



Ingredient focus: Valencia rice

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Valencia is the spiritual home of Spain's most famous dish – paella. Rachel McCormack visits The Albufera natural park to find out more about the rice it's made from.

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The single most famous dish from the whole of Spain is paella. Originally from Valencia, it's a rice dish named after the pan it's made in and was a fixed feature of the agricultural workers in the region, who would build fires from the wood of the fruit trees in the orchards that they were working in to make their meals. Using the vegetables of the region, snails and rabbit, the paella de la huerta (the vegetable garden) was the original Valencian paella. Local fishermen on the coast got in on the act and made seafood rice dishes in the same way when they landed their catch, and so paella was made either with vegetables or with seafood in the province.

Nowadays paella is made in a million different ways, often controversially, as Valencians have very strong views on what constitutes a paella and what doesn't. They consider that a paella can only be a proper paella if it is made in Valencia, with Valencian rice, garrafó beans and P.D.O. Azafrán (saffron) de La Mancha. Anything else is not a paella but merely a rice dish. However, what is undeniable for the best Spanish rice dishes in their many forms is that you need to start off with good quality rice, and some of the best is found in Valencia.

The Albufera natural park, about eight miles south of the Valencian capital, is one of the best places to grow rice in the region and my guide to the rice fields is Juan Valero of Arroz Tartana. He belongs to a fifth generation of rice farmers whose ancestors, formed of five siblings, bought some rice growing land in Albufera at the end of the nineteenth century. Originally called Els Gorets - The Gregorio Juniors, after their father - the five siblings created a business on the Isla del Palmar in the middle of Albufera, and today the cousins who run the business are known by the same name.



'El Gorets' have been growing rice in the the Albufera natural park since the nineteenth century.

The business forms part of the rice producers that make up the D.O.P. Arroz de Valencia (Rice from Valencia) and Valero tells me why the D.O.P. is important to him, 'to be part of the D.O.P. Arroz de Valencia, all members have to grow the rice with no pesticides in three very specific areas of Valencia,' explains Valero, 'and we have to package and label the rice in the same area.' This gives consumers maximum traceability and guarantees. 'Back in the old days,' he adds, 'when people bought from farmers, they knew there was a level of trust and traceability that was automatic. Nowadays what a D.O.P. certification gives you is that trust in the farmer and the product. It's as close as you can get today to actually knowing the farmer and their farming practices personally.'

The Albufera Natural Park is both wetland and a natural freshwater lagoon of approximately 21,000 hectares and is one of the most important areas of its kind in Europe. So called after the Hispano-Arab word albuháyra, meaning 'little sea', nowadays it has almost 16,000 hectares of rice fields, and employs an innovative technique, developed in partnership with Valencia University, of using pheromones rather than pesticides during the growing process.

'Most of the land we grow the rice on is lower than sea level,' explains Valero, 'and we have a water irrigation scheme in the park known as tancats which means 'closed' in Valencian.' Drainage of the water in the tancats starts in February, rice is planted in April and harvested in September and then the fields are flooded again for the winter. 'The winter flooding does two main things,' he says, 'it helps us as growers, by giving the soil a chance to rest in preparation for the next harvest, while preventing fungus and weeds from growing; but it also extends the habitat for migratory birds who spend the winter here or pass through on their way to Africa.' By October the rice is harvested and preserved in its husk in rice mountain stores on the island of Palmar, which, due to the drainage systems, is now an island in name only.



The fields in Albufera are allowed to flood every winter, giving the soil a chance to rest ahead of the following year's harvest.

There are three different varieties of rice grown under D.O.P. certification; bomba, albufera and J.Sendra (a type of Senia). The difference in the varieties is their starch content, which makes them react differently when cooked. The more starch a rice grain has, the more flavour it absorbs on cooking and the creamier it is. Starchier rice is, however, more likely to stick to the pan and is also more easily overcooked.

'The bomba variety is the best known for making paellas as its lower starch content means it doesn't stick to the pan, so it's harder to overcook than the other varieties, and more forgiving.' Valero explains while standing in front of a mountain of unpeeled bomba rice. 'J.Sendra is creamier and absorbs more flavour, and is generally used by professionals or the highly experienced cook, while albufera is the newest variety within the D.O. and is fast becoming a favourite with cooks. It's the most versatile rice we produce in the area, so can be used for all the types of rice dishes we make in Spain. It's a combination of bomba and J.Sendra so it gives a cook all the flavour absorption of J.Sendra with the resistance to overcooking of the bomba variety. Best of all, it rests very well once it has finished cooking, which is a really important thing for most Spanish rice dishes.'

As we leave Palmar and flood plains give way to orange tree orchards, Valero points out the restaurants on the island. 'There are only 700 inhabitants here and thirty-two restaurants; on a Sunday it can seem like most of Valencia city comes here to have lunch, and it's always rice. Then they buy more to take away and make their own great rice dishes at home during the week.'

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