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Foolproof rice recipes

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Rice, like gravy, is something people think they can't prepare, and there is a plethora of part-cooked, easy-cook and almost instant solutions on the supermarket shelf.

When my youngest son was 8 or 9, he became obsessed with anything Chinese, and rice in particular. I used to take him to Chinatown as a special treat, for congee or egg-fried rice. He loved wandering around the food shops, curious about woks and bamboo steamers, and the unfamiliar fruit and vegetables. We always left with something, usually a bag of frozen dim sum, cha for brewing in his Chinese teapot and flaky custard tarts that rarely lasted the journey home.

On one occasion, I bought an electric rice steamer and, while my sons were growing up, it was a godsend. Not only could both boys cook perfect rice without me around, but leftovers provided the backbone for a constant supply of snacks when they arrived home famished from school. The most popular, partly because it could be eaten from a Chinese bowl with chopsticks, was egg-fried rice. The basic concept of egg-scrambled rice with bacon and spring onions changed all the time, depending on what could be scrounged from the fridge.

The latest version relies on chorizo to pack a spicy, meaty flavour, and it goes wonderfully well with spring onions and a hint of Thai seasoning, making a healthy, quick fridge supper. It was Michel Roux, when his book *Eggs* was published, who tipped me off about Maggi Seasoning. The intensely savoury, almost soy sauce, taste brings out the umami - the so-called fifth taste - in eggs, among other things. I use it all the time, particularly with eggs, rice and in stir-fries, although I should point out that it is not essential to the success of this dish.

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My favourite everyday rice is basmati. It always cooks perfectly, even if I've slipped up and forgotten to wash it. Unless I'm cooking for four or more, when I use the steamer, I follow a foolproof ratio of 1 part rice to 1½ parts cold water. The rice is brought to simmer, the heat turned very low, the pan covered and cooked for 10 minutes. It's then left, covered but

off the heat, for a further 10 minutes to finish cooking in the steam.

Wholegrain brown rice always seems more satisfying than basmati and its nutty flavour lends extra interest to this pretty salmon, sugar snap pea and chive rice dish, but any rice is suitable. It's so quick and simple to make, yet classy and a satisfying mix of crunchy and creamy. It can be eaten warm immediately or boxed up for the fridge, to eat within 48 hours.

I used bought cooked brown whole-grain rice for the salmon dish and it was also just right for mushroom pilaf with spinach, a perfect solution for an impromptu vegetarian supper. To cook the rice from scratch, add 125g to plenty of boiling water, reduce the heat, cover and cook for 25 minutes, then strain. You end up with about 300g cooked rice. If you want to cheat, I particularly rate the M&S and Veetee Dine In ranges.

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