

Message From Chef Michele Iammatteo

Welcome to my first “virtual” cooking class! I want to thank everyone, in advance, for inviting me back to celebrate Italian Heritage Month with you. It is truly an honor for me. Our recipe this year is **Arancini**. In my recipe “travels,” I came across, what I feel, is an interesting source of information about the “birth” of this delicious dish, written by Francesca Lombardo, a Palermo native, and the Best of Sicily’s resident wine expert and author of Sicilian Street Food.

Arancini (rice balls) were invented in the tenth century during the Kalbid rule of Sicily. Stuffed with meat and coated with a light, crispy batter, rice balls are similar to foods based on [recipes](#) known in the Middle East during the Middle Ages. Their Italian name comes to us from the word for orange (arancia), which they faintly resemble in colour and texture. Nowadays the arancine made in western Sicily are round while those made in eastern Sicily (particularly around Catania) are often conical.

This all seems fairly simple, though preparing arancine (or arancini) well is something of an art. But how did rice arrive in Sicily in the first place? It’s certainly not grown here today. Rice (as well as oranges) was introduced during the Arab period. Of course, rice cultivation requires water. The Arabs built innovative and very efficient irrigation systems in Sicily, but the island was naturally greener then. The climate was cooler and there were larger forests. There were also more streams that flowed year round (instead of the run-off torrents seen today), navigable rivers and natural lakes. In such an environment the Arabs revolutionised agriculture and introduced crops such as cotton and sugar cane.

The cultivation of rice in Sicily had no connection with rice farming in Piedmont, a sub-alpine region of northern Italy where arborio and other rice varieties are still grown. The introduction of rice in Sicily parallels that in Spain.

Arancine are formed of cooked and flavoured rice shaped around a core of chopped meat filling. The balls are then coated and deep fried to a crisp. Arancini are not the only crispy fried Sicilian food introduced by the Arabs. Pannelle come to mind. These are flat cakes made with ceci flour. Rice balls are the golden jewel in the crown of Sicilian cuisine.

Recipe

The first step in making Arancini is of course to cook the rice. The rice most often used is risotto, a stubby, short-grain, starch rich type - usually Arborio or canaroli which are easily found here in the US.

Basic risotto ingredients - 4-6 servings (which will be perfect for our Arancini)

- ❖ 6-8 cups of stock or broth (you can even use water)
- ❖ 2-3 tablespoons of olive oil
- ❖ 1 cup of chopped onion
- ❖ 2 shallots, chopped
- ❖ 2 cloves garlic, minced - optional
- ❖ zest of half lemon - also optional
- ❖ 2 1/3 cup of Arborio or canaroli rice - about a 1 lb

- ❖ 1 cup of dry white wine- at room temperature
- ❖ 2-3 tablespoons butter - optional
- ❖ 1/2 cup or more, parmigiana grated cheese - also optional, but for the Arancini you need to incorporate it into the risotto
- ❖ 1/2 cup of chopped parsley or chives
- ❖ salt & pepper to tasteof course.
- ❖ Making risotto is basically learning a technique, once you perfect it, the use of risotto has endless possibilities....almost any vegetable, protein, or flavoring can make a great risotto dish. Let's not forget, risotto is also gluten free.

The “Technique”

- For every cup of raw rice, heat about 2-3 cups of stock, broth or water
- The first step is to prepare a flavor base: sauté over medium heat, the onion and shallots, gently in a large pot until translucent.
- Add the rice and cook, stirring until the grains are coated and have a chance to heat through. Do not rush this step! The toasting, making sure not to let it burn, of the rice prepares the grain to accept the liquid and release starch. Very important, this is where the risotto naturally gets its creamy, velvety sauce...no heavy cream needed, if done properly.
- The toasted rice should remind you of the fragrance of popcorn. Anyone familiar Jiffy Pop?
- Now add your first liquid which is the wine. Allow to cook until the mixture is just about dry.
- Add hot stock—only enough to cover the rice, stir and allow the rice to absorb the liquid.
- Continue adding one or two ladles of stock and a time and stirring until the rice has become plump and al dente tender.
- Turn off the heat. Stir in the butter and grated cheese and parsley
- Risotto takes between 15-30 minutes to be perfectly cooked.
- Now for the Arancini...keep in mind, left over risotto is great for making Arancini. Today we are making a Sicilian Arancini with chopped meat, mozzarella and peas. Feel free to experiment with different fillings and, of course, if you have a family favorite. The preparation technique remains the same, as follows:
- for every 2 cups of risotto add 2 egg yolks and season with more grated cheese. The cheese not only flavors the rice, but also adds to its stickiness.
- Set up a “dipping” station for yourself. One bowl each of flour, beaten eggs and breadcrumbs.
- Take about 1/4 cup of rice in your hand, shape into the hollow of your palm, add a - bit of your chosen filling and a piece of mozzarella into the hollow. Seal well with more of the rice mixture.....compress and roll firmly into the a ball.
- Dip lightly in the flour, then in the egg and then the breadcrumbs.
- Fry in vegetable oil at 350 degrees, until golden brown on all sides.
- Remove from the frying oil and set on a paper towel lined tray to blot excess oil.

I hope you enjoy this year's choice of Arancini. Bon Appetit!