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## YELLOW LENTIL AND RICE "RISOTTO"

*Khara Huggi or Pongal*

All seasons • Serves 4

Gluten-Free

Fittingly named, huggi is the ultimate comfort food. You definitely feel like you're being hugged when eating it. It's made from rice, yellow lentils called moong dal, which are split mung beans without skin, and black pepper and cumin seeds fried in ghee or butter. The lentils and rice cook together, making a creamy, rich dish resembling risotto. Traditionally, this dish is served with additional melted butter or ghee on top. I usually pair it with tangy accompaniments, like raitas, my green beans palya, cilantro coconut chutney, Brooklyn Delhi tomato achar, or even a dash of lemon juice. Feel free to substitute red lentils for the yellow variety if that's what you have on hand.

Similar rice and lentil dishes exist throughout India, and are known by different names. This rice dish is also known as pongal in South India and is often served during the Hindu harvest festival of Sankranti. There are spicy and sweet versions. You can make the sweet version by omitting the black pepper, cumin, asafetida, and ginger and adding sugar, golden raisins, and ground cardamom.

1 cup basmati rice, preferably Dehraduni, or jasmine rice  
1/3 cup moong dal or red lentils  
1/4 teaspoon turmeric powder  
4 tablespoons plus 1/2 teaspoon ghee or unsalted butter  
1 teaspoon peeled, grated fresh ginger  
2 tablespoons cashews, broken into large pieces  
1 teaspoon cumin seeds or ground cumin  
1/2 teaspoon whole black peppercorns or freshly ground black pepper  
1 1/4 teaspoons salt  
1/4 cup dried unsweetened shredded coconut  
Big pinch of asafetida (hing) powder

Wash the rice in several changes of water until the water runs clear. Soak the rice in water, generously covered, for at least 30 minutes. (This is optional but results in softer, more evenly cooked rice.) Drain thoroughly using a fine-mesh sieve.



In a soup pot, dry-roast and stir the lentils continuously over medium heat until they are golden brown and have a nutty aroma, 2 to 3 minutes. (This step is optional but reduces the stickiness of the dal.) Thoroughly wash the lentils using a fine-mesh colander. Return them to the pot, together with the rice, and add 3 1/2 cups of water. Bring to a boil. Skim the foam off the top. Add the turmeric powder, 2 tablespoons of the ghee, and the ginger to the boiling mixture.

Cover and cook over low heat until the rice and lentils are completely cooked, about 20 minutes. At this point, the grains will look separate. Add another 1/2 cup of water and continue to cook over medium-low heat, partially covered, for about 5 minutes. When you stir the mixture, it should have a creamy consistency. Feel free to mash the rice and lentils with a spoon. The consistency should be similar to a risotto. Turn off the heat.

While the rice and lentils are cooking, put 1/2 teaspoon of the ghee in a tempering pot or small pan over medium heat. Add the cashews, stirring them until they are fragrant and turn golden brown, a few minutes. Set the cashews aside to cool in a bowl lined with a paper towel. If using cumin seeds and peppercorns, roughly crush them in a mortar with a pestle. Set aside.

When the rice and lentil mixture is cooked, mix in the salt, coconut, and fried cashews, reserving some cashews for garnish.

Put the remaining 2 tablespoons of ghee in the tempering pot or small pan over medium heat. When melted, add the crushed black peppercorns and cumin seeds and the asafetida. Fry for a few seconds until fragrant. Turn off the heat.

Immediately pour the spiced ghee over the rice. To get all of the spiced ghee out of the pot, put a spoonful of the rice mixture into the pot, stir, and spoon it back into the rest of the dish. Taste for salt and adjust as needed. Garnish with the reserved cashews. Serve hot.

When reheating, add a little water to loosen up the dish, as it has a tendency to dry out.



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