

The Many Legends of Rice



Since rice is a staple food for half of the world's population, it is no surprise that each country has many different legends, fables and beliefs that have been passed on to each generation.

The significance of rice in many countries is demonstrated by its importance in the languages and cultures. Rice legends and folklore live on in many cultures, including here in the United States. In fact, rice is one of America's oldest agribusinesses, dating back to 1685.

Many people honor the tradition of throwing a handful of rice at newlyweds as they leave the church. This ancient rice-throwing ritual originally symbolized fertility and the blessing of many children. Today, it symbolizes prosperity and abundance.

It is said that Louisiana's Cajuns can look at a field of rice and rattle off the amount of beans and gravy needed to serve with that amount of rice.

"A meal without rice," the Chinese say, "is like a beautiful woman with only one eye." In China, where the word for rice is also the word for food, young girls are warned that every grain of rice they leave in their bowl will be a pockmark on the face of their future husband. Instead of saying "How are you?" as a typical greeting, the Chinese ask "Have you had your rice today?"

An old Chinese cure for aching bones, stomach upsets and colds involves combining toasted brown rice minced with gingerroot in a cloth, simmered in liquor. The compress is then rubbed on the joint or stomach. Quitting or losing a job is called "breaking the rice bowl," and it is bad luck to upset a bowl of rice. The deadliest insult of all is to pick up a bowl of someone else's rice and spill it on the ground. In some parts of China, it is a practice to "present the New Year's rice," that is, place a wooden bowl of rice on the altar dedicated to the family ancestors. This will bring good luck for the New Year.

In Japan, where the word for cooked rice is also the word for meal, legend has it that soaking rice before cooking releases the life energy and gives the eater a more powerful soul. Japanese rice fields are sometimes given names as if they were people.

In India, rice is the first food a new bride offers her husband. It is also the first food offered a newborn. There is a saying that grains of rice should be like two brothers--close but not stuck together.

In Indonesia, no girl can be considered for marriage until she can skillfully prepare rice. Rice barns are holy places where the rice spirit lives until it is time for the next sowing or harvest. Since the barns must be suitable dwellings for supernatural beings, they are often beautifully carved and decorated. There are strict rules about who may enter the barn and how this is to be done. Only women may go into the barn and only once a day. If unexpected guests arrive, a woman must turn the ladder over so that the spirit inside will not know she has invaded the privacy of the rice twice on the same day.



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