious and refined saffron is now made in smaller, boutique fields across the globe, from Portugal to Vermont. The total annual production of dried saffron is estimated to be around 325 tonnes a year, with almost ninety per cent of the world's harvest being grown in the Khoraqsan province of Iran, and the second biggest producer being the Kashmir region of India, although this spice-loving nation tends not to export the majority of its crop. Spain

and Portugal achieve over \$55 million US in exports of the highest quality saffron every year, with Afghanistan next at \$45 million US, China at \$7 million US and France at almost \$5 million US. Smaller harvests occur in England, Turkey, Morocco, Switzerland, Israel, Aserbaijan, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Tasmania, North America, Mexico, Italy. Over the last five years, the world has seen a significant increase in the production and exporting of saffron, as tastes in growing economies around the world identify the importance of this historic ingredient.