

PILA (FRAGRANT FRIED RICE)

Rice is the heart of an Indian meal, and this dish has no equal in the world. Indians perfected the art of cooking rice, and this exquisite and fluffy rice is the great pride of every table. The golden rule for a perfect pilau, with each grain separate and well cooked, is not to disturb the rice while it is cooking.

- 2 cups uncooked basmati rice, soaked for 15 minutes
- 1 small onion, sliced
- 1/4 cup unsalted butter
- 1 tsp. black cumin seeds
- 1-inch cinnamon stick
- 2 bay leaves
- 3 green cardamom pods
- 4 cups water
- salt to taste

Drain the water from rice; set aside. Fry the sliced onion in butter until crisp and well browned. Remove the fried onion with a slotted spoon and keep for later use. In the remaining butter, fry the cinnamon stick, cumin seeds, bay leaves, and slightly opened cardamom pods. When the pods swell up, add the soaked rice. Keep stirring constantly for a minute. Pour in water and salt, cover, and cook on medium heat. When it comes to a boil, reduce heat and cook for 12--15 minutes, or until the water has been absorbed and rice is done. To test rice at this stage, press a grain between thumb and index finger. If it needs a bit more cooking, leave on low heat for another minute, then turn off the heat, keep covered, and let it cook a while longer in its own moisture.

To serve, arrange on a platter and garnish with crisp, fried onions. Serves 6--8.