

## Italian Rice: Risotto

Italian Rice: Risotto Italy is the largest producer of rice in Europe. Rice was introduced in Italy somewhere in the 14th century, most probably by Venetian or Genoese merchants who used to trade with the east. The earliest documentation of rice cultivation in Italy dates to 1475 A.D long after its cultivation was firmly established. The cultivation of rice requires flooding the fields with a lot of water and stagnant water is the perfect breeding place for anopheles mosquitoes which are the carriers of the deadly disease &ndash; Malaria. This fact also means that the rice harvest of early years in Italy must have been considerable to make the farmers ignore a threat as potent as malaria. Once entrenched in the Po valley, where it became the staple food, rice cultivation spread its tentacles to almost all parts of Italy. However it never became as prominent as in Lombardy, Piedmont and the Veneto. Most of the rice in Italy is grown in the valley of Po River. The best rice &ndash; Lomellina - is grown in the Lombardy region, while the regions of Piedmont and Veneto are also known to produce some of the finest varieties of rice in Italy. The tradition of growing rice is so well entrenched in the Po valley that instead of pasta, which is a very popular dish in this country, risotto is served as the first course in these parts. Furthermore rice is the perfect way to serve the seasonal specialty be it wild mushrooms (like Porcini), sea food, meat or game. Although rice is more popular in these areas, it is also consumed in other parts of Italy where numerous varieties are grown and are consumed as a part of different courses &ndash; soups, main course, and desserts. The rice grown in Italy is usually short and barrel shaped and comes in four varieties based on the grain size &ndash; commune, semifino, fino and superfino. The varieties of rice used to prepare risotto are superfino and baldo. Venetian cooks prefer to use carnoroli variety that was invented in the 1950&rsquo;s and Vialone Nano is also popular with the Veronese variety being given a PGI designation. Risotto is prepared by braising rice and then allowing it to absorb the cooking liquid, which in most cases is broth. Braising involves toasting rice in a soffrito, which is a mixture of chopped vegetables such as onion, garlic, carrots and celery. After this broth is slowly ladled in allowing the rice to absorb the liquid and at the same time the liquid absorbs the starches of the rice and other vegetables that are added into it. This imparts a rich consistency to the cooking liquid and makes it somewhat similar to a heavy cream sauce. Risotto is a very versatile dish and in different regions risotto is made in different ways. In Milan it is flavored with saffron and this version of risotto is arguably the best Italian Rice dish. In Piedmont, risotto is cooked with truffles or is made in red Barolo wine while in the Veneto, especially in Venice city, risotto comes with rich seafood.