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How to cook the perfect paella

Oven or hob? And what about stock? Picking your way through paella purists' recommendations can be more than a little tricky



Nice as paella ... Felicity Cloake's recipe for perfection. All photos: Felicity Cloake

Some dishes are a victim of their own success. The Yorkshire pudding springs to mind – just a little too tasty and conveniently shaped for its own good; the Scotch egg suffers from a similar problem. One of the saddest examples is the brave paella. As Catalan author Josep Pla put it, the "abuses" committed against Spain's most famous dish are "excessive – an authentic scandal". It's little things like Keith Floyd's quick-cook rice, as much as any outrageous Thai "twist" or Caribbean pineapple garnish, which offend the sensibilities of Valencians who claim the dish as their birthright.

The original version reflects that city's inland position, with Jenny Chandler reporting in *The Real Taste of Spain* that shoppers in its Mercat Central could be persuaded to agree on only thing – fish and shellfish are "absolutely out of the question". Chicken and rabbit, meanwhile, are mandatory – with snails an "optional extra". As Valencian chef Llorenç Millo sensibly observes, "paella has as many recipes as there are villages, and nearly as many as there are cooks". This includes, of course, the seafood version that's more familiar to British visitors, who tend to congregate on the coast where such ingredients are plentiful. Colman Andrews makes a good point in his book *Catalan Cuisine* when he says: "What is understood in Valencia ... is that whether it contains seafood or not, paella is above all a rice dish – and it is ultimately good rice, not good seafood (or whatever) that makes a paella great."

Rice is a tricky ingredient and, just like risotto, certain rules must be observed to achieve paella nirvana. For a start, one needs a short-grain variety – not long-grain, Ainsley and others – that absorbs liquid easily and won't dry out, even when the outside is toasted to a crunch, as well as a paella pan (or wide pan with a thin base) so the aforementioned liquid cooks off quickly and evenly. Ideally that pan would be set over a wood fire, to give the dish a delicious whiff of smoke, but a gas ring will do. Unlike with a risotto, stirring is absolutely forbidden – Ballymaloe take note – because you're aiming for a tender, but not creamy result. Besides, the brown, crisp layer that forms on the bottom of a well-cooked paella, the *socarrat*, is a highly prized delicacy.

Much paella lore – that, as Elisabeth Luard reports, "to be truly worthy of the name, the cook is always a man"; that the dish must always be prepared and eaten in the open air, "preferably in the shade of an old vine or fig tree", and always at midday, rather than dinnertime – can be happily disregarded as it suits ... although come to think of it, that fig tree does sound rather tempting.

Cooking with gas

Traditionally the paella would have been prepared over a fire of vine or orange tree prunings but, as chef Alberto Herráiz – who has just published a book entitled Paella and thus has some claim to be an expert on the subject – explains, "the ability to control the degree of heat precisely when cooking over wood or charcoal calls for great skills and forms part of the *paellero's* inherited knowhow. The Sunday cook is expected to concentrate fully on the paella, and to pay exceptional attention to detail." In other words, we're not competent enough to do two things at once. Wood fires also, he says, spoil the texture of the rice. "For the best flavour and texture," Herráiz concludes, "the easiest and most successful method is to start off the paella on the stove and carry out the rest of the cooking in the oven."



Alberto Herráiz's traditional-style recipe

This is controversial. Armed with Herráiz's recipe for "paella rice 'a banda' without the banda", which is the closest he comes to a seafood paella in his stove-top chapter, and a more conventional take on things from Sam and Eddie Hart's Modern Spanish Cooking, I go to work. Herráiz's method calls for me to sauté cuttlefish and seafood in oil and then stir in the rice and cook for a couple of minutes, stirring, before adding the tomato sofrito (of which more later) and the stock. The dish is then left to cook over a very high heat for five minutes, until the rice has risen to the top, at which point I transfer it to the oven for a further 12 minutes. It then rests for three minutes. The texture is curious – a skin has formed on top, which seems to have kept the rice nice and moist – but it's just too silkily uniform for my taste.

The Harts' recipe is much simpler. After sautéing onion, garlic, peppers, paprika and seafood together in the paella pan, I add the rice, leave it to cook for 2 minutes and then pour in the stock, increase the heat and simmer vigorously for 10 minutes. Finally I arrange the seafood on top, leave it to cook for 8 minutes and then, after a brief rest under foil, it's ready to serve. The resulting paella suits my tastes better; the grains have remained pleasantly separate and those around the edge have begun to caramelize, giving the dish a more interesting texture.



The simplified version from Sam

and Eddie Hart

Chef José Pizarro gives a recipe in his book *Seasonal Spanish Food* that follows a similar process, but he covers the dish with foil for the last eight minutes of cooking. This speeds up the cooking of the seafood but, in comparison to the Harts' paella, the rice seems slightly mushy.



Sri Owen mixes things up

Perhaps most unorthodox of all, however, is Sri Owen who, in her *Rice Book*, admits that at home she gets the best results by "cooking the rice and seafood separately and combining them together just before serving". I'm all for giving the rice a little individual love and attention but this seems a shame: despite the use of some fairly pricey and nicely flavoured stock, the dish is bland, becoming simply rice with seafood rather than a paella.

Two essentials

Short-grain rice is obviously essential for paella – preferably Spanish bomba (often sold under the geographic indication Calasparra), but Herráiz claims Italian risotto or Japanese sushi rice are also suitable. I make his paella with arborio and no one notices the difference, even under sustained questioning, although I decide it's slightly chalkier – which could, of course be entirely the power of suggestion.

The other important ingredient, of course, is the stock that rice is cooked in. The Harts go to the trouble of making one specially, using prawn heads, fennel, tomato and brandy, but I feel the complexities of flavour are lost in the finished dish. Instead I take Herráiz's suggestion of dressing up good-quality fish stock by simmering the heads and tails of shellfish in it for 25 minutes, which gives it a greater depth of flavour without much more trouble to the cook. Chicken, as used by Colman Andrews in his Valencian paella with shellfish, imparts a pleasingly savoury note but jars with the marine flavours in this particular dish.

Sundries

The sofrito – that aromatic mixture of gently sautéed onions, garlic and tomatoes – is a lynchpin of Spanish cookery, and of most paellas, with the exception of the Harts', which adds tomato to the stock rather than the dish itself. Herráiz makes a very tasty slow-cooked version, simmered for an hour and then passed through a fine sieve, but José Pizarro's simpler take on the sofrito gives his paella a more robust

flavour and texture. He makes it in the pan itself, gently sautéing onion and garlic with olive oil, tomatoes and wine, and then allowing it to reduce before adding the other ingredients – it's quick and gives the finished dish a richness only Herráiz's can rival but in less than half the time. (Both chefs use copious amounts of olive oil, which also helps on this front.) Although I try using fresh tomatoes, the tinned sort give a more reliable flavour here and are much less fiddly to prepare.



José Pizarro offers a more robust take

Pizarro also uses monkfish in his paella, which goes down well with the testing panel – it's firmer than Sri Owen's cod, so it doesn't break down during cooking, and it makes a nice textural contrast to the smoothness of the squid. The peas he uses add a sweetness to the dish, but as broad beans are still in season here I've substituted them in homage to the fresh white lima beans that make an appearance in the traditional paella valenciana.

Paella is sometimes served with aioli but, although I can never resist a spoonful if there's some around, its rich, garlicky flavour does overpower the delicacy of the rice. To make the most of it, allow the dish to rest before serving. As Colman Andrews points out, "most aficionados of paella prefer it tepid rather than hot", and with good reason: it tastes much better.

I'm not sure there's any truth in the idea that paella should only be eaten with a wooden spoon but I'm sure that it really, if possible, should be scooped straight from the pan. This is a festive dish that celebrates the joy of communal dining rather than a formal knife and fork affair – so make it for Sunday lunch, stick the pan straight on to the garden table and get stuck in.

Perfect paella



Felicity Cloake's perfect paella

Serves 2-4, depending on hunger

4 raw, unshelled tiger prawns
90ml olive oil
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
500ml good-quality fish stock
150g sustainable monkfish, cut into chunks

1 onion, finely diced
1 tsp smoked paprika
200g chopped tomatoes
50ml dry white wine
Pinch of saffron soaked in 1 tbsp hot water
200g Calasparra or other short-grain rice
150g baby squid, cut into rings
150g broad beans
150g mussels, scrubbed
Handful of flat-leaf parsley to garnish
½ lemon, cut into wedges



Sautéing prawns to pimp the stock

1. Shell the prawns and put the flesh aside. Heat 1 tbsp olive oil in a large pan and gently sauté one clove of chopped garlic for two minutes. Add the prawn heads and tails and sauté, stirring to break them up, for three minutes. Pour in the stock and simmer gently for 30 minutes, then strain, season to taste and keep warm.
2. Heat the remaining oil in a 26cm paella or other wide, thin-based pan and add the monkfish. Sauté for five minutes until slightly browned, then remove and set aside. Add the onion and garlic and cook until softened, then stir in the paprika and cook for one minute. Tip in the tomatoes and wine, turn up the heat and simmer for 10 minutes. Add the squid and beans.
3. Stir in the rice to coat well so it forms an even layer, then add 400ml stock and the saffron and soaking water. Simmer vigorously for 10 minutes then arrange the monkfish, mussels and prawns on the top of the dish, pushing them well into the rice but not otherwise disturbing it. Cook for about eight minutes – if the dish looks very dry before the rice has cooked completely then add the rest of the stock, bearing in mind it shouldn't be at all soupy.
4. Cover the dish with foil and take off the heat. Allow to rest for 10 minutes then garnish with flat-leaf parsley and wedges of lemon.

Is paella Spain's proudest culinary achievement, and can a seafood version ever hope to compete with a proper paella valenciana? What do you like to put in yours – and has anyone been brave enough to try one of Alberto Herráiz's dessert paellas?

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