

### A Lesson in Making - and Debating - the Perfect Paella

By CAITLIN RANDALL

**T**HE LUNCH CROWD had swelled and orders were stacking up. "Mixta for four, table 38," the waiter shouted, smiling with complicity at the chef, Jose Luis Rojo of La Barraca in Madrid, a restaurant noted for its varied paellas.

This was it: my final exam, of a sort. Armed with a wooden spoon and 90 minutes of lessons, I got to work preparing Spain's most famous dish; that sumptuous combination of saffron rice, chicken and shellfish known as paella.

To the uninitiated, paella is little more than a seafood dish accompanied by rice. But in Spain, preparing the perfect paella is a work of gastronomic art. Tempers flare over what constitute authentic ingredients, whether to mix meat and seafood and if genuine paella is cooked only over a wood-burning fire. This is more than a dish; it's a national passion.

Ingredients lay scattered along the metal countertop: chopped onions, chicken parts, a tub of fresh shrimp, green beans and pimiento strips, olive oil and powdered saffron. Seized with the jitters, I grab the wrong pan, spattering oil into a paellera made for eight. The chef calmly steers me towards the 15-inch model, hanging in long row of pans - the largest of which measures several feet across at the base and serves 20.



Jose Luis Rojo, head chef of La Barraca restaurant in Madrid

Photos: Manolo Casamayor at Cinco Dias

A paellera is a shallow, two-handed pan in which paella is cooked and served. The word paella in fact, refers not to the combination of rice, seafood, sausages and other meats, but to the paellera. The pan, which resembles a large

flat wok, derives its name from the Latin for pan, *paella*. Paelleras come in all sizes, although some chefs scoff at the idea of preparing a noteworthy paella in a pan measuring six feet across.

"That is for tourists," chef Rojo says. "The rice loses its flavor in a huge pan. A paellera should be cast-iron, never Teflon, so the socarrat can form."

The socarrat is considered the most delectable part of the paella, a golden crust of rice that forms along the bottom of the pan. When paella is served in Spain, it is brought to the table in the paellera, and a mindful waiter will scour the bottom, doling out the savory scrapings.

A heavy iron skillet can take the place of a paellera, but it's important the pan is wide and shallow and that the rice cooks uncovered, preventing it from steaming.

My quest to learn paella-making began when I tasted my first truly Spanish paella, a traditional Valencian recipe that included chicken, rabbit and green beans cooked over a wood burning fire. But my real inspiration came well before that. I chalk it up to sibling rivalry and point the finger at my three older sisters, all superb cooks, whose skills in the kitchen have long left me relegated to chopping and peeling duties. Here was a culinary expertise I could claim as my own.

Like a mantra, I repeat chef Rojo's counsel: "Master the rice and the rest is easy." Following his orders, I begin by heating a splash of olive oil to quickly sauté the onions. Chicken fried golden on all sides, browned chunks of pork, a scattering of diced tomato, a

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### Delicious Debate Over the Perfect Paella Simmers

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few cups of rice and a dash of olive oil flavored by fresh parsley and garlic are all tossed into the paellera. Next, add a few threads of saffron, crumpled or pounded into powder.

At over \$2,000 a pound, saffron is the most expensive spice in the world, but no Spanish chef would accept a substitute, particularly since some of the best saffron in the world comes from La Mancha in Spain. Fortunately, a very tiny amount of the potent spice is needed to give rice an extraordinary flavor and aroma.

When the rice is just transparent, coated in oil and spice, piping hot chicken or fish stock is added, a ladle at a time to let the starch absorb all the pungent flavors.

"In Spain, every region has its own version, every family a social recipe," chef Rojo says. "But the secret of a perfect paella is all in the rice."

The 50-year-old chef prefers the Calasparra brand from Murcia, but says any good bomba (short-grain) rice from Valencia will produce the same tasty results. Since Valencian rice isn't often easy to find outside Spain, Italian arborio or Californian pearl rice can substitute as long as it is short-grain. This is because short-grain rice has a longer cooking time and absorbs liquid better than long-grain, allowing flavors to seep into the rice as the stock simmers down.

**True Method**

The correct method of cooking rice opens yet another topic for debate among Spaniards. There are those who argue cooking a paella on a stove top or over an open fire is the only true method; others claim putting a paellera in the oven at the end of the process not only speeds things up but makes a better socarrat. But in a restaurant where 60 paellas are cooked at lunch, there is no debate; the quicker oven method was out.

The time to transfer the paella uncovered to the oven is when the rice is no longer soupy, but still some liquid remains. Before my creation goes into the heat, several jumbo shrimp, a few strips of pimiento and a handful of mussels are pushed deep into the fragrant mixture. In about 12 min-

utes the paella emerges from the oven, glorious golden rice garnished with mussels in their open shells, pink shrimp, chunks of chicken and everyone's favorite flat green beans. The chef bestows the universal thumbs up, a pass.

#### Paella's Birthplace

As I leave, making my way through the small, crowded dining rooms, a waiter asks which concoction is mine. "Table 38, the Mixta," I answer with authority. "I've earned my apron."

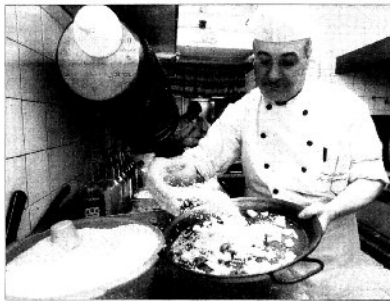
But that's Madrid. In Valencia, the undisputed of paella making, creating the perfect rice dish requires more than a few lessons.

It was here that rice first came to Spain more than a thousand years ago, when the Arabs conquered Iberia. They brought with them the tropical meadow grass, originally that originated in China and India, and the art of irrigation. Even the Spanish word for rice-*arroz* comes directly from the Arabic *ariz*. Muslim rule was temporarily interrupted by El Cid, the renegade Castilian knight, but it wasn't until 1388, when King Jaime I captured Valencia, that the 3000s were definitively ousted. By then, huge rice fields were spread out across the flat marshland surrounding Valencia.

When malaria broke out, King Jaime banned rice growing in the wetlands and later restricted it to area around the Albufera lagoon, but by then the starchy short grain had become a staple in the Valencian diet and an entrenched part of the local culture.

Valencia today is Spain's third-largest city, a vibrant if not picturesque seaside metropolis still famed for its rice-growing. Indeed, any visitor here can't help seeing it's rice country. Luminous green rice shoots cover the marshy flatlands outside the city and everyone seems to be eating rice dishes of all kinds, from single peasant fare to spectacular seafood feasts.

There is no arguing, even among Spanish cooks, that the birthplace of paella is this Mediterranean port. And it is here that world's best of paella can be found in mind-boggling variety. There are seafood paellas of every description where shellfish, squid and halibut are the featured ingredi-



Making paella: Jose Luis Rojo tosses rice over other ingredients in the paellera pan (right), adds a dash of olive oil (below left) and presents the tasty result (below right).

Photos: Manolo Casamayor at Cinco Dias

ents, other versions are made with meat or sausage, duck, chicken even snails. One of the most popular dishes, *arroz a banda*, is a variation on paella in which the supporting cast of shrimp, clams and lobster is served on the side with the seafood-laden rice taking center stage.

But the granddaddy of all paellas is unquestionably the Valenciana, a medley of rabbit, chicken and green beans, seasoned with garlic, a pinch of paprika and saffron. The more traditional recipe can also include sea snails.

"Valencia is where you eat genuine paella, everything else is just an imitation," says Salvador Omos, manager at Raco de l'Olla Restaurant in the heart of Valencia's rice fields. It is his restaurant that Peregrino Casas, the co-owner of regional Spanish cooking and author of several cookbooks, tips as Mecca for paella lovers.

The restaurant looks out over the Albufera lagoon, some 10 kilometers south of Valencia. This freshwater lagoon is separated from the Mediterranean by a strip of sand dunes and pine forests. Surrounded by the rice fields, the Albufera has diminished in size over the years with parts of the lagoon silted up in open row land for cultivating rice. In 1996, however, it was declared a national park and sanctuary to hundreds of species of migrating birds.

The restaurant itself is set among the reeds, a catwalk of adjoining rooms, each with its own spectacular view of the lagoon.

Bertrande Merino, the restaurant's chief chef, is a paella purist. He sighs at the mention of tinsmithing techniques. His menu does not include the so-called paella mixta, a dish that combines seafood and meat in a jumble of flavors he says over-

whelms each other. A chef at Raco de l'Olla for nearly 30 years, Merino says certain rules must be obeyed in the art of paella making. He snubs the practice of putting paella in the oven, and insists the dish should cook entirely over a stove-top flame, or better yet, an outdoor fire. Cutting corners by adding colorants or saffron substitutes is a sacrilege, as is skirting on the stock and using chicken cubes. "When the rice is cooking, leave it alone, don't stir the paellera," Merino advises. "Give it all a last blast of hot heat, about one minute, to ensure a delicious socarrat, then let it sit for a few minutes before you serve."

#### Ready to Eat

"Can anyone make a perfect paella?" I ask wistfully. Chef Merino shakes his head.

"You have to cook paella in Valencia. It's the local water, it makes all the difference. The chemicals make it taste terrible to drink, but it's perfect for cooking paella," Merino says, claiming he once knew a Valencian who aged brining his own special cubic to Madrid.

Looking out over the Albufera, a white heron lands on the shore. My paella Valenciana arrives along with a glass of Spanish red wine. As I tuck into the mouth-watering mix of tender rabbit, chicken and the fragrant saffron rice, I have to admit paella is good as close to perfection.

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#### Paella a la Valenciana

(Serves 4 to 6)

- Ingredients**
- 500 grams of rabbit, cut in bite-size pieces
  - 500 grams of chicken, cut in serving pieces
  - 2 tablespoons of olive oil
  - 1 small onion
  - 1 medium tomato, finely chopped
  - a pinch of sweet paprika
  - 3 gloves of garlic, minced
  - 1 tablespoon minced parsley
  - 1 healthy pinch of saffron, filaments pounded or crumbled
  - 300 grams of short-grain rice
  - 1-1/2 liters of strong chicken stock, preferably homemade
  - 150 grams of lima beans
  - 250 grams of peas, flat green beans
  - salt

**Method**

Sprinkle the rabbit and chicken pieces with salt. Heat the oil in a paellera pan measuring about 15 inches (38 centimeters) across. Fry the meat over a high heat until golden brown on all sides; remove to a platter. Sauté onion. Add the tomato, paprika, garlic and parsley, and heat until liquid from the tomato evaporates. Add the saffron and rice, coating the rice with the mixture. Add boiling chicken broth, a ladle at a time, allowing the liquid to absorb into rice. Add lima and green beans. When rice is no longer soupy, but some liquid remains, remove chicken and rabbit to the rice. Cook *al dente* until the rice is nearly done (turn up flame for a last-minute blast of heat and let sit for 10 minutes before serving) or place in the oven and bake, uncovered, for about 15 minutes (225 degrees Fahrenheit or 102 degrees Celsius), let sit before serving.