



## The ultimate foodie guide to Valencia and Murcia

by Great British Chefs · 4 January 2023

*Found on Spain's eastern coast, Valencia and Murcia are two neighbouring autonomous communities, renowned for their seafood and rice in particular. Find out more about the food heritage of these coastal regions.*

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The Spanish autonomous communities of Valencia and Murcia are often known together as the Levante and form the eastern part of the Spanish Mediterranean coast. That long coastline makes fish and seafood the centrepiece of both regions' food traditions. Murcia is well known as the home of baked salted fish, especially baked sea bream, while Valencia has Alicante's obsession with tuna. The fishermen of Benidorm in the province of Alicante were famous throughout the Mediterranean for their skill at tuna fishing and that love of tuna can still be seen in Alicante's markets and restaurants. Further north, one of the best seafood products in the whole of the region is the Denia red prawn, so beloved of chef Quique Dacosta. The prawn can only be found between Cape San Antonio and Ibiza and at a depth of about 600 metres, where the sun doesn't reach and where the prawn has almost no natural predators. The taste of a Denia red prawn is so delicate and so highly regarded that proper Denia red prawns normally cost over £120 a kilo and that price can double during the Christmas period.

One of the most famous of all the Levante products is rice. Originally brought to Spain by the Moors, the Albufera coast was the first place in Europe to grow rice and they continue to do so today as one of the three areas within the prestigious D.O.P. Arroz de Valencia (P.D.O. Rice from Valencia). For people across this area Sunday lunch is rice, and while they do make rice dishes during the week, the Sunday one is special. The Valencian paella, named after the pan it's made in, has become Spain's national dish, much to the chagrin of many Valencians who insist that a proper Valencian paella can only be made in Valencia with Valencian rice, garrafó beans and D.O.P. Saffron from La Mancha. For them, anything else is 'rice with things in it' not proper paella.



Ingredient focus: Valencia rice

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Further north in the province of Castellón, arroccito de Castellón, a rice dish created by Michelin star chef Miguel Barrera, is fast becoming their signature dish. The dish is a homage to Castellón's larder and uses D.O.P. Arroz de Valencia rice, extra virgin olive oil, D.O.P. Alcachofa de Benicarló (P.D.O. Benicarló artichokes), tomato, garlic, Castellón langoustines, tiny cuttlefish and fish stock. There is even an annual arroccito competition to judge the best made dish. In Alicante there are various rice dishes, none of which are considered paella; Alicantinos leave paella to their northern brethren in Valencia. One of the best known is arroz de senyoret - the little Master's rice - so called because all of the seafood in the dish is already peeled and ready to eat. Murcia has various rice dishes too, with the inland rice of vegetables and pork ribs being one highlight, as well as the seafood arroz caldero de mar menor.

In the Levante cheeses of great character are made such as the hard goats' raw milk cheese called D.O.P. Queso de Murcia al Vino, the rind of which is washed in the Murcia region's red wine, giving it a distinctive colour. The other two geographically protected cheeses in Murcia are both raw goat's cheese and are either cured or soft and together are known as D.O.P. Queso de Murcia.

When it comes to charcuterie both regions have a vast range of pork products that can be hyper-local to a very specific valley or village. However, long thin chorizo-type sausages called longaniza de Pascua which are mostly made around Easter time, are popular throughout Valencia. In Murcia the best quality pork charcuterie is made from the much-appreciated chato murciano pig breed.

Both regions are well-known wine makers, and they are an integral part of the huge rise in quality of Spanish wine over the past couple of decades. The main grape grown in the region is the Monastrell variety of red grape, an indigenous variety that is well suited to the lack of rainfall, extremely hot summers and low night temperatures of the area. There are a number of D.O.s whose principal grape variety is monastrell including Yecla, Jumilla, Valencia and Alicante. The exception to this is D.O. Utiel Requena where the main grape is bobal, an excellent variety for making lively reds and bright rosés.



The wine regions of Spain: Alicante

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The centre of the city of Murcia is an excellent place to go out and eat tapas. One of the most famous tapas in Murcia is the marinara - Russian salad on a small slice of toasted bread with an anchovy on top, while roasted octopus with a squeeze of lemon is also a regular on almost every bar menu. Valencians throughout the region have a tendency to stay in one restaurant or tapas bar rather than moving from place to place, but a roast pepper, salt cod and black olive salad known as esgarraet is on almost every menu in the capital city.

No one could ever accuse Murcians of not knowing how to have a good time, and middle-aged Murcians who long ago stopped going out clubbing, have developed the tradition of tardeo at the weekend. After lunch, they go to bars and clubs, for example Enboga or Teatre, which open after lunch and close about 8pm. Their counterparts in Alicante have enthusiastically adopted the tradition, going to places like Mauro at the San Juan beach, while in the city of Valencia they seem to be resisting, for now, this new tradition.

Due to the fertile soil in both regions, fresh vegetables and fruit are a major part of the Levante's industry and wherever you go here you can always expect fruit and vegetables of the highest quality. Many of the fruit and vegetables have special geographic protection, from the pomegranates of Elche to the Torre Pacheco melon, which gives the end consumer clear traceability and a guarantee of quality.

Altogether the Spanish Levante offers a real sense of the authentic traditions of the region, while also using innovative methods in both agriculture and wine making. Both Valencia and Murcia retain their characteristic Mediterranean style despite embracing the best the modern world has to offer.



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