

What You Need to Know about Carolina Gold Rice: History and Cooking Tips

Carolina rice, a slim long-grain rice of slim ambition, first surfaced in the Colonies in the late 1600s. Clean, sweet, and nonaromatic, it prospered in Coastal Carolina and Georgia bogs and did its fluffy separate-grain thing in a traditional black iron hearth pot, or *potje*, complementing the African-style stews it attended. But when Thomas Jefferson, then ambassador to France for our new government, tried to persuade French rice merchants to buy improved Carolina Gold rice, the French said no thanks. They preferred the gruel-like qualities of medium-grain Italian rice to Carolina Gold's firm and upright carriage for their puddings and desserts.

Recognizing the French might have a point, Jefferson dispatched his own agent to smuggle seed rice out of Italy and sent the seed, probably an ancestor of Arborio, to a successful Charleston rice planter for study. Jefferson continued, throughout his presidency, to promote research in South Carolina to breed a rice variety capable of producing both high-quality separate-grain and gruel dishes.

By 1810, an improved Carolina rice called fat, or Northern, Carolina Gold began to establish market share in Europe. Barely a long-grain rice by definition and nearly a medium grain in its dimension and diversity of cooking application, Northern Carolina Gold had attributes substantial enough to appeal to a broad international market. Beyond its superior flavor, aroma, and texture, the new rice possessed starch qualities capable of producing sticky, creamy, or separate-grain dishes, depending on how it was cooked. Most significantly, Carolina Gold created a culture and cuisine of influence in the city of Charleston and enabled America to take the European rice trade from Italy and dominate world import rice markets until the Civil War.

The Civil War brought the culture, cuisine, and rice of Charleston to its knees, and though Carolina Gold continued to set quality standards for American rice into the 20th century, ultimately, it lost ground to new varieties and became, after the Depression, virtually extinct. In the mid-1980s, a plantation owner from Savannah collected stores of Carolina Gold from a U.S. Department of Agriculture seed bank and repatriated the rice to its former home along the coastal wetlands around Charleston. Anson Mills began growing heirloom Carolina Gold for research in 1998 and today has organic rice fields in Georgia, North and South Carolina, and Texas.

What Is New-Crop Rice?

New-crop rice, the name designate for Anson Mills Carolina Gold, refers to rice that is milled and cooked within four months of harvest. The appeal of new-crop rice (which is nearly a religion in Japan) lies in its delicate fresh flavor and lush, pearly mouthfeel, qualities derived from the immature starch character of the kernels themselves and

Aromatic versus Nonaromatic Rice

Aromatic long-grain rice, represented by jasmine and basmati, has a heady, perfumed fragrance and a flavor that can go head to head with the racy-hot and complex seasonings of Thai and Indian cuisine. Its flavor is thought to develop more fully after a postharvest year on the shelf. Aromatic rice can generally be relied on to cook up dry, light, and fluffy, like any well-behaved long grain.

Neutral in flavor, nonaromatic rice, such as Carolina Gold or Japanese short grain, enhances more subtly seasoned fare: It provides a pristine bolster for raw fish, and doesn't try to wrench the lead from a delicate fish sauce or a mild chicken stew. Nonaromatic rice has a more absorbing nature as well: It will bloom with the flavor of whatever it touches in a pot.

Historically, Carolina Gold rice owed much of its appeal to the way it was milled. In colonial times African slave women were tasked daily to hand-pound and winnow hulls from the grains with mortar, pestle, and fanner basket. The resulting rice, scrubbed golden white through abrasion, contained whole and broken

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from the fact that the rice is not dried down. Most rice in the United States, by contrast, is harvested and run over a high-heat drying table, a process that converts the kernels to mature, aged rice with no remaining new-crop quality. Unlike mature rice, Carolina Gold new crop retains subtle traces of field greenery in its aroma and flavor, particularly green tea and almond. For practical purposes, Anson Mills extends the life and character of new-crop rice by storing unhulled rice in the freezer until it's ready for milling.

How to Handle New-Crop Rice

Our rice is delicate, subject to breakage, and likely to become gummy if cooked or handled improperly. *Handle it gently.* New crop rice will cook to a sticky finish unless it is parboiled in free-moving water, like pasta. For some dishes sticky rice is desirable; for others it is not. Anson Mills Carolina Gold simmers to a finish more quickly than standard mature rice and can overcook in a hurry, too. So please note the times and techniques recommended in the recipes that follow.

grains, with germ and flecks of bran intact. The resulting flavor and texture were exquisite. Anson Mills returns this style of Carolina Gold rice to the table with state-of-the-art milling technology designed by engineers in California and Japan. It is the only rice of its kind produced in the United States.