

## *Easy Rice Pilaf*

*When I was young and inexperienced, I used to say that you could judge a chef by his or her rice. That's probably because I could never seem to make decent rice. It always turned out starchy and mushy. Then, I learned to make this easy rice pilaf, and now I get perfect rice every time. You know, when you spoon it out of the pan and every grain falls apart separately. "Pilaf" is not a flavor, but rather a technique. Pilaf means to first sauté the rice then bake it in the oven. Sautéing the rice sears the outside and seals the starches inside so that the individual grains don't stick together after being cooked. Baking the rice in a covered container then steams and cooks it. You can use the pilaf technique with a variety of rice types (white, brown, wild grain) and for any flavor you want. The nice thing about serving rice as a side dish is that you can make it before you cook the rest of the meal and hold it in the oven on low heat. I've included a couple of other styles of rice that use the same pilaf cooking technique but have slightly different ingredients that complement certain dishes in this book. My instructions for these variations assume that you have already mastered the basic Easy Rice Pilaf.*

### *Ingredients*

2 TBS canola oil  
1/2 cup yellow or white onion, cut small dice  
(about half an onion)  
1 clove garlic, cut fine brunoise  
1/2 tsp salt  
1/2 tsp freshly ground pepper  
1 cup rice (recommend Ben's Original converted)  
2-1/4 cups chicken stock (heated)  
2 sprigs fresh thyme  
1 bay leaf



### *Sautéing the Rice*

Heat the chicken stock in a small sauce pan with medium heat so that a little steam is rising from the surface, but it's not bubbling. If you see any bubbles, reduce the heat. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Heat a 4-quart sauté pan to medium heat. When hot, coat the bottom of the pan with oil and add the onions. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cook just until the onions are translucent (about 3 minutes). Do not brown them. Add the garlic and cook until fragrant (about 20-30 seconds). Add the rice, stir and cook until it becomes golden (about 3 minutes). You just want to sear the outside of all the grains but not actually brown the rice. Measure one cup of hot chicken stock and slowly pour it into the sauté pan. You will hear the rice sizzle and crackle. Stir. Measure another cup of hot chicken stock and pour it into the sauté pan. If the rice package calls for more than two cups of water, measure that extra quantity of chicken stock and pour it into the sauté pan. Add the thyme and bay leaves and stir.

### *Cooking the Rice*

Put the lid on the sauté pan and put the pan in the oven. Cook for 25 minutes. Do not open the oven or lift the lid off during this time. After 25 minutes, carefully remove the pan USING OVEN MITTS OR POTHOLDERS and set it on a trivet. Again, with an oven mitt or potholder, lift the lid and check the rice with a spoon. It should be done, and all the water should be gone. There may be holes on the surface of the rice. If there is still liquid in the pan, put it back in the oven, covered, for another 5 minutes then remove and put the pan back on the trivet. With tongs, remove the bay leaves and thyme sprigs. Depending on the type of onion, it will probably be dissolved into the rice.

### *Presentation*

You can hold the rice in the hot, covered sauté pan for about a half hour. If you need to hold it longer, set the oven to warm (about 100 degrees) and put the covered pan back in the oven. Serve on the side with your main dish. Serves 4-6 people.

### *The California Ingredient*

Californians have been growing rice for over 100 years. We are the number two rice producing state (behind Arkansas) and provide the United States with nearly all of its sushi rice. Virtually all California rice is grown in the Sacramento valley, just north of the city. The clay soils and plentiful water from Lake Oroville provide perfect conditions for growing rice. As a bonus, California rice fields are wetlands that provide habitat for 230 species of wildlife, many of which are species of special concern, threatened or endangered. Seven million ducks and geese migrating along the Pacific Flyway stop at the California rice fields each year. Hundreds of thousands of shorebirds nest in the fields year-round. One notable annual visitor, the Sandhill Crane, uses the rice fields to winter over before migrating farther North to breed in the spring. Lodi is host to the annual Sandhill Crane Festival in November.

### *Tips and Tricks*

The key to making perfect rice is achieving the exact ratio of liquid to rice. It's usually stated on the rice package. Generally, it's two parts water to one part rice, though some brands or types call for a little extra liquid. Notice that my ingredients list calls for 2-1/4 cups liquid for 1 cup rice. When you heat the stock, a little may boil off. That's why you want to start with a little extra liquid and measure it while it's hot.

Make sure that your sauté pan and lid are oven safe to at least 350 degrees. Generally, all stainless steel pans are oven safe, and even many lower priced pans with plastic handles are as well, but make sure you check before you put the pan in the oven.

Putting the sauté pan in the oven to cook the rice is a great idea until you forget that the pan is hot and grab the handle with your bare hand. I've done it--more than once. When you set the pan on the trivet on the counter, drape a potholder or oven mitt over the pot handle and lay another one on the lid handle. You can also buy handle covers that you slide on when you remove the pan from the oven.

## Easy Rice Pilaf-Caribbean Style

### Ingredients

2 TBS canola oil  
1/2 cup yellow or white onion, cut small dice (about half an onion)  
3/4 cup shredded coconut (sweetened)  
1/2 tsp salt  
1/2 tsp freshly ground pepper  
1 cup rice (recommend Ben's Original converted)  
2-1/4 cups chicken stock (heated)  
1 ripe mango, cut fine dice (page 205)

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Bring a 4-quart sauté pan to medium heat. When hot, add the oil. Add the onions and sprinkle the salt and pepper over the onions. Sauté the onions until they are translucent (about 3 minutes). Add the coconut and cook until it just starts to brown (about a minute), then add the rice and cook until it becomes golden (about 3 minutes). Add the hot chicken stock one cup at a time and stir. Put the lid on the sauté pan and put the pan in the oven. Cook for 25 minutes. Stir in the mango pieces just before serving.

## Easy Rice Pilaf-Mexican Style

### Ingredients

2 TBS canola oil  
1/2 cup yellow or white onion, cut small dice (about half an onion)  
1 tsp Goya Adobo all-purpose seasoning (blue lid)  
1 tsp Goya Sazón con Azafran seasoning (one 5-gram packet)  
1 cup rice (recommend Ben's Original converted)  
**1-3/4 cups** chicken stock (heated, note the different quantity than the other rice recipes)  
1/2 cup tomato sauce (no salt added)

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Bring a 4-quart sauté pan to medium heat. When hot, add the oil. Add the onions and sauté until they are translucent (about 3 minutes). Sprinkle both seasonings over the onions, then add the rice and cook until it becomes golden (about 3 minutes). Add the hot chicken stock 1 cup at a time and stir. Add the tomato sauce and stir. Put the lid on the sauté pan and put the pan in the oven. Cook for 25 minutes. *Remember your liquid to rice ratio!* Tomato sauce is almost all water, so you must reduce the amount of chicken stock by the amount of tomato sauce.



## Easy Rice Pilaf-Wild Rice Style

### *Ingredients*

2 TBS canola oil

1/2 cup yellow or white onion, cut small dice (about half an onion)

1 TBS Linda's Herb Seasoning (page 216)

1/2 tsp salt

1 cup wild rice mix (Recommend O Organics with Brown Basmati and Wild Rice)

2-1/4 cups chicken stock (heated)

2 sprigs fresh thyme

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Bring a 4-quart sauté pan to medium heat. When hot, add the oil. Add the onions. Sprinkle the seasoning mix and salt over the onions. Sauté the onions until they are translucent (about 3 minutes). Add the rice and cook until it becomes golden (about 3 minutes). Add the chicken stock 1 cup at a time. Add the thyme sprigs, put the lid on the sauté pan, and put the pan in the oven. Wild rice normally requires about 10 minutes longer in the oven than white rice (30 to 40 minutes), so follow the cooking times on the rice package.



### *Chef's Technique: Dicing a Mango*

You want a nearly ripe mango--one that is soft enough to eat but not too soft that it turns to mush. You want to be able to cut it into small pieces and have them hold their shape. The mango display at a typical grocery store will have mangos with a variety of ripeness levels, from fully ripe to rock hard. The first sign of ripeness is the color of the skin. The ripest mangos are all yellow and will give quite a bit if you gently press the skin. A good ripeness level for my salsa and rice recipes is about half yellow and half red skin color. If the mango skin is all red, it will probably not be ripe enough. Any green will make the mango too hard to work with.

Cutting a mango is pretty easy, but there is a trick to doing it right. The mango has a thick, dense core at the center that is approximately the same shape as the mango itself. There is maybe 1/2 to 3/4 inch of flesh between the skin and the outside edge of this center core. Allrecpies.com has a pretty good video on how to peel and dice a mango. Here's the way I do it. Stand the mango up on its end. Looking down on it, you will notice that it is oblong. With your chef's knife or paring knife parallel to the longer part on each side of the stem, cut straight down, which cuts the mango into three approximately equal slices, such that you have two sides and the center. If you start feeling a lot of resistance from the harder core as you are cutting, tilt the knife a little outward toward the skin and cut around the core. Rotate the center piece, and cut the two soft strips (1/4 to 1/2 inch thick) off from around the core. Discard the core. On one of the large pieces, use the rim of an 8 to 12-ounce water glass to "scoop" out the soft flesh from the skin. A nice mango flesh "filet" should end up inside the glass. Repeat this for the other side and the two strips that you cut from the center piece. Cut the strips of flesh into 1/2-inch cubes.