

## Spanish Paella Perfection

In eastern Spain's Valencia region, paella (Pie-AY-a) is a saffron-infused rice dish with various meats, vegetables, and seafood cooked and served in a single pan. It is traditionally made with Spanish short-grain rice. The dish is prepared and served in a large, round, shallow pan. An authentic Spanish paella is cooked outside over a wood fire, but that doesn't mean you can't make a perfectly delicious paella at home on the stovetop.

The pan is a crucial piece for perfecting paella. A traditional pan, called a paella or paellera, is a large, flat, open, round, shallow steel pan with two handles. It has sloping sides about 2 inches deep so that the rice has the most contact with the bottom of the pan. The pan dimples trap small amounts of liquid and thus promote even cooking; they make the pan rigid and prevent warping. It does not have a lid.

To achieve the specific thickness of rice, you must use a paella pan with a specific diameter for the number of servings you plan on eating. The shape of the pan helps ensure that the rice cooks in a thin layer. The Valencians say the cooked rice should be only as thick as about 1/2 inch. For that reason, paella pans grow in diameter rather than in height.

Want to make paella without committing to a special pan? No problem! Any wide, shallow skillet will work. If you plan to finish the paella in the oven, ensure the pan and handle are heat-safe.

To make paella, first, the vegetables and meats are sautéed in olive oil, generally separate, to ensure that they are cooked completely.

A sauté of aromatics called the sofrito, provides the flavor base. The components of the sofrito vary by region. Tomato, onion, and garlic are a popular trio for the sofrito. Some cooks add smoked paprika, fresh herbs, or a dried sweet red pepper called *ñora*.

Almost every paella recipe calls for the water or liquid to be infused with saffron, which contributes to the color and flavor of the rice. Saffron gives the dish an earthy, sweet, and slightly musky flavor.

One of the keys to a great paella is using the proper rice. Use the *bomba* variety of rice for best results, an almost round rice grain from the eastern coast of Spain. Bomba rice is unique because it absorbs three times its volume in liquid without turning mushy.

If the meat isn't already in the pan, return it, setting it on top of the rice, then let the paella simmer, uncovered, without stirring, until the rice has absorbed the liquid and is *al dente*.

To achieve the crispy golden crust (*socarrat*), which is the distinguishing feature of a truly excellent paella, the cook turns the heat up and listens closely. The paella will start to crackle, and a toasted odor will emerge from the bottom of the pan. The paella should be quickly removed from the heat before it burns. A freshly cooked paella needs to rest for several minutes.

It isn't difficult to make a fantastic paella (though getting the toasty socarrat to appear on that bottom layer does take a little practice), as long as you keep these elements in mind. One of the most common mistakes is overloading the pan with too many ingredients, thereby suffocating the rice. Add them with restraint for great paella, and let the rice take center stage.

There's only one perfect way to eat paella with a group – everyone gets a spoon and digs right into the pan. Barring that, serving everyone on their own plate is acceptable, but make sure everyone gets some of that prized socarrat.

A paella may sound ambitious, but everything is cooked in one dish. Today, there are endless variations of paella using a variety of poultry, meats, seafood, and vegetables. There is no right or wrong recipe, only one that pleases you!