Cheeseball lemon rice with chilli butter

8 cloves
6 cardamom pods, bashed
1 lemon: shave the skin into strips, then juice to get 2 tbsp
125g ricotta
150g feta, crumbled
125g hard mozzarella, grated
25g Parmesan, grated
1 egg, beaten
400g basmati rice, rinsed and drained well
75g pitted green olives, cut in half
100g unsalted butter
½ tsp chilli flakes
¾ tsp Aleppo chilli flakes
½ tsp sumac
5 spring onions, sliced on the diagonal into 1cm pieces (50g)
salt

There's something really reassuring about a rice traybake. Add the right amount of water, seal the dish well, pop it into the oven, and forget about it. This is as comforting and delicious as you'd expect cheesy, briny, chilli-butter-doused rice to be. It's the perfect side to something simple like a roast chicken, or else can be eaten as a main, with some wilted greens. ***Pictured overleaf.***

Getting ahead: **The rice wants to be eaten fresh out of the oven but can be taken up to the point just before the hot water and aromatics are added, if you want to get ahead.**

Serves 6

Preheat the oven to 200°C fan.

Pour 750ml of water into a medium saucepan and add the cloves, cardamom pods, lemon strips and 1½ teaspoons of salt. Place on a medium-high heat, bring to a simmer, then remove from the heat.

Meanwhile, put the four cheeses and the egg into a medium bowl and mix well. Using your hands, divide the mixture into 12 portions and roll them roughly into balls, approximately 40g each. They don't need to be perfect, as they will spread once in the rice.

Scatter the rice on the bottom of a high-sided baking tray or dish, 24cm x 32cm (or a 28cm ovenproof sauté pan, for which you have a lid), and scatter over the olives. Pour over the hot water and aromatics. Shake the tray gently to spread the rice evenly, then deposit the cheese balls in the rice. Cover the tray tightly with foil (or lid), to keep the steam in, and bake for 25 minutes. Remove from the oven and leave to settle, covered, for 10 minutes.

While the rice is resting, melt the butter in a medium saucepan on a medium heat. Add the chilli flakes, Aleppo flakes and sumac and cook for 2–3 minutes. Add the spring onions and cook for a further 20 seconds. Remove from the heat, add the lemon juice and set aside.

Uncover the rice and spoon the chilli butter all over just before serving.