

# Perfecting Paella

Perfecting Paella, pleez! Is it all in the pan or is there more? If the dish is made correctly, it's one of the most perfect comfort foods. If made incorrectly, it's a disaster dish that just can't be fixed. Maybe that's why discussions about Paella recipes can go on until the wee hours of the morning, similar to the perfect New Orleans Gumbo recipe—a post I'll get to one of these days.



Traditional preparation of paella

Historically, Paella the Spanish rice dish that includes different combinations of vegetables and meats, characteristically seasoned with saffron and good olive oil, originates from Valencia in Eastern Spain and requires the freshest ingredients and the best rice to make it truly wonderful.

## Where does Paella come from?

The most common story of paella's origins is that servants would take leftovers from Moorish royal banquets and cook them over open fires preparing delicious dishes to bring home to their families. Those must have been some seriously delicious leftovers!

The word "paella" may come from the Arab word 'baqiyah', which means 'leftovers'. Some linguists though believe that the word

'paella' is derived from a Latin word 'patella', which was a flat plate used for religious offerings. So the dish name is actually for the cooking utensil.

### **What's required to make an Authentic Spanish Paella?**

For hundreds of years people not only argue over the origins, but on the ingredients and the perfect paella recipe since many different varieties of paella are passed on to the family cooks as best kept secrets. This includes for example, the Valencia version where fish and shellfish are an absolute 'no go' which makes sense because the laborers of the fields serving at the Moorish royal banquets were far from the coastline.

Therefore an authentic Valencia version never includes fish and seafood, but chicken and rabbit as well as snails and often beans and artichokes. Let's not stop there, other varieties include *Paella de Marisco* (Seafood Paella), a vegetarian versions containing hearty white beans, artichokes, eggplant and peppers, or the mixed Valencian Catalan version.

### **The Perfect Paella Pan**

There are many different ways to prepare paella as there are little fishing villages in and around Spain, but first things first I need a Paella pan and I need it fast. I'm only in Barcelona for the weekend and want to make paella at home this winter.



Traditional Paella Pan

I should go to a little *Ferreteria* (hardware store) to get my Paella pan, but I'll head to El Corte Ingles, my favorite Spanish department store and ask for a '*paellera*'. I'll opt for an enameled steel pans made of carbon steel and coated with a speckled black enamel finish. They won't rust, are affordable, and make cleanup a breeze. It should also be a flat-bottomed pan, which is uniquely made for my modern burner.

If I don't have luck finding a '*paellera*' at El Corte Ingles, I'll just buy a Gucci purse instead and head towards 'La Boqueria', Europe's best food market which has been operating since the 13th century. No, I won't buy a Gucci purse, that's just the Diva in me is coming out. I'll buy a Chanel.

Seriously, at La Boqueria I'm sure to find the pan, the rice, and a place to rest my legs while enjoying Tapas. I'm on vacation after all.

### **Perfect paella, it's all in the Bomba**

The perfect paella is not only in the pan but the rice they say and namely the Bomba rice, a short grain and pearl-colored round rice. Bomba is 'the' supreme rice in Spain, because it absorbs three times its volume in broth (rather than the normal two), yet the grains remain firm and delicious. Since Bomba can absorb much more liquid, it's hard to overcook it and since I'm new to paella, this is the rice for me.



Bomba rice; Wiki photo by J.P.Lon

Bomba rice grows leisurely in the village of Calasparra until it matures. This longer growing cycle produces dehydrated kernels which are ready to absorb the utmost flavors of paella broth. This is my absolute fear, the absorptions process which can be the difference between crunchy or mushy paella. I don't know how to control the amount of liquid yet, but will soon learn.

Ay, yi, yi! I pray the primrose path to perfecting paella is a perpetual pleasure. ☐

Just as paella historically melded unique ingredients, the dish is a union of Spain for the dish, the Romans, for the pan, and the Arabs, for the rice. Without the unity of these nations, we'd be living in a world without paella and that would be a pity.