

Photo credit to Neil John Burger

Bisi Bele Bath Risotto

BY SATHISH KUMAR | @SATHISHSUBRAMANIYAM

Bisi Bele Bath is a dish whose flavors belong to a part of South India that has always felt familiar to me—the warmth of roasted spices, curry leaves, chilies, lentils, and the comforting combination of rice and vegetables, especially on a rainy day. Traditionally cooked as a one pot meal with plenty of vegetables, it carries a sense of warmth and familiarity.

Growing up as a Tamilian, rice was never just an ingredient; it was part of the language of home. Food was how we connected with family, memories, and where we came from. This dish grew from that idea. I wanted to take the flavors of Bisi Bele Bath (the toasted spice blend, curry leaves, chili, warmth, and comforting rice) and express them through a technique I learned and worked with in the United States: risotto.

The butternut squash is intentional. It is an ingredient that feels distinctly American to me, particularly in the fall, when you get to work with different varieties of squash that pair naturally with the flavors I grew up around. Its sweetness softens the heat of the spices, while the cumin ricotta adds another layer of richness and helps bring the two culinary worlds together.

The Bisi Bele Bath represents the familiarity of South India, the risotto technique represents the culinary experiences I have gained in America, and the butternut squash represents the ingredients and influences I have discovered along the way. It is my interpretation of home—not a recreation of a traditional dish, but a reflection of how my understanding of food has evolved while living between cultures. In the end, the dish is about memory, adaptation, and identity— taking something familiar and allowing it to take on a new expression.

Bisi Bele Bath Risotto

BY SATHISH KUMAR

SERVES: 4

INGREDIENTS

Butternut Squash Purée

450 g butternut squash
25 g garlic cloves
20 ml oil
10 g salt

Bisi Bele Bath Spice Powder

20 g coriander seeds
20 g chana dal
5 g sesame seeds
10 g urad dal
10 dried red chilies
5 g cumin seeds
2.5 g black peppercorns
3 pods green cardamom
1½ inches cinnamon stick
3 cloves
10 g poppy seeds
1-1.5 g fenugreek seeds
12 leaves curry leaves
1-2 g asafoetida
15 g dried coconut

Cumin Ricotta

50 g ricotta cheese
7 g roasted cumin powder
To taste salt

Ingredients and recipe continue...

INSTRUCTIONS

01 For the Butternut Squash Purée

1. Peel the butternut squash and separate the neck from the bulbous bottom section.
2. Cut the bottom section in half and remove the seeds.
3. Cut the squash into medium-sized pieces and place on a roasting tray.
4. Add the garlic cloves, oil, and salt. Toss well to coat.
5. Roast at 180°C / 355°F for approximately 25 minutes, or until the squash is completely tender and lightly caramelized.
6. Transfer the roasted squash and garlic to a blender and blend until completely smooth. Adjust the consistency with a small amount of vegetable stock if required.
7. Pass through a fine sieve if a very smooth purée is desired.
8. Reserve 200 g of purée for the risotto.

Note: Reserve the neck/top portion of the squash separately. Cut into small, even dice for the final garnish

02 For the Bisi Bele Bath Spice Powder

1. Heat a dry pan over medium heat.
2. Dry-roast the coriander seeds, chana dal, sesame seeds, urad dal, dried red chilies, cumin seeds, black peppercorns, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, poppy seeds, and fenugreek seeds until aromatic and lightly toasted.
3. Add the curry leaves and roast briefly until fragrant and crisp.
4. Add the dried coconut toward the end and toast carefully until lightly golden. Do not allow it to burn.
5. Remove from the heat and allow the spices to cool completely.
6. Grind to a fine powder.
7. Add the asafoetida and mix thoroughly.
8. Store in an airtight container until required.

Alternative: A good-quality, ready-made Bisi Bele Bath spice blend may be used if required.

Bisi Bele Bath Risotto

BY SATHISH KUMAR

Risotto

50 ml vegetable oil
150 g shallots, finely chopped
70 g garlic, finely chopped
70 g ginger, finely chopped
5 leaves curry leaves, finely chopped
5 g green chili, finely chopped
450 g Arborio rice
50 g Bisi Bele Bath spice powder
1.2-1.5 L hot vegetable stock
200 g butternut squash purée
80 g butter, chilled
Salt, to taste
2 tbsp/30 g ghee
Freshly cracked black pepper, to taste
Fresh lemon juice, to taste

Plate & Serve

Reserved butternut squash, small dice
50 g cumin ricotta

Optional Garnish

Tempura-fried squash blossom
Tempura-fried artichoke bottoms
Fried curry leaves
A light drizzle of ghee

Recipe continue...

03 For the Cumin Ricotta

1. Place the ricotta in a mixing bowl.
2. Add the roasted cumin powder and a pinch of salt.
3. Whisk until smooth, light, and creamy.
4. Transfer to a piping bag or container and refrigerate until required.

04 For the Risotto

1. Keep the vegetable stock hot in a separate saucepan.
2. Heat the oil in a wide, heavy-based saucepan over medium heat.
3. Add the chopped shallots, ginger, and garlic. Sweat gently until soft and translucent without allowing them to color excessively.
4. Add the chopped curry leaves and green chili. Sauté briefly until aromatic.
5. Add the Bisi Bele Bath spice powder and cook over low heat for approximately 30-60 seconds to bloom the spices.
6. Add a small splash of hot vegetable stock and stir to release the spices from the base of the pan.
7. Add the Arborio rice and toast gently for 1-2 minutes, ensuring that the grains are evenly coated with the spice mixture.
8. Begin adding the hot vegetable stock gradually, one ladle at a time, stirring regularly and allowing each addition to be absorbed before adding more.
9. Continue cooking the rice until it is approximately halfway cooked.
10. Add the butternut squash purée and continue adding the hot stock as required.
11. Continue cooking until the rice is al dente and the risotto has a creamy, flowing consistency.
12. Meanwhile, heat a sauté pan with a small amount of ghee. Add the diced butternut squash and season lightly with salt and a small pinch of Bisi Bele Bath spice powder. Sauté until tender and lightly caramelized.
13. Remove the risotto from the heat. Add the chilled butter and vigorously stir or toss to emulsify and create a glossy, creamy finish.
14. Adjust the seasoning with salt and freshly cracked black pepper.

Bisi Bele Bath Risotto

BY SATHISH KUMAR

15. Finish with freshly squeezed lemon juice, adding gradually to provide freshness and balance the richness of the butter and squash.
16. Check the final seasoning and consistency. The risotto should be creamy and fluid rather than stiff or dry.

05 Plate & Serve

1. Spoon the risotto into warm, shallow bowls and gently tap the base of the plate to allow the risotto to spread naturally.
2. Arrange the sautéed diced butternut squash over the risotto.
3. Finish with quenelles or small dots of whipped cumin ricotta.
4. Serve immediately.