

[Home](#)

Our Products

[Paella Pans](#)[Paella Burners](#)[Paella Tripods](#)[Gift Set](#)[Cooking Utensils](#)[Olive Oil and Saffron](#)[How to Order](#)[Paella Techniques](#)[Paella Recipes & More](#)[What Our Customers Say](#)[Contact Us](#)[Related Links](#)

How to Make Perfect Paella

Perfect paella. Have you ever really experienced it? Probably not, unless you've been to Spain. And even then, you may have been served a lackluster rendition of what should be an addictively wonderful dish. Truly spectacular paella, in my opinion, must have a thin layer of rice (no thicker than a half-inch), it must feature a few other ingredients on top (but not so many as to smother the rice), and it must have been cooked *and* served directly in a real Spanish paella pan. Lastly, if the bottom layer of rice yields a golden caramelized crust, called *socarrat*, you know you've reached the pinnacle of paella greatness.

Entire books have been written (in Spanish, mostly) about the correct way to make paella. I haven't read them all, but I've read enough of them to know that paella cooks are passionate and unyielding in their convictions. I have traveled far and wide in Spain, the U.S., and other countries, tasting, analyzing, and comparing notes with paella chefs. And I have discovered that each chef has his own method that he believes is best. I'm as opinionated as the next guy when it comes to paella, but if there's one chef whose approach to paella parallels my own, it's Norberto Jorge of Madrid, whose restaurant, Casa Benigna, specializes in authentic paellas and rice dishes. Norberto and I collaborated on a paella article for Fine Cooking magazine, in which he identified the following five essential elements to any paella:

[The following text is excerpted from the article, which appears in issue #33 of Fine Cooking]

1. **The Rice**

The rice should be medium grain. Spanish rice is rounded and short; it absorbs liquid very well, and it stays relatively firm during cooking. Those qualities make it ideal for paella, where the rice grains absorb flavor from the liquid. the rice should be dry and separate when done, not creamy like risotto. The most appreciated variety of Spanish rice is bomba, but you'll have fine success with the widely available medium-grain rice sold by Goya. Arborio is an acceptable substitute; long-grain rices, however, are not.

2. **The Pan**

A true paella pan is wide, round, and shallow and has splayed sides. It does not have a lid. It has two looped handles and may dip slightly in the middle so the oil can pool there for the preliminary sauteing. The shape of the pan, which is called either a paella or paellera, helps ensure that the rice cooks in a thin layer. The Valencians say that the cooked rice should be only as thick as "*un ditet*," or the width of one finger (about 1/2inch). The key is to maximize the amount of rice touching the bottom of the pan because that's where the flavor lives. For that reason, paella pans grow in diameter rather than in height.

3. **The Heat Source**

Try to find a heat source that can accommodate the whole paella pan. Depending on the configuration of your burners, you'll need to straddle the pan over two burners or set it on your largest burner. Either way, you'll have to move and rotate the pan to distribute the heat. Or you can cook the paella outdoors on a large gas or charcoal grill, or even over a wood fire, which is how it's done at paella competitions in Spain.

4. **The Sofrito**

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 use paprika, herbs, or a dried sweet red pepper called ñora. The technique is simple; sauté the vegetables over medium heat until they soften and the flavors meld, and the water from the tomato has evaporated. This mixture should be thick enough to hold its shape in a spoon.

5. **The Cooking Liquid**

A flavorful liquid cooks the rice, while imbuing it with additional character. If you don't have a homemade stock on hand, improvise one with the ingredients in the paella. For paella with shrimp, for example, simmer the shells in salted water for a quick, flavorful stock. If you use canned stock, choose a low-salt one. You can also use water, as many home cooks do in Spain. Almost every paella recipe calls for the liquid to be infused with saffron, which contributes color as well as a subtle background flavor to the rice.

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 Norberto's five elements in mind and are careful to avoid a couple of pitfalls. One of the most common mistakes is to overload the pan with too many ingredients, thereby suffocating the rice. When the rice in a paella is cooked well, nothing else matters—not the chicken, not the clams, not even the artichokes. These other ingredients do have a role to play in the pan, and that is to provide flavor to the rice. For great paella, add them with restraint, and let the rice take center stage.

Another egregious offense is to serve the paella on a plate rather than from the pan. I think that this destroys the texture of the rice, which when cooked properly creates a thin cohesive blanket across the paella pan. I urge you to seat yourself and your guests around the paella pan (a round or square table works best), and eat the paella right from the pan, starting from the perimeter and working toward the center. This communal style is the traditional way to eat paella, and I can vouch for at least one family in Granada that still does it, every Sunday afternoon without fail.

Copyright Sarah Jay 1999-2001