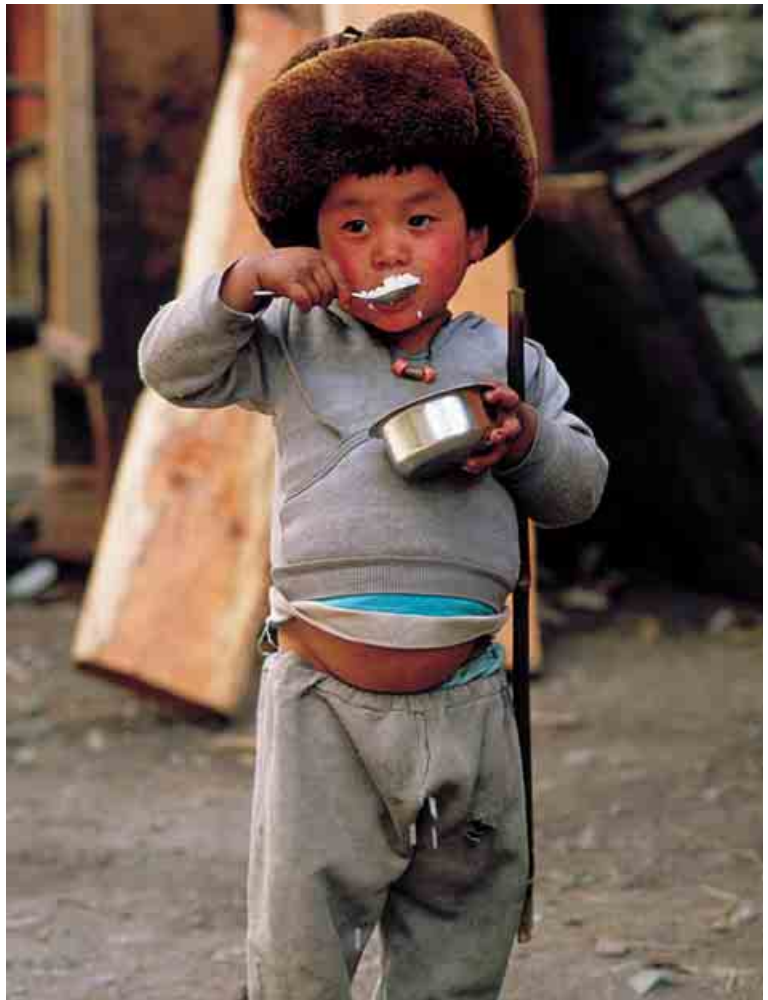


Dehradun Basmati

This scented rice has its roots in the Himalayas

Maya Jani





Dehradun Basmati is grown on both the steep valley walls and the flat plains in the states of Uttar Pradesh, at the foothills of the Himalayas, and Uttaranchal, high in the Himalayan range. Before cultivation, the land is divided into fields following the contours of the hillside. On the hillsides, terraces are cut and supporting walls are built of clay, mud and weeds with openings for water outflow and inflow. The tools used for rice production here are simple: sickles, a wooden plow, a tractor and a bullock cart.

During rice cultivation, men plow and mix seed stocks, while women transplant the seedlings. The best time for transplant is July and August, when there is enough water available. In this period, the seedlings are tied in small bundles and carried to the field for transplantation. During transplanting, a bunch of seedling is held in one hand and two-four seedlings are pulled out with the other hand and thrust into the mud. The fields are all irrigated, and once the rice grains have ripened, two-three weeks before the harvest, the wa-

Navdanya

Indian scientist Vandana Shiva created the Navdanya Foundation to conserve indigenous seed varieties (above all rice varieties important for the family food supply), and to save the traditional balanced diet. 'Navdayna' – the name means 'nine seeds' – works with more than 60,000 farmers to promote seed banks throughout Northern India and to develop organic agriculture. The Foundation also publishes a range of material documenting traditional seed varieties and coordinates projects such as the Slow Food Basmati Rice and Mustard-seed Oil Presidia.

On the steepest slopes, the farmers create terraces for the rice paddies from mud, and the women transplant seedlings by hand in the fields submerged in water. After the threshing, the rice is separated from the bran by throwing it into the air with a bamboo broom.



Srinagar, photo Steve McCurry, Magnum/Contrasto

ter is drained off. Besides natural substances such as ash and cow urine, various plants are traditionally used for pest control in rice paddies. Alas, continued use of pesticides in the Dehradun valley has caused environmental damage, contributing to the emergence of some chemical-resistant pests. Pesticides also wipe out many useful natural predators and parasites, which help in keeping a check on the growth of the pest population. In such cases, it is important to bring back traditional methods of pest control and plant-based pesticides. Rice plantings are rotated with plantings of green pea and wheat, or else mustard and wheat. In October and November, when the rice is harvested, the entire plant is cut from the base with a sickle and is spread over the ground to dry in the sun. Once the plants are thoroughly dry, they are piled in bundles or left loose and then threshed (the whole grains are covered with tarpaulin and beaten by hand). Af-

ter threshing, the grains are separated by being thrown onto a tarpaulin from a height of about 5-6 feet with a bamboo broom, the *suppu*, which lifts the bran from the grain. The rice is cleaned by women with sieves, and the men put the grain to be used for food into separate bamboo or wooden boxes. Neem, Dainkan, and Tulsi leaves are also put on the top and bottom of the box to protect the rice from pests.

In Dehradun, Basmati is prized for its light fragrance, and local dishes make the most of this special scent. *Kheer*, a sweet milky rice pudding, is a very auspicious dish made during all festive occasions as an offering to the gods and guests. *Kheer* prepared with Basmati is very creamy and has a delightful aroma, especially when seasoned with cardamom, almond slivers, and raisins. A dash of saffron gives the creamy dish a luminous, pale golden color.

In Dehradun, a birthday, a dinner party or a festive meal, is celebrated with



Srinagar, photo Steve McCurry, Magnum/Contrasto - Besi Sahar, photo Earl & Nazima Kowall, Corbis/Contrasto



Celebrating rice

Throughout India during weddings, at harvest time and religious ceremonies, rice serves as a metaphor for abundance, fertility and sacredness. Religious festivities are always structured around eating, and several mythological and scriptural stories underscore the importance of offering food in festivals. Very often the flavored sweetmeats prepared during religious festivals are based on rice, some examples are: *kheer*, a sweet rice and milk preparation; *pulao* better known as pilaf in the West; and savories made of rice flour.

On any auspicious occasion, rice grains mixed with turmeric, *akshat*, are applied to the forehead of family members or friends to welcome them, bless them and recognize the divinity that is within them. *Akshat* means 'the Imperishable' and is one of a multitude of names in the Indian language for rice. In India, when a bride leaves her parental home, she throws a handful of rice grains over her shoulder. The symbolism is complex: young girls are seen as the image of Laxmi, the Goddess of Plenty (and incidentally also the Goddess of Agriculture). Therefore, the Bride-Goddess ensures that her departure does not deprive her parental home of its prosperity by leaving the grains behind. Before entering her new husband's home, she repeats the gesture as a symbol of bringing prosperity and well-being to her new life.

Rice is such an integral part of Indian culture that in many regions the first sowing, the transplanting, and the harvesting are each marked by rituals and celebrations. Of these, *Akshay Tritiya*, celebrated in Orissa, on the southeast coast on the Bay of Bengal, is extremely elaborate and the most famous. During these festivals, farmers freely distribute seeds to each other in a spirit of solidarity within the community.

In the oral tradition, a beautiful story illustrates the role of rice: Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, had just finished feeding her family when news reached her that Durvasa, a very irascible *sadhu*, or Shiva holyman, had arrived extremely hungry. As times were bad, Draupadi's pot was empty and she had no grains left to cook. She was upset because it is sinful not to feed a guest but it is also a dishonor for a woman not to have enough to provide for those who come to her house. In her predicament, she called upon Krishna the Divine Flute Player who was above all, her *sakha*, her friend, to ask for his help. Krishna asked her to bring whatever was left in her pot: there was but a grain of rice left in it and Draupadi brought it to Krishna who put it in his mouth. The moment he did so, Durvasa the *sadhu* suddenly felt satiated. Instead of clamoring for food, he came to Draupadi, blessed her and moved on.

a *pulao*. Basmati is best suited for this dish as its long grains stand out from the various other ingredients used (peas, carrots, potatoes, and cauliflower). The rich, full-bodied aroma of Basmati makes the *pulao* more savory. This hot rice dish is accompanied by a cooling *raita*, made from yogurt and cucumbers seasoned with

mint and cumin, or mustard-oil pickles. Curry is made in Dehradun with steamed fragrant Basmati; it is a treat to taste the curry sauce blended with the soft, fluffy and aromatic Basmati rice. In Dehradun, it is common to add a few cloves to the boiling water of the rice steamer to heighten flavor. *Khichdi* is a dish made of Basmati and

moong beans seasoned with cardamom, *garam masala* and spiked with cashew nuts. *Khichdi* is traditionally served at the Sankranti harvest festival, where the combination of rice and pulses is symbolic of plenty and prosperity. The dish is a slightly sticky delight, to be eaten with curds and mango and cucumber mustard-oil pickles.



THE BASMATI RICE PRESIDIUM

The first written records of Basmati date back to the eighteenth century, but since then, farmers have developed hundreds of varieties of this fragrant rice. They range in color from clear yellow to deep dark brown, and the flavors themselves vary from jasmine to sandalwood.

In 1997, Basmati became the subject of a worldwide debate when an American company attempted to patent various varieties of the rice. Thanks to the mobilization of the Navdanya Foundation, the Indian government took the company to court and forced it to withdraw the patent application. In spite of this important victory, Basmati is still under threat: from urbanization; from the excessive use of pesticides; from the cultivation of 'twin' varieties in the USA (like Kasmati and Texmati); and from the promotion of genetically engineered seeds to Indian farmers. This Presidium promotes a number of Basmati varieties, selected for

their flavor and aromatic characteristics: the *Punjab Basmati*, wonderfully aromatic with long, clear yellow grains; the *Desi Basmati*, rich with perfumes of white flowers and sandalwood; *Kasturi Basmati*, aromatic with notes of mint and lemon; and the unique whole grain *Desi Basmati*, which requires 12 hours of soaking before cooking and boasts an intense flavor.

Area of Production

Punjab Basmati: Saharanpur (Uttar Pradesh State)

Dehradun Desi Basmati: Dehradun (Uttaranchal State)

Kasturi Basmati: Dehradun (Uttaranchal State)

Producers

The Presidium involves about 5,000 farmers.

Project Coordinator

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