

# THE MICROWAVE RISOTTO

Culinary fashion meets microwave phobia – and the microwave wins. When I mentioned in a foodie magazine in NZ you could make a great risotto in the microwave, it was so swamped by reader requests we had to print it in full.

I know full well there are cooks who need, *demand*, the ritual of stirring for 25 minutes or so. But what if you can't see the television from there?

## How to do it

The following quantities serve two or three as a light main course with salad etc or four or more as a first course, the traditional place for risotto in Italy. When I was first taught risotto in the kitchens of the august Cipriani Hotel, the chef said there was no need to use onion to start if you were using a good stock. Neither did he boil down wine with the raw rice, before adding stock, but you can.

Whether you use a small or large cup or a small bowl doesn't matter, as long as you use the same for the rice and the stock. The other ingredients are always adjusted to taste and circumstances anyway, including financial.

1 large cup vialone, arborio or carnaroli rice  
2 generous tablespoons butter  
2 ½ - 3 large cups suitable stock, which must not be salty or too strong  
75g/3oz Parmesan cheese, freshly grated  
Extra 1 or 2 tablespoons butter.

First fix in your mind the objective. A bowl of rice grains still *al dente* in the middle and held together by a luxurious emulsion of reduced stock, starch, butter and Parmesan. In Venice they like it *all'onde* or porridgy and in which you can make waves; elsewhere they like it to stand up for itself.

Heat the stock to boiling point in a measuring jug in the microwave, remove and then cover. Put the rice into a 2-litre microwave safe glass bowl and top with the first amount of butter. Cook on High for two or more minutes, stirring just once until the rice is well buttered and turning from solid to opaque around the edges, but not browning; except I rather like the toastiness this gives.

Pour on half the stock and then cook on High for five minutes. Remove the bowl and whisk the contents vigorously. Pour in half the remaining stock, cook on High until that is almost absorbed – three to five minutes according to the power of your microwave. Whisk well, when you should be starting to see a creamy sauce. Repeat with half the remaining stock and then test. The rice

should retain a little resistance in each grain, but if it is tough, cook on in increments of one or two minutes.

As with any risotto, only preference and experience can finally guide you. You will further emulsify and thicken what liquid is there, so judge if there is too little for the final effect you want. If it is already too thick, whisk in extra stock. Then stir in the second amount of butter and all the Parmesan and whisk these in – in Venice this is called *mantecari* and if you don't do take this step you've more a lippy pilaff than a risotto. The sauce should now be as glossy and unctuous and as liquid or thick as you want. Adjust accordingly, even adding a splash of wine if you want. Give it a passing bash in the microwave, just enough to inject heat without cooking much. Don't worry heaps about it losing heat because a risotto is classically served warmish rather than hot, but on very hot plates. Serve. Salivate. Yes, even as plain as that, especially if you have used my Brown Chicken Stock – see below. Well, you could stir in flat-leaf parsley.

### **Increasing your repertoire**

Additions should, to my mind, be cooked separately and added hot only at the last minutes. Here the microwave is also a boon. While you are finishing and adjusting the risotto, you can swiftly microwave vegetables, seafood, whatever.

- Peas: the classic *risi e bisi* adds only fresh, sweet peas but is sublime. The tiniest frozen peas, quickly cooked without extra water in the microwave are by far the best. Always much better than imagined
- Vegetables: fresh mushrooms, artichoke bottoms, pumpkin cubes with basil leaves, chunked courgette with tarragon, baby broad beans with roasted black pepper and cubed Parmesan. . . or any mixture
- Special stocks: the stock you choose can be all the difference you need. Partridge, pheasant, grouse, Barbary or other duck, even Christmas goose stock will all give wondrous results, but can have additions too
  - Halved white grapes
  - Membrane-free segments of orange, especially blood orange
  - Red or white currants
  - Shreds of flesh
- Porcini: quite one of the best. For this amount of rice you need at least 15g of porcini, rinsed at least three times to get rid of the damnable grit and then reconstituted and cooked in plenty of water to which sherry has been added with some profligacy. Use this to make up the stock quantity you need and stir in the porcini at the last minute. This is a great friend to anything meaty you might have – oxtail stew?
- Herbal: a mint or basil risotto is extraordinarily good as the base or the accompaniment of any kind of fish, seafood or poultry dish – use 20 or more leaves as the very last addition and serve at once

- Pestos: swirl in dollops of basil or mint or any other pesto – sun-dried tomato pesto is great in a risotto, perhaps with chopped black olives and capers; I'd finish each serve with cubes of Parmesan and torn flat-leaf parsley. As usual.
- Seafood: microwave scallops, prawns, mussels or a mixture after marinading briefly in mandarin flavoured olive oil, in olive oil with a dash of lime oil or in chopped sundried tomatoes in olive oil and then tumble them on to the top of a plain risotto or one intensely saffroned.
- Saffron: the basic risotto *Milanese* proves why you must add that last mixture of butter and Parmesan to a true risotto – without them this only looks good; with them it is sublime. Always eaten as a first course or with true *ossi bucci* made with tiny slices of pale veal meat and white wine rather than the plates of darker soup meat you get from older animals; this is topped with *gremolata*.
- Gremolata: a spoonful each of chopped parsley, raw garlic and freshly grated lemon zest, mixed and then more finely chopped together. It makes a wondrously stimulating risotto as a first course but shines brightly as an accompaniment, especially to anything fishy. For the above amount I'd use about a tablespoon of each ingredient. Make it very shortly before using or it loses its veracity.