

## SAFFRON-SCENTED CHICKEN PILAF

Call me Scheherazade, but I'm in my turquoise gauze veil and jeweled slippers for this one. The cinnamon and lemony yogurt marinade gives the chicken a soft, perfumed tenderness; the saffron in the rice, itself studded with nuts and the musky breath of cardamom, is almost lit up with gold. Cook this and people will want gratefully to strew your path with rose petals for evermore.

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| <b>18 ounces chicken breast, cut into 1 x 1/2-inch-thick pieces (please don't get your ruler out: I mean this as an approx. guide only)</b> | <b>1 tablespoon unsalted butter</b>           |
| <b>3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons whole-milk yogurt</b>   | <b>2-3 tablespoons peanut oil</b>             |
| <b>juice of half a lemon</b>  | <b>2 1/4 cups basmati rice</b>                |
| <b>1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon</b>   | <b>3-4 cardamom pods, bruised</b>             |
| <b>1/2 teaspoon saffron threads</b>   | <b>juice and zest of 1 lemon</b>              |
| <b>1 generous quart chicken stock (instant bouillon concentrate is, as ever, fine)</b>  | <b>scant 1/4 cup cashew nuts</b>              |
|   | <b>scant 1/4 cup slivered almonds</b>         |
|   | <b>2 tablespoons pine nuts</b>                |
|   | <b>3-4 tablespoons shelled pistachio nuts</b> |
|   | <b>small bunch fresh parsley, chopped</b>     |

Marinate the chicken pieces in the yogurt, lemon and cinnamon for about an hour. Soak the saffron threads in the chicken stock.

Over medium heat, in a large pan with a lid, melt the butter along with 1 tablespoon oil and add the rice, stirring it to coat until glossy. Pour in the saffron and chicken stock, add the cardamom pods, lemon juice and zest and bring the pan to the boil, then clamp on a lid and turn the heat down to very low; a heat diffuser, if you've got one, would be good here. Cook like this for about 10-15 minutes, by which time the rice should have absorbed the liquid and be cooked through.

While the rice is cooking, shake the excess yogurt marinade off the chicken using a sieve. Then fry the meat in a hot pan with the remaining spoonful or so of oil, and do this in batches so that the chicken colors rather than just pallidly stews to cookedness.

When the rice is cooked, take it off the heat and fork through the pan-bronzed chicken pieces. Toast all the nuts except the pistachios, by simply shaking them in a dry frying pan over a medium heat until they color and begin to give off their waxy scent, and then add them to the pilaf along with the chopped parsley. Pile everything onto a plate and add a fabulously green sprinkling of slivered or roughly chopped pistachios.

Serves 6.