Paella Azorin

by *Jess H. Brewer*

This recipe was passed down to me from my stepfather, Manuel Azorin. Manolo (as we knew him) was born in Spain, lived most of his life in Cuba (until Castro took over) and most of the rest in Florida, where he met my mother. I am honored to have known him and blessed to have been his stepson as an adult. He taught me how to make paella half my lifetime ago and it is one of the few lessons I have never forgotten.

As for Physics and for many other kinds of food, it is more important to understand the *principles* behind paella than to memorize every detail of any recipe. The essential component of paella is saffron rice, but the *soul* of paella is assembled one flavour at a time and "downloaded" into the rice at the last step. The *vehicle* for the soul is the *oil*, where each flavour is stored in turn and shared with successive ingredients.

As long as you remember and respect those principles, you can create your own version and not go too far wrong. However, I recommend the following version as a solid starting point.

There is an awful lot of chopping, slicing and other preparation involved in paella. I find it makes an incredible difference to the chef's experience if as many of these steps as possible are done in advance of the actual "assembly" of the paella. The list of ingredients therefore includes (insofar as possible) what should be done with them ahead of time.

IMPLEMENTS:

Paella is traditionally cooked over an open fire. You can make do with a stove if you have to, but even with gas burners it's hard to get even heat over the bottom of the *large* (at least 12 inch, otherwise you may need to use two in parallel) flat-bottomed cast-iron skillet that is the *essential* vessel for paella. (If your skillet has a *lid*, use it. I have seen statements that true Spanish paella is never cooked covered, but I don't like the dry rice this creates on the top of the dish.) Manolo used to build a hardwood fire outdoors in a makeshift fireplace built from bricks. When he had an even bed of coals he would place a metal grill over the coals and adjust the height using bricks at the corners as spacers as needed to create the ideal uniform heat at each step. However, this may be regarded as virtuoso stuff; you can manage with some combination of stove, barbeque grill and oven if you are careful. You'll also need lots of bowls and/or baggies (to store

ingredients temporarily), a nice sharp knife, a good meat cleaver and cutting block (for the chicken), a ceramic mortar and pestle (if you can't get powdered saffron), a wooden spoon and some tongs for turning items in the hot oil. And the better part of a day. Don't rush paella! (Some sangria should be marinating for the feast; it is the cook's duty to sample it for flavour.)

INGREDIENTS:

- About ½ cup extra virgin Spanish *olive oil* (enough to thoroughly coat the bottom of the skillet while it's still cold).
- 2-3 *bay leaves.*
- 4-8 unpeeled whole *garlic* cloves.
- 2 medium-sized *green peppers* cut into ¼ inch strips.
- 1 *whole chicken* chopped into 2-inch chunks. (Go out of your way to *cut through the bones*, where all the flavour is!)
- (*optional*) Half a pound or so of firm-fleshed *fish* (anglerfish, also known as monkfish, is good) or *squid*, cut into bite-sized chunks.
- A few tablespoons of white flour.
- Salt and black pepper.
- ¼ to ½ pound of *red ham* diced into ¾ inch cubes ***or*** ½ pound of *chorizo sausage* cut into ¾ inch slices.
- 1 dozen fresh *mussels* ***and*** 1 dozen medium-sized *clams* in their shells, all scrubbed clean. (They'll be going into the paella with their shells.) You can also add a 6-8 ounce *can of whole large clams* (without shells) later when you assemble the paella.
- About a dozen large fresh *prawns* in their shells *with the heads on* ***or*** a similar number of *scampi* (ideally whole) ***or*** a half dozen *lobster tails.* I'll assume prawns.
- Or use your imagination. One recipe I saw called for "1 dozen snails, fed on rosemary." Sounds great, but where do I buy hungry live snails?
- 5-6 cups of water (salted to taste).

- ½ to 1 packet of *Spanish saffron* (the good stuff!). I am fond of the *Spice Islands* brand (which comes pre-powdered in an envelope inside a sealed bottle) but have also had good luck with other brands as long as they are sealed in an airtight container; otherwise most of the perfume will have long since escaped and you will get a drab result. If you get the whole saffron stamens you will have to grind them into a fine powder with the mortar and pestle; postpone this until just before you need it for the rice.
- 2 ripe *tomatoes* choped fine.
- (*optional*) 1 small Spanish *onion* chopped fine.
- 2½ to 3 cups of *pearl rice.* (Don't use any other kind!)
- 1½ cups or so of freshly shelled *green peas* (if you *must* use frozen peas, defrost them thoroughly first!) and/or baby lima beans or fava beans or whatever inspires you in the way of green legumes. Peas are traditional.
- A small bundle of fresh *green asparagus.*
- Several *Spanish pimientos* cut into long strips.

PROCEDURE:

First make a good fire of hardwood and create an even bed of coals. Or turn on the stove. Coat the bottom of the cold skillet with the olive oil, then put it on the fire and heat until almost smoking hot (but not quite). Put in the bay leaves, garlic and pepper strips and brown lightly, then remove all from the oil and set aside. This creates "flavoured olive oil" in which to cook the other ingredients.

Dust the chicken and fish lightly with a mixture of flour, salt and black pepper, then add a few pieces at a time to the flavoured oil (which should be almost smoking), brown as quickly as possible, remove and set aside. Then brown the ham or chorizo chunks lightly in the oil, remove and set aside.

While you are cooking the meat, you should be boiling 5-6 cups of water (salted to taste) for the *seafood.* This brings me to an irreducible problem with paella for which I have not found an acceptable solution: some of the ingredients do not fare well with the amount of cooking needed to get the rice completely done (which is of course the top priority). In particular, the prawns tend to be woefully overcooked. Therefore I do not boil them any more, even though Manolo taught me to. See below. Clams and mussels can take it, though, so briefly boil the mussels or clams (in shell) and any other seafood needing more cooking than the

rice before setting them aside and straining the resultant broth for adding to the rice (see below). It is a good idea to *remove one side* of the clam and mussel shells before you add them to the paella; this cuts down on the space taken up by shells and allows you to use more clams and/or mussels if you like.

As for the prawns, you can either add them to the paella mixture uncooked when all the ingredients are assembled (see below) or sauté them in the *hot* oil just long enough to crisp their shells, then set them aside to be added *just before the paella is done.* The latter requires masterful manipulation unless you don't mind having them all on top.

Add the *tomatoes* and *onion* (if any) to the hot oil and cook down at medium heat to a *paste*. Then add the *rice* to the paste and cook until well coated. The idea here is to absorb all the oil and its accumulated flavours into the rice before adding any water. Don't add the water until the rice is good and hot, but be careful not to burn it!

Add the powdered *saffron* to enough *boiling seafood water* to cook the rice. (For 3 cups of rice you should need around 4-5 cups of water; but use judgement and experience to gauge how much is needed. You don't want to waste any saffron!) The water should turn a good rich yellow. Pour the boiling saffron seafood water over the rice. You should get a good puff of steam indicating that the rice is indeed hot. Then quickly mix in all the previously reserved ingredients (except the prawns, if you want to try to "implant" them at the last minute) *and* the green peas.

When the mixture is fairly uniform, bring the water to a boil and then lower the heat and cover the pan to cook the rice. *This is the most important step!* First of all, the rice must be fully cooked but you don't want to overcook all the other ingredients. Second, the rice at the bottom of the pan should be light brown and slightly crusty but not burnt. This is the finest feature of a great paella, but it is hard to get it perfect without a lot of practice. If you decided to try implanting the prawns late, pick your time and put them in quickly so that not too much steam escapes. Good luck with this!

When it's *almost done* (maybe 10-15 minutes early), *garnish* with a starburst pattern of fresh green asparagus alternating with long strips of Spanish pimiento and replace the cover. The asparagus should steam to a nice bright green as the rice finishes cooking.

Serve in the pan.

Serves 6 hungry people or 8 finicky eaters.

There are rules for eating paella. These may not be broken, or ancient Moorish ghosts will cut off your hands.

- Each person gets a *wedge*, as in a pizza. You may not go outside your wedge.
- Above all, *no "picking"*!

It is a very good thing if you make too much. Like black bean soup, paella gets better with age; unfortunately, the seafood prevents one from taking full advantage of this effect, so "the day after" is the only safe time to enjoy "aged" paella, and then only if you remember to refrigerate it as soon as it is cool.