

Sauté and Simmer Grains for Delicious Pilafs

Try wild rice, barley, or millet for full-flavored and delicately chewy dishes



Wild rice tastes great with nuts and dried fruits, which complement its deep, earthy flavor.

BY AMANDA CUSHMAN

Sauté your favorite grain with a little onion in oil or butter, add stock, simmer, and then toss in ingredients for texture and flavor, and you've made a pilaf. For starters, you have an appealing, colorful side dish. Add meat, beans, or vegetables, and you'll elevate your pilaf to main-dish status.

The pilaf technique translates well to many grains; though rice is the traditional base, pilaf is adaptable. Barley cooks up plump and sturdy with a pleasantly chewy texture and nutty flavor; coarse-textured millet turns delicate when cooked; it also has a nutty flavor.

Whatever grain you choose, your pilaf will be deliciously easy. When you get home from work, you can quickly chop up some ingredients, put the pan on to simmer, and by the time you've changed clothes and read the mail, dinner's ready.

FIRST STEPS GIVE GRAINS FLAVOR AND TEXTURE

Here are the extra steps that set pilafs apart from plain boiled or steamed grains.

- ◆ **Dry-toast barley and millet to bring out their nutty flavor.** Skillet-toasting also keeps delicate grains like millet from turning mushy during cooking.
- ◆ **Next, sauté onions or shallots in butter or oil.** Sautéing these to a deep, golden color adds flavor.

◆ **Add the grain.** Stir it well to make sure it's coated with oil. A light coating on each grain helps keep the grains from sticking to one another, so you won't end up with a gummy pilaf. And that bit of fat goes a long way toward adding flavor.

FULLY COOKED GRAINS ARE CHEWY BUT NEVER CRUNCHY

Grains taste best cooked in vegetable, chicken, or even veal stock. Fish stock or beef broth can be overpowering. I cook grains in plain water only when I want a very simple taste.

The idea is for all the liquid to be absorbed just at the time the grains are done. Keep the pan covered and check for doneness as you approach the end of the recipe's cooking time. If the liquid is all gone but the grain needs more time, add ½ cup water, bring it back to a boil, reduce the heat, and continue cooking.

A little bit of bite is fine, but a crunch or a too-chewy texture means the grain is undercooked. If you're happy with the texture of your grain but there's still liquid in the pan, just pour it off.

GRAINS WELCOME MORE COLOR, TEXTURE, AND FLAVOR

Most grains are beige or brownish and need a lift of color. Chopped herbs, dried fruits, and diced vegetables break the brown monotony and add texture and flavor, too. White rice and bulgur tend to turn out fluffy rather than chewy; diced vegetables and nuts are especially good for adding crunch to those grains. I don't like tossing in extra oil or butter after cooking. This makes the pilaf too heavy because the grains will just keep absorbing oil, like pasta does.

Steps to a superb pilaf



Sauté the onions to a caramelized golden color. This will give the pilaf deeper flavor.

Wild Rice Pilaf with Dried Apricots & Pine Nuts

Wild rice varies, so check for doneness after 45 minutes, but it may need more than an hour. Try dried cherries or cranberries instead of apricots, or brown rice instead of wild. *Serves four.*

3 Tbs. butter
1 medium onion, diced
1 tsp. finely chopped fresh rosemary
1 cup wild rice
2 cups homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock
¾ tsp. salt; more to taste
½ cup diced dried apricots
½ cup toasted pine nuts
Freshly ground black pepper to taste

In a medium frying pan, heat the butter over medium heat and sauté the onion and rosemary until the onion

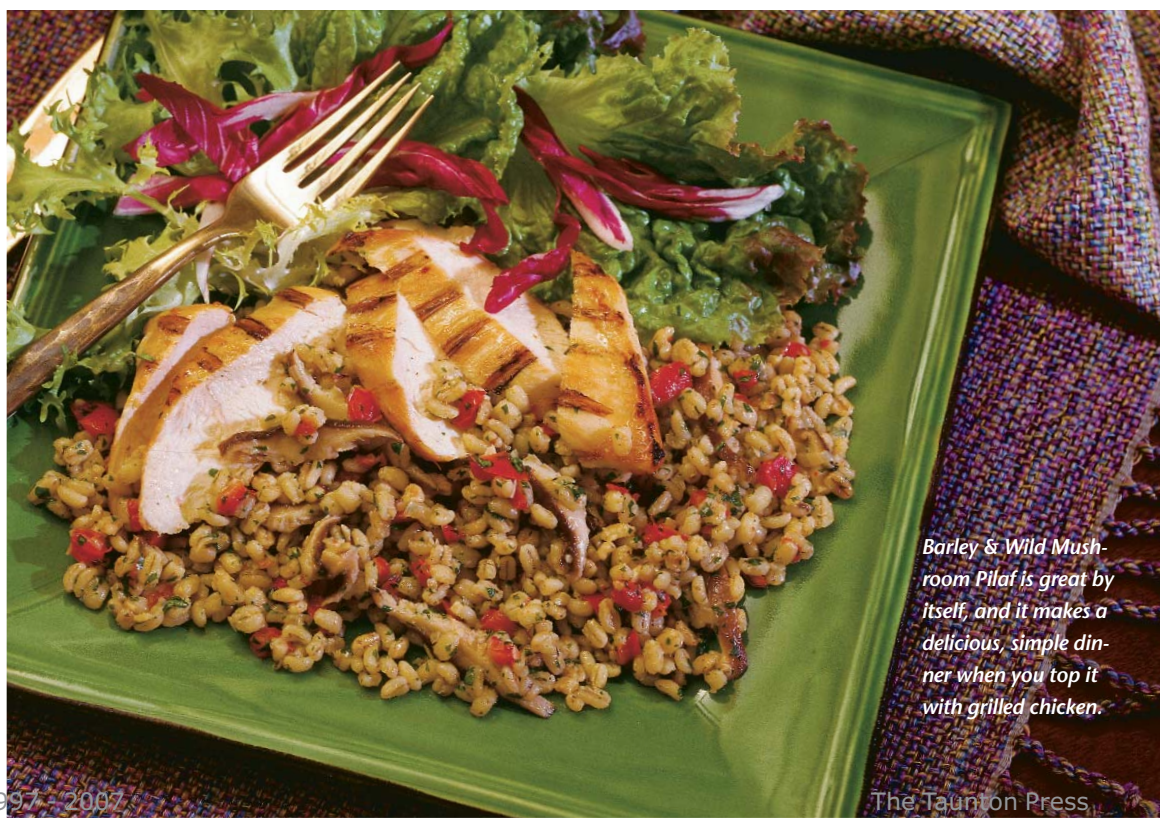
TURN LEFTOVER PILAF INTO DINNER TOMORROW NIGHT

Make a few nights' worth of pilaf. You'll have delicious leftovers and a springboard for easy meals.

◆ Make salads by adding vinaigrette to leftover pilaf. Mix in diced vegetables—raw or blanched—for additional color and texture.

◆ Make your own version of that Chinese takeout staple, fried rice. Sauté leftover rice pilaf in a little oil and add scrambled egg and bean sprouts.

◆ Build a main dish. Add cooked chicken, shrimp, pork, or beef. Or bulk up a pilaf with beans: grains and beans make an extremely nutritious meal.



Barley & Wild Mushroom Pilaf is great by itself, and it makes a delicious, simple dinner when you top it with grilled chicken.

Photos at top: Scott Phillips



Add the grains and stir to coat them well. A light coating of oil keeps the grains from sticking together.



Add stock for simmering. Lighter stocks like chicken or veal are best for cooking pilafs.



The pilaf is done when the grain is tender but still chewy and the liquid is absorbed. Wild rice grains will start to burst open. If the grain is done but some liquid remains, just pour off the liquid.

is deep golden, about 10 min. Add the wild rice and stir to coat. Add the stock and salt. Cover, bring to a boil, and reduce the heat. Simmer over medium-low heat until the grains are slightly open and tender but not mushy, about 50 min. Let rest covered for 5 min. Stir in the apricots, pine nuts, and pepper; taste and adjust seasonings.

Barley & Wild Mushroom Pilaf

Toasting the barley first intensifies its nutty flavor. If you can't find good shiitakes, use crimini or button mushrooms. Serves four.

- 1 cup pearl barley
- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 shallots, minced
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 1½ cups sliced shiitake mushrooms (stems removed)
- ¼ tsp. salt
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1 tsp. chopped fresh thyme
- 2 cups homemade or low-salt canned vegetable or chicken stock
- ½ cup chopped flat-leaf parsley

In a medium frying pan, toast the barley over medium heat until fragrant and slightly browned, about 4 min. Transfer to a bowl and set aside. In the same pan, heat the oil and sauté the garlic and shallots over medium heat until fragrant, about 1 min. Add the red pepper and mushrooms; sauté, stirring, until the mushrooms are softened slightly, about 5 min. Add the salt, pepper, barley, and thyme; stir to coat. Add the stock and bring to a boil. Cover, reduce the heat to low, and cook until all the liquid is absorbed and the barley is slightly tender but still chewy, about 45 min. Let rest covered for 10 min. Stir in the parsley; taste and adjust seasonings.

Saffron-Scented Millet Pilaf with Roasted Peppers

The deeply flavored blend of roasted peppers and fragrant spices is worth the few extra steps in this one. Serves four.

- 1 cup millet
- 3 Tbs. olive oil
- 1 small onion, diced



- ½ tsp. salt
- 1 large pinch saffron, crumbled
- ⅛ tsp. turmeric
- 2 cups homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock
- 3 Tbs. chopped basil
- 2 tsp. chopped thyme
- 2 red bell peppers, roasted, peeled, seeded, and chopped
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- Chopped flat-leaf parsley for garnish

In a medium frying pan, toast the millet over medium heat, stirring often, until it starts to pop, 3 to 4 min. Transfer to a bowl and set aside. In the same pan, heat the oil over medium heat; add the onion and salt. Sauté until the onion is golden brown, about 10 min. Add the saffron and turmeric; cook for a few seconds. Add the millet and stir to coat, about 1 min. Add the stock, bring to a boil, reduce the heat to low, and cover. Cook until the liquid is absorbed, about 20 min. The millet should keep its texture but shouldn't be crunchy. Toss in the basil, thyme, and roasted peppers. Add pepper to taste and sprinkle with parsley.

Saffron-Scented Millet Pilaf with Roasted Peppers is a colorful and intense mix of flavors.

Amanda Cushman is a chef, cooking teacher, and food writer who lives in New York City. ♦