

# Food & Think

A Heaping Helping of Food News, Science and Culture

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## Heirloom Rice, Forbidden and Otherwise

The other day I tried forbidden rice, a black grain that turns a deep violet color when cooked. I picked it up at the natural foods store, enticed by the look of the shiny onyx particles and the provocative name.

Other than licorice and blackberries (and the occasional forgotten slice of toast), there aren't a whole lot of black foods out there, so their appearance on a plate is always a little surprising. When served with brightly colored foods, like red pepper or mango, the inky rice looks downright striking.



Thai Forbidden Black Rice, Courtesy Flickr user Dayna McIsaac

It turns out that this heirloom rice, grown in China, is also naturally high in iron—it contains more than three times as much iron as regular brown rice, and sixteen times as much as glutinous white rice (although enriched white rice nearly matches it). As a whole grain, it is also high in fiber. Its flavor is slightly nutty, although I found it a bit bland (possibly because I omitted the salt that the cooking instructions advised), and its texture is smooth and firm—not at all sticky like glutinous rice.

The story behind the name, according to the company that sells it in the United States, Lotus Foods, is that the rice was once grown exclusively for emperors in China. Other sources claim it was believed to be an aphrodisiac. In any case, it is only one of several varieties of heirloom rice on the market that Uncle Ben never heard of.

Rice is a member of the grass family that grows wild in tropical and sub-tropical regions. According to *The Cambridge World History of Food*, rice may have been cultivated beginning 10,000 years ago in China, India and other Asian countries. There are about 40,000 varieties of rice, yet only a handful are familiar to most Americans.

In addition to forbidden rice, Lotus Foods also sells a Bhutanese red rice—intriguing if only for the novelty of eating something grown in Bhutan, a tiny, mountainous country that has prioritized “gross national happiness” over gross domestic product—and Kalijira, or “the prince of rice,” grown in Bangladesh and described as looking like miniature Basmati. The site includes recipes for each variety.

Unusual varieties of fair-trade rice grown in the terraces of the northern Philippines are sold under the name Eighth Wonder as part of a project to preserve heirloom rice and the communities and cultures that have formed around its production since ancient times. Sticky rice varieties include rust-red Kalinga Jekot and Mountain Violet. Ulikan is a long-grain russet-colored rice said to have an earthy aroma.

There are also heirloom varieties that originated closer to home. Carolina Gold Rice, a long-grain rice that was the dominant crop of the Carolina Territory and Georgia during the colonial and antebellum periods, became nearly extinct by the end of the Great Depression. It was revived in the 1980s by a Savannah plantation owner, who collected seeds from a seed bank and began cultivating it. It's not as colorful or as exotic as some Asian varieties, but its fans are partial to its delicate taste and texture.

Do you have a favorite variety of rice?

Posted By: Lisa Braman — Around the World, Cooking | Link | Comments (2)

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1. Malaysian Pulut Hitam black rice cooked with fresh pandan leaves (screwpine) and coconut milk, yumyum.

For savoury rice try Indian Basmati of the Selak or kernel varieties; fry it dry (after washing it) with whole warm spices like black and green cardamoms, casia, cloves, onion, garlic, ginger and last a bit of turmeric and finally cook it with a water, salt and a touch of coconut milk and pandan leaves.

Comment by michael pang-larsen — April 9, 2010 @ 7:51 pm

2. I find that the purple color comes out better if you mix one part forbidden rice with three parts white rice.

Comment by Laura Helmuth — April 12, 2010 @ 11:46 am

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