

Bouillabaisse-marinated prawns with saffron aioli

I developed this recipe while dreaming up hors d'oeuvres for my father-in-law's 70th birthday party. I like bouillabaisse and I like prawns. It was as simple as that.



Makes: 30

Time: 1¼ hours total

For the marinade:

1 tsp lemon zest

1 tsp orange zest

3 tbsps lemon juice

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6 tbsps extra virgin olive oil

3 tbsps Pernod (or similar)

1½ tbsps minced garlic

½ tsp dried chilli flakes

1 tsp ground fennel

1½ tsps concentrated tomato paste

¾ tsp (regular table) salt

¾ tsp ground black pepper

1½ tsps sugar

1 tbsp minced parsley

1½ tsps minced thyme

30 medium-large prawns

olive oil for frying

minced parsley or fennel fronds for garnish

For the saffron aioli:

240ml stiff mayonnaise (see below for recipe)

a pinch of saffron threads

1 small garlic clove

salt to taste

1. Peel and de-vein the prawns, leaving the tails on.
2. Mix the marinade ingredients together in a bowl. Toss prawns with marinade and leave to marinate for 30-40 mins, tossing occasionally.
3. Crumble saffron into very hot (but not boiling) water and stir. Leave saffron water to infuse for 20 mins. Peel and crush garlic to a smooth pulp (using a pestle and mortar or with the side of your knife against the work surface). Mix saffron water and garlic paste into mayonnaise until well-blended. NB You may not wish to add all of the garlic, depending on the size of your clove. Taste and season with salt as desired. Chill until needed.
4. Heat a little olive oil in a frying pan until very hot and shimmering. Lift prawns out of marinade and fry in batches, just very briefly on each side until slightly coloured but not quite cooked through. NB Reserve the marinade.
5. Return all prawns and the marinade to the pan and simmer for 1 minute while stirring. Lift prawns out with a slotted spoon.
6. Serve prawns warm with saffron aioli as a dipping sauce. Or let prawns cool to room temperature, store in fridge until needed (no more than a day), then bring back to room temperature before serving. Garnish with a sprinkling of minced parsley or fennel fronds if desired.

To make your own mayonnaise:

'Proper' way – by hand:

- Bring an egg to room temperature. Separate yolk from white and place yolk in a bowl that you have run under warm water and then dried. If the yolk is too cold it will be hard to make it emulsify with the oil.
- Place a tiny dollop ($\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp) of Dijon mustard, a squirt ($\frac{1}{2}$ -1 tsp) of lemon juice and a pinch of salt on the yolk. These all help the yolk emulsify with the oil. Or, just add the salt and then add the mustard and lemon juice later, once your mayonnaise starts to stiffen. The first way makes it easier to get the emulsion started, whereas the second way makes the mayonnaise more stable – ie less likely to break if left to sit around for a while. There are various complicated chemical reasons for this which I cannot bring myself to elaborate. Pros and cons to each method - the choice is yours.
- Whisk up the yolk, adding in the smallest drizzle of olive oil. Then, whisking constantly, add in approx 250ml (1+ cups) of oil in a slow, steady stream. Depending on how strong your olive oil is, you may wish to use a plain vegetable oil, eg sunflower, for between $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ of this amount. Using purely unrefined extra virgin olive oil might sound good, but will probably taste too strong and is also likely to make the mayonnaise split. If it gets really stiff, whisk in a little cold water. To make the whisking easier, you can place the bowl inside a saucepan lined with a tea towel, which holds it in place leaving you one hand for the whisk and one hand for the

jug of oil. Less than 100 years ago at least one pharmacist proclaimed that you could only create an emulsion by stirring in one direction only (ie clockwise *or* widdershins, not both), and another that a left-handed man simply had no chance of success. This sounds like a good excuse if you are left-handed, as whisking up mayonnaise by hand is a pain in the ****, especially in large quantities.

- If it looks like it's separating (ie not forming an emulsion), trying whisking like crazy for a while (in either direction), and if that doesn't work repeat the first two steps above with a new yolk and bowl, and then slowly add in your broken mayonnaise, whisking all the time.
- Finally, taste and season with salt – it will need a fair bit more. You may also wish to add a little more lemon juice or red wine vinegar and some pepper.

Cheat way - in the processor:

- Follow the same process as above except a) use the whole egg not just the yolk, and b) let the processor do the mixing while you drizzle in the oil through the spout in its lid. So much easier but not *quite* as good.

Saffron facts:

- 'Saffron' comes from the Arabic '*az-za'fran*', which in stems from a Semitic root meaning 'to be/become yellow'. Via the mediaeval Latin – '*safranum*' - the name spread to almost all European languages and many non European ones also. The word is recognisable in Hindi, Amharic, Finnish, Japanese, Hebrew and even Basque, to name but a few.
- Saffron is the dried stigma of a particular autumn flowering crocus, which was probably first cultivated in the Bronze Age in or near Greece. The crocus was selectively bred for its long red stigma, of which there are three in each flower, to the point where it cannot naturally reproduce and spread without the help of human hands. From Greece its cultivation spread eastwards to Persia and on to China, and also westwards through Europe and to America.
- It has long been prized for its unique properties – a potent ability to colour foods, paints and other materials bright yellow, an unusual bitter, earthy taste and a bizarre straw-like aroma. The colour is mainly due to *crocin*, a powerful carotenoid pigment; the flavour to *picrocrotin*, which probably evolved as a defence against predators; and the smell to the volatile *safranal*, which is released only once the stigma have been dried.
- It seems there is nothing saffron has not been used for – paint, food colouring, spice, perfume, cosmetics, magic potions, divine offerings and the treatment of some 90 illnesses. Cleopatra and Alexander the Great both bathed in it – she to make sex more pleasurable; he to cure battle wounds.
- So valued has it been that people have given their lives for it on a number of occasions. During the 14th century the Black Death in Europe caused demand to skyrocket, with saffron being imported by the shipload from

Mediterranean islands such as Rhodes. One such shipload, worth \$500,000 in today's money, was stolen by a group of nobleman, and the ensuing bout of saffron piracy led to the 14 week 'Saffron War' and the establishment of Basel as a safer, closer saffron producing centre. (Saffron crocuses are still grown in the Swiss mountains.) Later the European production and trade centre moved to Nuremberg, where rampant adulteration of saffron led to the *Safranschou code*, under which adulterers could be fined, imprisoned or even put to death.

- It is indeed very valuable – the most expensive spice you can buy. Not only does the crocus require very specific cultivation conditions, but it can also only be harvested and processed by hand. Each flower is open for just a few short hours, when it must be hand-picked. The stigma are then separated out by hand, and dried in the sun or over a fire. It would take you 200 hours of back-breaking labour to harvest enough crocuses (some 70,000) to yield 450g (1 lb) of saffron, for which you could then charge between \$500 and \$5000.
- The world's largest producer, by far, is Iran, followed by Spain, with some also coming from India, Greece, Azerbaijan, Morocco, and Italy. Production decreased in other European countries after the introduction of new exotic temptations such as coffee, tea, chocolate and vanilla. England used to produce a fair bit, with Saffron Walden in Essex being a major centre.
- Over the centuries saffron has become integral to many regions' traditional dishes, notably the Provençal bouillabaisse, risotto Milanese, Cornish saffron buns, Persian pilafs, Valencian paella, Indian biryanis. It pairs well with starches (rice, potatoes, couscous, pastry, bread), seafood, onions, eggs, tomatoes and dairy products (yoghurt, milk). Adding a touch to lamb and pork stews also works a treat.
- It is thought that the British hot cross bun used to contain saffron. They are traceable to the saffron crescent cakes made by the Phoenicians as offerings to Ashtoreth, goddess of fertility, from whose rites Easter was later developed by the Christians. Ashtoreth is worth getting to know. She has been widely worshipped for millennia, as Astarte by the ancient Egyptians, Aphrodite by the Greeks and of course Venus by the Romans, among other incarnations.
- Saffron may be expensive but a little goes a long way, so it's worth it. Good saffron will look bright orange-red, feel fresh and smell great. (Hence the deceptive red cellophane around saffron in those little supermarket jars.) The best is '*sargo*' from Iran, followed by Spanish '*coupe*', both of which can be hard to find. In which case you can confidently settle for '*pushal*' from La Mancha in Spain. Look out too for the array of 'boutique' saffrons now available from various random places, organic and all. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. Watch out for safflower masquerading as saffron, saffron threads mixed with the tasteless yellow crocus stamens or even red silk threads, or saffron powder cut with turmeric or paprika.

- If stored somewhere cool, dark and airtight saffron will keep pretty well for months if not years, but don't buy in bulk as it does lose some of its flavour with time. Some people recommend keeping it in the freezer, but I don't.
- Most recipes annoyingly call for 'a pinch'. The only way to work out how much you need is by developing a feel for it. A little does indeed go a long way, but don't use so little you end up not noticing it in the final dish. Then your pinch was only wasted. Unless the dish is already hot and liquidy, such as a braise or risotto, you should first crumble the threads and let them steep in a little hot, but not boiling, water (or stock, wine, milk etc) for 10-20 mins. Some people say it's also worth toasting the threads lightly first; others say this is a waste of time. Adding a little alcohol or oil to the steeping liquid is a good idea as not all of saffron's carotenoids are water-soluble.
- Not that you would, but don't eat saffron in large quantities, as that can be poisonous. Also, please don't try to pick your own – there is a very similar-looking crocus out there that is responsible for a number of DIY saffron-makers' deaths. Safer to stick to the little red cellophane packets.

Sources:

On Food and Cooking, Harold McGee, 2004

Real Flavours, Glynn Christian, 2005

www.wikipedia.org



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