

Tahdig

Many claim that the Persian method of preparing rice known as *chelo*, which involves cooking the rice in two batches, is a gift to humanity. I'm prepared to agree. The rice becomes extremely fluffy and airy without it seeming parboiled or too sticky. When preparing Iran's most famous dish, *tahdig*, you use the chelo cooking method and then let the rice get a crispy, caramelized surface against the edges of the pot. Then when you turn the pot upside down, you get a cake of rice with a golden saffron topping. Make sure you fill a large saucepan with water and pre-boil the rice for 5 minutes to release the starch. The rice can then steam until ready with other ingredients later on without needing much liquid. If you boil the rice in too little water, the starch won't disappear, which means that the rice won't become as airy after it's steamed.

The crunchy surface is created with the help of butter and just the right amount of heat. Too hot and the rice burns. Everyone knows the taste of burned rice—just throw it out and start over. There are several tricks to release the rice from the pot more easily when turning it out. You can either mix the rice with yogurt, which gives it a good flavor and elevates the dish a bit, but can make the surface a little less crispy. Or you can slice potatoes and put them in the bottom of the pot to get crispy potato slices on top of the rice. If you use this method, it's important to get potato slices of the perfect thickness. If they're too thin, they'll burn easily. If they're too thick, it's difficult to get them soft or else they just become mushy. Some recipes suggest placing pieces of bread on the bottom, which turn into crunchy croutons on top of the rice.

Saffron is an exclusive spice that has always been revered in Iran and is an important ingredient in *tahdig*. The saffron stamens are always placed in water, which leaches out a lot of color and flavor. Every drop is then used in the rice dish. Although the basis of a traditional *tahdig* is only rice, water, saffron, and butter, the dish has many variations.

Tahdig and shirin polo.

