



In search of the perfect paella

On a weekend break in Spain's third city we go in search of the region's most famous export to the world

PULLING INTO El Palmar, we were greeted by a sign blasting out the fact that we had arrived in the 'Cradle of Valencian cuisine'. The humble beginnings of *paella*, the dish that conquered the world, are firmly rooted in this small, unassuming town of only nine hundred inhabitants. Driving through crowded streets festooned with fiesta bunting and fairy lights, it seemed hard to imagine the place as a seething cauldron of resentment/fear and loathing. In January of this year a judge in Valencia finally ended 750 years of male domination of the *Comunidad de Pescadores* or Fishermen's Guild. The ten-year-old dispute threatened to tear the community apart, with fathers and grandfathers locked in bitter disputes with daughters and granddaughters over their right to become full members of this most ancient of guilds. For many years it was held in just as much reverence as the

Church, taking on the functions of a Town Hall and doctor's surgery. The first schools in the area were built on land ceded by the entity. In a recent interview, the president of the organization José Caballer refused to acknowledge any possible discrimination on the part of its members towards the women, claiming that throughout the guild's history its membership requirements have remained unchanged and that they would have to adapt to the changing times. The case has attracted a lot of media attention in Spain with Pilar Bardem, actor, left-wing activist and mother of Oscar winning Javier, and the Conservative mayor of Valencia, Rita Barberá, both rallying to the women's cause.

The real thing

Nothing quite prepares you for the fall-off-your-horse experience of eating authentic paella for the

first time, especially if you'd had a few disappointing previous encounters. The owner of the restaurant explained, with a straight face, that he was just an emissary, that the real miracles were worked in the kitchen by his mother-in-law and that I was a braver man than him if I dared to venture in there. Telling me I would get the nod after we'd had our starters. The opening gambit was *esgarraet con mojama*, a fabulous salad consisting of finely flaked salt cod, strips of wood-roasted red peppers and wafer thin slices of cured blue fin tuna, drizzled with extra virgin olive oil. The wine recommended was Aranjón Crianza 2005, from the up and coming D.O. Utiel-Requena, an excellent drop that married perfectly with the relatively strong flavours of the salt cod and cured tuna. Next was an Albufera signature dish, *All i Pebre*, chunks of young eel braised with potatoes in a rich, garlicky, *pimentón* laden sauce. Not having confronted eel

DAY OUT FROM THE CITY

Just outside the busy city, the Albufera makes for a fascinating few hours away from the urban hustle and bustle of Valencia

The Albufera and rice paddies are only eight kilometres south west of the city and can easily be reached by car, taxi or even bicycle. There are a number of walking routes known unofficially as *las rutas de caña y barro* or cane and mud trails/routes, which take you through areas that afford the bird-watcher with endless opportunities, not to mention the dune system and beaches, currently undergoing regeneration, in a belated attempt to return the area to its former pristine beauty. One of the best ways of seeing the lagoon is by taking a trip in an *albuferenc*, the traditional Albufera craft, from any of the jetties in El Saler, El Pujol, El Palmar, Catarroja and Silla but establish the price and duration of the trip with the owner before boarding.

since my boyhood on the edge of the fens, the dish was a very pleasant surprise indeed. Last, but not least of the *entrantes* or starters were *sepietas*, tiny boned cuttlefish, cooked in their own ink, and simply stunning. It was at this point that I got the nod from the owner, and after a swift introduction and a shout of 'he's all yours' to his mother-in-law, he was gone. Swallowing hard, I decided to ask a predictable question about the decisive factor in the making of authentic paella, which, unsurprisingly, turned out to be first-class ingredients and a wood fire to impart that *sabor autentico* or real flavour.

Back at the table, the humungous paella was greeted with much fanfare with our neighbours giving





NICE RICE

Spanish rice has a high concentration of starch in the centre of the grain that gives it that brilliant white color when uncooked and allows for a huge absorption of stock which gives a creaminess to the rice after cooking. The famous *Bomba* is almost round, with a slight tail at one end, and expands up to three times when cooked. It is also much less likely than other varieties to split open, resulting in that starchy sludge. We've all been there...

The three most important Spanish rice growing regions have Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status which means the origin of the rice and its varietal purity are controlled by a regulatory board, as are aspects of its production and harvesting.

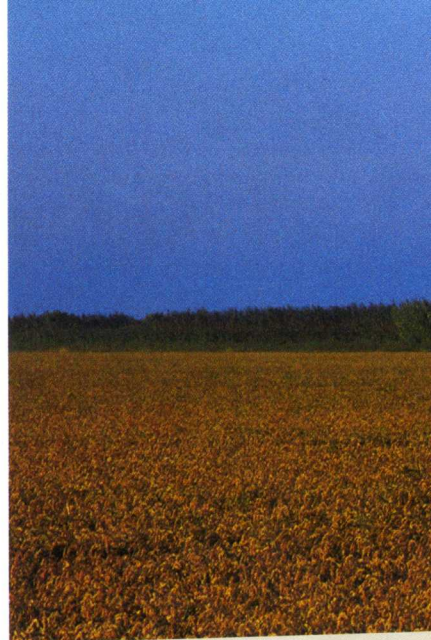
We tasted the most famous of the three, *Arroz de Valencia* in the Albufera Nature Park and the PDO includes three varieties of rice: medium-grain *Senia* and *Bahía*, and short-grain *Bomba*.

A Catalan rice, *Arroz del Delta del Ebro* from Tarragona is another PDO. This is one of the most important rice-producing areas in Spain. The mouth of the Ebro River forms a fertile delta that fans out 125 square miles into the Mediterranean and rice has been cultivated here since the fifteenth century. The mild climate gives the rice superb cooking qualities. The grain is short, aromatic, and again, very absorbent allowing it to absorb complex flavours.

The third and smallest rice PDO is *Arroz de Calasparra*, claimed by many to be the best rice in the world. Most of Murcia's star food product is produced by a co-operative and packaged in distinctive white cloth bags with the bold red lettering *Virgen de la Esperanza*.

What makes it unique is that it is grown in cold, moving mountain river water up in the hills as opposed to growing in still water at sea-level as in Valencia and the Ebro Delta. A slower ripening process results in a harder grain and the resulting rice absorbs more stock than any other rice and still hold its shape perfectly.

Until fairly recently, though, many feared that the strain would become extinct. *Bomba* had all but disappeared because it requires such intensive care in order to flourish. Fortunately, gourmet chefs, plus a huge increase in interest from foodies in all things Spanish, have created a big demand for *bomba* from Calasparra's busy co-op.





admiring nods and smiles. Interestingly, there's a strict protocol to follow. If it's paella for four, it's invisibly divided into quarters and the occasional foray into somebody else's territory is frowned upon. The rice is gently pushed from the rim of the *paellera* towards the centre, with a wooden spoon, preferably made from the wood of an orange tree. The paella we chose, on the trusty recommendation of the owner, featured wild duck from the Albufera, rabbit and snails and chicken. When we'd just about finished, I noticed that our guide, Fran, began to scrape away at the dark residue at the bottom of the *paellera*. He confided to us that for true paella fans, this was one of the best things about the dish and that it even had a special name, *socarrat*. The *socarrat* has a profound concentration of flavours and that ever-so-slightly burnt taste that some find absolutely irresistible. Burnt bits fought over, it was now time for pudding. Hitting the table in rapid succession

were an extremely filling *helado de queso*, cheese ice-cream with pine nuts, walnuts, dried apricots, sultanas and honey; an equally filling *helado de turrón*, or nougat ice-cream and *mousse de leche merengada*, which rather woefully translates as meringued milk mousse, but was truly scrummy. Reservations are absolutely essential here as the place draws devotees from all over Spain, including celebrities. ■

PAELLA HEAVEN

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■ GETTING THERE

Iberia, easyJet, Jet2, Thomsonfly and Ryanair offer regular, scheduled flights to Valencia Airport

■ METRO VALENCIA

Once in Arrivals, just follow the METRO sign down the escalator to the main platform. A single costs just 1.80€. Take *línea 3* and get off at Xátiva.

■ STAYING THERE

Hostal Antigua Morellana
C/En Bou 2
Tel: +34 963 91 57 73

www.hostalam.com

This lovely little 18-room boutique hotel boasts all the charm of an 18th century building with all the comforts of the 21st. It's right in the heart of medieval Valencia and only a couple of minutes' walk from The Mercado Central. Just down the road, and belonging to the same family, *Alfonso Martínez* is an excellent *pastelería* where you can stock up on finger burningly fresh Valencian pastries, bread and cakes. Lovely people. Rooms from €45

■ TOURIST INFORMATION

Plaza de la Reina 19 and Plaza del Ayuntamiento
Check out Valencia online at:
www.turisvalencia.es

